**How to conduct an interview**

**Where Do I Start?**

**Who?**

Begin by interviewing older family members, but eventually aim to interview all of your relatives. Speak with people from different generations of your family. Stories and details may have been held and passed down by different lines of the family.

**Preparation**

* Before your interview, consider what you’d like to know. Are you interested in a particular time period/subject, or a full-scale account of your interviewee’s life?
* Conduct background research and plan questions.
* Build rapport with your participant. Describe the nature of the project and some of the topics you’d like to talk about to help put the interviewee at ease. Your relatives can prepare for dates, details, and stories they would like to share.

**Logistics**

* Schedule the interview for a time and place (either in-person or over the phone) that is most convenient to your relative.
* The interview should take place in a relaxed and comfortable environment (often at the interviewee’s home).
* If you don’t know the relative well, bring someone who is more familiar to him/her. This mutual person may make an introductory phone call on your behalf.

**Conversation Tips**

* Don’t interrogate your interviewees with details they might not remember, but instead think of the interview as a friendly discussion. Ask questions about names and dates as they arise naturally in conversation.
* Show interest, listen carefully, maintain eye contact, and provide encouragement with nods and smiles—try not to interrupt.
* Doing an activity alongside your relatives (e.g. walking, knitting, cooking) may help them reveal details more easily.

**Documenting the Interview**

Take notes of important details and questions you may think of while your participant is speaking. You may also like to record the interview using a digital recorder/camera (ask permission!) so you can focus on the discussion rather than writing.

**What Questions Do I Ask?**

Prepare questions to use as a structural guide for your interview. Background research will help you determine what you want to know, what subjects you’d like to cover, and will help you ask better questions.

**Structuring your questions:** Questions should be concise and open-ended, allowing the interviewee opportunities to elaborate. Ask follow-up questions and engage in conversation. (e.g. Could you explain? Can you give me an example?)

**Start with the basics:** Begin with biographical questions (e.g. What is your name? Where were you born? Where did you grow up?)

**Genealogy focus:** Ask names of family members and important dates (e.g. birth, death, marriage, date of immigration), and locations (e.g. where they lived and worked, native country and town).

**Remembering family customs:** Ask about family traditions, holiday celebrations, and cultural influences (e.g. my family had an aunt who draped homemade pasta all around her house).

**Exploring local history:** Ask for descriptions of hometowns, what it was like to grow up in a particular town and how it changed over time. Ask about community traditions and how the area was impacted by historical events.

**Expect the unexpected:**Don’t worry if the conversation strays from topics on your lists of prepared subjects. Allow interviewees the opportunity to tell their stories and speak freely—they may have experiences of which you were previously unaware. You can always redirect the interview to your original plan if strays too far off course.

**Artefacts**

Old photos and documents may help spark memories, prompt questions, and ease your interview into natural conversation. Ask to see your relatives’ old photos when you visit with them and bring photos of people who you'd like to discuss.

Artefacts can include photos, scrapbooks, letters, vital records, immigration documents, family Bibles, and a variety of other heirlooms.

Gathering artefacts can also jump start your family history research. Documents that would have required painstaking effort to locate may suddenly become available at the hand of a family member. Things such as birth, marriage and death certificates, photos, wedding invitations, letter or diaries might all be helpful.