Interviewing Guide (9-12)

Like detectives, we can learn a lot about our history by looking at pieces of evidence from the past. These pieces of evidence, or "cultural markers," can be artifacts from the past (pottery, arrowheads, treasures, etc.), maps, literature, music, and even people's firsthand experiences. Listening to stories from people who participated in events is in some ways like looking through a window to the past.

Below, you will learn the five steps to conducting an interview that will allow you to learn as much as possible from someone with an experience to share. The steps are adapted from the *Geography Action!* Project Guide article "The Art of the Interview" written by Ann Williams, *National Geographic* magazine Senior Writer and Regional Editor.

STEP 1: *PLAN*

One of the most important steps in having a successful interview is to plan in advance.

Choose and research a topic

- ❑ Write up a *mission statement*—what you want to get out of the interview.
- ❑ Research the topic. This will help you develop questions to ask. If you understand the topic before the interview, you'll be able to lead a more meaningful conversation with the person you are interviewing.
    - Start by looking online and in books for reputable sources of information about the topic.
    - Take notes on the events that are most relevant to the mission you identified for the interview.

Select a person to interview

- ❑ Find the appropriate person to interview: Hint: Tap the connectors in your community—people who can steer you to the best characters to interview and maybe even introduce you to them.
- ❑ Contact potential subjects—plan to meet on their turf if possible.
- ❑ When someone agrees to be interviewed, set a place, date, and time. Be sure he or she understands how long the interview should take and that you plan to record the session.

Equipment

- ❑ Voice recorder—preferably digital, with fresh batteries and spares
- ❑ Notebook—durable cover, continuous spiral binding, interior dividers with pockets
- ❑ Pens—pack several
- ❑ Your contact information

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STEP 2: *QUESTION*

List potential questions that you *may* ask the person you are interviewing and prepare to ask them.

Write up your questions

- ❑ Include the basics.
  - Remember who, what, when, where, why, how (such as "Where were you born?" and "What was your surname?").
- ❑ Question feelings and details
  - Use your research to create questions that invite the person you are interviewing to share stories in detail (such as "Describe the landscape of your hometown before World War II").
  - Make sure that some questions encourage the interviewee to share their feeling about some of the events ("How did traveling for six months make you feel as a 14 year-old?").

Gather support materials

- ❑ If possible, gather photographs, newspaper clippings, and other artifacts to prompt your subject's memory. You can also ask the subject to bring his or her own memorabilia to help you better understand—and tell—the story.

Practice your questions

- ❑ Be familiar with your topic, your questions, and the mission of your interview.
- ❑ Practicing with a friend before the real thing can help you fix confusing questions and organize question order.

STEP 3: *LISTEN*

Perfect your interviewing style before you start. It is very important that you *participate* in the interview by *listening.* If you ask a series of questions without listening to the answer, several things could happen. First, you might ask a question which has already been answered during another part of the interview. Second, you might miss an opportunity to ask a more in-depth question you hadn't thought to ask. Finally, you might interrupt the "flow" of the interview and change it from a conversational tone to a question and answer tone.

Be a good interviewer

- ❑ Be natural—make your subject comfortable.
- ❑ Throw away questions that you had planned to ask if they don't seem important during the interview.
- ❑ Ask questions that occur to you during the interview.
- ❑ Maintain eye contact—try not to look at your notes, never look at your recorder.
- ❑ Be a good listener—don't interrupt.
- ❑ Don't rush, but don't overstay your welcome.
- ❑ Some folks will talk too much, some too little—you can get a good interview in an hour or less.
- ❑ Remember, the best interviews are really just engaging conversations.

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STEP 4: *RECORD*

Listening to the interviewee will give you a lot of information, but unless you properly record that information—either with a voice recorder or with hand-written notes—it is difficult to capture the details and to quote the interviewee accurately and responsibly. Never change what the interviewee said or how they said it. Sometimes, the best stories are told in the way they are shared.

Before the Interview

- Check your equipment one last time.
- Run through your questions one last time.

The Interview

- Turn on the recorder, then forget about it.
- Get the basics—your subject's name, address, contact information.
- Take notes—jot down what your subject is saying, follow-up questions, details about your subject and his/her environment.
- Use any memorabilia present to help prompt and illustrate the story.
- Last question: Is there anything you think I should have asked that I didn't?
- Keep the recorder running as you say goodbye and walk out the door.

STEP 5: *TELL A STORY*

Now that you've gathered all of this great information and have accurately recorded it, it is important that you find a way to effectively document and share the story in a way that celebrates and accurately describes the story you were told. You can choose to share the story in journalistic (or new article) form, or you can try to share the story creatively in poetry or prose. The important part to remember is to remain true to the original story and to capture the story as a whole and the mood or any feelings that are shared in it.

Transcribe the interview

- Write out both sides of the conversation, both question and answer. Again, never change what the interviewee said or how they said it.
- Outline the important points.
- Edit the transcript for clarity, flow, and length.

Tell the story

- Revisit your original *mission statement* for the interview.
- Write a "lede" (or "lead"—the first sentence or the first paragraph of an article. It can summarize the article, set the scene, or establish the mood of the story).
- Introduce your subject.
- Add details from your notes—appearance and personality of your subject, ambient sounds, smells, visuals.
- The end—wrap up the package with an insightful sentence or two, or a good quote.
- Check the facts.

Public Relations and Press

- Write a thank you.
- Send your subject a copy—or a heads-up if the interview appears online.

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Sample Interview by Ann Williams, *National Geographic* magazine Senior Writer and Regional Editor

Below is an excerpt of an interview with Ray Johnson, a Tut-era specialist at the University of Chicago. The resulting work was featured in the *National Geographic* magazine's June 2005 cover story on King Tut.

Some background information from Ann: "Ray and I had been talking about Ankhesenamun, King Tut's wife, but we had segued into the decoration of Tut's tomb. I then asked a question that brought us back to Ankheseamun—and that gave me the *perfect quote*. I've included the section of the interview that leads up to the quote. As you can see, I've underlined and boldfaced the most interesting bits."

Interview:

Ray Johnson:
....the material that seems to be made for him originally seems to be absolutely exquisite. In fact, I find it a little hard to understand how they could do all of this for him in 70 days. And that's another controversy. Was he buried within the 70-day limit? Or was it longer? Some people…I'm not sure what the final word on that is, but some people see something of a delay while Ankhesenamun is writing to the Hittite king. You know it's the successor who buries the king. And I do believe that…I've read from Carter's notes that the outermost gilded shrine that covered the sarcophagus in the burial chamber was apparently just a LITTLE bit too big for the burial chamber, and so it had to be whittled down a bit. And Carter found chips, because they did it, of course, right on the spot. And they had paint drips on them from the wall paintings. So there's a possibility…one of the reason why the style of the paintings look a little wonky is that the artists…it wasn't painted at the time of the burial but the artists squeezed in later and painted the walls. Because you know who's shown officiating there—it's Ay. So it's possible that those paintings were added after the burial.

Ken Garrett, the photographer*: Was it physically possible? Was there enough space?*

Ray:
Not very much. But that would explain why some of those figures look a little stylistically weird.

Now it is interesting, too, most of the…**the canon of proportions for 3 walls, I think, is Amarna, and for one wall it's traditional. Gay Robins talks about this**.

ARW*: Why wouldn't they have painted it (the tomb) at the time of burial?*

Ray:
Well, it may be that [and he whispers] there was no king. And Ankhesenamun was ruling alone until she figured out who she'd be ruling with. Her story is one of the most interesting from this period. Because we have to imagine, from the evidence in the letter to the Hittite king, this woman thought she had the power to rule with whomever she wanted. **Now think about this: Her grandmother was queen Tiy, one of the most powerful queens that Egypt ever saw. Her mother was Nefertiti. Her**

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grandmother and her mother ruled as living goddesses. So of course Ankhesenamun saw herself in the same role. She lived at a time when she witnessed some of the most powerful women ruling alongside their husbands, equally, almost equal status. So of course she felt she had the same power. And she found out that she didn't. I think this must have been just crushing for her. Was she a spoiled little palace brat who lived in this reality that had no bearing on real reality? Or was she a very smart, clever, talented woman who was sort of crushed by history or defeated by the ambitions of some of the counselors of her husband and his predecessors?

Sample Passage:
Appeared in NGM, June 2005 by A.R. Williams, King Tut Article, p. 18:

> A crisis of succession gripped the royal court. With power plays and intrigues surely seething around her, Tut's widow, Ankhesenamun, appears to have launched a coup of her own, sending desperate letters to the king of the Hittites in Anatolia. "My husband is dead," she wrote. " Send me your son and I will make him king." It was an unprecedented request, but understandable. "Her grandmother was Queen Tiye, one of the most powerful queens Egypt ever saw," Ray Johnson explained." "Her mother was Nefertiti. They ruled as living goddesses, so of course Ankhesenamun felt she had the same power. And she found out that she didn't."
>
> A Hittite prince, Zannanza, was eventually sent south to marry her, but he was killed—by a hit squad, some speculate—as he entered Egyptian territory."

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