

Oral History Interview Guidelines



Introduction

One of the aims of *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists* (ESDA) is to not only produce accurate, authoritative, and comprehensive articles, but to document and make available the primary sources that were used to write the articles. Although most sources will already have been written, some will come from talking with people whose memories will be a valuable primary source for an article. The object for the ESDA author, then, is to not only use the information conveyed in the interview to write the article, but to get the interview on permanent record, thus creating a source from which others can access and benefit. This is termed “oral history interviews” (interview/s) and this brief guide will provide some guidelines for doing oral history.

Who should you interview?

Because the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is relatively short, there are likely individuals who are still alive who can enhance your article with their memories and knowledge. Listed below are some candidates for an interview for each type of ESDA article. Note that if the person who fits the description below is deceased or cannot be interviewed, it may be profitable to interview someone who knew the person that fits the description. These are just broad guidelines; feel free to interview anyone who you think will enhance the article.

Biography: A person who knew the biography subject or was a contemporary of theirs.

Church Administrative Unit: A person who worked in the division, union, conference, or mission. It is especially valuable to interview a person who helped found a unit, worked in a unit in the early years, or worked for a defunct unit.

Country: A person who was a pioneer worker in a country, or in a certain region or among an ethnic group in the country, who knew early Adventists there, and/or played a role in the upbuilding of the work.

Educational Institution: A person who helped found the institution, was a charter or early student, faculty, or staff member, or, more broadly, was a student or employee there during a historically significant period.

Event: A person who organized or participated in the planning of the event, and/or participated and attended the event.

Medical Institution: A person who helped found the institution, was a charter or early patient, staff member, or, more broadly, was a patient or employee there during a historically significant period.

Publishing and Media Institution: A person who helped found the institution, was a charter or early employee, or an employee there during a historically significant period.

Ministry: A person who founded the ministry, was an early participant in it, or worked with it during a historically significant period.

Periodical/Book/Electronic Text: A person who was the founder, editor, or employee of the periodical; an author of the book, or someone who was instrumental in its publication.

Issue: A person who was alive during a particular event, was an employee of the church or government at the time, or has expertise in the subject of the article.

Arranging an Interview

Contact the individual you want to interview. Tell them briefly about the Encyclopedia project and the article you are writing for it. Ask them if they'd be willing to be interviewed for the article. Tell them how much time it will take, and a proposed venue (wherever is most convenient for them). If they are amenable, decide on a date and venue, provide them the interview questions in advance, and get their permission for the interview to be recorded. You must also have them sign the ESDA Interview Release Form provided by the ESDA main office.

Equipment

Thanks to technology, interviews do not have to be conducted face to face or in person, although this is still the preferred method. Interviews can be done over the phone, video chat, or through an app. You may also opt for a written interview over email, but this may be laborious for the interviewee. It is optimal to record your interview, either by audio or video.

Below is the equipment you will need, depending on how you conduct the interview:

In person: A device to record: a recorder or smart phone will do. Laptop or writing utensils to take notes. Chargers for devices.

Phone: A phone, preferably with a recording option. Most smart phones include this feature. Laptop or writing utensils to take notes. Chargers for devices.

Video chat: Laptop, pc, or phone—any device that does video chat. Laptop or writing utensils to take notes. Chargers for devices.

Interview Questions

Prepare questions that will take between one and two hours of interviewing. Have a standard list of questions for the various types of interviews you will be conducting; as needed, add the appropriate questions for each particular interview. Leave room for follow-up questions. The types of questions that can be asked are endless, therefore, below are basic guidelines.

- Before you begin writing down your questions, thoroughly research the subject and the interviewee. Knowing about both will enable you to ask better questions.
- Pray with the interviewee before you begin.
- Begin with basic questions to put the interviewee at ease.
Example: “Where were you born?” “When did you become a Seventh-day Adventist?”
“Please tell the story you always share about this ministry.”

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- Ask open-ended questions; keep single-word and yes/no questions to a minimum.
Example: “What it was like to be among the first Adventist missionaries to Libya?” “We know about _____ as an administrator, but can you describe what s/he was like on an interpersonal level?”
- Ask what you need to know for your article, but be open to asking follow-up questions if the interviewee ventures into an area that is important to them or that you didn’t think of.
Example: “Can you explain?” “How did that happen?”
- Sometimes a follow-up interview is inevitable, but try to ask questions that cover the gamut of what you want to know.
Example: “When did you begin working among the Rarámuri peoples? Can I have the month, date and year?”
- When possible, include visual materials, documents, or artifacts to accompany questions, as these can stimulate memories and trigger stories.
Example: “Here is a photo of you at the groundbreaking ceremony for the mission building. What was that day like?” “This is the first issue of the magazine of which you were editor. What were some of the challenges of getting it off the press?”
- Ask if the interviewee knows of other people or materials that can help you write the best article.
- Review the questions to make sure you have covered everything.

The Interview

Here are some general guidelines for the interview itself:

- Wear professional clothing, and come prepared.
- Have the interview at a time and place that work best for the interviewee. The place, even if it is over the phone or webchat, should be as free from distractions and noises as possible.
- Make sure that all your digital devices are charged, and that you have tested them before the interview begins. The storage on your device should have ample space for the interview.
- Ask the interviewee again if they will permit you to record the interview.
- Once the device has started recording, identify yourself, the interviewee, and the time, date, and place.
- As stated above, begin with simple questions that will lighten up any nervousness and make the interviewee feel at ease.

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- Maintain eye contact with the interviewee, but don't be too intense.
- Do not interrupt the interviewee, however tough it may be at times. Never dominate the interview—remember that you are here to listen and not to be heard.
- Be ready with facts or information in case the interviewee's memory needs to be jogged.
- Ask for clarification if you need to. Follow-up on interesting or relevant digressions.
- Even though you are recording, take notes for later.
- Be sensitive to the interviewee. If you notice him/her getting tired, gently conclude the interview. Between one and two hours is usually an appropriate amount of time for an interview.
- Once you have asked all of your questions, ask the interviewee if they wish to say anything more.
- Remember to have the interviewee fill out the ESDA Interview Release Form.
- If a follow-up interview is necessary, schedule one.

After the Interview

After the interview, be sure to thank the interviewee for their time. Let them know that you will provide them with a digital copy of the interview if they would like one, and that you will send them a draft of the article or the completed article. Ask them if you can contact them about any clarifications you may need, and leave the possibility open for a follow-up interview.

It is good to have a period of reflection after the interview. What did you learn about the article subject? Does it challenge your notions about the topic? Write down your impressions and questions that arose from the interview.

As soon as possible, store the digital file of the interview in multiple places, be it on your desktop, external drive, cloud, on the recording device, etc. Label the recording with the appropriate conventions, including the interviewer, interviewee, date, and place of the interview. It is up to you whether to transcribe the interview. There are real pluses to transcription, but most often doing it will be based on if you have the time or resources. Explore if there is an archive or library that would be interested in having the interview for their collection, and if so, send a copy to them (this will be outlined in the ESDA Interview Release Form that the interviewee signs). When appropriate, the interview will be featured on the Encyclopedia website as a primary source for your article.

Of course everything that the interviewee said is not the gospel truth, so be critical in the way you use the interview material in your article. However, whether you have not started to write the article, or have almost completed it, the interview should alter its contents and conclusions in

some way. In whatever way you use the interview, by doing it you have made an important contribution to the preservation of Seventh-day Adventist history!