TIPS FOR CONDUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

I. BEFORE THE INTERVIEW:

*Introduce the class and assignment.*
- Explain what you have been learning in MAS 115 and what the nature of this assignment is.
- Make sure that you have their permission to use their life story for this assignment. Assure them that the professor is the only other person aside from you who will read the final product.

*Set up a specific day and time for the interview.*
- Give your interviewee an opportunity to arrange some quiet time in his or her schedule.
- Think of a good location to talk, one that will have minimal distractions and allow you both to hear each other.

*Begin preparing.*
- Although you have been provided with sample questions, remember to tailor them for your interviewee. Some questions may not apply or may touch upon a sensitive topic in your family. Feel free to alter, delete, and/or substitute questions.
- At the same time, be open to veer off-track a little during the actual interview, as new and interesting questions may arise once you begin to hear the life story. Do not hesitate to alter your original questions or to ask new ones in order to follow up on something your interviewee has said.
- If you have access to a voice recorder (i.e. your phone), consider using it so that you will be able to go back and review what you heard as you are writing your essay.

II. DURING THE INTERVIEW

*Engage in small talk beforehand.*
- Provide your interviewee with a copy of the questions. Knowing the topics will enable them to stay on track.
- Let them know that you will be taking notes to capture important details, and position your notebook so that they can see what you are writing.

*Assure your interviewee that his or her story is important.*
- Express enthusiasm for this opportunity to learn their personal history.
- Be attentive to your interviewee and show that you have a real interest in their story.
- Knowing your interviewee very well can sometimes present challenges. For example, in response to some questions, your aunt might insist, “You already know that.” In this case, you might have to remind her that you would like to hear her story, or say, “Well can you please describe that for me again?”
Be aware of your body language and behavior.

- Get enough rest the night before so that you are focused and not constantly yawning.
- Silence your cell phone and other distracting technology.

Consider using visual aids.

- Bring an old photo or two of your interviewee, if you have any. These images can help trigger a particular memory or be a point of focus during the interview.
- If you do not have a photo of the person, then consider finding one of their hometown. During the interview, you can say something like, “Here’s an image of your town. Has it changed much since you lived there?”
- You can even bring a piece of blank paper and ask your interviewee to draw their neighborhood, the home where they were born, their family tree, etc. Let them know you do not expect artistry; it is just a helpful point of focus.

Allow sufficient time for the interview.

- Plan to spend at least one hour, perhaps even two, conducting the interview.
- Remember that much depends on your particular interviewee and how much they have to say.
  - Interviewing a talkative person who really likes to reminisce means that you will have to keep them focused and move on to further questions in a timely manner.
  - Working with someone who tends to be shy or to give brief answers may mean that you will need to ask many follow-up questions to extract further details.

Check in periodically on your interviewee’s physical comfort.

- They may need something to drink, a moment to stretch, a bathroom break, etc., especially if they are elderly.

III. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Do not just get up and walk away.

- Allow the conversation to wind down naturally.
- Spend a few moments reflecting on what the interview experience was like for both of you.
- Ask your interviewee, “Is there anything you would like to ask me?”
- Thank them for their time and for giving you a glimpse into their experiences.

Plan to review immediately afterwards for about an hour.

- As soon as the interview has concluded, sit down alone and review your notes—ASAP! It is critical that you supplement your notes while your memory is still fresh.
- Remember to record your general impressions of the interview: the setting, the sounds, what your interviewee was wearing, his or her demeanor and energy, particular expressions he or she used in response to certain questions.