

20 HACKS FOR INTERVIEWING ALMOST ANYONE AND GETTING A GOOD STORY

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1. **Know the stages of memory loss and the effect on storytelling**
 - Stages of memory loss related to the geriatric population:
<https://www.fhca.org/members/qi/clinadmin/global.pdf>
 - Communication strategies for different stages

2. **Be aware of other conditions that affect memory and storytelling**
 - Dehydration: Bodies are 60-70% water, brains are 73% water
<https://water.usgs.gov/edu/propertyyou.html>
 - Medications
 - Infections, falls, physical trauma
 - Depression, anxiety, grief, loss or changes in life

3. **“Prime” the memory pump**
 - Do not use the word “remember” to prompt someone with memory issues
 - Use non-challenging story starters. For example:
 - *“You told me that you had a horse named Silas.”*
 - *“You were driving around Delta in your dad’s car, and you were just eight years old! How did you reach the pedals?”*
 - Start the memory thread with a few details to get subject going
 - Allow time for subject to process questions and form answers – WAIT!

4. **Reassure subject when memory issues arise**
 - Anxiety over names and dates can shut down memory thread
 - Redirect and encourage subject to move on
 - Research names, dates, details and fill those in later

5. **Supply a guide sheet for those with memory issues**
 - Prepare a “cheat sheet” with names, dates and important information
 - This becomes a visual cue subject can refer to as they tell the story: *“I made this just so we could all be on the same page...”*

6. **Take time to build trust with subject**
 - Allow time to build rapport. Patience pays off!
 - Use relaxed tone, body language, facial expression and demeanor
 - Go into the interview prepared but lose your agenda

7. Make connections with your subject

- Connections build trust!
 - *“I see that you [something subject does well]. Teach me more about that.”*
 - *“Oh, you worked at Hewlett-Packard? So did my dad...”*
- Do your research. Find yearbook photos, news articles, historic events that are mentioned in the interview and share them with subject.

8. Prepare storytelling environment

- Be mindful of subject’s comfort level and distraction level: Noise, temperature, routine, environment, etc.
- It’s best to go to subject’s home because transitions away can be difficult

9. Learn about your subject before interviewing them

- Visit with a family member or friend of the subject
- Ask about:
 - Subject’s health, memory, cares or concerns
 - Willingness to share stories; sensitive topics
 - Interview environment
- Learning about them before you meet helps you prompt them more effectively during the interview

10. For the best storytelling, use the least invasive recording equipment

- Audio vs. video
- Practice with equipment at home
- Introduce equipment to subject; then make it “invisible”

11. Learn to use audience to your advantage

- The realm of intimacy of a subject’s audience affects the stories they tell and the way they tell them: Subject → Loved Ones → Acquaintances → Outsiders
- Examples of how audience might affect stories told by subject:
 - Subject/Sibling: Competitive, unspoken nuance, uninhibited
 - Subject/Grandchild: Purposeful, careful, moral, detailed
 - Subject/Outsider: Detailed, nuance explained
- Remove/Add people to enhance type of story told and how it is told

12. Use effective prompts and story starters

- Open-ended questions
- Memorabilia, objects, iconic era markers: Toys, TV shows, historic symbols, products, household items
- Photographs
- Sensory prompts: Food, sound recordings, going to special places

13. Listen for clues to subject's recall pattern

- Everyone organizes and recalls memories differently
- Howard Gardner Multiple Intelligences:
https://soba.ucr.edu/news_events/The%20Nine%20Different%20Types%20of%20Intelligence.pdf
- Examples of how to prompt for various recall patterns:
 - Visual: Photos, heirlooms
 - Auditory: Songs, old recordings
 - Spatial: Crafts and hobbies, making things
 - Kinesthetic: Walk while you talk, go onsite, have them hold an object with which they can fidget

14. Listen with your face

- Be involved visually and silently!
- It's hard to be silent during an interview! Practice, practice, practice!
- Learn to engage with your face and body language
- Subject will fill silence with more details to the story

15. It's better to listen to "wrongs" than interrupt with "rights"

- Allow subject to tell their "truth"
- Interruptions ruin concentration
- Jot corrections on paper and refer to them at a stopping point

16. Give subject permission to tell difficult stories

- Generations today want honesty and full details in stories
- Past generations didn't talk about unpleasant events, or they "whitewashed" the story in order to protect those involved. Example:
 - What was told: *"Mother hid a little money away for herself."*
 - What was true: *"Mother had to hide money away from Dad because he bought whiskey with every last dime. We survived on the money she hid."*
- Stories of triumph over adversity are the most powerful stories for future generations to hear
- Additional information:
 - <http://www.wmfc.org/uploads/GenerationalDifferencesChart.pdf>
 - <https://www.thriveglobal.com/stories/main-characteristics-per-generation/>

17. Offer guideline prompts for whether or not to share a difficult story

- *"What is my purpose in sharing it?"*
- *"Who will this story affect if it is shared?"*
- In hindsight: *"What do I know now that I didn't know then?"*
- Disclaimer: *"I may not have this story right, but this is what I perceived was happening at the time."*

“If you want a happier family, create, refine and retell the story of your family’s positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come.” – Bruce Feiler

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>

18. Ease into difficult stories only after building a relationship of trust

- Difficult stories are difficult to remember and take more time to retell
- Subject will share difficult stories when they feel safe and understood
- Choose audience carefully when these kinds of stories are told

19. Validation goes a long way

- Create positive emotional energy, especially during and after a difficult story is told. Take time to come back to a hopeful note.
- Show reverence and respect for subject’s journey: *“You are so strong. How did you get through that? You are amazing!”*

20. Collect stories today. Don’t wait!

- Act on your hunch to collect stories today rather than waiting for a subject to have a "tragic antecedent" when it becomes critical that you do
- *“When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.” – African proverb*