



Preparing for an Interview

The best StoryCorps® interviews are casual enough to let a conversation follow its natural course and focused enough that the most important topics are covered. Here are eight steps to getting a great interview:

1. Pick a storyteller.

Start by figuring out whom to interview. Everyone has a story to tell; just ask. Some people might be hesitant. Remind them that their experiences are unique and that the StoryCorps® interview is about making a record for the future. Many people don't think their stories are worth hearing; convince them otherwise. The interview should be fun and gratifying for both of you.

2. Create a question list

No matter how well you know your storyteller, a little preparation will improve the quality of your interview enormously. Even if you'll have the opportunity to interview your storyteller more than once, it helps to think of each session as your best chance to capture the most important stories, words, or songs on tape. Decide what you want to talk about. What are the important aspects of your storyteller's life? What do they know that you want to learn?

3. Practice using the equipment

Before your interview, get comfortable with your equipment. Record yourself. Find a friend and do a mock interview. A few things to remember: If you can, always wear headphones when recording. Your headphones are your "ears" for the interview; they tell you exactly what you'll hear on your finished recording.

Mic close. Hold the microphone about seven inches (roughly a hand's length) from your storyteller's mouth and slightly off to the side. Always hold the mic in your hand, moving it between you and your storyteller, just like a TV news reporter. At the start of the interview, you can ask your storyteller to wait a moment before responding to your questions so that you have time to move the microphone back and forth. If the sound is too loud in your headphones, lower the headphone volume instead of moving the mic farther away.

Be careful of mic noise. The low rumbling sound you might hear when you move the mic in your hands is known as "mic handling noise." Avoid it by using a light touch

and not shifting around too much. If you must move the mic, make sure to wait until your storyteller has finished speaking.

Avoid popping "p" and sharp "s" sounds. If you hear either, point the mic to the side of the storyteller's mouth. Both occur only in a relatively narrow zone directly in front of the mouth. (To see for yourself, say the word "pop" with your hand directly in front of your mouth. Now say it again while moving your hand to the side. You'll be surprised how quickly the plosive zone disappears.)

4. Choose an interview location.

Pick the quietest place possible. A carpeted living room or bedroom makes for warm, intimate recordings. Avoid large, empty rooms, and stay away from kitchens, which have a lot of reflective surfaces and appliance noise. Prevent noisy distractions. Rooms are full of all sorts of sounds that you normally don't notice but that can wreak havoc on your recording. Close the door, unplug the phone, make sure your chairs don't creak, turn off anything that is making noise: ticking clocks, buzzing fluorescent lights, air conditioners, fans, etc. Listen and adjust during the interview as well. If you hear noise as your storyteller fiddles with her necklace, for example, feel free to let her know. Never record interviews when there's a radio or television on in the background.

5. Set up and test the equipment.

Set up your equipment as early as possible and make sure you're comfortable with it. This way you'll be able to focus on the person you are interviewing and not the equipment. Before you begin your interview, record your storyteller talking for a few seconds to make sure everything is working. Ask warm-up questions like, "Can you describe what this room looks like?" Stop, rewind, and listen to the recording you just made to make sure everything is working.

6. Begin the conversation.

Begin your StoryCorps® session with warm-up questions or small talk to help put your storyteller at ease. If you haven't already, let her know why you want to interview her and what, generally, you'll want to talk about in the interview. Once she is ready, you can move on to the ID.

The ID is an important part of every interview. Start by stating your name, your age, the date, and the location of the interview. For example, "Hi, my name is Christopher. I'm forty-one years old. The date is August 3, 1492, and we're sitting here on my ship called the Santa Maria in the port of Palos." Now ask your storyteller to state the same information. Repeat this procedure at the start of any new discs.

Use your question list. Remember, the questions you generated are just suggestions. Trust your instincts. If something interests you or bears exploring, ask more questions. Sometimes your storyteller will need "permission" to explore a certain topic; granting that permission might mean nothing more than showing your interest, or saying, "Tell me more." Think of the question list as a crutch. If you get tongue-tied or need a place to start, use it, but don't let it constrain you. Feel free to ask questions in whatever order feels right. Take breaks if you need them.

Don't make noise when your storyteller is talking. Don't say, "uh huh," or interrupt when something interesting or important is being said. Instead, use visual cues like nodding your head. Make sure you alternate the microphone between you and the storyteller. When you're asking the question, the mic should be pointing at your mouth. But when your storyteller is answering, the mic should be close to him.

7. Get great stories.

The best interview is simply a conversation and it should feel like your storyteller is just being him or herself. However, sometimes people act differently when a microphone is present. Here are some tips for helping the conversation flow:

Listen closely. Look at your storyteller's eyes (not the mic). Stay interested and engaged.

Stick with the good stuff. When you hear something that moves you, feel free to talk about it more. If you think the current topic isn't interesting, steer the conversation somewhere else.

Be yourself. You can laugh with the person you are interviewing or even cry with them. Real moments are the best moments.

Help the storyteller be more descriptive. When you need your storyteller to describe something, it can help to ask him to "paint a picture with words."

Don't be afraid to record again. If the storyteller garbles words or makes a mistake, ask him to repeat himself. If a story never quite gets to the end or your storyteller loses his train of thought, you can ask for the ending again. Make sure you are happy with what you're recording. You can record as many times as necessary (as long as you're not driving your storyteller crazy).

Ask emotional questions. Questions like "How does this make you feel?" often elicits thoughtful responses. Don't be afraid to ask.

Take notes during the interview. Write down any questions or stories you might want to return to later in your interview.

Be curious and honest and keep an open heart. Great things will happen.

8. Wrap it up.

Before you turn off your recorder, do two things: Ask the storyteller if there is anything else that she wants to talk about, and thank her. Sharing a story can be difficult for some people. It's a privilege to have someone share his story with you. Express your gratitude.

Grading Rubric for StoryCorps®	Poor	Below Average	Average	Good	Fantastic
Storyteller	0-5	6	7	8	10
Question List	0-5	6	7	8	10
Use of Technology	0-5	6	7	8	10
Interview Skills	0-5	6	7	8	10
Written Response	0-10	12	14	16	20
Oral Presentation	0-10	12	14	16	20
Creativity	0-5	6	7	8	10
Overall	0-5	6	7	8	10
Possible Total	0-50	60	70	80	100
YOUR SCORE	?	?	?	?	?

This assignment is due on _____

I am interviewing _____

Date of interview _____

Time of interview _____

Place of interview _____

Thank-you note written YES NO _____

Sample Questions

1. Please tell me your name, your birthdate, our relationship, and where we are.
2. What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
3. Who was the most important person in your life?
4. Who has been the biggest influence on your life?
5. Who has been the kindest to you in your life?
6. What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?
7. What is your earliest memory?
8. Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to me?
9. What are you proudest of in your life?
10. When in life have you felt most alone?
11. How has your life been different than what you'd imagined?
12. How would you like to be remembered?
13. Do you have any regrets?
14. What does your future hold?
15. Is there anything that you've never told me but want to tell me now?
16. Is there something about me that you've always wanted to know?
17. When and where were you born? Where did you grow up?
18. Who are/were your parents and what are/were they like?
19. How was your relationship with your parents?
20. Did you get into trouble? What was the worst thing you did?
21. Do you have any siblings? What were they like growing up?
22. How would you describe yourself as a child? Were you happy?
23. What is your best memory of childhood? Worst?
24. Did you have a nickname? How'd you get it?
25. Who were your best friends? What were they like?
26. How would you describe a perfect day when you were young?
27. What did you think your life would be like when you were older?
28. Do you have any favorite stories from your childhood?
29. Did you enjoy school? What kind of student were you?
30. What would you do for fun?
31. How would your classmates remember you?
32. Are you still friends with anyone from that time in your life?
33. What are your best/worst memories of grade school/high school/college/graduate school?
34. Was there a teacher who had a particularly strong influence of your life?
35. Do you have any favorite stories from school?
36. Do you have a love of your life?
37. When did you first fall in love?
38. Can you tell me about your first kiss?
39. What was your first serious relationship?
40. Do you believe in love at first sight?
41. Do you ever think about previous lovers?
42. What lessons have you learned from your relationships?
43. How did you meet your husband/wife?
44. How did you know he/she was "the one"?
45. How did you propose?
46. What were the best times? The most difficult times?
47. Did you ever think of getting divorced?
48. Did you ever get divorced? Can you tell me about it?
49. What advice do you have for young couples?
50. Do you have any favorite stories from your marriage?
51. When did you first find out that you'd be a parent?
52. Can you describe the moment when you saw your child for the first time?
53. How has being a parent changed you?
54. What are your dreams for your children?
55. Do you remember when your last child left home for good?
56. Do you have any favorite stories about your kids?
57. What do you do for a living?
58. Tell me about how you got into your line of work.
59. Do you like your job?
60. What did you think you were going to be when you grew up?
61. What did you want to be when you grew up?
62. What lessons has your work life taught you?
63. If you could do anything now, what would you do? Why?
64. Do you plan on retiring? If so, when? How do you feel about it?
65. Do you have any favorite stories from your work life?
66. Can you tell me about your religious beliefs/spiritual beliefs?
67. What is your religion?
68. Have you experienced any miracles?
69. What was the most profound spiritual moment of your life?
70. Do you believe in the afterlife? What do you think it will be like?
71. When you meet God, what do you want to say to Him?
72. Do you regret anything?
73. If you were to give advice to me or my children, or even children to come in our family, what would it be?
74. What have you learned from life? The most important things?
75. How do you want to be remembered?
76. What is your ethnic background?
77. Where is your mom's family from? Where is your dad's family from?
78. What traditions have been passed down in your family?
79. Who were your favorite relatives?
80. Do you remember any of the stories they used to tell you?
81. What are the classic family stories? Jokes? Songs?
82. Were you in the military?
83. Did you go to war? What was it like?
84. How did war change you?
85. During your service, can you recall times when you were afraid?
86. What are your strongest memories from your time in the military?
87. What lessons did you learn from this time in your life?
88. Is there anything we didn't talk about that you would like to add?