



Quick Guide:
Story Interviewing for
Heart & Soul
Community Planning

Spring, 2011





Introduction

Story interviews can be transformative for interviewee and interviewer. The interviewee has the opportunity to share his or her experience and perspectives in their own words and reflect on the connection that story has to his or her community. The interviewer can listen deeply to the story working to understand another person's connection to his or her place. These stories (depending on their final form) can also be used in broader community conversations. They can be used to celebrate a place or to show the challenges that it faces. They can be used to prompt discussion about what's important in a town and how to plan for its future. This method, while powerful, requires consideration of many factors to do well:

Time: Story interviewing is time consuming—from setting up the interviews all the way through editing and sharing. Consider that just one minute of edited audio combined with images can take 10 hours to produce! If you've got a cadre of dedicated volunteers and locals with experience, this time can be worth it. If you're starting from square one, be prepared to spend many months.

Technology: Digital recorders, Flip audio-video digital recorders and still cameras are a few of the devices you may want to use. Decide the purpose and quality of the final product to determine the best technology to use (see "Sharing" below).

Participants: How many stories do you need to capture a cross-section of your community? Whose stories absolutely need to be told? Don't forget to use your Community Network Analysis to determine whom to reach out to and how.

Questions: There is a big difference between getting information through surveys and getting information through story. We are used to filling out surveys, being canvassed by phone or in person, but we are less accustomed to being asked open-ended questions that are meant to lead us to tell about specific experiences with the people and places of our communities as a way to reveal values. Work with your Story Team to craft the right questions.

Editing: The process of whittling down a substantial amount of raw material into a workable final piece can be daunting. Stay organized throughout the fieldwork phase for a smoother final editing process (e.g. taking field notes after each interview).

Sharing: Before you start your interviewing, think about how you want to share the stories (e.g. online, in meetings, an exhibit). The final destination for these stories can help shape how you gather them.





Make it Happen

Preparing the Ground for the Interview

- When you make an appointment to interview someone, explain why you would like to conduct the interview and how you hope to use the interview.
- Explain that you would like to record and publish the interview (explain if you will use a voice or video recorder and where you hope to publish the results), but that the subject has the right to ask that the interview be used only for information gathering and not for publication.

Before the Start of the Interview

- After thanking your subject for the honor of interviewing him/her, explain that you will be asking permission at the end of the interview to use the recording, so the subject can decide then about how public s/he wishes to go with the information. Also ask if it would be okay to take a photograph of him/her to go with the interview as well as any collateral material.
- Make sure you have all of your equipment set up and tested (batteries fully charged) before starting the interview. It can be distracting for your interviewee to see you paying as much (or more) attention to your recorder and mic and notes as to him/her.
- Choose a quiet location without distracting ambient noise.
- If you are videotaping the interview, make sure objects in the background will not distract viewers. Make sure you have ample lighting. Use a tripod. Avoid zooming.
- Start the recording before starting the interview.

Opening the Interview

- Make sure you have the interviewee state his/her name.
- Asking factual questions, who-what-where, about how long the person has lived here allows the subject to get comfortable with you, the machine(s) and the warm-up to the story.
- Some questions to move into the heart of the interview: How has the community shaped you? How have you shaped the community? Tell me about... Explain to me...
- You could also show your subject some photos about which you would like to hear his/her stories.

During the Interview

- Listen attentively with your body language as well as your ears and recording devices through eye contact and by nodding, smiling and leaning forward. Be friendly and interested!
- Do not interrupt your interviewee, but judge how much s/he will open up through conversation rather than through Q & A. Sometimes you will have to offer some of your own examples—but try to avoid directing attention to your opinion or your story.
- Do not ask leading questions that will unduly influence interviewee's answer.
- Silence is okay. Let your subject think a little.
- If s/he gets off track, tactfully find a pause and pull the focus back to the topic with a question, or an "I was really interested in what you said about..." "Could you tell me more about that?"
- Keep checking in with the well being of your interviewee by reading his/her body language. Do not fatigue someone.
- It's okay for you to jot down notes for follow-up questions, but remember to return your attention to your storyteller.





The Meat of the Interview—Useful Questions

- To gather more precise detail: Can you tell me more about that? What was so important about that particular event? Why is that a critical piece of the story?
- To get at values: What is the resounding fact here? The dominant emotion? How has this issue affected your life?
- When they indicate visuals through gestures, help them to describe what they are seeing for someone who will only hear them.

Closing the Interview

- What else should I have asked—did we miss anything?
- Ask if you can take pictures of collateral materials (if any).

After the Interview

- Go over the release form and ask if s/he will sign it. Also ask if s/he would like a copy of the interview as recorded, and then a copy of it once edited.
- If using a story interview form (see sample script below), fill it out with the interviewee.
- Follow up with a thank-you note and copy of the interview.





Sample Script: One-on-One Story Interview

1. Warm Up

- ✓ Begin by introducing the project, why you are soliciting the person's story and how it will be used. If recording, this is a chance to test the equipment.
- ✓ Ask opening questions like:
 - How long have you lived/worked here?
 - Why did you move here (or why was your family here)?
 - If you were talking with a friend, how would you describe the highlights of your town?

2. Explore Values

- ✓ Ask an opening value prompting question like: We're gathering stories about your town to understand what people feel is special about it and what they'd like to see in its future. Can you think of a personal experience that speaks to what you value about our town? OR What is your favorite memory about living in our town?
- ✓ Attentively listen to the story.

3. Get Specific

- ✓ Ask clarifying questions to get at story details and why this particular story speaks to the person's connection to place. Sample questions include:
 - Would you tell me more about that?
 - Can you give me a specific example?
 - What was so important to you about this particular experience?
 - Why is that a critical piece of the story?
 - What about your experience speaks to what's important about our town?
- ✓ Ask more specific questions to get at areas of interest and/or depending on where stories lead. Here are a few examples:

An Area like Downtown

- What brings people downtown today?
- Do you attend any special events downtown? Which ones?
- How do you feel about downtown and the surrounding area today?

An Issue like Change

- If you were able to change 3 things in town, what would they be?
- What, if lost, would fundamentally change the character of town?
- In your life here, what changes have had the biggest impact on you and why?
- What parts of town have changed? What parts are still the same?

4. Reflect Back

- ✓ Reflect back on what you heard. Asking a simple question like, "I'm hearing that X is important to you as we plan for our town's future. Did I get that right?"
- ✓ Ask person to confirm the information on the "Story Interview Form", which can be used to organize information from the interview. (See next page for an example.)





Story Interview Form (adapted from Digital Explorations, LLC)

Story Interviewee_____

Story Interviewer_____

Themes from the story that stand out as descriptions of what's important in the community:

Examples

Downtown

Family Friendly

Access to the River

Specifics of Key Themes:

Examples

Downtown – can get day-to-day shopping done there, annual town celebrations like Harvest Fest, see neighbors in the streets

Family Friendly – town events like Harvest Fest, local organizations that support family activities like the YMCA

River – can swim and fish in it, there is access to it from downtown

Community Values in the Story:

Involved Community
Living Locally
Working Locally
☒ Family Friendly
Education
Small Town Feel
☒ Connection to Nature
Accessible, walkable and bikeable
Inclusive, Responsive Government
☒ Sense of Community/Belonging
☒ Strong Local Economy
Other (specify)

What other community values are important to the story sharer? (Pick up to 3 more)

☒ Involved Community
Living Locally
Working Locally
Family Friendly
Education
Small Town Feel
Connection to Nature
Accessible, walkable and bikeable
☒ Inclusive, Responsive Government
Sense of Community/Belonging
Strong Local Economy
Other (specify)

