Personal Narrative Assignment

Interview Project: Description and purpose

A personal narrative tells a true story about someone’s life. In this assignment, you will interview someone in your family and write a personal narrative based on the shared details of that person’s life.

You will begin the assignment by choosing an older relative to interview, either over the phone or in person. You will then work collaboratively in class to develop interview questions to ask that person. Once your interview is complete, you will write a personal narrative using the information you discovered. You will include basic personal information about your family member, as well as stories about his or her experiences that relate to culture and language. You will write not only about your family member’s life, but also about how culture was featured in their life.

Format: This is the format for your final personal narrative:

* 1st paragraph: Explain who you are, who you interviewed (full name), and why you chose that person.
* 2nd paragraph: Write a short biography about the person you interviewed using information you gathered from the “Basic Questions” section of the ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONS handout.
* 3rd paragraph: Write what you learned about your ancestral history using the “Family History Questions” section of the ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONS handout.
* 4th paragraph: Share what you learned about the interviewee’s cultural (language, traditions, religion, holidays) background, and the role it played in the development of their identity/character.
* Additional paragraphs: Write at least one paragraph, or more, about the responses to your personal questions and anything else that came up during the interview. If you learned something about your parents/relative, you can share it here as well.
* Last paragraph Write a reflective paragraph about the process of the interview and what you learned about your interviewee, his or her life, and the importance of culture.
* Make sure to include visuals (pictures, maps, etc) with captions through out your paper.

How to interview a relative: (Adapted from <http://genealogy.about.com/cs/oralhistory/ht/interview.htm>)

1. Always call a few days ahead to make sure your relative is available. Decide together where and when you will conduct the interview.

2. Give your relative a copy of your interview questions in advance. This will allow him or her time to think and prepare a few answers.

3. While you will need notebook paper and pens or pencils, you may also want to think about recording the interview with a digital recorder or video camera. Ask permission before you set up a camera though! Some people are shy about being taped. Bring at least one completely empty notebook with you. Mark the date each time you start a new interview session.

4. Ask questions that need more than simple “yes” or “no” answers. You are seeking facts, feelings, stories, and descriptions.

5. Don’t push for answers if your relative is unwilling to share. Move on to another question.

6. Use your questions as a guide, but don’t be afraid to let your relative tell a story that doesn’t seem related to your questions. (You want to make sure you get the basic information you need for the assignment, however.) Don’t interrupt your relative to get back to your interview questions—wait until he or she is finished the story.

7. Try not to schedule the interview for more than two hours and remember to take breaks while you are talking. Offer refreshments if you are conducting the interview at your house.

8. When you are done, be sure to thank your relative for his or her time. Sharing a final copy of the narrative with your relative would also be a nice gesture.

Interview Reminders:

1. Have a plan of attack beginning with careful and logical organization of your ten questions with the toughest and most sensitive questions for last.

2. Ask open-ended questions. Establish where the interviewee was with respect to the historical period or event being examined. Place your interviewee in context.

3. Ask one question at a time. Be prepared to think on your feet developing follow-up questions to insure clarity (“can you explain further?”). Do not move too fast into another question and allow for the “silent question” which can lead to further response. When you get “yes” or “no” responses ask why or why not?

4. Give the interviewee enough time to think and finish her or his thought before moving on to the next question. When you get a “yes” or “no” response ask, why or why not?

5. Let the interviewee answer for herself or himself without leading to an answer you expect. Remember your perceptions might not parallel those of the interviewee. Remember that the purpose of the interview is to find out what that person thinks, not what you think.

6. Listen closely and ask good follow-up questions. In forming new questions remember that individuals reading your interview may not know what you mean by some terms or references to places and people you and your interviewee might know well. Get interviewee to explain.

7. Let the interviewee do most of the talking. Interrupt only when the interviewee appears to be going off tangent, in order to redirect the interview. This said, keep in mind tangents often lead to new opportunities.

8. Save controversial questions for the end of the interview, when the interviewee is more comfortable talking with you.

9. Include your prepared questions on a separate sheet of paper.

Name of interviewee:

Relationship to interviewee:

Background personal information:

Notes on culture/language:

Prepared questions for interviewee: