

Interviewing for Research - Audio Recorders

- The equipment and how to use it
- Positioning equipment
- Recording environment
- Starting the recording

Equipment

Get to know your equipment. Take time to read the instruction booklet. Practise recording things. Think of the following factors:

In what situations might the recording be distorted because it is too loud. Or when might it be too quiet? Has the machine an automatic recording level, or can you set the level manually; if so, at what level should it be set?

Does your machine have a Long Play feature? If you are concerned with obtaining the highest possible quality of recording, don't use this.

Advice about what audio equipment is currently available can be found on the East Midlands Oral History Archive website at:

<http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/equipment.html>

Positioning equipment

Where should you position the microphone? Tie microphones should be fixed around the lapel area. Too close to the mouth and there may be distortion, too far away and the recording will be too quiet. Be aware of the microphone brushing against clothes - a crocodile clip which makes the microphone stand proud of clothing is useful - and of the interviewee playing with the cable or crossing their arms over the microphone.

Table microphones should be placed as near to the interviewee as possible, and are sometimes placed on a soft surface like a book or cushion to lessen the effect of the sound reflecting off hard table tops.

If you are worried about the interviewer's voice not being loud enough you may want to consider using two microphones with a two-in-one adaptor. Practise all this to see what happens.

Recording environment

Beware of environments with hard surfaces which produce 'cold' recordings with lots of echo. Carpets and soft furnishings absorb echoes and produce better recordings.

However, you may find yourself in an office or room which you know will produce a less than ideal recording. Here, a tie microphone is preferable to a table microphone as there will be less echo on the recording.

Interviewees who have notes they want to refer to should be discouraged from rustling papers in front of the microphone. They should also not play with the microphone lead or the microphone itself. Drumming fingers and nervous tics which make a noise will come out on the recording too.

A microphone isn't nearly as selective as the human ear and brain, and sounds you may not notice at the time will be louder on the recording than you might expect. Ticking clocks, hissing fires, snoring dogs, chirping budgies and noises from kitchens have all spoiled recordings in the past. Passing traffic can provide an annoying background hum. Try to remove pets (or at least keep them quiet), close windows, or find the quietest place possible to make the recording.

Having said this, your primary concern should be the comfort of the interviewee (and this may mean they need to sit in their 'comfy chair'). If you are going to be talking with someone for 90 minutes or so, comfort may outweigh considerations of background noise, although not if this makes the words on the recording inaudible.

Starting the recording

Start the recording by asking the interviewee to give you some basic information. For example, their name, date of birth and place of birth; or name, occupation, and the day's date (it is usually best not to ask for someone's current address in case other people listen to the recording. Keep this on a separate form). Once they have done this, stop the recording and listen back to it. It is to be hoped that any loose connections or failing batteries will reveal themselves at this point.

You can explain to the interviewee that you will occasionally look at the recorder to make sure it is still working. It is easy to be carried away in an interesting interview and miss the end of the tape/minidisk/CD, or not notice that a connection has come loose.

Again, practise using the equipment.

More information about sound recording equipment

Equipment pages at EMOHA: <http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/equipment.html>