

# Global Folklorist Interview Guide

*Most of what folklorists want to discover is not in books; it is in the lives and minds of people. Through observation, participation and asking good questions while interviewing tradition bearers, folklorists learn firsthand about living traditions.*



Smithsonian  
Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage



## Identify a Tradition Bearer to Interview

The best way to find people is by asking other people. Chances are you know someone who knows just the tradition bearer you are seeking!

Ask: family, friends, neighbors, teachers, librarians, folklorists and local historians

Check: local newspapers, community bulletin boards and senior citizen centers

Attend: a local event or festival, or a community gathering

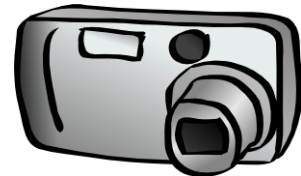


## Schedule a First Meeting

If at all possible, schedule a preliminary visit with your tradition bearer. Introduce yourself and the goals of your project. Figure out when and where to meet next to do the video and audio recording.

## Gather and Test Equipment

An important first step in conducting an interview is to think about the equipment you will need. Audio or video recording and note-taking are the most common ways of recording interviews.



Folklorists recommend:

- notebook and pen
- video camera and tripod
- audio recorder
- digital camera
- spare batteries and/or battery charger
- extension cord
- tradition bearer release form

Practice setting up and using equipment before your interview. You may want to practice by interviewing a friend.

## Schedule the Interview

Contact the tradition bearer to make sure he/she is willing to be interviewed.

Be sure that the tradition bearer clearly understands the purpose of the interview: your tapes and notes will be turned into a presentation that will be submitted to an international online challenge. Your tradition bearer will need to sign your release form.

Ask the tradition bearer if it's ok with them to use voice and image recording equipment during the interview.

Schedule a time and place for the interview. Schedule enough time with the tradition bearer (at least one hour) to test your equipment and conduct the interview.



## Prepare Questions for the Interview

The first step in writing questions is to do your background research. Knowing more about the tradition will help you ask better questions and result in a better interview. You can consult books, articles or a reliable Internet source. (Ask your parent or teacher if you are not sure a website is reliable.) Look for the answers to these questions:

### Research

- What is the history and origin of the tradition?
- Who usually performs/does it?
- Where, when and why it is usually done?
- Are there variations (different versions or ways of doing it)?
- How may it have changed over the years?



Once you understand more about the tradition, prepare a list of questions specific to your tradition bearer.

**TIP:** Avoid questions that may get only a yes or no response.

Think of your interview as a story with a beginning, middle and end. Build on your questions, and link them together. One way to structure your questioning for a tradition bearer is by following these suggestions:

### Prepare Questions

- **Personal Background:** Where did you grow up? When did you first become aware of this tradition? Why did you want to learn it?
- **Learning:** Who taught you this skill? How long did it take to learn?
- **Context:** Where do you do this tradition, and for whom? Do you work with others? Where do you get your supplies/instruments/tools/ingredients?
- **Process:** Explain the steps in making or performing your tradition from start to finish. What are the names of particular instruments/tools/techniques?
- **Evolution:** Has the tradition changed and why? What do you think is the future of this tradition?

(See Appendix A for more sample questions.)



**TIP:** Your list of questions should serve as a guideline, not limit the number of questions you can or should ask.

## During the Interview

Some rules for conducting a good, effective interview:

1. Check microphone placement. Do a short test recording to make sure you are picking up voices well.
2. Speak directly to the person in a respectful, conversational tone.
3. Always listen carefully as the tradition bearer answers a question before asking the next question.
4. Ask follow-up questions to get more information based on what you hear and learn. For example:
  - a. Can you explain?
  - b. Can you give me an example?
  - c. How did that happen?
5. Ask to see photographs, examples of crafts, home movies or audio recordings and other artifacts that can act as “prompts” to help illustrate what was said.



The cameras allow you to capture a visual record of more than just your tradition bearer during the interview – take videos and photographs of related materials and experiences that the tradition bearer may share. If you visit a craftsperson's home, ask to see his/her workspace or workshop. If you are interviewing a tradition bearer about a movement or performance-based tradition, such as music, dance or martial arts, ask if he/she will play a tune or show you a dance or a move, or plan to attend a performance he/she will be giving in your community.

Include in your visuals or video:

- tools or supplies related to the tradition, with the tradition bearer demonstrating how to use them, if possible
- products “in process” as well as completed products
- copies of historic or family photos (take a photo of these, or if possible, scan them to get a digital copy, with the tradition bearer's permission).

## Before You Leave

1. Have the release form signed by the tradition bearer.
2. Ask if it's ok to contact the tradition bearer with follow-up questions.
3. Thank the tradition bearer for sharing his/her time and tradition with you.

## Immediately after the Interview

Make notes about the interview while it is still fresh in your mind. Jot down impressions, observations, important themes, contextual information and ideas for follow-up. Make sure to send the tradition bearer a thanks you note, along with a copy or the link to watch/listen to your edited video.



## Appendix A: Sample Questions to Spark Interview Ideas for Global Folklorists

### **Personal Background**

What is your name? Where and when were you born? Where have you lived? What languages do you speak? What jobs have you had? What do you do for a living now?

Why have you made an effort to preserve this tradition? What community stories and memories do you have that are associated with this tradition?

### **Learning Process**

How did you first get started with this particular tradition/skill? What got you interested?

How did you learn your skills? Who taught you? When? What was the learning process like? What is the most challenging or difficult aspect of the tradition to learn? Why?

How is your skill learned, mastered and passed on to younger generations?

### **History**

What are the key characteristics of the tradition? What is its history? Do you know and where the tradition originated? How has it traditionally been practiced? How has it changed or developed over time?

Does the tradition have different styles or variations? What are they?

What do you think is the future of this tradition? What are its challenges and opportunities? Are others learning and practicing the tradition?

### **Process**

Describe the steps of the process from start to finish. What's involved?

What special knowledge, skills and abilities are needed? What techniques and methods?

What raw materials are used? Where do you get your materials/supplies/ingredients? How are they prepared? Have they changed over time? How? Why?

What tools are involved? How and when are they used?

### **Context**

In what context is the skill/tradition performed? For whom? When? What do you value most about what you do? Why?

How do you judge excellence within the tradition? What standards and criteria are used to evaluate the way the tradition is performed? What makes someone respected in the tradition?

## References

**This guide was created with information from the following sources. Visit these sources directly for more information:**

- The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide  
[http://www.folklife.si.edu/education\\_exhibits/resources/guide/introduction.aspx](http://www.folklife.si.edu/education_exhibits/resources/guide/introduction.aspx)
- Inherit Iowa (produced by Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies) <http://www.uni.edu/iowaonline/folklife/inherit/1.pdf>
- Student Guide: Discovering Our Delta  
<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/StudentGuideandForms.pdf>