Effective Question Formats

Open-Ended
This question format promotes broad interpretation and elaborative response. Use this often.

Examples: How did you happen to choose USC for your undergraduate work? (or) What was it like to work at the Charleston Naval Ship Yard during WWII?

Two-Sentence
The first sentence gives the interviewee brief background of why your question is important; the second asks the question.

Example: We want to preserve your recollections to pass down to the next generation of USC students. What was your academic experience at USC like in the 1950s?

Reverse
This is used to turn the perspective in a different direction. It’s sometimes important to know why someone didn’t do something as much as why they did do something.

Example: Why weren’t USC students more politically active in the 1960s? (instead of) Why were USC students of the 1960s politically passive?

Follow Up
When the interviewee says something that sparks another question, be sure to follow up rather than just going to the next question on your list.

Question Formats to Avoid

Double Question
Asking two questions at once is likely to result in only one being answered and the other forgotten—it is confusing to the interviewee. If you really want both questions answered, ask them separately.

Example of what NOT to do: —What year did you start playing football for USC and what was your major?

Yes/No Question
These are questions asked in a way that allows a simple yes or no answer without elaboration which is not conducive to storytelling(unless you have a particularly sophisticated or loquacious interviewee).

Leading Question: It is important to avoid inserting your own bias or assumptions into a question.

Example: What are your recollections of the Civil Rights movement, and why were most community members apathetic to the cause? (This is the interviewer’s opinion, not a fact)