

RECORDING A PANDEMIC



Sample Interview



SAMPLE INTERVIEW



*Some tips and tricks,
based on a real interview*

The next few pages contain the transcript of a few excerpts from an oral history interview I conducted about life during COVID-19.

I've highlighted a few more interviewing tips, but I've also pointed out a number of mistakes I made while conducting this interview! Oral history interviews are an in-the-moment experience, and little mistakes happen all the time. But hopefully what I highlight here will help prevent you from making some of the more common mistakes!

One note about this transcript: it is structured relatively informally, to make it easier to read. More professional transcripts often include time stamps for each question and answer, as well as other forms of notation.

Interview Transcript:

Serena Lowery—April 24, 2020

Emma Tennier-Stuart (ETS) interviewing Serena Lowery (SL) via Facebook video call, April 24, 2020.

This is the start of the recording, but I always spend a couple minutes just chatting before turning the recorder on and starting the formal interview

ETS: Today is April 24, 2020. My name is Emma Tennier-Stuart. I'm in Guelph Ontario and I'm interviewing Serena Lowery, who is in Kingston, Ontario. And I know Serena as a friend and as a co-worker from the museum where we both work—or at least where we both work when there isn't a pandemic going on.

Always start by introducing yourself and your interviewee. Make sure to keep a document with your audio file that contains the correct spellings of your full names.

So I'm going to start with just some kind of like basic preliminary questions just to kind of get you talking, show you that it's actually super easy to answer these questions, you do know the answers. It's not a scary job interview. (laughs)

So, what is your full name?

These interviews can be as formal or informal as you like!

SL: My full name is Serena Mary Jean Lowery.

ETS: Okay. And if you're comfortable sharing, how old are you?

SL: I am 24.

Approach this question with caution!!

ETS: Yes, you are. We'll get more into that after. And where do you live, both now and usually?

SL: I—right now I live in Kingston, Ontario, and I go to Queen's University. I will be moving, though—back to Guelph, after my lease is up in my apartment, to finish off my degree.

ETS: Lovely. Okay, so I'm going to kind of just pick and choose some of the questions that are in the guide. I don't know if you had a chance to look at it or not. But one of the questions is: what do you do for work? So, knowing that you're a student right now, what kind of—what work are you doing right now and what do you and don't you like about it?

[beep] ← *If you're using an audio recorder, pay attention to any strange sounds it may make...*

SL: So, my work is with a lot of self-determination and discipline. So I am currently writing my master's thesis. That entails basically writing a lot during the day, realizing I don't have information I need, doing quick research, going back to writing, and editing my work. And then I also am a teaching assistant [beep] so I'm also marking exams at the moment.

ETS: Good times. And are you living with someone or alone right now?

SL: I live by myself in Kingston.

ETS: Okay. Before the pandemic, what would you say an average day was like for you?

SL: I would get up, [beep] grab a coffee from a café, decide whether or not I was going to my office. If I did get to my office, which I would try to, work there for a couple hours.

[Audio file cuts out] ← *Always make sure your recording device has enough battery power AND enough storage. I made a classic mistake here, and the recording stopped when it ran out of space. I had to delete a file before continuing the interview, losing part of this interview in the process.*

ETS: Alright, resuming. So what would you normally do on the weekends?

SL: On Saturdays, I still work on my thesis. So it's the same type of day than my—as my workday—workweek, sorry. And then Sundays, I don't work on anything. I usually end up seeing friends, watching a movie, or playing too many hours of Sims.

ETS: I love the honesty. Thank you. (both laugh)

ETS: And then were you planning anything for this spring or summer? So, thinking before the pandemic started, if none of this had happened, what were your plans for the spring and summer?

SL: Well, I was hoping to graduate, which, I mean, is still happening, but there's no ceremony now. But actually I guess it kind of works out because I'm not defending before that ceremony anyway, so I guess scratch that. I don't know. Anyways, I was going to be moving back home and working at the museum. I was very—I was looking forward to that. Love—love my job.

ETS: Can you tell me a bit more about the museums? What is the museum where you work? Pretend I don't know.

Always imagine someone who doesn't know you or your interviewee will listen to your interview someday. Be sure to clarify information, even if it's something you already know.

SL: So I work at the Guelph Civic Museum and the John McCrae House. The Guelph Civic Museum tells the story and the history of Guelph and its peoples. And the John McCrae House is the birthplace of Lieutenant John McCrae...

ETS: Maybe we won't get into—Unless you have any strong feelings about how the government has handled the pandemic—any strong opinions on that? We can skip over that one if you—if—if not—

SL: No, no, no. I think they're doing what they have to do. That's—yeah. Compared to some other countries, Canada's not doing terribly.

[inaudible crosstalk]

ETS: Fair enough.

When interviewing, try to let your interviewee speak, uninterrupted. Here, I spoke over Serena, and made it impossible to hear what either of us was saying.

ETS: Um, okay, so the next kind of group of questions that I have written—we're kind of getting to the end—but they're about, like, looking forward. Before we get into that, though: a more, like, personalized question that I wanted to ask. So your birthday was on Sunday. What was it like to have a birthday during a pandemic, while living in isolation?

SL: Um. It was odd.

When your interviewee gives a short response, you can reply, to indicate that you've heard them. But keep that reply short, and then remain silent for a moment to see if your interviewee will say anything more.

ETS: Fair.

SL: I'm, so actually I—before I say this, I would say that I was living with my parents three weeks ago, and in a couple days, I'll be living with them again. So just—my parents ended up surprising me and they came to Kingston and we ordered in lunch from one of the takeout places, so it was a nice surprise because it made it less lonely, and I got to hug a human. It's very nice. They didn't bring my dog, which I'm just realizing. Wow.

ETS: I was gonna ask. How rude!

SL: They didn't bring my dog. Wow. Never mind. Maybe I'm a little less grateful now. (both laugh)

But that was nice. And then they left and I had some really nice friends, like, drop off stuff, and my other friends played board games with me [remotely, through an online boardgame website] so it was a weird birthday because usually—this is gonna sound very self-centered,—but I love celebrating my birthday. I usually have, like, a weekend where it's just like, this friend group one night, and this friend group the other. So, like, definitely having it in one day was odd.

I mostly just like it because it's an excuse for people to hang out with me. But—so that was odd. But it was not as bad as I thought it was going to be.

If you realise after your interview that you forgot to clarify a point like this, be sure to write it down in a document you save alongside the audio file.