

Resources

Oral History texts and guides:

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Recording Equipment and technical resources:

- Audio Technology Tutorial. *The Spoken Word: New Resources to Transform Teaching and Learning*,

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- Towne, Jeff. (2009). *Recording Phone Calls*. Atlantic Public Media. <http://transom.org/?p=1165> (For telephone interviews)

Contacts

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Society of California Archivists Brochure Series: Preserving Your History

Doing Oral History



What is oral history?

An **oral history** is a recorded audio or video interview, in question-and-answer format.

An **oral history project** is a series of oral history interviews focused on documenting a topic, theme, era, place, organization, event, or group of people.

Oral histories provide a means of capturing the unique stories and first-hand experiences of individuals, families, and diverse communities that are not recorded as paper documents and would otherwise be lost. It is a way to document the stories of everyday people so that their history is preserved. Oral histories can also enhance the paper trail of the past by providing details about photographs and clarifying meaning in written documents.



Planning an oral history interview

Successful oral history requires thought and planning.

Crucial steps include:

- Defining the objectives of the interview.
- Conducting background research in order to develop a topic outline and to draft questions for all likely topics/subtopics.
- Selecting appropriate recording equipment and practicing with it before the interview.

Equipment

- For long-term preservation and access, use the best recording equipment within your means.
- Use an external microphone instead of relying on the microphone built into the recorder.
- Commit oral histories to file-based digital media from the outset to avoid physical formats (magnetic tape, CD-R, etc.) that degrade over time and require ever-rarer playback devices. This also avoids expensive downstream analog-to-digital transfer later on.
- Record in an uncompressed, multi-platform, standard format such as WAV or broadcast WAV (BWF) at a resolution no less than 16-bit, 44.1 kps.
- Interviewers may decide to use digital videorecording equipment to collect and preserve visual as well as aural information. There are many different digital video formats and they each have their pros and cons. These files can be more complicated to preserve and also may be hard for users to view, due to the CODECS (coding/decoding methods).

During the interview

Equipment, location, and interview setup

- Place the recorder where you can see it, but where it is out of the line of sight of your narrator.
- Interview and record in a quiet place! Close windows and doors to avoid traffic noises, put pets outside, silence all phones.
- Do a brief test recording with the interviewee at the interview location and play it back immediately to make sure the equipment is working and there is no distracting background noise.
- The interviewer should record a “lead” at the start of each session, consisting of the names of interviewee and interviewer, day and year of session, interview’s location, and proposed subject(s) of the recording.
- Both parties should agree to the approximate length of the interview in advance.

The Interview

- Work from an outline of major topics with prepared questions for each topic. In general, a chronological organization is best, because it can show how their ideas and experiences have developed over time.
- For example: family background; siblings; early schooling; neighborhood characteristics; community life; later education and vacation(s); work and professional life; marriage and children, etc.
- Start with easily answered personal (and non-controversial) background questions.
- Ask short questions, making one query at a time.
- Avoid questions that result in “Yes” or “No” responses. Questions that begin “Tell me about . . .” or “Can you describe . . .” are good ways of stimulating the interviewee’s memory.
- Probe! Always ask for hows and whys; ask for opinions and feelings. Ask follow-up questions; don’t just go on to the next question on your list. Ask for anecdotes and examples. Be alert to what the interviewee does not say and to help him or her expand the story so it is more meaningful for others.
- Avoid prematurely interrupting interviewee responses. Allow silence and give the interviewee time to think.
- Don’t make the interviewee strictly stick to the chronological order of the questions; sometimes they will remember something and jump around in time. Once they are done talking about that topic, gently bring them back to the chronology. “So let’s get back to . . .”
- Avoid participating in a conversation and supplying your own anecdotes - make sure that you are only asking questions, not answering them.

After the interview

- Have the interviewee sign and date a legal agreement or deed of gift that establishes who owns the copyright and how the interview can be used by researchers. This agreement is mandatory if the interview is donated to a library or an archives.
- Field Notes: Very soon after the interview, the interviewer should sit down and make notes in an organized fashion, before time dulls the details. The notes should tell who, what, when, and where. They add context that will help the transcriber or future scholars to understand the interview.

- Life History Forms: Personal data is very useful and recommended if the interview is a family history project or if interviews are to be archived for future use. The form needs to contain information that helps scholars understand, use, and interpret the interview. Aside from interviewee’s name, address, telephone number, birthdate, and birthplace, the form might ask for the names, birth dates, and dates of death for parents, siblings, spouses, and children. It could also ask for places the interviewee lived, education and work histories, listings of special skills and memberships in organizations.
- Prepare the transcript (written text of words spoken during the interview) by listening to each recording and producing a word processed document for easy access to content. If you don’t have time to do a full transcript, at least summarize the interview in time segments by creating an index. This will help you know which portion to listen to, in order to hear a particular topic.

Preservation

- Transfer the digital file(s) from your recorder to your computer and include the interviewee’s full name and date of interview in the file name(s). These uncompressed files will be the archival versions - do not edit them.
- Create a copy of the audio file(s) as MP3(s) for playback and transcription.
- Copy the interview and transcript files onto an external hard drive and/or upload them to a server (cloud computing - also known as “the cloud”). You could also burn a copy onto a CD or DVD for the interviewee or a transcriber; however, doing this as a backup is not very reliable because CDs and DVDs have very short lifespans (do this only if you don’t have access to an external hard drive or server).
- Only after making all these copies and backups should you delete the files from your audio recorder.
- Make sure you regularly back up the contents of your computer and migrate the file formats forward as necessary (on your computer and on your external hard drive).
- If you received photographs or other artifacts (originals or photocopies) that were used during the interview, label and describe their significance and store them with any notes, in a cool dry place.