

Oral History Kit 2009
Instructions & Guidelines
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Introduction

Oral history involves the systematic collection of people's life stories. The goal of collecting these stories is to document people's lived experience, as they see it through their own eyes, for the historical record. Oral history thus differs from folklore, hearsay, rumor, or gossip in that it seeks to record and verify the information people give about their own lives. Oral historians collect people's testimonies, analyze those testimonies for accuracy, and place them into a viable historical context. Without such testimonies, memories of lived experience are lost and the everyday histories of ordinary people remain unwritten. As an oral historian you thus have the unique privilege of gathering and processing information that may shed light on your own lived experiences as well as those of future generations.

Getting Started

It is important to formulate a plan for collecting and processing the information given to you by interviewees. The plan should include central questions to be answered by talking with certain individuals, equipment available for interviewing and processing interview data, personnel to carry out data collection and processing, time frames for completion of the project, financial resources available, archival requirements for storing collected data, and the end product or result of the data collection. Your plan should reflect your research goals and indicate how you will reach them. Your goals may change as the project evolves and your central questions get answered, for in the process of talking with people and learning their (hi)stories, additional questions will arise which may indicate a promising new avenue of investigation. When such avenues open to you, you are on the path to collecting a richer and more complete body of data. Stay focused on what you want to learn, and keep your central questions in mind as you proceed, even if those questions change in the course of data collection.

- *Central questions: decide what information you want to know and how you will invite your interviewees to tell you about it.* Knowing at the outset what you hope to learn from interviewees will help you to formulate good interview questions later.
- *Equipment: choose the equipment you will need to record, analyze, and process the information you collect.* Consider whether or not you will need broadcast-quality recordings, for example, and the equipment necessary to produce them. Digital audio recorders with internal/external microphones, digital video recorders, scanners, printers, and laptop computers typically work well for collecting oral histories.
- *Personnel: determine the people who will carry out each part of your plan.* You will want to enlist interviewers and data processors whom are knowledgeable about the information you are seeking and about the data collection process.
- *Time: determine the time frame available for completion of the project.* A common error when collecting oral histories is to plan to accomplish too much in too short a

time. Be realistic about how much time it will take to schedule, conduct, transcribe, analyze, present, and archive your data.

- *Finances: create a budget that is also realistic.* If you must purchase equipment for the project, choose the equipment that will help you best accomplish your particular project goals.
- *Archives: prepare your data for long-term storage.* You will need to complete records that document your work for future use, including release forms for interviewer and interviewees, biographical information sheets for interviewees, and release forms for donated and/or loaned materials from interviewees. You will want to use archival-quality materials to ensure the longest life possible for your recordings and other collected materials.
- *End result: envision your data as part of an end product.* What will you do with the stories you collect? How will you make them available to a wider audience? Who is your intended audience, and what will it want to know about the data you've gathered? Answers to these questions should be reflected in your central questions and project goals.

Preparing for interviews

Interviewing people about their life stories is an exciting task, but it is different than simply having a conversation with them. Because the interview will be recorded and data from the interview used to help create a historical record, it is important that as an interviewer you are prepared (with equipment and with knowledge of your subject) and that your interviewees understand what will happen to the information they give you. You will need to find out all you can about your subject before determining whom to interview.

- *Background research: conduct preliminary research using reputable written sources.* Get to know your subject well so that you can ask good questions during the course of the interview. Create a bibliography to document the sources you consult.
- *Selecting interviewees: determine whom to contact to get your questions answered.* Seek out individuals with first-hand experience of the subject and with enthusiasm for your project, if possible. Seek out those with insider knowledge, and, if necessary, with materials to lend/donate.
- *Making contact: before the interview, explain to interviewees the goals of your project, its timeline and procedures, and the topics you'd like to discuss when you meet.* A phone call to discuss these items and to decide on a time and place to meet usually suffices.

Conducting interviews

- *Rapport: establish a positive relationship with your interviewee so that you are both more comfortable.* Make a good impression by being presentable and polite. Chat with interviewees before beginning the interview, but avoid chatting about subjects that would be better to discuss while recording.
- *Stress management: some interviewees may be nervous or self-conscious in front of recording equipment.* It is your job to make them feel comfortable and to help them manage the stress of a recorded event. Explain what you are doing and why, and answer any questions they may have before you begin. Place the recording equipment out of sight, if necessary.

- *Identify participants at the outset of the recording.* Name the people, place, date, and time of the interview as you begin the interview. This information will help you label your recordings accurately.
- *Equipment: know your equipment well and to be ready with a back-up plan should it fail.* Practice using your equipment before going to the interview. At the interview, use two modes of recording (two digital audio recorders, one audio recorder and one video recorder, etc.) in case one mode fails. Have extra batteries/power packs, extension cords, adapters, etc. on hand if your equipment requires them. Monitor your equipment as the interview proceeds; you may need to change batteries or make other adjustments during the course of the interview.
- *Location: choose a quiet place without background noise.* Be mindful of ambient noise (outside traffic, chiming clocks, rustling papers, etc.) that may compromise a recording. Check sound levels before beginning the interview.
- *Introduction: create a standard beginning for your recordings.* Identify the date, time, place, and names of the people present at the beginning of your recording. Get verbal consent/permission from the interviewee before proceeding. Briefly explain what you are doing and why, and ask the interviewee for permission to include in the archives the information they provide.

Asking questions

- *Begin with easy questions and proceed to harder ones.* Ease into the interview to give the interviewee time to get comfortable. You may want to begin with a biographical sheet that records personal data like contact information, age and place of birth, educational background, military service, clubs and affiliations, etc. You may also want to complete the bio sheet as a warm up, before recording begins.
- *Ask “open” or “essay” questions, rather than “closed” ones.* Open/essay questions like “How did you feel when that happened?” invite extended answers. Closed questions like “You felt wonderful, didn’t you?” invite yes/no answers.
- *Speak plainly and avoid putting words into the interviewee’s mouth.* The closed question above leads the interviewee to an answer, rather than allowing the interviewee to use his/her own words.
- *Make eye contact.* Keep your rapport strong. Use silent ways to encourage the interviewee to share information. Nodding, smiling, and similar gestures let the interviewee know that you are interested.
- *Allow for silence.* Sometimes interviewees need to think about an answer before giving it, or they may need extra time to process what you are asking. Be prepared to wait for answers and to restate questions if necessary.
- *Ask about things that are unclear.* Listen carefully to what is said, and take notes during the interview to help clarify information as it is exchanged. These notes will help you later with transcription.
- *Ask follow-up questions to elicit further information about a topic.* Probe for greater detail or for connections to things that have already been discussed or that you’d like to discuss. Good use of follow-up questions yields good data.
- *Keep your opinions to yourself.* The goal is to record the interviewee’s thoughts, rather than to expound on your own. Stay focused on helping the interviewee to keep talking about important matters.

- *Bring the conversation back around to the information you are seeking.* If the conversation proceeds along a tangent, gently bring the talk back to topic if necessary.
- *Allow the interviewee enough latitude to pursue information that may seem at first to be tangential.* At times information that appears to be unimportant at first will turn out to be crucial later. Use your best judgment about when to move on to a new topic or return to one already discussed.
- *Monitor the energy levels of all concerned.* Interviewer and interviewees alike can expend a great deal of energy during an interview. Wrap it up before exhaustion sets in. One hour per interview is a good rule of thumb.
- *Handle materials provided by the interviewee with care.* If materials are donated to you/your project, handle them with an eye toward respecting the donor's wishes for the use of the material, as well as archival requirements for materials preservation.
- *Complete required forms before leaving the interview.* Consent forms, accession and use permission forms, etc. are easiest to complete with the interviewee, rather than after the fact.
- *Talk with the interviewee after the interview is over.* Ease out of the interview visit by chatting briefly. Allow the interviewee time to ask questions before you leave.

After the interview

- *Label recordings immediately.* Include the interviewee's name and the date, time, and place of the interview.
- *Send a thank-you note to the interviewee.* Express your gratitude for their time, effort, materials, insights, etc.
- *Make a copy of your recordings.* If the original is lost or damaged, the copy can replace it. Use archival-quality materials for original copies of the interviews, and use copies of the original to do transcription and analysis work.
- *Index and transcribe the interview as soon as possible using a copy of the original recording.* Your memory of what was said, the gestures the interviewee used while talking, and other pertinent information will be freshest right after the interview is complete. Use the notes you took during the interview to assist with transcription.
- *Allow ample time to complete transcriptions.* Each hour of recorded talk time will result in 30+ pages of typescript and require six to twelve hours of labor. Plan accordingly.

Interview indexing and transcription

Create an index and a verbatim transcription for each interview you complete.

- An index is a topical summary of the information exchanged during the interview. Use the digital counter on the recorder to label the place in the recording where each subject was discussed. Use keywords to label each subject.
- A verbatim transcription is a written record of everything that was said during the interview. This record is literal; do not paraphrase, summarize, or otherwise change wording. Do not include false starts unless they add meaning. If the transcript will be used for tape editing to produce an audiovisual presentation, however, include everything.

- Omit the interviewer’s supportive sounds like “I see” and “Uh-huh,” as well as crutch words like “you know” unless they add meaning or convey the interviewee’s unique speech patterns.
- Include a cover sheet that with basic information about the interview (date, place, interviewer, interviewee).
- Double space the typescript and use margins for wide enough for editing.
- Identify each speaker according to last name, initials, or “Q” and “A.”
- Include editorial remarks that explain interruptions that occurred during the interview. Put them in brackets: “[end of side one].”
- Begin each page of the typescript by identifying the speaker, even if it is a continuation of the previous page.
- Include both the interviewer’s questions and the interviewee’s answers.
- Leave a blank space for a word or phrase that is unclear. This may be filled in later by interviewer or interviewee.
- If the spelling of a proper name is unclear, spell the name phonetically and indicate in parentheses “phonetic.”
- Laughter and significant gestures can be indicated in brackets (do this sparingly).

Transcription editing

Edit the transcription for final submission to the archives.

- Edit the transcript for style and clarity rather than content.
- Fill in any blanks left by the transcriber.
- Remove any false starts that remain.
- Remove any restricted information. Note on the transcript where the material was removed.
- Correct spelling and punctuation errors.
- Correct grammar only when the corrections help clarify ambiguities or misstatements.
- Do not edit so extensively as to modify the facts or the general impression of the interview (except to remove restricted information).

Archiving materials

Materials collected during interviews should be handled with archival requirements in mind:

- Interviewee identification: complete a “Biographical Information” sheet for each interviewee which includes contact information and other pertinent details.
- Potential donations: complete an “Accession Receiving Report” for all materials intended for donation. Give signed copies of the form to potential donors.
- Loaned documents: complete a “Receipt and Release for Temporary Custody and Copying” form and give a signed copy to the lender. Borrow only those documents pertinent to your project and return them as soon as possible to the lender.
- Label photos and other documents that are borrowed/donated with names, dates, places, and other identifying information. Use only pencil.
- Scan photos and other documents that are borrowed or intended for donation. Keep scanned and original documents together when submitting to the curator of your archives.
- Handle all materials per curatorial instructions and hold them in a secure location while processing them.

- Return all materials to loaners in satisfactory condition.
- Complete a “Receipt and Release for Temporary Custody and Copying” form to show that materials on loan have been returned to their lender. Submit to curator/archives all original paperwork.

Materials scanned after interviews should meet the following criteria:

- Photos and documents 8X10 and larger: 600 dpi
- Photos and documents smaller than 8X10: at least 600 dpi
- Assign a processing number to digital files. This number should coordinate with a written record of information about the file (who, what, where, when, why, how, etc.)

Archival supplies can be purchased at University Products, www.universityproducts.com.

Things to purchase:

- Acid free reinforced file folders (legal size, 100)
- CD storage pocket (Tyvek, 25/pk)
- Archival Gold CD R/W
- Document preservation binder (10X13, 5/pk)
- Polypro Photo Pages (4X6)
- Print Holder Protector (8.5X11, 50 pk)
- Disposable cotton gloves (sizes 6-8, size medium)
- Acid-free bond paper 8.5X11 (500/RM)
- Permanent Dry Box 11.5X15X1.5 (12)
- Reinforced document case 15.5X12.5X5 (12)
- CD storage box 5.5X5.4375” and dividers
- Divider guides for CD storage box (10/pk)
- Pencils HB soft (3 boxes)
- Polypro or Tyvek CD sleeves (100)

Additional information

There are many online resources available to help you get started. You may want to consult first the Oral History Association’s website, which provides a wealth of information, including a list of oral history centers and collections throughout the world at <http://www.h-net.org>. This list includes brief descriptions of oral history resources available at universities, museums, libraries, and other public and private institutions, as well as links to those institutions.