



Getting Started with Oral History

What is Oral History?

Oral history refers both to a field of history as well as its object of study. Oral history can be narratives or stories about the past communicated verbally and living in memory, as well as the recorded interviews representing or expressing those stories. Oral history is a distinct mode of historical inquiry with its own methods and approach. Oral history practice is predicated on **shared authority** and **dialogue** between narrator and historian. It also calls our attention to issues of memory and reliability, the ways in which cultural forces shape story. As a communicative event oral history often contains a range of verbal genres: storytelling formulas, anecdotes, reminiscences, memoir, testimonies, songs, proverbs, and other aspects of folklore. Oral history allows us to expand whose voices “count” in history and to understand memory and what it means for us today.

Project Design

Why do oral history? An oral history project is an opportunity to document history that has been left out of or silenced in the historical record. It is an opportunity to document memories and experiences to share with future generations.

In designing an oral history project, consider what your goals are. Why are you doing this project? What is the project focus? Are you exploring a specific time and/or place? Are you driven by contemporary concerns or issues? Are you documenting a unique community or generating new historical knowledge? Are you interested in exploring specific themes? Are you compiling a family or community history? Will these interviews become part of an archive or other larger project?

After you have a focus, think about and identify possible narrators. Who do you know? Are there any organizations or associations that can be helpful? Attend community events to make connections and forge relationships. Always ask, “who else should I talk to?”

Develop protocols for your project, including a release form and lists of questions. Consider any ethical issues that might arise. Are you working with a vulnerable population that might require special protections? Can you provide those protections?



Types of oral history projects include:

Life stories
Family histories
Community histories
Storytelling projects
Individual or collective
memoriescapes
Documentaries, exhibits,
websites, and more

Interviewing

Oral history comes into being through talk and interaction – between speakers and listeners, and more formally, between a **narrator and interviewer** in dialogue with one another. Each interview is a unique, so there is no one formula that guarantees a successful interview. Yet interviewing is a skill that can be learned, developed, and improved with practice. Aim to **establish rapport** and conduct interviews that ask specific but open-ended questions, with an emphasis on allowing the person being interviewed to answer without being limited by pre-defined choices.

There are a few things you need to ***do before you begin your interview.***

- **Do your homework.** Learn what you can about your topic and your narrator before you go in. This will help you make a connection with them and figure out what questions to ask.
- **Create your release form and other supporting documents.** In preparing a release form you need to make sure you include a statement of informed consent in which the narrator indicates they are voluntarily being interviewed and that they understand what the interview will be used for. Also make sure your release form includes language about potential use and keep that language as broad and inclusive as possible. Remember to bring a release form for the narrator to sign. Be prepared to explain the form and make sure your narrator understands what they are signing. You can also create biographical forms to summarize information about narrators.



- **Get familiar with your equipment.** If recording in person, test microphone, recording, volume and recording software. Prepare for any eventuality in your environment. Make sure your batteries are fresh. Take an extension cord with you. If recording online, test your connection and recording function. Make sure your narrator has internet access, broadband sufficient for virtual recording, and a microphone and webcam, either integrated or external.
- **Consider a pre-interview.** This can be an informal chat or meeting/phone call in which you introduce yourself and help your narrator get comfortable and understand what to expect. Contact the potential narrator by phone, e-mail, letter or in person. Clearly state the purpose of the interview, and what might be done with it. Consider doing a pre-interview to gather information and create greater rapport with your narrator.
- **Draft an interview guide** that includes possible questions and topics. Write up a specific list of open-ended questions before interviewing and think of ways of making your questions specific *and* flexible.

Make a connection

Making a connection is important at the beginning of an interview. Think about what you can do or say to **establish rapport** and make your narrator feel comfortable.

Some interviewers talk on the phone first, while others chat awhile with their narrator before turning on the tape recorder. What approach you use will depend in large part on the personality of your narrator, time constraints, and your approach.

Tips for establishing rapport:

- **Express interest:** make eye contact, respond by nodding, smiling, or saying something brief to acknowledge you are listening.
- **Start easy:** Start with neutral, easy questions (like “Where were you born” “How long have you lived here?”) and work up to harder questions (“Why do you think you stayed in the neighborhood?”).
- **Take it one step at a time:** Sequence your questions to start with neutral, simple information-oriented questions and work up to more complex, reflective questions.
- **Encourage narrator to share:** photos, scrapbooks or other items that will help them remember.

Asking Questions



It's important to write up specific questions before interviewing, and to think of ways of making your questions specific *and* flexible. Before you go into the interview situation, take the time to draw up an **open-ended list of questions** that you can refer to during the interview. You group these questions together by topic or theme, so that you can move around and refer to them as topics come up in the interview. Try to avoid creating a “questionnaire” that you rigidly go through. Think of multiple ways to follow up each question or break it down into smaller more detailed questions.

According to anthropologist James Spradley, there are **three general types of interview questions:**

Descriptive: Questions that ask someone to describe **in their own words**, an aspect of their history or reality. Descriptive questions move from “big picture” (tell me what your house looked like) to “little picture” (What kinds of activities took place in the living room?)

Example: What did this block look like 20 years ago? Who lived here?

Structural: Questions that help you to discover information about your narrator's **social and cultural knowledge and view of the world**. Structural questions often require an explanation, as in "I'm interested in the way you and other ballet dancers refer to exercises, what would you call them in class?" and should include as many of the narrator's native terms as possible.

Example: What kinds of different people lived on this block 20 years ago? What kinds of houses were built in this neighborhood in the 1970s?

Contrast: Questions that help you find out **how narrators compare and contrast** different ideas, objects, events, or people. Contrast questions help establish the meaning of a symbol, object, or expression in relation to other things by looking at similarities and differences.

Example: How is this block different from how it was 30 years ago? How did urban renewal projects change this neighborhood?

Sequencing questions

Be flexible and let your narrator guide the conversational flow, particularly in the beginning. Most interviews are a combination of **directive and nondirective** approaches; general conversation is good at the beginning, suggesting a subject and letting your narrator talk. At another stage, you will want to be a little more directive, asking pointed questions, but still retaining flexibility. Try to **sequence your questions** so that the simpler, easier to answer questions are at the beginning, and the more reflective questions are toward the end, when the conversation is flowing and the narrator is more relaxed and has time to think more about the subject. Move **from the general to the specific** in your questions. Keep the more reflective, complicated, or personal questions for later in the interview.

Other Tips

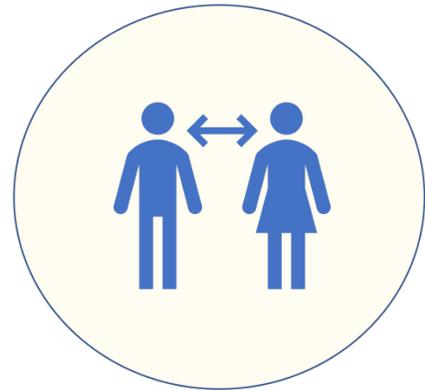
- Treat your narrator as a teacher and ask them to teach you what they know.
- **Avoid yes/no** questions.
- Avoid leading, manipulative, or prejudicial questions. Ask **open-ended who/what/when/how questions** that encourage the narrator to **describe, explain, reflect**, or make a judgement.
- Ask **one question at a time**. Keep your questions short and simple.
- Think of **different ways of asking** the same question in case your narrator doesn't understand what you mean.
- Always have a list of **follow-up questions** for each question you pose.
- Be **flexible**: allow the narrator to follow the train of their memory, rather than always following your list of questions.

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- Incorporate native terms into your questions.
 - **Be sensitive** to the fact that some of your questions may not be relevant to your narrator. If this seems to be the case, listen for what is relevant instead. Even if you and your narrator both speak English, you may not be speaking the same language.

Learning to listen

Listening during an interview is hard work and requires that you adopt **active listening strategies**. Often those new to interviewing are so preoccupied with asking their next question, they neglect to really listen to what is being said. Listen actively be prepared to follow up on what is said. Don't worry about remembering your questions – it is more important to focus and follow up on what is being said. You can always look at the questions for reference during a pause in the talk. It's also important to pay attention to what is not said or said in a specific way. Pay attention to what

sociolinguists call **contextualization cues**, or the ways in which speakers offer clues as to how to take what they are saying. Try to offer your narrator your own contextualization cues, to indicate that they are being understood. Remember that these cues are culturally specific, and may not be shared, requiring even more sensitive listening.



Some strategies for active listening:

- **Restate** what your narrator has said **in their own words** (to show that you understand or ask for explanation, amplification or elaboration. Listen carefully for references and meanings you may not understand.
- **Don't be afraid of silence** – sometimes waiting out a silence can help your narrator remember, so don't feel you have to jump right in with another question.
- **Promote an imbalance of turn taking** by talking less, encouraging narrator to elaborate and talk more.
- **Take brief notes** reminding yourself to follow up on something that was said or come back to a question so you can focus on listening.
- **Don't talk about yourself** unless you are asked to.
- **Don't interrupt** or challenge your narrator's memory or version of events in the moment.

Other interview tips:

- Include an introduction at the beginning of the recording.
- Be prepared to explain your project, your purpose, how you want to proceed,

your questions, what you mean, what you're interested in and why.

- Try to keep the interview between **60-90 minutes**.
- Draw on other media – encourage narrator to share photos, scrapbooks or other items that will help aid memory.



Distance interviewing is now common during the COVID era, as oral historians seek to continue their work while staying safe. Distance interviewing is not that different from face-to-face interviewing but has its own set of tools, issues, and considerations.

Considerations:

- Make an electronic version of your release form and share it with the narrator beforehand.
- Online conferencing apps often have a slight second delay that can increase silences in the interview and make the exchange more awkward. Be aware that non-verbal cues may not register in the same way as they do face to face.
- If you are recording through a computer, ensure that all other audio and video playback has stopped and that any programs which might have audio notifications have been closed.
- Be aware of bandwidth issues. Make sure both parties have sufficient bandwidth to run applications. Try to schedule the interview when others are not using the network.
- Narrators may have differential access to technology (the "digital divide"). Make sure they have a microphone and webcam - if you both use headsets and microphones you will get a better-quality recording.
- Narrators will have differing levels of comfort with online video tools. Consider if a recorded phone call would be more comfortable for you subject.
- Some recording platforms may not be able to provide total privacy or security of recordings.
- Choose a recording platform and stick with it. Ultimately, the recommended remote recording strategy platform is:
 - The one that works
 - The one you know how to use
 - The one that the narrator is comfortable using
 - The one that encourages connection
 - The one that best meets your needs or the needs of the project

Tools for distance interviewing include Skype, Webex, Zoom, or TheirStory (<https://theirstory.io/welcome>)

Ethics

Everyone involved in oral history work, from interviewers and narrators to archivists and researchers, becomes part of a web of mutual responsibility working to ensure that the narrator's perspective, dignity, privacy, and safety are respected. **Informed consent** is the bedrock of oral history ethics, embodied by the release form. All release forms should both 1. Indicate the narrator's voluntary participation in the interview and 2. Confirm that the narrator understands what will be done with the interview and what their rights are.



Don't forget to get those release forms signed!

Be clear about copyright and intellectual property. A narrator's oral history is assumed to belong to them and they can grant your permission to use or transfer rights to you or another entity. Use the release form to indicate who will own the interview and who will share rights. Often narrators transfer copyright to interviewers or archives, but also retain rights during their lifetime (or their heirs do).

Other important ideas in oral history are **reciprocity** – giving back to those who share their stories with us – and collaboration – sharing authority with narrators as well as the broader community of stakeholders – are the cornerstones of oral history ethics. Above all, "do no harm," or **protect the narrator**, is our guiding principle.

Processing and sharing your interviews

There are a number of ways we can process and access our interviews after they are recorded that make them more accessible and facilitate editing and excerpting.

Sharing interviews and authority

First, always share the recording and transcription of the interview with the narrator, giving them a copy to keep. Remember that it is their story and it belongs to them. Invite narrators to help edit the transcription, offering corrections, changes, or in some cases, removals. Go a step further and involve narrators in editing, excerpting, or interpreting interviews. One oral historian uses "collaborative witnessing" with their narrators, each playing an equal role in deciding what goes into a final story. At the very least, never release an interview without giving the narrator the chance to review it first.

If you want to donate your interviews to an archive, make sure that your release form allows for such a transfer. Also be aware that different archives have different requirements for acquisition, so contact them ahead of time to ensure that your interviews fit into their collection development policy, have the required paperwork, and are in a format that can be preserved.

Create an index

An index is a document that organizes information in an interview according to its order in the recording, creating a time log of the interview. Indexing or logging breaks your

interview into segments based on content and indicates with a time stamp when they appear. An index allows anyone to target specific moments in the interview to listen or excerpt.

In addition to topic and time stamp, indexes can also include:

- Partial Transcript
- Subjects (semi-colon delimited)
- Keywords (semi-colon delimited)
- Segment Summary (very common)
- GPS Coordinates
- GPS Description
- Hyperlink

Sample Index

Interview with Robert Chirwa, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky Libraries, Jack Wilson, Interviewer | 2014OH062 AITB 001, African Immigrants in the Bluegrass Oral History Project, <https://kentuckyoralhistory.org/ark:/16417/xt7tb27prz26>.

An example of a basic interview index that includes only time stamp and topic title

00:00:01 - Growing up, family, and schooling
00:02:59 - Secondary school and university
00:10:09 - Jobs after university
00:12:22 - Coming to the U.S.
00:17:01 - Marriage, family, and further education
00:26:02 - Acculturation
00:39:10 - Positive and negative experiences
00:43:16 - Family in the U.S. and in Malawi
00:57:10 - Misconceptions about Malawi
01:02:20 - Educating Americans about Malawi
01:05:55 - Identity
01:08:40 - Racial discrimination
01:13:33 - Contributions to Kentucky by Africans
01:22:54 - Additional thoughts on mobility and citizenship differences

Transcribe the interview

Outside of the interview recording, the most common way an interview enters the historical record is as a written transcription. A transcription is a verbatim account of everything that was said in an interview. A transcription needs to be as accurate as possible, especially for a master transcript. In addition, there are questions of how to punctuate, when to create line and paragraph breaks, how to represent laughter, pauses, and other interactions. There are also issues of voice: how to represent tone, whether or not to correct grammar, how formal and informal to be. Experiment with ways to represent

these aspects of speech, but avoid dialect or other aspects of pronunciation, and be consistent. Baylor University has a great transcription guide (see Resources).

Sample interview transcript

Interview with Dun Mark, Philadelphia, 2009, by Kathryn Wilson

KW: So, what do you think made you stay in Chinatown all those years?

DM: Well, first of all, after I got married, come back, I finish college, got a job with RCA, and I spent I think it was, fourteen years with RCA. So I got good job and I'm working, why would I move? Where am I going? And Chinatown pretty nice. Close to everything. Lit Brothers, Gimbel's, remember those stores? Snellenberg. All around the area within walking distance. My wife, she just beginning to learn a little bit of English, but it was good for her because she could go out buying things she wanted. That's why we stay on, stay on. But now I'm not moving at all. (Laughter) I'm not even thinking about moving. So Chinatown is a good place to live. It has improved a lot. Time change, people learn, younger generation come up. And lotta people, they don't have to work in Chinatown, like myself. I'm an electronic engineer, go out, I work for American factory for most of my life. And so was a lot of other younger generation. Only those that did not learn English or did not have other trade, so the only thing they could do was work in restaurant, in the kitchen. Laundries peter out or fade out, because people wash and wear. So that's the way Chinatown is. Today, it's much better, much better. Lot more Chinese people came and they make a living much easier than sixty years ago when we were here. Course then you don't have too many restaurant for them to work, so you either own a laundry or you work for somebody else or you don't do nothing.

KW: Now you could have bought a house in some other part of the city...

DM: I could, yeah.

KW: So why do you think you bought one in Chinatown?

DM: First of all, it's better for my wife. I could move to New Jersey with couple friend of mine that I knew for long time back at RCA. They bought house over there, but I couldn't do it. I would love to go there but I wouldn't do it because for my wife. She wouldn't be happy because she couldn't speak with the neighbor, and it's tough for her. Here she go next door and yak, yak, yak, walk downtown, know everybody, see mostly Chinese people. That's why I stay. And I don't regret it because it's a nice place to stay. It's close to everything.

Oral History Resources

Books and Guides

Shirley Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2014.

Linda P. Wood, *Oral History Projects in Your Classroom*. Oral History Association Pamphlet Series, 2001.

Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf, *Using Oral History in Community History Projects*. Oral History Association Pamphlet Series 2007.

Linda Barnickel, *Oral History for the Family Historian: A Basic Guide*. Oral History Association Pamphlet Series, 2006.

Cliff Mayotte and Claire Keefer, eds. *Say it Forward: A Guide to Social Justice Storytelling*. Voices of Witness/Haymarket Books, 2018.

Oral History in the Digital Age: <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>

Equipment

Ask Doug: <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/doug/>. Through this online resource, you can take a quiz and get recommendations for recording devices and microphones that are best for your project and within your price range.

Transcription and editing

Baylor University Transcription Guide:
<https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974464>

Interviewing

Baylor University Oral History Resources:
<https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974438>

OHA Remote Interviewing Resources: <https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>

Legal and Ethical Issues

Oral History Principles and Best Practices, Oral History Association:
<https://www.oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>

John A. Neuenschwander, *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*. Oxford University Press, 2009.