

# Interviewing Family Members: Oral History Basics

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## What is Oral History?

- A dialogue with the past
- Recording and transcription of a first hand account (interview) of a historical event or person.

## Why are Oral History projects important?

### Primary Sources

- Learn historical information from a first-person account
- Gain unique and original perspectives

### Historic Preservation

- Create and preserve history and traditions

### Share Family History

- Oral history projects like family history interviews and biographical life histories help share your ancestors' lives with future generations.

## The Oral History Process

### Pre-Interview

#### First Steps:

- Scope/Scale
- Themes: Topics, Subjects, People, Places, etc.

-Who, what, when, why, how?

### **Who do you want to interview?**

-Friends, family, acquaintances?

### **Background Research**

-Review other primary and secondary sources about your chosen topic to help with generating interview questions.

### **Equipment Considerations**

-Recording Device

-Look for digital recorders

-USB adaptors are nice to have for easy transfer of files to your computer.

-Microphones

-Look for condenser microphone types rather than dynamic microphones

-Lighting/Sound/Background

-For Video interviews

### **Recording on a smartphone**

-Voice recorder apps

-iphone: Voice Memo; Rev Voice Recorder

-Android: Smart Recorder, Rev Voice Recorder

-Audio Editing Tools

-Audacity

-WavePad Audio Editor

### **Legal Considerations**

-Forms:

-Basic release form template-

<https://sites.duke.edu/archivox/2015/01/29/oral-history-basic-release-template/>

-Copyright Considerations

-Will you publish the interview, post it online, or include it in an article?

-Suggested Reading

-A Guide to Oral History and the Law

By John A. Neuenschwander

Call no. 344.73 N481G

### **Ethical Considerations**

-Try not to surprise your narrator(s) with unexpected topics or questions.

-Help the narrator(s) feel like a partner in your project by asking them to take part in deciding the main topics and/or questions.

-Do not mislead your narrators or use leading questions to get a certain answer.

-Respect the narrator's privacy and comfort

-Make sure to discuss if there are any topics that the narrator or interviewee does not want to talk about.

-Offer the narrator a chance to review the completed interview.

### **Interview Practice Tips**

-Watch other interviews

-Practice interviewing with friends, family, or colleagues

-Test equipment before the interview

-Choose equipment and technology that you feel comfortable operating

### **Challenges**

-Interruptions such as phones, loud noises, distractions or loud interview environments.

-Avoid recording problems by bringing back up batteries and/or chargers

-Test equipment

-Smartphones and tablets can be good options and work well as backups

### **Pre-Interview Meetings**

-Describe the project and purpose for the interview

-Allow time for the narrator/interviewee to provide feedback on preferred topics and any privacy concerns or restrictions.

- Acquire informed consent from the narrator/interviewee
- Have documents prepared for narrator to sign
- Go over the procedures
- Set a pre-determined length for the interview(s)
- Decide on a location
- Decide on the number of participants
- Ask the narrators about their expectations
- Keep a record of the meeting(s)

### **Reluctant narrators/interviewees**

- Collaborate: encourage the narrators to be a partner in the project
- Ensure that participants are aware that they have the right to protect their private and personal information.
- Optional: send questions ahead of time; send survey with topics and questions they would most like to discuss

### **Interview Extras**

- Family heirlooms/artifacts
- Family photographs
- School yearbooks
- Awards/achievements

### **Interview Formats**

- Audio: usually less equipment is required and can be used in many different locations
- Video: helpful when including photos, artifacts ,or memorabilia; some people may not feel comfortable with video

### **Best Practices**

- Oral History Association
- <https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices/>

## **The Interview Process**

### **Lead Statements**

- Start each interview with a lead statement
- Include:

- The names of narrator and interviewer
- Date and time of session
- Interview location
- Subject/topic of the interview

### **Interview Styles**

- Q&A
- Conversational
- Fluid & Flexible

### **Practice Good Listening Skills**

- Active listening
- Take notes
- The narrator is the expert

### **Interview Tips**

- Be encouraging
- Create a list of keywords and phrases
- Do not overwhelm your narrator
- Say thank you
- Pauses are okay
- Allow time for people to collect their thoughts
- Avoid filling in answers when pauses occur

### Post Interview

#### **Transcribing**

- Google Docs Voice Typing
- Express Scribe Transcription

#### **Indexing**

- Time coding
- Time-subject index
- Index as soon as possible
- Find obvious breaks in the topic or breaks in time

- The more details, the better
- Use hour, minute, and second format
- Digital playback and transcribing software is very helpful

### **Future Use**

- Publish
- Share
- Donate

## **Resources**

### **Books**

- Oral History for the Family Historian  
By Linda Barnickel  
Call no. 907.2 B262O
  
- Your -The Oral History Workshop: Collect and Celebrate the Life Stories of  
Family and Friends  
By Cynthia Hart and Lisa Samson  
Call no. 907.2 H325O
  
- Doing Oral History  
By Donald A. Ritchie  
Call no. 907.2 R598D

### **Online Resources**

- How to Guides:  
Baylor University's Institute for Oral History: "Introduction to Oral  
History Manual"

<https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974438>

-Equipment Reviews & Suggestions

Digital Audio Field Recording Equipment Guide-Vermont Folklife  
Center

<https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/fieldwork-guides>

-Blogs, articles, websites

-Family Tree Magazine

<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/interview-tips-questions-family-history/>

## Organizations

-Oral History Association

<https://www.oralhistory.org>

-International Oral History Association

<https://www.ioha.org>

## Regional Organizations

-Michigan Oral History Association

-Midwest Oral History Group

-New England Association for Oral History

-Northwest Oral History Association

-OHMAR-Oral History Mid-Atlantic Region

-Southwest Oral History Association

-Texas Oral History Association



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