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June 1, 2023

How to Conduct an Oral History Interview

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Preservation Tips and Tools

By:

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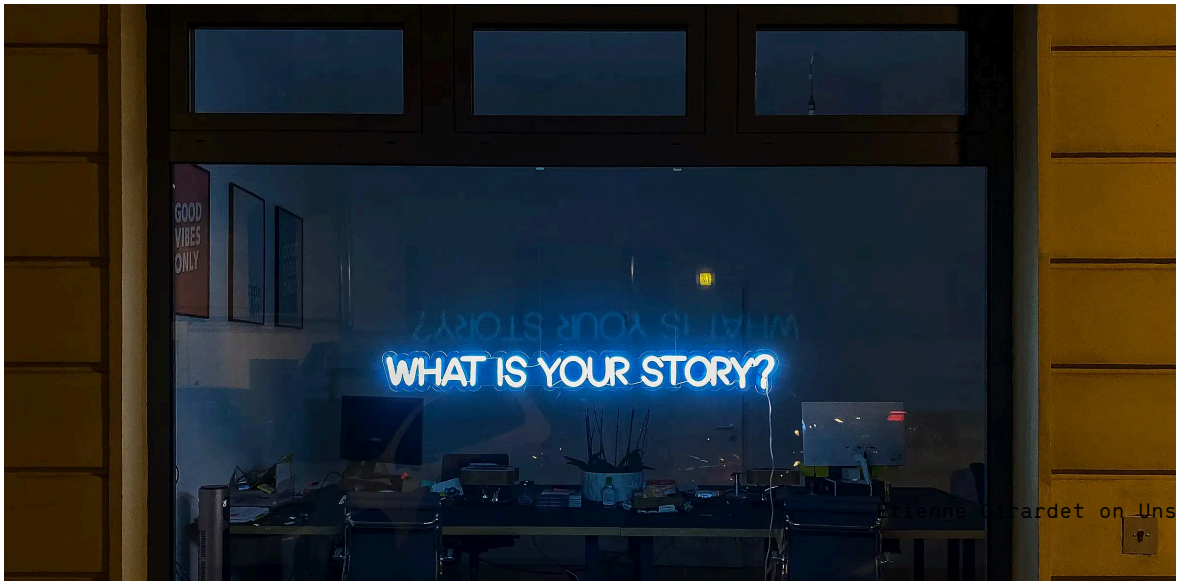
Oral histories are an ancient way of sharing knowledge from generation to generation and a great resource for learning more about place, whether it is a specific site, the history of a community that is still present, or one that has been lost. According to the Oral History Association [Link: https://oralhistory.org/] , oral history refers to "the interview process and the products that result from a recorded spoken interview (whether audio, video or other formats)."

Are you ready to get out there and get some stories? Grab your recording device, because we are sharing 9 tips on how you can get started with conducting your own oral history interview with your family or members of the community.



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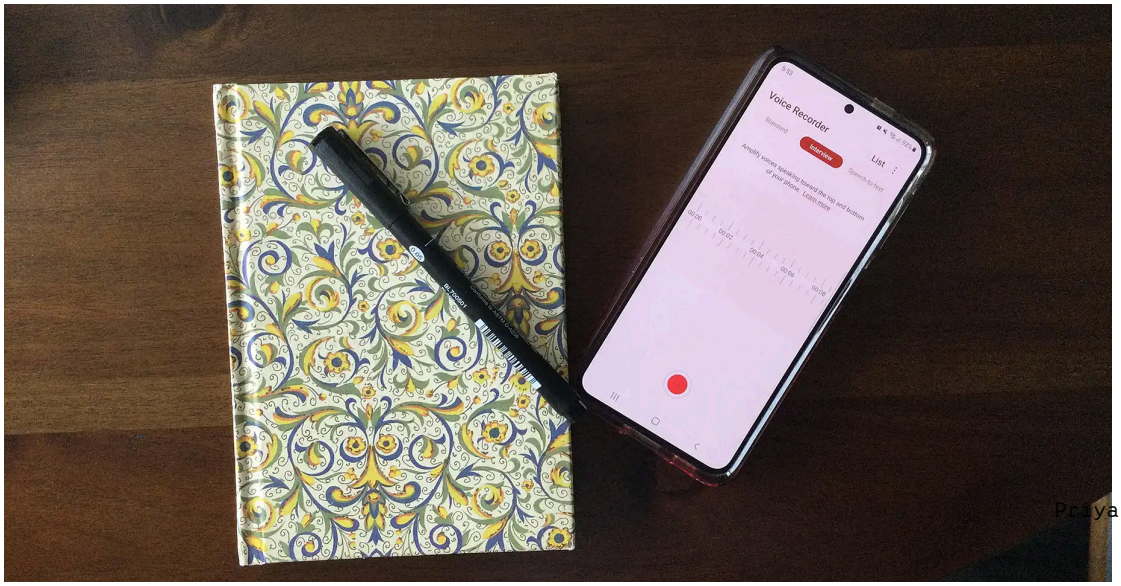
Preparation is good!

What do you want to find out more about? What do you think others might like to know—the history of a building? A community and its traditions? A person who lived there? Or how a place was used? Who better to ask than the knowledge holders who were there or know stories from those who were? Do your research on your topic to better craft your questions.

It is important to be transparent from the beginning.

Make it clear to your narrator what the purpose of the interview is, and how the transcript or recording will be used.



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Allow enough time for conversation.

Plan on scheduling one to two hours for your interview. This will allow space for the conversation to flourish, sometimes moving in unexpected directions as you build a rapport and relationship with the narrator.

Ask clear, open-ended questions.

Don't ask leading questions such as "Don't you think that…" or ones that are "either/or" or end simply with "Yes" or "No" that can stop your narrator from providing a longer answer. It is also important to ease into your questions. Try not to ask sensitive or personal ones at first and let your narrator become more relaxed with you.

To be a good interviewer, be a good listener.

Part of being a good interviewer is being a good listener. Pay close attention to what they are saying. Let your narrator share their experience. Sometimes they might be quiet for a moment until they are ready to continue again.

Soundtrap on Unsplash

Remember, you are having a conversation, not a confrontation.

You are recording their story. Try phrases like "I have heard that…," but let your narrator share without value judgements. Be mindful of your own stereotypes and biases and recognize the differences that you might have with your narrator, such as culture, religion, or class, that could influence your questions or interaction.

Have patience.

Don't interrupt your narrator and break their flow. It is all right to steer your narrator back on track if they go off on a tangent, but listen and see where that tangent is going first. You could end up with a gem of a story.

When you are finished, thank your narrator for their time and sharing their story with you.

Make sure that you get their permission to share it and have them sign a release form. The resources below have good examples of release forms that you can use.

Consider the best place to store the interview.

Choose a repository—physical or virtual—that would be the best way to preserve your oral history and make it accessible to the public, whether it is a library, archive, or online resource.

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Other resources to find out more about conducting oral histories, with best practices and sample questions and forms:

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The Oral History Association: Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History [Link: https://oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/]
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UC Santa Cruz's Regional History Project [Link: https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oral-history-primer]

Baylor University's Institute for Oral History [Link: https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974460]

Texas Freedom Colonies Project [Link: https://www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/oral-history-resources]

Doing Oral History by Don Ritchie [Link: https://amzn.to/43AQE1W]

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