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Oral history is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information – primary source material – from personal recollections through planned recorded interviews. Below are suggestions for anyone looking to start recording oral histories based on best practices used in the Smithsonian Oral History Program at the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Oral History at Home – Five Easy Steps



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What is Oral History?

Oral history is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information – primary source material – from personal recollections through planned recorded interviews. This method of interviewing is used to preserve the voices, memories and perspectives of people in history. It's a tool we can all use to engage with and learn from family members, friends, and the people we share space with in an interview that captures their unique history and perspective in their own words. Oral history stems from the tradition of passing information of importance to the family or tribe from one generation to the next. In the United States, the Oral History Association connects oral historians and provides a broad range of information on oral history.

Technique: The methodology of oral history can be adapted to many different types of projects from family history to academic research projects in many different disciplines. The interviews should usually be conducted in a one-on-one situation, although group interviews can also be effective.

Sharing: In collaboration with a well-prepared and empathetic interviewer, the narrator may be able to share information that they do not realize they recall and to make associations and draw conclusions about their experience that they would not be able to produce without the interviewer.

Preserving: Recording preserves the interview, in sound or video and later in transcript for use by others removed in time and/or distance from the interviewee. Oral history also preserves the ENTIRE interview, in its original form, rather than the interviewer's interpretation of what was said.

Original historically important information: The well-prepared interviewer will know what information is already in documents and will use the oral history interview to seek new information, clarification, or new interpretation of a historical event.

Personal recollections: The interviewer should ask the narrator for first-person information. These are memories that the narrator can provide on a reliable basis, e.g., events in which they participated or witnessed or decisions in which they took part. Oral history interviews can convey personality, explain motivation, and reveal inner thoughts and perceptions.

Martha Ross: The Six R's of Oral History Interviewing

The oral history interviewer should strive to create a situation in which the interviewee is able to reflect widely, to recall fully, and to associate freely on the subject of the interview, and to maintain an atmosphere in which they are willing to articulate fully those recollections.

The following six considerations are basic to good oral history practice.

1. **RESEARCH**: Thorough preparation enables the interviewer to know what questions to ask and is essential to establishing rapport with the interviewee. Research pays off during the interview, when the interviewer's knowledge of names, dates, and places may jog the interviewee's memory.
2. **RAPPORT**: Good rapport is established with the interviewee by approaching them properly, informing them of the purpose of the project, and advising them of their role and their rights. A pre-interview call or visit to get acquainted and discuss procedures is recommended.
3. **RESTRAINT**: The experienced interviewer maintains rapport by following good interview techniques: being efficient but unobtrusive with equipment, starting at the beginning and proceeding chronologically, asking open-ended questions, listening closely without interrupting, following up on details or unexpected avenues of information, challenging questionable information in a non-threatening way, and generally maintaining an atmosphere in which the interviewee feels able to respond fully and truthfully.

4. RETREAT: Close each interview session by asking a “deflationary” question, such as an assessment of the experiences just discussed. All sessions should be planned and scheduled so that they conclude before the interviewee becomes fatigued.

5. REVIEW: Interviewers should listen to their interviews soon afterwards to analyze their interviewing techniques and to pick up details to follow up on in subsequent sessions.

6. RESPECT: Respect underlies every aspect of oral history – respect for the interviewee as an individual, their experience, for the way they remember that experience, and for the way they are able and willing to articulate those recollections. Maintaining respect toward the individual interviewee and toward the practice of oral history interviewing is essential to success as an interviewer.

NOTE: Martha Ross is the “mother” of oral history in the mid-Atlantic region and taught at the University of Maryland in the 1970s and 1980s.

Preparing for Oral History Interviews

1. Select an interviewee.

2. Ask the interviewee if they are interested.

3. If interviewee is interested, set up a time and place for the interview. Also request any background information the interviewee might want to provide. Check about the best place – somewhere quiet where you won’t be disturbed. Request at least two hours for the interview session.

4. Write a follow-up email confirming plans for the interview that discusses the goals, legal rights, and how the interviews will be handled. Provide a very general list of topic areas and ask them to think about topics they would like to cover.

5. Conduct basic biographical research on your interviewee. Conduct internet searches. Read publications and profiles. Ask others about topics you should cover, stories they should tell.

6. Develop a chronology of the important events in their life. Develop lists of personal names and terms important in their life, such as geographic names where they traveled, names of important family or community members. Compile a folder of photographs of the interviewee and their world. These will prove invaluable in the interview when the interviewee gets confused or forgets names.

7. Rework the question outline, making it relevant to this interviewee, deleting topics that don't pertain to them, and adding areas, such as organizations they were involved in, etc.

8. With the equipment, **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE** until you can use it in your sleep. Practice interviewing family members and friends. Then delete all the files you've created, so the recorder is at full capacity. Make sure all the settings match the instruction sheet. Make sure that you have all the necessary pieces of equipment, such as the recorder power cord and an extension cord.

9. The day before the interview, confirm time and place.

10. Bring with you: equipment, extension cord, cell phone (in case of equipment problems), question outline, chronology, terms, photos, etc., legal forms, extra paper for notes and a pen. Also bring throat lozenges or hard candy, in case throats get dry. If possible, bring a camera and take photograph of the interviewee at the interview.

11. When you arrive, assess room for sound. Turn off equipment, close doors, and rearrange furniture into a comfortable arrangement facing each other close enough to hand photos but not too close. Set up equipment so you can monitor it constantly and discretely, without turning away from the interviewee.

12. Go over the list of topic areas again and permissions again.

13. Ask about any scrapbooks, news clippings, awards, etc., that they might want to bring out.

How to Ask Questions in Oral History Interviews

1. Find a quiet place to conduct the interview where you won't be bothered by telephones, family members, pets, traffic noise, etc. Get two glasses of water. Take a photograph. Turn off cell phones, etc.

2. Explain to your interviewee what you are doing.

Explain their legal rights.

Explain how interview is likely to be used.

Explain that they can choose what questions to answer and that the recorder can be turned off at any time.

3. Ask your interviewee to sign the deed of gift and cosign it yourself if you have one.

4. Use an outline of topics you wish to cover, with follow-up questions, that you have prepared in advance. Also bring photographs and a personal name and term list, and chronology.

5. Start with easy questions, such as their name, where and when born, names of family members.

6. Allow the interviewee to do the talking.

7. Ask "open-ended" questions, such as, tell me about, describe, etc., what do you remember about?

If the interviewee responds with just a yes or no, ask how, why, when, where, who.

What the interviewee chooses to tell you and how they choose to tell it is just as informative/revealing as the actual answers they give.

8. Avoid "closed-ended" questions that can end in a yes or not, or single fact.

Examples, were you there? What was date of that? Did you like that?

If you get a short answer, follow up with tell me more, who, what, when, where, how and why.

9. Do not ask leading questions – was it this or that? Or I thought that the most important thing was.....These have been demonstrated to affect interviewee's answer and will taint your interview.
10. Ask one question at a time and try to ask simple questions.
11. Try to ask follow-up questions – tell me more, who, what, where.
12. To stimulate their memory, use "statement questions" such as, "In 1956, you traveled to Tibet to conduct research. How did that trip come about?"
13. Focus on recording their personal experiences, rather than stories about others or that they have heard. If you're getting general stories, say tell me about your role, describe how you felt that day or dealt with that crisis, etc.
14. Don't worry about silences. Let the interviewee think and take time before they answer. Look at your outline and check off topics if the interviewee needs time to think.
15. Note what types of questions your interviewee responds best to and try to adapt your style to what works best with them.
16. Let the interviewee suggest topics to you that you might not have thought of.
17. Allow the interviewee to drift off to topics not on your outline. These can be the best part of your interview.
18. After an hour or less, ask interviewee if they would like to take a break. Write down the last words as you turn the recorder off.

19. Provide the interviewee with feedback by nodding, smiling, listening attentively. Try to avoid too many verbal responses that will record over the interviewee, such as "Really!" or "Uh-huh, uh-huh."

20. Don't be afraid to politely question information that might be incorrect – ask for a clarification, or say something to the effect, "Oh, I'm confused, I thought that Mrs. X was involved in that."

21. Rephrase questions that the interviewee does not answer – they may not have heard what you thought you asked. But they have the right to not answer if they don't want to.

22. Do allow the interviewee to tell "THE STORY." Most interviews have a favorite story. They will fit it in somehow, so let it happen! Allow some repetition since additional details may emerge with a second version, but don't allow your interviewee to keep telling the same story over and over.

23. Bring visuals, if possible, to stimulate memory or ask to bring out photo albums of trips or family events, etc. Invite the interviewee to bring visuals to the interview.

24. Let the interviewee do the talking. Try to avoid telling your own stories, "Yes! When I was there..." or offering your own opinions. If asked for an opinion, explain that the interview is designed to record their point of view, not yours.

25. An interview usually does not last much longer than 1 1/2 to 2 hours. After that both interviewer and interviewee get tired and lose their concentration.

26. End interview gracefully, asking them to assess their lives and the topics you have discussed.

27. Ask your interviewee to spell any names or places you did not understand.

28. Clean up. Make sure you have all pieces of equipment.

29. As you depart, keep options open to return for an additional interview.

Suggestions for Recording Oral History Interviews

1. There are many recorder options that will record an uncompressed preservation quality audio file. If you do not have access to a recorder, most smartphones have recording software that will record an MP3 audio file.
2. If possible, record an uncompressed WAV audio file at 24 bit.
3. Use external microphones if possible.
4. Check room for extraneous noise such as motors, fans, pets, traffic, etc.
5. Test the recorder to check the volume of the interviewer and interviewee and to see if it is picking up any static or surrounding noise.
6. Begin with an introduction that identifies who is being interviewed, who is conducting the interview, where, when, and the purpose of the interview.
7. Ask if you have permission to record the interview.
8. Avoid speaking while your interviewee is sharing. Instead, try to use physical cues that you're listening like nodding and taking notes instead of affirming "mhms."
9. Upload the files from the recorder to your computer, external hard drive and/or the cloud to ensure you don't lose the file.
10. Name the file in a way you can identify it later. Ex:
LastnameFirstname_Date_Interview#_File#
11. Make copies of your digital file. Save a copy to an external hard drive and/or the cloud.

Suggested Topics/Questions for Oral History Interviews

1. What is your full name?
2. Do I have permission to record this interview?
3. Where and when were you born?
4. Who else was in your family?

What were your parents' names?

Are there any traditional first names in your family?

What type of work did they do?

5. Did other family members live nearby?

Tell me about them.

How did they meet?

What did they do for a living?

When did you get to see them?

6. What did your community look like outside of your family?

How did you meet them?

What types of activities would you do together?

Tell me about your neighborhood.

7. Where did your ancestors come from?

When did they come to the United States?

Where did they first settle?

Did your family name change when your family immigrated to the United States?

Are any of their traditions still carried on today?

What language did your parents and grandparents speak?

8. What games did you play when you were young?

What toys did you have?

Who did you play with?

Where did you play?

Did you have any hobbies?

Have your hobbies and interests changed over time?

Did you collect anything? Baseball cards, dolls, etc.

9. Tell me about your grammar and high school education?

Describe your grammar school/high school.

What subjects did you study?

Tell me about your interests in your school days.

Did you have any influential teachers?

Any leadership roles in organizations/classes?

What were your hobbies and interests as a child?

Did you read much, if so, what topics?

Did you belong to any influential clubs or organizations?

Did you have any goals/dreams for when you grew up?

How did gender roles affect you during K-12 education?

10. What holidays did your family celebrate?

How did you celebrate them?

What was your favorite part of the holidays?

11. Tell me about the house you grew up in.

How was it furnished?

Did you have your own room?

Where did you spend most of your time?

Did you move to another home while you were growing up?

Tell me about the new home.

How did your community change?

12. What were mealtimes like in your family?

What foods did you eat?

Who cooked the food?

Who cleaned up after meals?

13. Did you have any pets? Describe them.

Who took care of them?

14. What type of clothes did you wear?

Where did you get them/who made them?

When did you get new clothes?

15. How did your family get around?

Did you have a car? Did you use public transportation?

If you had a car, when did you get it? Who drove it?

Did you go on vacations in it?

When did you learn to drive? Describe your first car.

What kind of public transportation was available?

16. What sort of entertainment did you like?

What did you listen to growing up?

Did you watch TV growing up? What did you watch?

What large moments do you remember watching on TV?

17. Who was your family doctor? Describe them.

Do you remember any epidemics or diseases?

Did your family have any home remedies? If so, describe.

18. What was your first job?

Describe a typical work day.

How much money did you earn?

How long did you have that job?

What lessons did you learn?

Additional jobs and details – trace career path, changes

Tell me about any influential mentors.

What were the most memorable aspects of that position?

19. Did you attend college?

Tell me about your college years.

What school? How did you decide to go there?

What was your major?

Any influential mentors?

Did you do a semester abroad?

Describe your major interests?

What were successes/accomplishments and challenges/frustrations?

Tell me about any gender challenges you encountered in college.

20. How have historic events, such as 9/11, hurricanes, the Great Depression, world wars, natural disasters, strikes, and now Covid-19 etc., affected you?

Did these events impact your community?

After the Oral History Interview

1. Download interview files onto your computer, following the instructions provided.
2. On your computer, rename each file by right clicking on file and selecting rename. Rename it in this format: LastnameFirstname_Date_Interview#_File#, for example, JonesSandra_04-30-2020_1.
3. Click on file to be sure it plays properly.
4. Do not erase files from your computer until you have made duplicates.
5. Erase files from recorder, so the recorder will be empty for next interview.
6. Write a one paragraph summary of what the interview is about, providing technical details. Also list a dozen or so name and subject terms for indexing. This will be used

to identify the interview for future use.

7. Prepare a longer list of all names, terms, etc. to use for transcription.

8. Prepare an introduction for the transcript that provides an overview of the interview for the reader and helps them understand what they are about to read. The introduction should include an opening paragraph that states why the individual was selected, i.e., the special significance or accomplishments of the individual; information as to the place and particular conditions of the interviews, e.g., the interviewee's home or office; research the interviewer did to prepare for the interview, i.e., books read or scrapbooks reviewed, and any prior relationship of special affinity between the interviewer and interviewee, e.g., friends for 25 years, grandchild or child. The interviewer should also prepare a biography of one or two paragraphs about themselves, including background and experiences of the interviewer related to the conduct of this particular interview.

9. Photocopy or scan the signed legal form, your question outline, chronology, etc.

10. Write a follow-up note to the interviewee, thanking them for their time and reminiscences.

Readings and Online Resources

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Neuenschwander, John A. A guide to oral history and the law. Oxford University Press, USA, 2014.

Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, The Oral History Reader, third edition. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Ritchie, Donald A. Doing oral history. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Thompson, Paul. The voice of the past: Oral history. Oxford university press, 2017.

Oral History in the Digital Age <https://www.oralhistory.org/oral-history-in-the-digital-age/> Oral History Association website, covering every aspect of oral history, from family and community oral history to academic oral history projects.

Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide <https://folklife.si.edu/the-smithsonian-folklife-and-oral-history-interviewing-guide/smithsonian> Contains guidelines Smithsonian folklorists have developed over the years for collecting folklife and oral history from family and community members, with a general guide to conducting an interview, as well as a sample list of questions that may be adapted to your own needs and circumstances, an information on preservation and use.

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

Oral History Discussion List: H-Oralhist <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/> is the oral history discussion list.

Library of Congress, Oral History Lesson Plans
<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/lessons/index.html#topic230>

Vermont Folklife Center, Oral History Guide
<https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/events/oral-history-an-introduction>

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