ORAL HISTORY MADE EASY

WEEK 4: GETTING READY FOR YOUR FIRST ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

WITH DR ANGELA MAYE-BANBURY BA MSC PHD SFHEA

ORAL HISTORIAN & EMERITUS FELLOW IN ORAL HISTORY


Recording
in Progress


YOU'RE
HALFWAY
THERE





You’ve done the heavy lifting! Now for the joyous part!

What we will have achieved at the end of today's session

Recap on ethics documentation and one thing you've learnt so far on the course. ✓

Feedback from last week's ethical dilemmas and project proposal. ✓

Golden rules for conducting your first oral history interview; preparing; on arrival; question types; the art of listening – and keeping an open mind. ✓

After the interview and guidance on transcription. ✓

The assignment ✓


1
IF THERE'S
ONE THING
I'VE LEARNED ...

YOUR FEEDBACK ON LAST WEEK'S TASKS

ORAL HISTORY
MADE EASY

Task 1:Ethical dilemmas.



Your oral history interviewee begins to talk about painful memories from a childhood experience. Your interviewee is showing visible signs of being upset. What should you do?

You have been given the opportunity to post an interview recorded last year on your project web site. The interview was not recorded by you. You have heard that this interview has rich content which would shed new light on the issue you are researching. What should you do?

Your interviewee has said that they can disclose many new insights on the theme you are researching but you would need to keep the information strictly confidential. What should you do?

Task 2: Project design

- ✓Your project title
- ✓Topic/purpose
- ✓Methodology
- ✓Scope, time and place.
- ✓Potential narrators.
- ✓Selected archives
- ✓Planned outcomes.
- ✓Timeframe for completion.



RECAP ON ETHICS PAPERWORK

ORAL HISTORY
MADE EASY

Reminder of the ethics documentation you will need

The participant information sheet 

The gatekeeper protocol (if needed) 

Agreement to participate (signed before the interview) 

Recording agreement (signed after the interview). 

Consent to use images (if needed) 

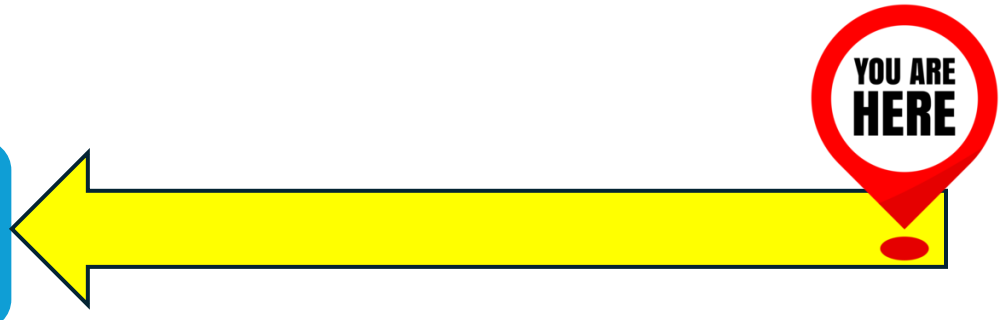
Exemplars USA, Ireland, UK and Saudi Arabia 

ORAL HISTORY AND ETHICS FLOW CHART
YOUR FIRST INTERVIEW

Habitus: Oral historian mindset. Ethics as starting point. Do risk assessment.

Identify participant/gatekeeper organisation. Verify non vulnerable interviewee.

Make contact with participant. Ensure transparency and build trust/rapport.



Go through participant sheet. Answer all questions . Secure consent to participate.

Conduct interview. Complete written deed of gift (USA) or recording/copyright agreement (Ireland/UK) after interview. Obtain written consent to use images

Explain next steps to interviewee including verification of transcript and making available. Follow through.

The assignment (1)



This assignment has the following three learning outcomes:

(i) To apply the principles of experiential learning to the practice of oral history.

(ii) To allow for reflection on the knowledge, skills and attributes needed in oral history.

(iii) To inform a professional and personal action plan as part of ongoing self development.


DUE DATE


AUG
16

The assignment (2)

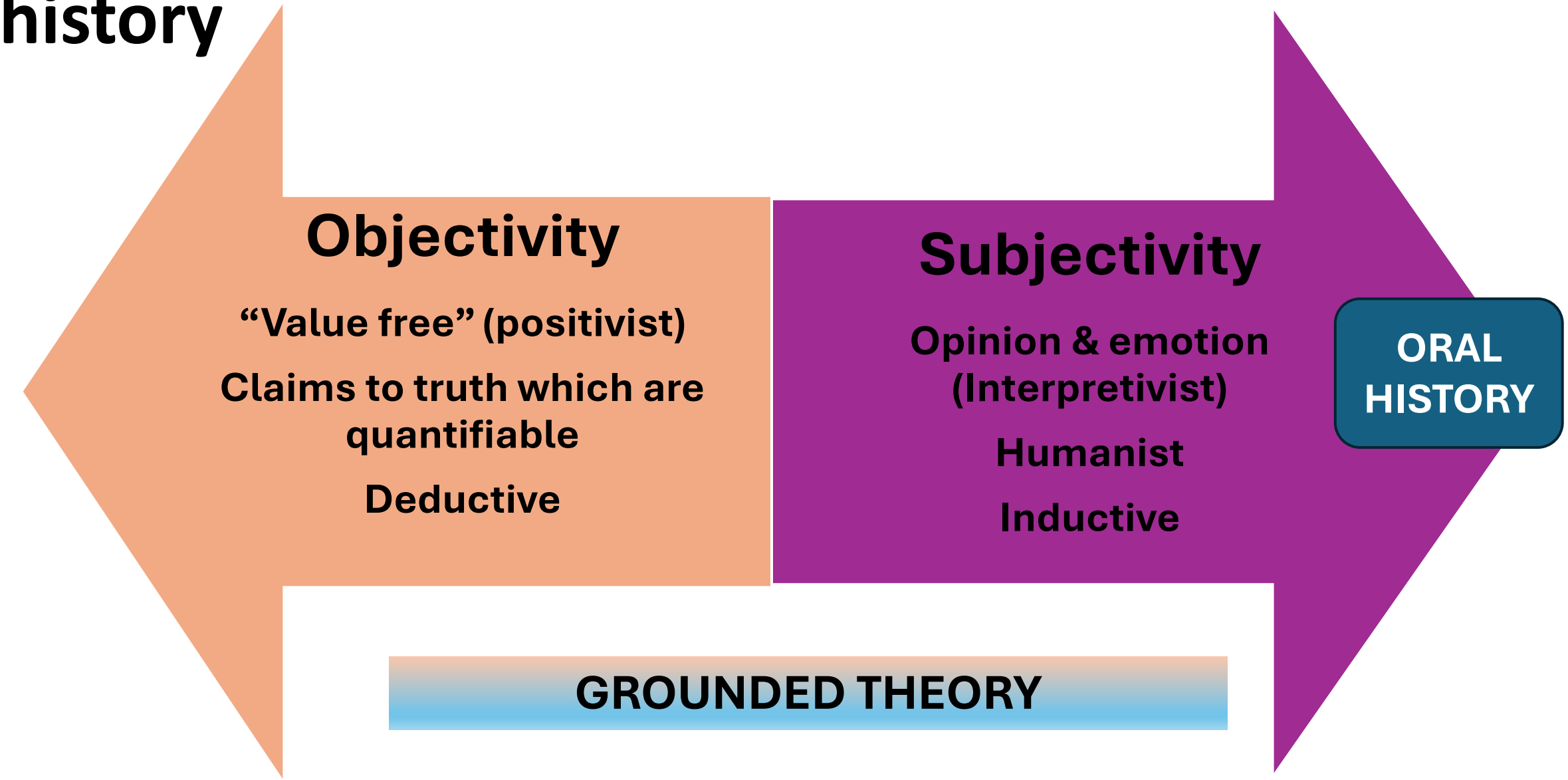


- A 1,000 word written report or equivalent with 750 words on your development journey and the remaining 250 on your future development action plan.
- Alternative formats: 4 Power Point slides; short film (6 – 8 mins);audio/podcast (6 – 8 mins)or web based resource. For other formats, check with Angela. Due on or before 16th Aug 2026.
- Estimated time to complete 2.5 – 3 hours. See assignment brief on the student portal.

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND IN ORAL HISTORY

ORAL HISTORY
MADE EASY

Embracing subjectivity as a continuum in oral history



GOLDEN RULES FOR INTERVIEWS & THE ART OF LISTENING

ORAL HISTORY
MADE EASY

We hear what we are listening for

What are we hearing? A test of understanding.



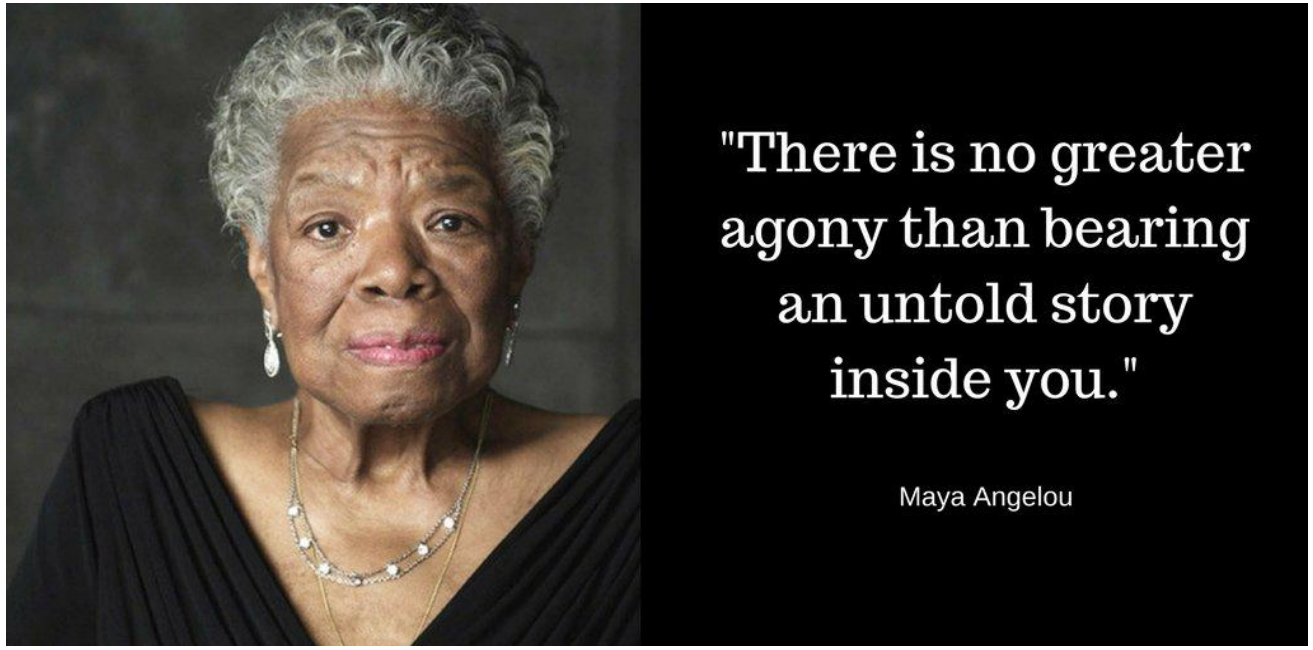


Listen up

How many times, if any, did I say the word ‘anger’?

ORAL HISTORY
MADE EASY





The oral history interview has two heroes: you the interviewer and your interviewee.

Golden rules for interviews (1)

Negotiate	Ensure you have been transparent about the scope of your project. Negotiate a time/date and venue. Confirm in email at least twice and phone on the day and/or day before. Book in at least two hours per interview.
Ensure	Ensure the consent form pre signed, the copyright/recording or deed of gift form prepared pre-populated with your interviewee's details for signing after interview. Send at least one week in advance of your interview. Check with your interviewee you have access to a quiet location.
Check	A few days before, check your equipment (battery levels) and make sure you have a contingency recorder in place (equipment covered separately). Test equipment. Make sure you are very familiar with the equipment. Check equipment the morning and the day before.
Visit	Visit location of interview a few days before. Check for extraneous noise. Mobile phones fully charged and on silent. Be aware of your personal safety – risk assessment.
Pilot	Do your pilot/test interview. What three things went well? What would you do differently next time? Apply the principles of experiential learning (see week 1).

The art of listening

The art of listening and reflections on the listening challenge.

Amend depending on context – use your judgement..

[Top ten listening tips (VLE).]



Adapted from The British Heart Foundation (2024) Ten Tips For Active Listening

What equipment you will need on the day (1)

- Recording equipment which saves to .wav format and had ideally with two external mics (Zoom) and USB port. Zoom online also works well with basis safeguards in place. H2N Handy Zoom recorder.
- Back up or alternative recording device e.g. IPad or smart phone; dictaphone or other digital recording device. Check you have enough memory (memory cards) Make sure you can **get your recording off** your equipment.
- Editing software e.g. Wavelab; Audacity.
- External mic and stand; rubber pad for recorder (a mouse pad or book works well).
- Headphones to check sound levels.
- Batteries (inc spare) and power supply.

What equipment you will need on the day (2)

- Note pad and pens.
- Mobile phone and charger (on silent).
- Your list of questions – try and memorise your key themes so you can focus on your interviewee.
- Any visual prompts such as photographic materials.
- Bottle of water.
- Throat lozenges e.g. Vocalzone or Fishermen's Friends.
- Remember your own health and well being.

Your recording equipment

Practise using your recording equipment until you are highly competent at setting up, recording, downloading and editing your interviews.

Standard recorders for oral history (archival quality) are: Zoom H1; Tascam DR-05; Zoom H2n (my favourite); Zoom H4n; Tascam DR-40; Zoom H5; Zoom H6; Roland R-26 and Tascam DR100 mk1.

See https://le.ac.uk/emoha/how-to-do-oral-history/equipment/sound-recorders

Preparing your questions

- Oral history interviews are a dialogue and therefore should be a natural exchange. But as a 'conversation with a purpose,' you will need a set of questions.
- Research your oral history topic. Use Google Scholar to guide you towards peer reviewed research.
- Create a ‘topic guide’ which will act as a road map for you and your interviewee. Be prepared to improvise when needed.
- Use open ended questions. Tell me about your first memory of…Describe the place you lived in when…What was that like? Why do you think…?

On arrival at the interview location

Remember the insights from your pilot. This will help your confidence as an interviewer. It will also enable you to check the flow of your questions.

Make a good positive impression. Ensure you arrive on time, greet your interviewee warmly and thank them for participating.

Before the interview formally begins, switch on the recording equipment and ask a benign question to check sound levels e.g. Tell me what you had for breakfast.

Have your back up recorder switched on as well.

Documenting time and place of interview.

- It's good practice to capture the date, time and location of your interview on your recording.
- A suggested opening statement is: "My name is (name of interviewer) and I am here with (name of interviewee) on (date & year) at (venue). (Name of interviewee), thank you so much for taking part in this interview. Can I confirm, please that you have read the participant information sheet? (wait answer). Can I now go through the consent form with you? (tick boxes in person or virtually)."
- Avoid too much formality. People often prefer more inviting vocabulary e.g. share your story; talk about memories of…

The art of active listening (1)

The importance of the interviewer's and interviewee's ‘inner voices’(Roberts, 2020) in non-judgmental way.

Minimal interviewer interruptions: be comfortable with silences. Listen with intention and attention.

Enables interviewer to ask more appropriate questions; indicates to respondent that you have been listening.

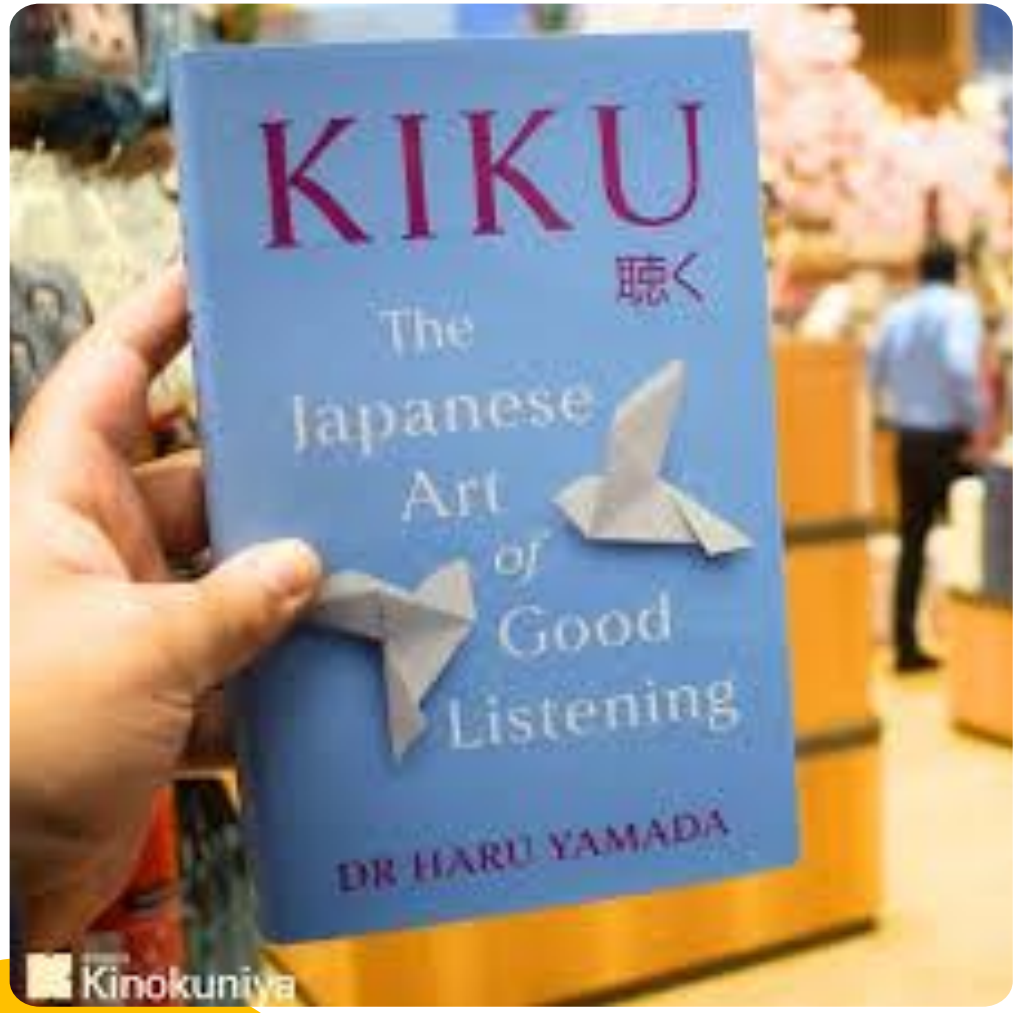
The art of ‘hearing data’ (Rubin and Rubin, 2011).

Audit interview transcripts; look at proportion of interviewer and interviewee speaking.

Actively listen. Be warned – it will be tiring!.







The art of active listening (2)

BBC Word Of Mouth 15th June 2025: Michael Rosen talks to sociolinguist Dr Haru Yamada about how we listen in different ways across different cultures and social groups, and how we can learn to do it better.

BBC Radio 4 - Word of Mouth, The Art of Listening and also as MP3 download Week 4 OHME VLE.

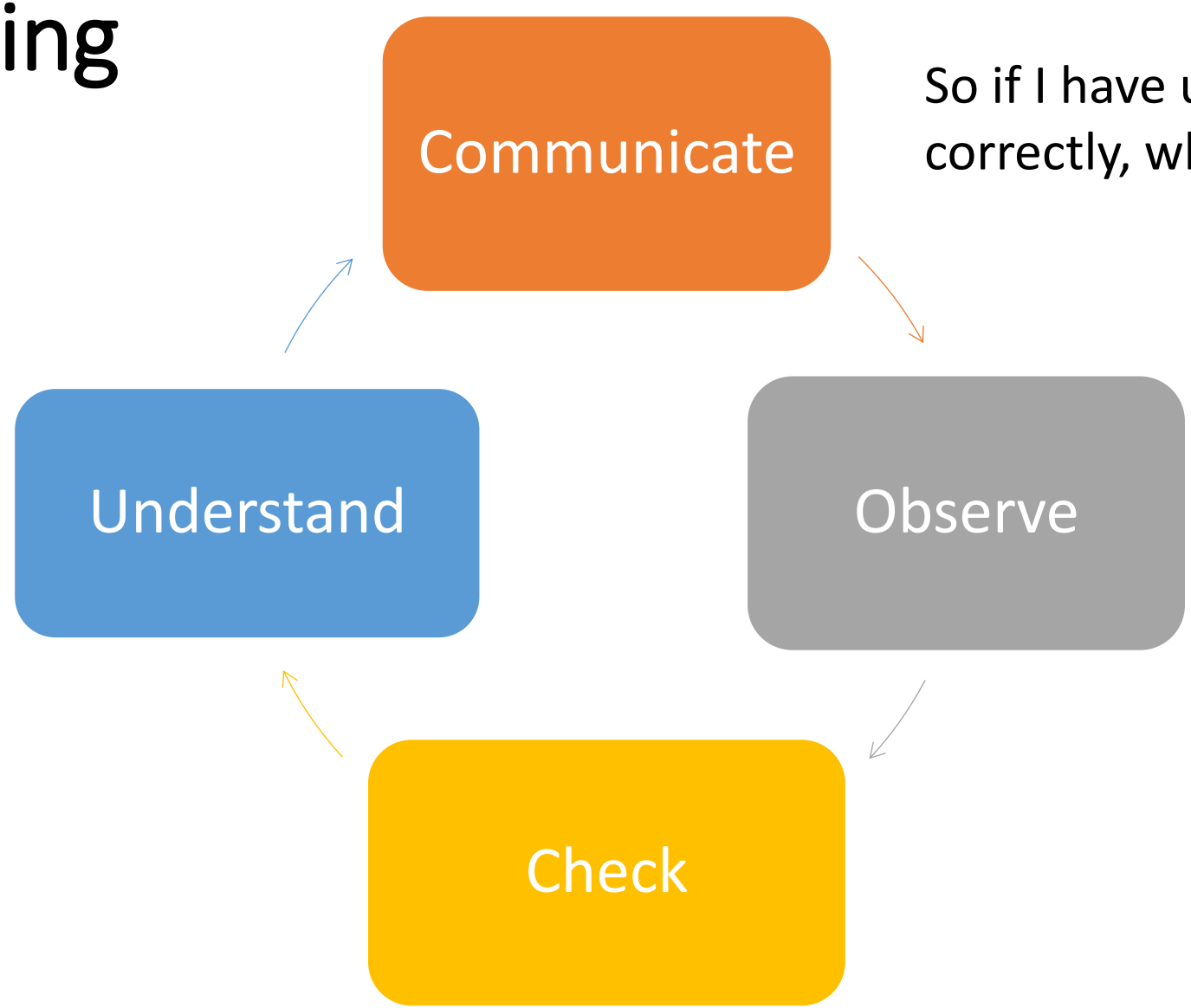
‘Informational listening,’ ‘listening with 14 hearts’ and ‘soft listening’.

Filtering what we hear through relational and cultural meaning

- It is just as important how we hear something as it is **how the thing is actually said.**
- What is the meaning behind the words? Links to hermeneutics.



The loop of understanding: words, emotions and feeling



So if I have understood you correctly, what happened was…

Oral history question types

Help me understand e.g. Describe to me…Tell me…How did you feel about?...How did that come about?...What happened next?

Structural/paradigmatic questions e.g. Out of all the things you've said, what is the most important to you?... Can you talk me through a typical day? …What are you most proud of…?

Follow-up/clarifying questions e.g. You mentioned that…can you tell me a little bit more about that? When you said (x), can you expand a little on that?

Experience/example questions e.g. In your experience, tell me what the most challenging circumstance was that…

Comparison/contrast questions e.g. If you were to compare life before and after (x), what are the main differences?

Ending the interview e.g. What would like to see happen in the future?

Adapted from: Janesick (2014)

A note on tangents

People do not recount their memories in a linear fashion. Rather, the memory is more of a labyrinth taking the narrator on a complex and nuanced route to the past.

Consequently, people will go off on what appear to be tangents. These tangents are an essential part of someone's past and can prove highly instructive.

To move someone back to the core topic, summarise what they have said (use loop of understanding) then use an open ended question to shift emphasis.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

After the interview

1

Immediately afterwards, explain the interview will be transcribed. Give timescale e.g. minimum 4 – 6 weeks. Manage expectations.

2

Write to your participant and thank them outlining what will happen next.

3

Download your interview. Make a minimum of two copies. Keep one copy on cloud based password protected storage and another on password protected hard drive.

4

Have interview transcribed. Use line numbers and highlighted text to identify specific words/phrases which you need them to clarify.

5

Go through the interview with your respondents. Be mindful of any special needs. NB All interviews need to be verified by your respondent before being disseminated.

Make notes immediately after the interview

- Using the principles of reflective practice, audit how you are feeling immediately after the interview.

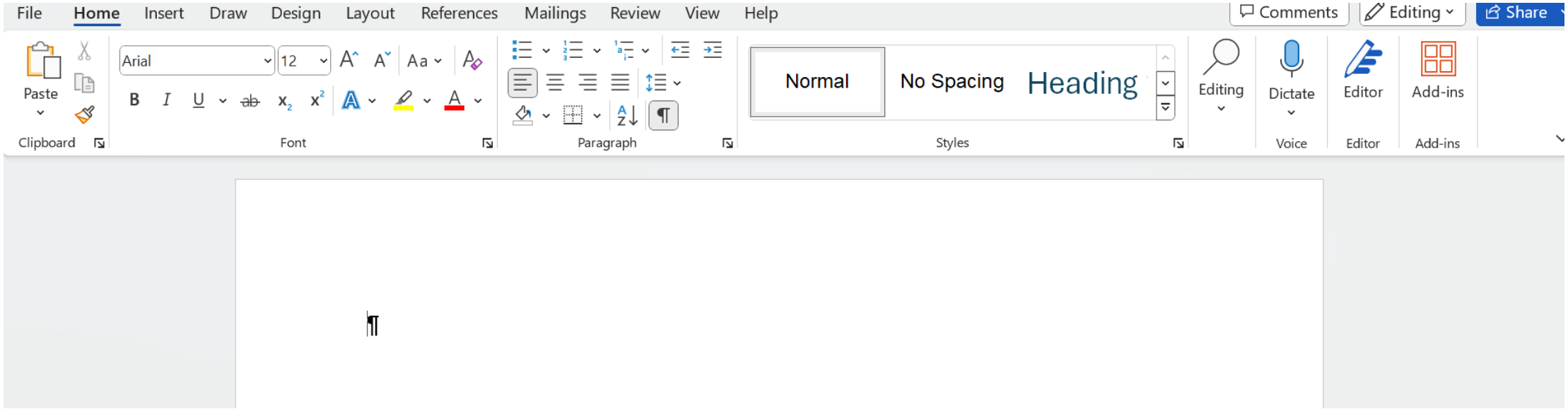
- What three things went well? What three things would you do differently next time? These reflections will be very useful for your assignment.



Transcribing the interview

- The gold standard is the verbatim transcript verified by your narrator.
- Using third party software has serious ethical implications e.g. third party ownership; copyright issues.
- Moreover, no software is as effective as transcribing by a person.
- Factor in 15 mins transcription time for 60 seconds of audio. Using the ‘Transcribe' tool on Word can help to speed up transcription.
- Double space text.
- Time code.
- Send to interviewee for final sign off, checking how s/he would like to be named when published and to verify any unusual spellings in the interview itself.
- See www.achilloralhistories.com and Peter Masterson Transcript July 2023

Using Word's 'Transcribe' tool



Using the ‘Transcribe’ tool in Word (1)



Stuart reads from the Shopes paper



Angela reads from the Shopes paper

Original Shopes text

What Is Oral History?

“Oral History” is a maddeningly imprecise term: It is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition-bearers; to informal conversations about “the old days” among family members, neighbors, or coworkers; to printed compilations of stories told about past times and present experiences; and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.

67 words

Each of these uses of the term has a certain currency. Unquestionably,
most people throughout history have learned about the past through the spoken word. Moreover, for generations, history-conscious individuals have preserved others' firsthand accounts of the past for the record, often precisely at the moment when the historical actors themselves, and with them their memories, were about to pass from the scene.

63 words

Stuart

What is oral history?

Oral history is a madding, the imprecise term. It is used to refer to formal rehearse accounts of the past, presented by culturally sanctioned tradition bearers to informal conversations about the old days among family members, neighbours or coworkers; to printed compensations of stories told about past times and present experiences and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.

69 words

Each of these uses of the term has a certain currency. Unquestionably, most people throughout history have learned about the past through the spoken word. Moreover, for generations, history conscious individuals have preserved others first hand accounts of the past, for the record, often precisely at the moment when historical actors themselves... with them, their memories were about to pass from the scene.

63 words

Angela

What is all history?

All history is a mattingly imprecise term. It is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past, presented by culturally sanctioned tradition bearers to informal conversations about the old days among family members, neighbours or co workers; to printed compilations of stories told about pastimes and present experiences and two recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.

64 words

Each of these uses of the term has a certain currency. Unquestionably, most people throughout history have learned about the past through the spoken word. Moreover, for generations, history conscious individuals have preserved others first hand accounts of the past, for the record, often precisely at the moment when the historical act is themselves, and with them their memories were about to pass from the scene.

66 words

Archiving and storage

- “Every effort should be made to ensure oral history materials are adequately stored, processed, maintained, and made accessible according to archival standards and best practices” (Oral History Association, 2022).
- Make the interviews discoverable i.e search engine optimisation.
- Record in .wav format (can be converted to MP3).
- Upload onto web archive.
- Ask for library cataloguing or other public archive.

Your two tasks between now & week 5,

1.Your pilot interview.

2. The assignment due 16th Aug 2026.



What we have covered in today's session

Recap on ethics documentation and one thing you've learnt so far on the course. ✓

Feedback from last week's ethical dilemmas (Zoom rooms). ✓

Golden rules for conducting your first oral history interview; preparing; on arrival; question types and the art of listening. ✓

After the interview and guidance on transcription. ✓

The assignment ✓

References

Janesick, V. J. (2014). Oral history interviewing: Issues and possibilities. *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 300-314.

Roberts, R. E. (2020). Qualitative Interview Questions: Guidance for Novice Researchers. *Qualitative Report*, *25*(9).

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage. ISBN: 978-1-4129-7837-8

Highly recommended viewing

- Doug Boyd Oral History, Ethics and AI - Seminar Presentations