

Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices

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Introduction: Notes on Using this Document and Developing an Archival Plan

This document is intended to be viewed in context as an addendum to the [Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices](#). It is important to note that this document is not just meant for professionally trained archivists or practitioners working with a traditional repository. Oral history is both created and cared for by a broad and diverse set of practitioners, including community organizers, independent researchers, affiliated faculty, storytellers, policymakers, journalists, writers, librarians, and families. While professionally-trained archivists who work with oral history are encouraged to engage with these guiding concepts and best practices, this document was created with all practitioners in mind. As a primer, we recommend reading the [Society of American Archivists Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics](#), as this document serves to “guide archivists, as well as to inform those who work with archivists, in shaping expectations for professional engagement.”

While considering an archival plan for oral history interviews, it will be helpful to consider the multifaceted nature of oral history. Oral history interviews are: primary sources that are meant to be accessible, discoverable, and understood; evidence for historical and anthropological understandings, as well as other disciplines; cultural objects; and archival objects requiring long-term preservation. Therefore, the archiving of oral history interviews has its own set of principles and best practices that need to be acknowledged and addressed in a centralized resource. This document applies well-established best practices from professional organizations and institutions to oral history interviews and collections.

This guide cannot be a one-size-fits-all resource. Practitioners may need to pick and choose from these best practices based on the needs and resources of their organization or community. Every oral history project should have a plan for archiving its oral histories that aligns with the project's goals and works within the capacity of the project's partners. Practitioners who are not affiliated with a formal archive should consider that capacity may be extended or re-envisioned through resource-sharing with repositories that can offer archival support or guidance. A plan for archiving interviews should take a form that is uniquely customized for the project, weighing the needs, concerns, and strengths of the individuals involved in the project, as well as the narrators.

Some archiving plans may eschew traditional repositories, particularly when working with [vulnerable communities](#), or when inclusion in a repository carries the potential for legal or personal danger. ^[1] When considering whether to donate to or work with a repository, it is critical to identify the priorities of the project. Some important questions to ask include: Who will have access to the materials and how will access be provided? How does a project align with the overall mission of potential partner organizations? How will privacy and confidentiality be handled? Plans may also require prioritization of immediate needs and uses of the oral histories over the future life of the materials—for example, in instances where projects emerge from political or environmental crises.

Considering all of the above, clear documentation of the archival plan is immensely important. This documentation will provide the means for understanding the context of the project in the future, including how and why the oral histories were conducted, how the project evolved over time, and how the archival plan was created. It will help future archivists and users understand the singularities of a project or collection, and it will serve to protect narrators and communities from any future misuse due to a lack of documentation.

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Archives Principles and Best Practices

Appraisal & Accessioning

Overview: The arrival of interviews at a repository is one of the most critical junctures in an interview's life cycle. There are two steps in this process: appraisal (the process of

determining which interviews should be accepted by a repository) and accessioning (the actions that archivists take to acquire legal and physical custody of the interviews). A clear appraisal and accessioning process allows repositories to handle the intake of oral histories and makes it easier for potential donors or partners to understand how the repository approaches the intake. Responsible accessioning is foundational to good archival practice. It protects materials and collects the necessary information to subsequently create metadata for discovery and provide access consistent with the intentions of the narrator.

Appraisal

Curators, archivists, and other repository staff need to consider the following aspects when appraising an interview or collection of interviews for inclusion in an archive. If the repository establishes that an interview does not meet its scope or standards, or if the repository is not able to responsibly care for an interview, the repository should decline the interview or collection. If appropriate, the repository may then wish to recommend a repository that may be a better fit for the materials.

1. **Appraisal of the physical object:** What is the physical condition of the media on which the interview is fixed? Is it deteriorating? Can it be preserved? Is it worth expending labor or resources to maintain it physically if it is brought into the collection?
2. **Appraisal of the content and context:** Does the interview fit with the mission, collection mandate, and/or acquisition policy of the repository, or would the interview(s) be better preserved in another institution that is more appropriately aligned with the content? Do you judge that it will be interesting to future researchers? Is the audio or audiovisual content of good quality (e.g., is the sound easy to hear)? Did the interviewer follow principles and best practices in planning and project management? Are the circumstances around which the interview(s) was(were) conducted clearly documented? If not, is this context easily discoverable through background research?
3. **Assessment of repository's capacity:** Does your repository have the capacity to preserve and provide access to the interview for future use? Do you have the equipment to preserve and play back the interview? Do you have the staffing or legal ability to follow through on rights agreements and promises to the donor(s)?
4. **Questions to ask with unprocessed legacy collections:** The issue and topic of legacy collections is larger than can be addressed here. Organizations and practitioners may come across or inherit oral history collections of which little is known. These oral histories often lack documentation, can be at risk of deterioration, and/or may not have clear rights. When encountering these collections, here are some questions to ask
 1. How much contextual information can be gathered about the oral histories? For example, who conducted the interviews? Who were the narrators? Who has rights to the content? Are there signed release forms?
 1. What formats were used? Keep in mind that playback may be risky depending on the condition of the media.
 2. How should the oral histories be preserved going forward? Think about appropriate storage, digitization, and future access. If your institution does not have the

necessary resources or capacity, is it more appropriate to transfer ownership to another organization?

3. If you are working for or with an institutional repository, does that entity have guidelines for dealing with legacy collections?

Accessioning

Responsible accessioning is the first step by which a repository gains physical and intellectual control over an interview or collection. The following activities should be a part of the accessioning process:

1. Accurately record all objects that come in from a donor, including media, transcripts, photographs, and any digital items (with their corresponding [checksums](#)). Establish a numbering or naming system to uniquely identify interviews and their components to ensure that materials are unambiguously connected to any information about them.^[2]
2. Ensure there is sufficient and consistent metadata collected at the time of donation so that content, context, and [provenance](#) are recorded, even if time passes between acquisition and full archival processing. (See the [Metadata](#) section in this document.)
3. Obtain all paperwork necessary for taking legal custody of interviews and documenting ownership and potential uses of interviews. Documents could include deeds of gift from donors, legal releases with narrators, and/or letters of transmittal.
4. In addition to metadata, accumulate as much supporting documentation around the interview as possible to ensure future knowledge of its provenance, conditions of creation, and the narrator/donor's intent for access, use, and responsibility of care. Supporting materials may include oral history project proposals, correspondence between interviewers and narrators, interviewer notes, or other documents regarding the creation of the interviews.
5. Donors will occasionally contribute accompanying materials that are more appropriately maintained by another archival department or repository. These might include paper archives, film archives, or photo archives. Archives should maintain tracking documentation for any materials that are ultimately transferred to other custodians. If possible, an institutional policy for dealing with different kinds of materials from one donor should be implemented.

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Metadata and Description

Overview: [Metadata](#) and description include specific fields of collected information which help place oral history interviews in context and enable discovery and access in a variety of ways. Devoting attention to description and metadata at all stages of the process is an essential part of any oral history project. It is important to collect the following types of information or metadata categories: administrative, descriptive, technical, preservation, and rights and access. All stages in the lifecycle of the interview should be considered as opportunities to engage in descriptive practices: pre-interview, interview, processing, preservation, and

dissemination. Practitioners should also keep in mind that metadata may need to be monitored over time and changes or updates to metadata may be required after the interview lifecycle.

[The Oral History Association Metadata Task Force \(OHA MTF\)](#) is producing detailed guidelines for those working with oral history metadata and description and is developing specific tools for metadata and description decision-making, which are based on [earlier best practices work](#).

The guidelines and principles below should be considered for oral history-specific metadata and description.

What to Collect

The following types of information, or metadata categories, are important to collect for oral history:

1. **Administrative metadata** is necessary to manage and use materials and is typically external to the content of the interview (e.g., details about acquisition and provenance (origin/donation), holding institution, or project documentation).
2. **Descriptive metadata** is information that is necessary for the discovery of oral history interviews and that documents the content and the context of the resource (e.g., the name of the interviewer and narrator, the date and place of the interview, and content information in the form of keywords, summary, and controlled vocabulary).
3. **Technical metadata** is information that includes all the physical and technical properties of the resource, including size, format, compression, and date stamps for recording. It can also include origin data, such as the recording device and the settings used.
4. **Preservation metadata** is information that is used to evaluate and protect a resource from harm, injury, deterioration, or destruction. For both analog and digital resources, practitioners should document the condition, creation of derivative copies, and any preservation events. The function of preservation is discussed in the Preservation section of this document.
5. **Rights and access metadata** is information that consists of information that documents legal and/or verbal agreements, copyright, licenses, restrictions, and any other information that guides future use.

When to Collect

Best practices for oral history metadata span the entire lifecycle of the interview. Whether data is being collected, transferred, or utilized, consider these four timeframes in the interview lifecycle as opportunities to engage in descriptive practices:

1. **Pre-Interview:** Project-level elements, as well as preparatory actions taken for particular interviews

2. **Interview:** All descriptive or technical elements of the actual interview, as well as biographical elements for those involved
3. **Processing:** Elements pertaining to the archival administration and preservation of the interview, as well as the production of derivative products
4. **Dissemination:** Administrative and descriptive elements relating to public discovery and access efforts, including legal rights and access statements

The OHA Metadata Task Force is creating a schema-agnostic rubric of suggested metadata fields for each of these lifecycle categories. The rubric and suggested fields are based on the types of metadata outlined above while keeping the special nature of oral history in mind.

Practitioners should also be aware that metadata may need to be monitored over time and changes or updates to metadata may be required after the interview lifecycle.

Metadata Decision-Making Practice

When considering all metadata categories, how does one determine priority? How and where should the information be collected? Is documenting all of these categories absolutely necessary? The answer to these questions will depend on a combination of factors such as institutional parameters and requirements, established systems and workflows, and access to resources. In general:

1. Metadata and description for oral history recordings and collections should, wherever possible, follow established standards. At the same time, oral history recordings and collections often do not fit neatly into existing standards that were developed for other types of materials and collections. Evaluating standards and crosswalking the above categories to existing systems in order to determine that oral-history specific information is being captured is an important part of the information-collection process.
2. Archivists, librarians and other practitioners may be in a position to suggest changes to existing standards and modules and/or develop new descriptive tools and templates to accommodate the descriptive needs of their oral history recordings and collections. It is acceptable to understand metadata standards as iterative, especially as new innovations in the field may help improve and enhance accessibility, preservation, discoverability, and understanding.
3. Collecting metadata and creating descriptive tools may not be one individual's job. Collaboration in acquiring accurate and quality metadata may be necessary and is encouraged (e.g., interviewer generated metadata worksheets, post-production metadata worksheets, or other joint processes).
4. There are a variety of reasons why monitoring metadata over time is important. External factors may require this as part of ongoing oral history preservation work. For example, access and rights conditions may change, terminologies could become outdated (or even offensive), and administrative and technical metadata may change due to actions taken on the interview. Updating metadata ensures the ongoing integrity and accuracy of the

resource(s), respects the intentions of the narrator and the project, and demonstrates responsible stewardship.

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Preservation

Overview: It is important for oral historians and archivists to understand the responsibility for ensuring the long-term preservation of an oral history interview. Oral history as a field of practice prioritizes preserving the original recording of the interview as well as related documentation. Therefore, the use of audiovisual materials in oral history practice, whether analog or digital, [\[3\]](#) inherently requires an appropriate and robust preservation plan. The obsolescence of media formats should be considered and planned for. [\[4\]](#)

Every effort should be made to ensure oral history materials are adequately stored, processed, maintained, and accessible according to archival standards and best practices. [\[5\]](#) Continued maintenance of the interviews and related materials ensures continued access to, and viability of, the materials for long-term preservation. Oral history practitioners and archival institutions should carefully review their infrastructure and resources to determine whether they are able to effectively undertake or intake an oral history project/collection. Individuals and organizations should determine if it's necessary to deposit materials into more experienced or better-supported repositories.

How to Preserve

Materials should be stored in a controlled environment, with an appropriate number of redundant digital copies stored in different physical locations.

- 1. The Importance of redundancy:** Redundancy refers to multiple copies of the interview(s). [\[6\]](#) This is not the same as multiple versions or formats (original recording, edited clip, textual transcription); redundancy means having multiple copies of all of those things, ideally, in different places. It is also a technological concept—for example, investing in mirroring redundant hard drives and servers to store your digital files. Redundancy is a solution to the question: if your computer or hard drive crashed (or your cloud computing solution went out of business, never to be heard from again), would all of your precious data be lost? How would you recover it? The concept of LOCKSS [\[7\]](#) (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe) is central to this question.
- 2. Backups are critical:** If redundancy is the concept, backups are the product of embracing that concept. Does your collection of interviews have an ongoing backup process in place? A small amount of upkeep, checking in, and maintenance is necessary to sustain collections. Do your project administrators (i.e. the person or people responsible for managing the oral history archive) have a regular practice of ensuring backups are secure? Are backups created again when revisions to interviews or interview descriptions take place? These questions also become increasingly important over time, as the

collection may change hands during staff or volunteer transitions and system upgrades—vulnerable moments for archived collections. Preparation and backup plans will help mitigate these vulnerabilities. ^[8]

3. **Documentation of backups is key:** Basic documentation on the location, content, and procedures used to create the backups is key to making the effort useful and effective. Is this documentation easily accessible and easily connected to the materials themselves? Are copies placed alongside the files/tapes, and are they accessible “offline”?
4. **A note about “backups” vs. archives/archiving:** The importance of redundancy as outlined above should not be confused with what a formal archive and/or archival relationship offers. Maintaining a backup is not the same as having a fully vested archival program. “Archiving” includes backing up data as well as doing the work to ensure all the other tasks outlined in this document are completed: appraising oral histories, properly describing them with thoughtful metadata, caring for them in a secure preservation environment, ensuring they are accessible, discoverable, and understood, promoting and marketing them, and facilitating their use. Resources that a cultural heritage institution may offer are both “hard” and “soft”—the equipment and infrastructure, as well as the expertise and experience of professionally trained practitioners.
5. **For repositories to think about:** Many archivists, librarians and curators would offer that partnering with a repository provides stability and succession planning for an oral history project/collection. At the same time, communities should maintain their agency in making decisions about choosing a partner repository that fits the needs of their project OR opting out of working with a repository.

What to Preserve

Audiovisual components should be preserved along with transcripts, metadata, and documentation detailing restrictions, interview content, or archival process. Equally important to the preservation of the actual recording is the documentation that accompanies the recording. At minimum this should include:

1. A legal release signed by the narrator, interviewer, and any others present during the interview.
2. A description or background statement explaining the overall project or series that a recording belongs to. (See the [Accessioning](#) section of this document.)
3. Metadata as required by an archive or repository. (See the [Metadata and Description](#) section of this document.)

Preservation of other documentation could also include fieldnotes or context statements, photographs or moving images, or any publications or documents created using the recording as the primary resource.

All documentation should unambiguously connect to the collections and materials they describe. For more information on file naming, see the resources in the [Accessioning](#) section of this document.

Access

Overview: One objective of most oral history projects is to create an opportunity for the public to interact with the interviews. There are several key components when considering how oral history interviews will be accessed and used:

1. Permissions and ethical use: Who can (and should) do what with an interview.
2. Transcription: Transcripts and video captions aid the discoverability and accessibility of interviews by allowing users to fully text-search an interview.
3. Public access and discoverability: Cataloging and providing access to oral histories should follow the standards of the collecting institution and/or be based on the capacity of the participants involved.

Permissions and Ethical Use

Ideally, all oral history interviews should be partnered with a legal release giving the archive permission to provide access to the interview (among other things). Releases should be signed by the interviewer and narrator and may provide options for participants to delineate restrictions on access and use of their interview. Archives often have existing access and use policies, which should be considered when drafting release forms for oral history recordings. At the same time, existing archival access and use policies should not be assumed to directly cover the relevant specificities for oral history recordings. Repositories should always honor the terms of access laid out in the release form or accompanying documentation as it evolves over the life cycle of the interview.

Narrator intent for the access and use of an interview should always be respected. Ideally, the oral history donor is the narrator their self, in which case the repository should obtain a release form specifying access and use of their interview. The other ideal situation is one in which a third-party donor has already obtained such documentation. In either case, it is ideal to have the signature of the interviewer. Oral histories are co-created by the interviewer and the narrator and copyright is most often considered as belonging to both parties unless or until they sign an agreement to transfer that right.

If a potential donor does not have either recorded verbal ^[9] or legal release for an interview, it is not recommended that the archive accept the donation, since access may not be provided to such recordings without exposing the archive to potential legal and ethical complications. If desired, the archive can accept the recording in hopes of eventually obtaining release forms that would allow them to provide access to the material. Archives with legacy oral histories in their holdings that do not have any kind of release from the narrator may consider locating the narrator or their next of kin. If the organization has a legal department, it is best to consult with them on matters such as these. If that is not possible, the archive should use their discretion to decide what kind of access to provide. ^[10]

For more information see the [Ownership and Rights Management](#) section of this document.

Transcription

Whenever possible, archives should create a transcript or video caption of oral history interviews. Transcripts and video captions aid the discoverability and accessibility of interviews by allowing users to fully text-search an interview. Ideally, transcription is done by a trained individual, either in-house or outsourced to a transcription service. It is also possible to use voice recognition software or services (aka automated transcription) to provide a rough transcript. The quality of transcripts created by voice recognition software varies drastically based on a number of factors. Because human transcribers and automated transcription services are both fallible, it is best practice to review first-draft transcripts for accuracy. Archives or project managers should create a style guide [\[11\]](#) to ensure consistency across transcripts. All transcripts should be reviewed before publishing, carefully checking to ensure that proper names are spelled correctly and that dates reflect what is said on the recording. Consider noting any differences between the verbatim recording and the resulting transcript for users.

In addition to, or in lieu of (if transcription isn't feasible), a transcript, the interview could be indexed to make it more searchable. Indexes allow researchers and users to find the subjects and topics they are interested in more readily within an interview. Another option may be to create a detailed catalog record for researcher access. Regardless of the access tool, it is important to have controlled vocabulary and consistent standards so that your materials are uniform. [\[12\]](#)

Public Access and Discoverability

Oral history recordings and collections should be cataloged following the guidelines in the Metadata and Description section above and in line with the standards of the collecting institution. If the legal release and ethical concerns allow, the interview materials should be discoverable online. In some cases this means making the entire recording and/or transcript or index available online. This could mean using online platforms or tools that are compatible with the organization's existing web presence or designing a new website, online portal [\[13\]](#) or audiovisual hosting site. If audiovisual files and/or transcripts cannot be hosted online, consider creating a finding aid for the oral history collection. A finding aid includes important metadata that will aid researchers in locating materials and can often easily be uploaded to a website. If a repository does not have the capability to make interviews discoverable online, they could explore collaboration with other institutions for doing so. Other options for providing access to oral histories include having on-site listening stations or providing on-request access to interviews by sending materials directly to patrons.

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Collaboration

Overview: In any collaborative partnership dealing with archiving oral history projects/collections, stakeholders should discuss and come to agreements on the following:

1. **Scope:** Ascertain that the subject matter of the interviews addresses the needs and interests of each stakeholder.
2. **Format:** Ensure that the recording(s) will be made in a format and standard suitable for accession, preservation, and any specific uses identified by stakeholders.
3. **Rights and permissions:** Ensure that a proper legal release is obtained and adheres to each stakeholder's needs and requests.
4. **Long-term preservation plan:** Ensure that any partnering repository has the capacity to accept the interview materials and is capable of long-term preservation of the objects.
5. **Metadata requirements:** Ensure that required metadata is defined at the outset of the project and is collected throughout the life cycle of the interview.
6. **Access:** Determine who can access the interview, how it is made accessible, and create policies dictating future duplication and dissemination of the interview material.
7. **Restrictions on use:** Determine any restrictions, and establish how they are handled by project stakeholders.
8. **Additional considerations:** Discuss any unique or specific wishes relevant to the needs of the narrator, community, repository, or other collaborating partner.

Partners may consider creating a Memorandum of Agreement/Understanding (often referred to as a MOA or a MOU) to document the agreed-upon plan to handle the above important issues.

Collaboration: Narrators

Narrators are encouraged to read and become familiar with the complete suite of Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices documents prior to being interviewed, particularly the "[For Participants In Oral History Interviews](#)" section. Narrators should work with the people responsible for the project to determine how involved they can/will be in various stages of the project's development. Some narrators may wish to be hands-on throughout the project and others may wish to conduct their interview and have no further role. Narrators should communicate with the project lead(s) and with their interviewer to ensure an understanding of levels of involvement for all parties.

A narrator information form or guide can prove useful as it provides key information about the mission of the project, contacts, and the proposed end result of the project. If sent before the interview is conducted, this document can also help narrators understand what to expect from the interview process.

See also: "Narrator Rights in an Archival Relationship" in the [Ownership and Rights Management](#) section below.

Collaboration: Practitioners

Oral history practitioners may be hired by institutions, either as independent contractors or temporary staff, to help carry out an oral history project or run an oral history program.

1. Practitioners are regularly enlisted to conduct interviews and may also be tasked with more collaborative roles, particularly when an institution is collecting oral histories for the first time and new modes of interdepartmental cooperation and protocols must be established to archive interviews and related materials.
2. In cases where a project is based in an institution that does not maintain or have access to a repository, does not have an archivist, and/or lacks experience and capacity with regard to storage and maintenance of audiovisual files, oral history practitioners should take a leading role in developing an appropriate archival plan that is feasible for the institution. Access should be discussed as part of an archival plan, whether through a project website, a plan to promote the collection to the institution's base or a more targeted audience, or other modes of access and usage that are customized to the project.
3. When an oral history practitioner is attached to a project temporarily, the overall project scope and timeline should allot time for that person to train designated permanent staff in the use of the oral histories after all the project materials have been collected and before the practitioner's contract ends. This training is to ensure that there are permanent staff in place to steward the collection who are familiar with access policies including restrictions, rights (see the [Ownership and Rights Management](#) section for more information), and routine file maintenance or website upkeep, if applicable.
4. If designated permanent staff are unable to follow the archival plan or to carry out ongoing stewardship of the collection, the institution should consider hiring the oral history practitioner to perform or coordinate regular maintenance of the collection, to periodically train new permanent staff in the management of the collection, or to transition the collection to a repository with suitable capacity.

Independent oral history practitioners may seek a collaborative partnership with an institution, or a particular archival repository, as a component of a grassroots community project or personal research project. Such collaborations may be a prerequisite to applying for grant funding necessary to carry out the project, or they may be advantageous if the collection would benefit from ongoing professional archival management after the interviews are conducted. [\[14\]](#)

1. Collaborations can initiate growth in new and unexpected directions, and collaborators can provide one another with complementary forms of quality control.
2. Archival repositories should strive to accommodate unique components and terms of a project, if capacity allows, while still ensuring adequate preservation of project materials.
3. A Memorandum of Understanding should explain the purpose of the partnership, outline rights and access policies, and clarify divisions of labor. The memorandum should be developed collaboratively and reflect mutual engagement. Any correspondence demonstrating its evolution, such as changes to the focus of the project, narrators' requests, or the nature of the partnership, should be saved as addenda.

4. Intellectual property rights should also be discussed and included in the memorandum of understanding. In addition to granting rights to the narrators and the repository, the oral history practitioner may also ask to be credited as the interviewer or for the conceptual development of the project, depending on the nature of their contribution to the partnership.
5. It is important to periodically reassess the collaboration to ensure that the terms continue to benefit the project.

Collaboration: Institutions/Organizations

Institutions and organizations may find it beneficial to collaborate with one another on an oral history project. Examples of these collaborations include: a university collaborating with a local historical society; a university office collaborating with internal departments and units; a public library collaborating with a local non-profit organization. The success of these types of collaborations relies heavily upon consistency and quality control within the project.

1. Providing clarity on how interviewers should schedule, record, and conduct oral history interviews for a specific project is important. This creates consistency in how interviewers understand the mission of the project, as well as best practices for interviewing. This can be accomplished by creating relevant videos, manuals, and/or in-person training.
2. Balancing access, restrictions, and rights when collaborating with organizations or institutions can be challenging. Agreeing upon specific guidelines for access, restrictions, and rights at the start of the project, and developing project-specific legal release forms, will help collaborators ensure their missions and best practices are aligned across all organizations and institutions involved in the project. (See “Permission and Ethical Use” in the [Access section](#) for more information about legal release forms.)
3. Creating uniform kits that include recording equipment, necessary paperwork—such as legal releases and narrator information forms—and backup materials such as extra batteries, SD cards, business cards, etc., can help streamline processes for both large-scale and small-scale collaborations. These kits can be provided for permanent use by staff or checked-out to part-time or volunteer interviewers.

Deciding on storage and access workflows can be challenging when collaborating with another institution or organization outside of your own. Determining where to store the transcripts, audiovisual files, and legal release forms is important, especially if they cannot be stored in a shared space.

1. If audiovisual files, transcripts, and legal release forms cannot be stored on a shared server and/or in the cloud, it is important to determine how and where these items will be stored for each institution or organization. Creating documentation for these workflows and providing them to all parties involved is helpful in ensuring clear communication.

2. If online access is an option for the project, all involved parties will need to agree upon specific workflows for uploading and cataloging materials. It is also important to determine which organization or institution will be responsible for maintaining the online repository, if necessary.

Collaboration: Community

The relationship between archival institutions and narrators extends beyond the oral history interview to include [communities](#): formal and informal groups of people who have a special interest or stake in an oral history project or collection. These communities can be defined by any number of identity sets and may or may not be completely homogenous or directly involved with the interview or archival process. Some examples may include projects organized around race or ethnicity, gender and sexuality, or shared experiences.

Collaboration with communities should be considered in every aspect of archiving, from ownership and preservation of oral history recordings, to the way in which recordings and collections are described and accessed. In each of these realms it is important to:

1. Identify and understand stakeholder communities and how oral histories could help or harm them in the context of broader societal relationships (i.e. safety, marginalization, or economic advantage), especially when working with [vulnerable communities](#).
2. Keep in mind existing power dynamics between the repository and different communities. Consider whether certain communities should receive different accommodations for access and use of oral histories.
3. Actively engage with these communities throughout the project lifecycle, and interview custodianship in order to responsibly preserve and distribute these materials.

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Ownership and Rights Management

Overview: Oral historians, archivists, and narrators alike must understand the complexity of ownership and rights management of oral history interviews. It is important to define ownership before a project starts and document any changes throughout the lifecycle of an oral history. This includes preserving narrator rights through an ongoing relationship with an archive. It is also important to consider the temporal aspects of administration and how practices change over time. Aspects that could impact ownership include changes in administrative best practice, in legislation, in societal understanding of ownership, and in technology.

The considerations in this section are grounded in contemporary oral history [best practices](#) and [ethics](#) and are intended to help any institution or practitioner understand the attributes, challenges, and responsibilities of ownership of both new and legacy oral history materials.

Definitions of Ownership

Before discussing ownership, it is important to define some of the different attributes of ownership that might apply to an interview. Narrators, interviewers, repositories, and other parties should strive to choose a mutually beneficial arrangement of ownership and properly document it in a way that is actionable according to the laws of their jurisdiction. All parties have an obligation to know their rights and responsibilities regarding ownership, but since knowledge of ownership issues is a part of archivists' core practice, they bear an additional responsibility to act in good faith and help narrators understand issues of ownership so narrators can act with [informed consent](#).

Types of ownership include:

1. **Ownership of physical property:** Interviews, whether audiovisual or print, can be fixed in numerous formats of carriers, both analog and digital. These physical carriers can be owned by the narrator, repository, or other third parties, regardless of the owner of the intellectual property. This ownership is governed by deeds of gift, deposit agreements, or the laws of the parties' jurisdiction(s).
2. **Ownership of intellectual property:** Owners of the intellectual property of the interview, including [copyright](#) and literary rights, have exclusive rights to use, distribute, and profit from that work. Copyright owners also have a right to [license](#) various uses of their interviews to other parties. ^[15] Repositories may desire to obtain copyright or a license for certain uses to legally perform functions associated with making the interview available in certain contexts.
3. **Access and ownership:** Access is related to ownership in that owners of intellectual or physical property may have certain legal or practical means to restrict or extend access to the interview. Access is not inherently related to ownership, however. For example, a repository may make an interview for which it does not hold copyright available to researchers, or a narrator and repository may agree to restrict access to an interview for a period of time, even after the interview has been gifted to the repository.
4. **Narrator's irreplicable relationship to their story:** Unlike the other categories, this is more a matter of ethics and principles than strict legal interpretation. It is acknowledged that the narrator has a special relationship with their story. Legal realities of ownership of physical property or intellectual property should not be used to alienate narrators from their stories. In certain cases, similar considerations of irreplicable relationships may apply to communities with a connection to the interviews, or to the interviewer.

Narrator Rights in an Archival Relationship

A narrator should retain the right to easily access and use the content of their interview through the terms established by the project agreement. Providing ongoing access and usage rights is one way for a repository to acknowledge a narrator's irreplicable relationship to the experiences and stories shared in the oral history.

Consideration should also be given to requests from family and community members to access or use oral histories. Repositories should work to eliminate any barriers to access and usage as identified by the narrator, family, or community members.

In some cases, a narrator's position on the public's access and use of their oral history may evolve, resulting in requests for the repository to increase or limit access or to remove the oral history from the collection altogether. ^[16] Repositories should recognize the significance of such requests and accommodate them whenever possible.

Across all discussions around narrator rights, it is important to prioritize good relationship building and to recognize that project forms and interview documentation may require multiple revisions and updates throughout the lifecycle of each oral history interview. Changes in agreements may also necessitate updates to description of interviews in catalogs, finding aids, and other discovery tools.

Documenting Provenance and Context of Interview

Provenance, or the “origin story” of an interview or collection of interviews, is an important part of understanding and documenting ownership and rights for oral history. This is particularly true for oral history in the digital age. ^[17] As articulated in the [OHA Statement on Ethics](#), “Oral historians and their archivist partners [must] clearly document relevant [metadata](#) so that future users will know easily who was interviewed, when and where the interview was conducted, and other key pieces of data about the interview.” This concept is applied here to underscore its importance not only for future users but for the archives, archivists, and other stewards of collections. Understanding rights, documenting decisions and processes early and often, and maintaining transparent record keeping should be part of regular operations.

1. All types of ownership and rights (in the Definitions of Ownership above) must be clearly understood by stewards and custodians of oral history interviews (e.g., archivists, librarians, or other project managers) at all stages of the oral history lifecycle, but particularly at the beginning of a project.
2. Research may be necessary to trace the origin of a collection, and those responsible for articulating ownership and rights should make a good-faith effort to independently verify and document not only the who, when, where, and what of an interview, but also— —and especially— —the how and the why of an interview or project, in order to fully understand origins.
3. Understandings must be clearly documented in text-based legal agreements, project documentation, and administrative metadata, and also, perhaps, orally recorded as part of an interview. ^[18] Language in contracts and agreements—including informed consent agreements, legal release forms, and deeds of gift—should clearly articulate the type of rights that have been discussed and transferred, and they should also include and reference examples of known and potential uses of oral history interviews.
4. There is a temporal aspect to caring for collections. Paradigms shift, and institutional missions may necessitate re-evaluations of collection ownership. If and when this happens, documentation about decisions must be cumulative and transparent.
5. When transferred and deposited to an institution or other responsible entity serving in an archival role, oral history interviews and collections may change hands more than once. Those transitions are vulnerable moments, and steps should be taken so that all

accompanying documentation and information “travels” with oral histories in order to preserve provenance and context.

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About the Document

The establishment of the Oral History Association (OHA) Archives Principles and Best Practices Task Force grew out of a direct recommendation from the OHA Principles and Best Practices Task Force after revision work was completed in 2018. The objective of the task force was to create a document addressing issues of best practices regarding the archiving of oral history, not only for archival management of oral history material, but also in terms of working with oral historians, narrators, and the public for access and care of oral history material. In January 2019 the OHA Council asked the OHA Archives Interest Group to form a small task force to take on this duty, with a suggested completion date to coincide with the 2019 OHA Annual Meeting in October. The task force reached out to the Society of American Archivists Oral History Section for support and recruitment of additional task force members. In late-January 2019 the task force convened twelve members with an intentional inclusion of backgrounds from large and small institutions, academic institutions, non-archivists working with archival collections, non-traditional archives, and independent practitioners.

The co-chairs identified six sections for this document: Appraisal and Accessioning; Metadata and Description; Preservation; Access; Collaboration; and Ownership and Rights Management. Ideas for a number of these sections came directly from discussions and feedback given by OHA members during the review of OHA’s general Principles and Best Practices document in 2018.

The co-chairs, Ellen Brooks and Jennifer Snyder, are more than grateful to the task force members—Patrick Daglaris, Sarah Dzedzic, Heather Fox, Lauren Kata, Kristin Leaman, Leslie McCartney, Caitlyn Oiyee Coon, David Olson, Nicholas Pavlik, Anna Robinson-Sweet, Teague Schreiber, and Steven Sielaff. Special thanks to Mary Larson for copy editing.

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^[1] Examples include interviews conducted with undocumented immigrants who would be at risk of deportation or survivors of domestic violence or stalking who risk being located and harmed by former abusers. For an in-depth exploration of the limits of repositories to protect narrators, see a [statement](#), [discussion](#), and [resources](#) on Boston College’s Belfast Project.

^[2] Resources on creating good file naming conventions:

1. <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/08/file-naming-in-the-digital-age/>
2. <https://www.avpreserve.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/5-Tips-For-What-Not-To-Do-When-Creating-A-File-Naming-Structure.pdf>

[3] A more detailed and advanced discussion of digital preservation concepts, including visualizations of systems, are in: Boyd, Douglas A. “The Digital Mortgage: Digital Preservation of Oral History,” in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012, <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/the-digital-mortgage/>

[4] A resource on media stability and format longevity/obsolescence is <https://obsoletemedia.org/media-preservation/>

[5] Digital Preservation, <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/digital-preservation/>

[6] <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/the-digital-mortgage/>

[7] LOCKSS resources: <https://www.lockss.org/about/what-lockss>

[8] One resource is “Fixity and checksums” on the Digital Preservation Coalition: <https://www.dpconline.org/handbook/technical-solutions-and-tools/fixity-and-checksums>

[9] The OHA Best Practices and Principles [For Participants in Oral History Interviews](#) document recommends that this process be fully documented in writing and that the signatures of all participating parties be obtained and preserved in project records. However, limitations of time, language, literacy, and other factors may make this recommendation unfeasible; in those cases, both the communication of the goals and risks associated with the project along with interviewee informed consent should be recorded prior to the beginning of the interview.

[10] An example of “risk assessment” from the Kentucky Oral History Commission regarding what level of access an oral history collection holder can provide based on what level of informed consent is available for each oral history recording. “Pathways to Oral History Access,” Pass the Word, A Project of the Kentucky Oral History Commission, accessed May 13, 2019, <https://passtheword.ky.gov/pathways-oral-history-access>.

[11] Examples of Style Guides include:

1. Baylor University – [A Quick Reference for Editing Oral History Transcripts](#)
2. Columbia University Center for Oral History Research (CCOHR) – [Oral History Transcription Style Guide](#)
3. [Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art](#) – [Oral History Program Style Guide](#)

[12] For examples of indexing standards see: “How can I index my recordings?” <https://www.loc.gov/vets/transcribe.html>, “Indexing Interviews in OHMS: An Overview” <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2014/11/indexing-interviews-in-ohms/>. Many organizations follow different sets of data entry standards for cataloging purposes.

[13] Examples of online platforms for oral history include the [Oral History Metadata Synchronizer](#) and [Aviary](#). Examples of audiovisual hosting sites are [YouTube](#), [SoundCloud](#), and

[Spotify](#).

[14] Once piece of valuable advice is to collaborate early in the interview life cycle with archivists and curators of institutions in order to parallel their workflows and policies. For more, see essays Oral History in the Digital Age, such as <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/no-one-wants-the-maintenance-crew-named-after-them/>.

[15] Licenses can support a range of objectives that might not be covered by copyright law. They can be unique agreements or standardized. For example, the [Creative Commons](#) suite of standardized licenses provides a range of options for rights-holders to convey expectations around sharing, attribution, repurposing, or commercial activities to would-be users.

[16] [The Right to Be Forgotten](#) via the EU General Data Protection Regulation.

[17] See: <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/what-do-you-think-you-own/>

[18] Realistically, circumstances do arise when agreements or understandings are not added to written legal documents. If this is the case, whoever is responsible should strive to document verbal agreements that have been made between repository and narrator so that they are not lost during staff turnovers or other vulnerable moments. Archivists with experience with legacy collections can attest that such documentation is no replacement for actual legal agreements, though it is far better than having no information at all about narrators' intent for access conditions and ownership of the interviews.

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