



HOW TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY

This guide includes help for the following:

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WHY ORAL HISTORY

- Source for Compelling Evidence
 - it can at times be quoted at some length with great effect if the quotation is well chosen;
 - it can be used to create case studies;
 - it can provide a writer with information and ideas which can be imported into a piece of writing without being directly quoted;
 - it can be used in captions.
- Serves as a link from the immediate present to the immediate past in a very human way.
- Fills an information gap when less and less information and reflections are recorded in written form and traditional historical records—particularly relevant for those pursuing issues of social justice or people and topics that have historically been relegated as not worth preserving. Much of oral history works to recover the past.
- Provides a natural opportunity to obtain information related to ordinary people.

Distinctions in Oral History

- One axis of difference is defined by the *provenance* of interviews.
Community-based: projects are developed by grass-roots groups to document their own experience.
Institution-based: interviews are conducted by scholars to inform their own research or to create a permanent archival collection for future scholarly work.
- The second axis is defined by *voice*, the extent to which the narrator's voice or the historian or interpreter's voice dominates the final product of the interviews.
Archival collections of interviews that are almost entirely in the narrators' voices.
Scholarly monographs in which the historian incorporates interviews along with other sources into an interpretation of the past.

Critiques of Oral History

-accuracy, immediacy, reality

"All history is the history of the present, as each generation rewrites history in terms of its current values and preoccupations. And so it is with private oral history. We all construct inside our head an autobiography as we progress through life and, like written history that autobiography... serves to make sense of the past and define our evolving sense of identity." Janet McCalman (*Struggletown*)

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Ground yourself thoroughly in the subject matter you wish to discuss so you are able to frame intelligent questions as well as to identify interviewee mistakes, honest or intentional. Look at a variety of secondary sources that may help you prepare for the interview, like textbooks, encyclopedias, or more general sources. Read selectively, focusing on those sections that pertain most directly to the topics you find most interesting and are likely to bring up in the interview. Your research will enable you to prepare a list of topics, preferably in chronological order, to be discussed during the interview.

Prepare an outline of topics to go over during the pre-interview, taking into consideration how you may follow up in the actual interview. If you feel nervous about conducting the actual interview itself, or would like to prepare more in-depth for the process, read some basic "how to" books or articles on oral history. Suggestions are available at the end of this document.

THE INTAKE INTERVIEW

Prior to conducting the oral history, you should also conduct an intake interview, or a short interview to assess the basic parameters of your subject's life, in order to gather more relevant questions for the actual interview.

Call the potential interviewee and indicate an interest in the interviewee's recollections and establish an appointment for the pre-interview. When you make your initial contact with the interviewee, be sure to explain the significance of your project and how their interview will contribute to completing your project.

Explain to the interviewee that the purpose of the intake interview is to plan the actual interview, to construct an outline, to discuss taping session mechanics, explain the legal agreement form, and to get acquainted by establishing a rapport. Before this pre-interview session, read over your information on the interviewee, create a brief biographical sketch, and prepare a list of general topics to be discussed. The intake interview session should not last much longer than fifteen minutes. Do not tape record this session. This is your chance to find out the parameters of your interviewee's life, so that when you prepare your interview questions you will be better informed as to the interview direction.

During this intake interview session create an *interview outline*. This initial interview outline is important because:

- It establishes and maintains a rapport with the interviewee.
- It involves the interviewee in research.
- It is the basis for planning the actual interview.
- It gives ways of asking tough questions without seeming to do so.
- It makes a framework for a finished project.
- It assists the editor with arranging the transcript.
- It aids the interviewer to pursue ongoing research in an orderly fashion.

Establish the basic facts. "I have your birth year as 1924, is that correct?" and "How do you spell the name?" Prepare the outline along chronological lines, establish the length of activity periods in the person's life (their childhood, college years, retirement, etc.)

Do not submit your list of specific questions to the interviewee.

Ask about possible environments for the actual interview to identify a noise-free place for taping and an environment in which the interviewee will feel comfortable. Suggest the general areas of question at the taping session in the near future. Decide on a possible date and time for the taped interview. From this outline, develop your interview questions.

Ask the interviewee to bring in photographs or personal documents (yearbooks, family albums) to go over with together during the interview and to potentially digitally scan in order to augment your oral history.

INTERVIEW MECHANICS

Equipment Checklist

- ✓ tape recorder and microphone with appropriate power source (batteries, if applicable)
- ✓ adequate supply of tapes
- ✓ extension cord
- ✓ note pad
- ✓ interview outline and questions
- ✓ release form--two copies (one for you and one for the interviewee)

Try to get the interview environment void of as much outside noise as possible. Encourage the interview to be conducted in privacy.

Label your tape with your name, the interviewee's name, the locale of the interview, and the date.

Place the recorder near to you so that you may see the tape counter and are able to monitor any technical difficulties.

Before the interview, test the machine to make sure it is working properly. While setting up and testing the machine, explain to the interviewee that during the taping, you will take notes and check occasionally with the earphone.

Before beginning or continuing the interview, play a bit of tape so that you are not recording on the leader. Begin the interview by stating your name, who you are interviewing, where you are interviewing, and the date. Do this directly into the microphone. Then turn the microphone to the interviewee and begin your questions.

Most interviewees get tired after 1 1/2 to 2 hours. Reschedule an additional interview if you have not finished covering the material in 2 hours.

Make sure to get your interview release form signed. Avoid use of restrictions if possible but when necessary, always include a termination date. Provide a copy of the agreement to your interviewee. (Sample form is attached at the end of this document).

Consider bringing in a camera to take a picture of the interviewee.

15 INTERVIEWING TIPS

1. Begin interviewing as soon as possible after arrival. Do not attempt to establish rapport with the interviewee by engaging in an extended conversation.
2. Start with easy personal, non-controversial background questions (that you have acquired during the intake interview) that will elicit expansive answers. Save controversial questions for later, after you have established a rapport. A good place to begin is with your subject's youth and background.
3. Avoid questions that will result in simply "yes" or "no" responses.
4. Keep yourself and your opinions out of the interview; never "lead" the interviewee.
5. Encourage the interviewee with continual and constant attentiveness; employ facial expressions, eye contact, however try to avoid verbal responses (such as "uh-huh"). These verbal responses tend to dominate the interviewee's responses on the tape.
6. Never turn off the recorder except for changing tape, telephone calls, doorbells or emergency calls of nature; do not turn off the machine in order to go "off the record. "
7. Take notes as a reminder for later questions or clarification of details.
8. Be mentally structuring new questions as you are asking questions from your list.
9. Do not interrupt interviewee responses even if interviewee has strayed from your planned outline. If the information is pertinent, let them go.
10. Do not fret over seemingly endless pauses; give the interviewee time to think.
11. Ask the interviewee to clarify time and place when he/she finishes answering the question; write down correct spelling of names and places after taping session is completed. Be sure to get exact addresses when possible.
12. Probe! Always ask why and how; ask for opinions and feelings.
13. If the interviewee's recollection of an event seems to disagree with the facts as you understand them, rephrase and repeat the question later. Do not challenge the interviewee's veracity; if he/she persists with the questionable version, refer to an anonymous source that disagrees with the remembrance and ask for a response.
14. Ask the interviewee to look at any photographs or albums before concluding the interview. Make notes on any pertinent pictures.
15. Concluding the interview, ask obvious wrap-up questions which will permit the interviewee to reveal anything that questioning may have missed but that he or she thinks is important to include.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Off tape: the purpose of the project and general nature of the questions to be asked will be explained. There can be some explanation of the papers and notes brought to the interview, and of the name-listing. The general control over interview use should be explained, to the extent that the interviewee knows he/she will have full editorial and access control; if there are any special conditions these should be recorded at start or end of the interview. On tape: interviewer states interviewee and interviewer's name, date, place.

What is your full name and why were you named it? Were you named after somebody else?

Did you have a nickname as you were growing up? If you did, what was it and why did they call you that? Have you had other nicknames as an adult?

Where were you born and what year?

Do you remember hearing your grandparents describe their lives? What did they say?

Who was the oldest person you can remember in your family as a child? What do you remember about them?

Do you remember your family discussing world events and politics?

Was there a chore you really hated doing as a child?

Do you ever remember not having enough food to eat because times were hard for your family?

What were your favorite toys and what were they like?

What were your schools like? What was your favorite subject in school and why?

Who was your favorite teacher and why were they special?

What school activities and sports did you participate in?

Did you and your friends have a special hang-out where you liked to spend time? Where was it and what did you do there?

How many years of education have you completed?

What did you usually wear to school? Describe it.

How old were you when you started dating? Do you remember your first date? Describe the circumstances.

How did you meet the person that you would later marry? Describe them?

Do you remember where you went on the first date with your spouse?

How long did you know them before you got married?

What was your wife's (husband's) background, education, when you met? Has your wife (husband) had a separate career?

How would you describe your spouse? What do (did) you admire most about them?

How did you find out that you were going to be a parent for the first time?

How many children did you have all together? What were their names, birth dates and birthplaces?

If you had it to do all over again, would you change the way you raised your family? How? What did you find most difficult about raising children? What did you find most rewarding about being a parent? Did you spoil any of your children? How?

Were you a strict or lenient parent?

Did you find that you had to treat each of your children differently? If so, why?

What was your first job?

How did you get that first job? What did the work involve? How old were you? Did you expect to keep that job for a long time? How much did you earn? What did you do with the money?

Did you work among mainly women, men, or both? Were your co-workers your age, younger or older? Were your bosses men or women?

Have you ever stopped working since you began? For what reasons? How was this decision made?

What do you usually do when you come home from work? What do other adults in your home do when they come home from work?

How have your husband/partner(s) felt about you working? What kinds of childcare arrangements have you made over the years? How have you felt about these? How has your partner felt? Has childcare been an important part of your responsibilities in the household?

How is/was other household work divided up among family members? How many hours of your work week are devoted to household labor? How many hours do your adult partner or teen or older children living in the home spend on household labor? (Laundry, cleaning, cooking, yard and home repair, auto maintenance, etc.)

How do you think your work career experiences would have been different if you had been a man? What parts of these differences would you have liked? What parts would you have not liked?

Have you ever experienced what we would now call sexual harassment while at work? (A hostile work environment, sexual advances or overtures, refusal of promotion for gender-linked reasons?)

If you had your choice of all the jobs in the world, and could get the right training/education, looking back, what would you have done? For job satisfaction? For money? For happiness?

Are you concerned about your financial status later in your life? If you were suddenly widowed or divorced or left without your partner, would you need to be concerned about your financial situation as you age?

How long did you have to work each day at your job?

What was the best job you ever had? Why? What was the worst? Why?

Who was the person that had the most positive influence on your life? Who were they and what did they do?

What were the hardest choices that you ever had to make? Do you feel like you made the right choices?

Is there a person that really changed the course of your life by something that they did? Who were they and what did they do?

How would you describe yourself politically?

What wars have been fought during your lifetime? How did you feel about them?

What U. S. President have you admired the most and why?

As you see it, what are the biggest problems that face our nation and how do you think they could be solved?

Do you wish you lived somewhere else (If so, where would it be)?

Have you ever been the victim of a crime? What happened?

Have you ever had an experience that you would consider to be super-natural or psychic? Did you ever know something was going to happen before it actually did? What was it?

What church, if any, do you attend regularly?

What was the most stressful experience that you ever lived through? What helped you get through it?

What things have you made that others have enjoyed?

How would you describe your sense of humor?

What is the most beautiful place you have ever visited and what was it like?

Is there anything you have always wanted to do, but haven't?

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA QUESTIONS:

Where were you when and what did you think of:

Disneyland opened (1954)

When the pill was introduced to the general public (1960)

the August 11, 1965 Riots occurred?

the 5 year UFW Delano Grape Strike (1965)

Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in LA on October 11, 1968 at the Ambassador Hotel?

the Dodgers came to Los Angeles (1958)

During the Manson murders and later trial (1969)

During the Kent State massacre (May 1970)

Tom Bradley was elected mayor of Los Angeles (1973)

When Nixon resigned (October 4, 1974)

the Rodney King beating (1991) and when the Rodney King verdict resulted in the LA Riots (April 1992)

OJ Simpson was arrested for a double murder (1994)

What have we left out? Is there something of interest we've missed?

POST-INTERVIEW WRAP UP

- 1) Write a brief interviewer's introduction describing the interview. Include the names of the interviewer and interviewee, date and place of the interview sessions, purpose of the interview, the interview environment, the characteristics of the interview, important aspects of the discussion, a brief biographical sketch of the interviewee (based on the intake interview), and other pertinent observations made during the taping.
- 2) Produce an index of the interview. Listen to your interview and write down specific topics covered and the counter numbers (if applicable) at which those topics are discussed. Also write down the correct spelling of specific names and locations associated with the topic (which you acquired at the end of your interview).
- 3) Create a keyword listing of the interview based on names, places, and events. Break down the interview by question and list what keywords are applicable per question. Be both general and specific in creating your list. This task will help build the foundation for work on your web project.
- 4) Property and use rights to a sound recording and finding aids are owned by those who participate in an interview. To vest those rights in a sponsoring project, both interviewee and interviewer must sign and date legal agreement forms. The sponsor (the Studio for Southern California History) keeps the signed, original legal form on file if any questions arise over interview rights.
- 5) After the project is completed, write a thank you note to the interviewee, sending back any loaned material (such as photographs or yearbooks).

FOR FURTHER READING

Edward D. Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History*. (University of Tennessee Press, 1980).

Willa Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. (AASLH, 1974)

James Hoopes, *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*. (University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

Derek Reimer, et. a. , eds. , *Voices: A Guide to Oral History*. (Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1984).

SAMPLE INTERVIEW AGREEMENT FORM

You have been asked for information to be used in an oral history project in connection with

Name of Institution

The purpose of this project is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer. A copy of this tape will be provided to you by the project. The final tape and index will be placed in the oral history collection of the

Name of Institution

Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be made available for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publications, or for other related educational purposes.

I, _____, have read the above and, in view of
(Interviewee, please print full name)

the historical and scholarly value of this information, I knowingly and voluntarily permit the

_____, the full use of this information with the following
Name of Institution

(if any) caveats:

I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to

Name of Institution

Interviewee (signature)

Interviewer (signature)

Date

Date