

# Oral History Toolkit

## Preserving Narratives Across Generations

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## What is Oral History?

Oral history is the process of recording and preserving the personal memories and experiences of individuals. It can be used to document a wide range of topics, including historical events, cultural practices, and personal life stories.

In his guidebook to oral history, *Doing Oral History*, the historian Donald A. Ritchie presents oral history as a process that “collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews”. He underlines the need for a well-prepared interviewer who can question an interviewee and record their exchange in audio or video format.

The quality of the recordings is essential and can facilitate the transcription, summarising or indexing of the interview which is then stored in a library or archives.

There are many ways of doing oral history and a variety of disciplines have enriched the development of this methodology, so that the interviews may be used for research publications, but also “radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other forms of public presentation”.

Although oral history interviews are considered primary sources for historical research, it is important to underline that “transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials” are part of the oral history research and must be archived along with recordings”<sup>1</sup>.

Oral interviews feature a narrator remembering the past, but attitudes and feelings of the present will inevitably impact on recollections of the past. “It should also be remembered that oral interviews are not history but one source among many that historians use when producing a written record of the past. They must be scrutinized and validated in the same manner as other sources”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oral History: Defined*, <<https://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Smith Midgette, *Expanding local resources: the challenge of oral history*, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 67 n. 3, 1983, pp. 350-355.

## **Why do Oral History?**

There are many reasons to do oral history. It can be a way to:

- Preserve the memories of people who have lived through important events.
- Document and preserve historical memory.
- Give voice to marginalized or underrepresented groups.
- Provide insights into the past that are not available from traditional historical sources.
- Understand the history of a community or region.
- Promote understanding and empathy between different cultures and communities.
- Learn about different cultures and perspectives.
- Teach people about the past and how it relates to the present.
- Create a sense of community and connection.

# How to conduct an oral history interview

Here are some tips for conducting a successful interview:

1. **Define the Purpose.** Clearly identify the purpose and scope of your oral history project. Determine the topics, themes, and individuals you want to focus on.
2. **Research.** Before you conduct the interview, take some time to learn about the person you are interviewing and the topic of the interview. This will help you to ask more informed questions and to build rapport with the interviewee.
3. **Create a comfortable environment.** The interview should take place in a quiet place where the interviewee feels comfortable.
4. **Quality Audio Recording.** Use a high-quality audio recorder to ensure clear and audible recordings.
  - a. Place **microphones close to the interviewee** to capture clear audio without background noise.
  - b. **Test equipment before** the interview to ensure proper functioning and adjust settings as needed.
  - c. **Record uncompressed PCM WAV** (or .wav) files at 44.1kHz 16 bit and/or 48kHz 16bit. This is a good standard of recording quality using a widely recognised format.
5. **Smartphone.** Mobile phones have become more sophisticated and capable. However, you should **think hard before using them** to record oral history interview.
  - a. Smartphones don't have very good built-in microphones, so **adding an external microphone (headphones)** is the single most effective way to improve the quality of the sound your phone captures.
  - b. Try **Smartphone apps** (Zoom Handy Recorder, Awesome Voice Recorder, Lexis Audio Editor, Hokusai Audio Editor, Voice Recorder & Audio Editor, Voice record Pro...).
6. **Virtual Interviews.** There are several tools that you can use to record a virtual interview (Mobile devices, ZOOM, Google Meet, YouTube...). The **recommended file formats** are .mp4 for video or audio and .wav for audio. Some technological tools have limited free versions. Explore **requirements for backup recordings**.
7. **Beginning of interview.** State your name, time, date (with day of the week) and place (if conducted virtually, state your location first), introduce your narrator (if conducted virtually, state narrator's location).
  - a. **Introduce the topic of the interview**, provide **context of the project**, and **review the OH agreement with the narrator**. The oral history process should be **transparent**, with continued trust, participation, and consent of all parties involved.
  - b. **Start with open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They allow the interviewee to share their story in their own words. **Incorporating objects** or props like photographs, maps, scrapbooks, or other materials into oral history recording is one way to help narrators recall their memories or experiences.
  - c. **Establish rapport.** Build a connection with the interviewee by sharing a bit about yourself and the purpose of the interview.
  - d. **Chronological approach.** Start with early life experiences and progress chronologically to recent events.

- e. **Be respectful and patient.** Oral history interviews can be emotional experiences for the interviewee. Be respectful of their feelings and be patient if they need time to answer your questions.
- f. **Active Listening.** Focus on the interviewee's responses, emotions, and cues. Show empathy and engagement.
- g. **Thank** the interviewee for their time, let them know how you will use their story, and let them know that you will be in touch if you have any further questions.
- h. At the end of the interview have a **brief concluding statement**. An example is, "This concludes our [date] interview with [narrator's name]. [Narrator's name] thank you for participating in this project".

## Post-Interview Steps

Once the interview is complete, the work continues.

**Consent Confirmation.** Reiterate the interviewee's consent to use the interview for your project's intended purposes.

### Long-term digital preservation strategies

Organize and store recordings securely in digital formats to prevent degradation and loss, and to ensure accessibility for different audiences (researchers, educators, and the public) and future technologies.

1. Keep it simple – complexity is a risk.
2. Multiple copies, multiple formats, multiple locations.
3. Digital storage options: Hard discs drives (HDDs), Cloud storage (Check location for data security!), RAID array, Linear Tape-Open (LTO)...

### **Remember: 'one copy is no copy'!**

Open a new folder and name it the name of your project.

Place all the important documents and oral history files in this folder:

- Original recordings (.wav, .mp4, .mov)
- Edited recordings (.wav, .mp4, .mp3)
- Transcription (.pdf)
- Signed consent forms (.pdf)
- Scanned documents (.pdf)
- Metadata

### Digital filenaming

Human and machine readable.

1. Create an abbreviated name of the project that will make sense long into the future.
2. Consistent: standard length, use alphanumeric characters, hyphens, and underscores.
3. Create a unique oral history identifier (ID).
4. Relation between the oral history ID and all accompanying papers such as consent form, transcription, documents....
5. After the oral history ID, the next bit of information should reflect what type of file this is. Create simple codes to reflect the types of files you are naming.

Example:

## AntCom Oral History Project

ANTCOMOHP0000\_A01 (Audio)  
ANTCOMOHP0000\_V01 (Video)  
ANTCOMOHP0000\_C01 (Consent)  
ANTCOMOHP0000\_T01 (Transcript)  
ANTCOMOHP0000\_P01 (Photograph)  
ANTCOMOHP0000\_D01 (Scanned documents...)

### **Transcribing or summarizing the Interview**

The primary record of an oral history interview is the audio/video recording.

Transcripts provide a verbatim guide to the audio/video recording.

Transcribing oral history interviews transforms spoken words into written records, facilitating access and analysis.

Transcription **editing** ensures accuracy, and shaping the narrative enhances storytelling.

**Share** the transcript with the interviewee to ensure accuracy and to give them an opportunity to make corrections.

Prepare a **transcription template** with:

- Title
- Date and place of the interview
- Oral History Project name
- Transcriber name
- Time coding and names of interviewer and interviewee

Transcription can be a **time-consuming process**, but it is important to do it carefully so that you can accurately capture the interviewee's words. There is no hard rule, but by some estimates, one hour of audio or video can take 4-10 hours to transcribe and to edit the text, depending on the subject, number of speakers, and audio quality<sup>3</sup>.

The use of **automatic speech recognition technology** (ASR) to transcribe and index Oral History interviews can be very useful: Dictate function of Microsoft 365 Word, Voice typing in Google Docs, Sonix, Amberscript, Amazon Transcribe, Oral History Transcription Portal (Clarín-EU)<sup>4</sup>,...

### **Transcription is very useful but not essential!**

Consider a **summary of the topics covered in the interview** to give the researchers an idea of what the interview contains without providing detail of what the interviewee says.

An essential navigational tool intended to gather key information about an interview and give a concise guide to its contents.

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa Bergen, *Transcribing Oral History*, Routledge, New York 2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://clarin.phonetik.uni-muenchen.de/apps/oh-portal/>



Includes names, places, events, and topics.

Includes timecodes.

Max. 250-300 words for every 30 minutes of recorded interview.

Consider including a **list of keywords/topics** relevant to the individual interview and the overall oral history project.

## **Metadata and Cataloging**

Description will range from the general to the specific.

Non-repetition of information.

Information should be relevant to the level of description. Generally, only two levels: the collection (or Oral History Project) and interview level.

### **Descriptive metadata:**

Reference number(s).

Names of individuals interviewing and being interviewed.

Dates of recordings.

Recording location.

Contents.

Language.

Item title.

Subjects.

Summary.

### **Technical metadata:**

Recording device used.

Type of audio/video file produced (.mp3, .wav, .mp4).

Type of additional material collect during the interview.

Various version(s) of the files (original, edited).

Length of recording.

Size of files.

**Rights and access metadata:** Who will be allowed to see/listen to this interview, will it be restricted for a certain number of years? Anonymization or Pseudonymization?

**Administrative metadata:** Who “owns” the oral history? Some possible owners are the interviewee, the interviewer, the project coordinator, the institution who is paying for the project, ....