



Introduction to Oral History

Baylor University Institute for Oral History
Workshop on the Web
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CONTENTS

Discovering oral history: What is it?	1
Understanding oral history: Why do it?	2
Planning a project: Where to begin?	3
Establishing ethical relationships	4
Preparing legal documents	5
Choosing & using equipment:	
I. Digital recorders	6
II. Analog recorders	7
Focusing & researching a topic	8
Selecting interviewees	9
Creating an interview outline	10
Composing questions	11
Interviewing for best results:	
I. Making contact & setting up	12
II. Getting the story	13
III. Protecting & preserving recordings	14
Making recordings accessible:	
I. Indexing oral histories	15
II. Transcribing oral histories	16
Critiquing & citing oral histories	17
Reaching the public with oral history outcomes	18
Learning more: Resources	19

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Oral history is a sound recording of historical information, obtained through an interview that preserves a person's life history or eyewitness account of a past experience—but read on. In the pages that follow, this manual invites you to explore the full implications of the terms *recording*, *interviewing*, and *preserving* as you learn to *create* oral history.

- ♦ Oral history *recordings* help listeners better understand how individuals from various viewpoints and different stations in society encountered the full range of life in their day, from everyday routines to catastrophic events. Carefully preserved, the recordings carry the witness of the present into the future, where through creative programs and publications, they can inform, instruct, and inspire generations to come.
- ♦ Creating an oral history requires two people—one who questions (an interviewer) and one who narrates (an interviewee). Two strengths distinguish oral history *interviewing*: 1) subjectivity, which allows interviewers to ask not only, What happened?, but also, How did you feel about what happened?, and 2) the partnership of co-creation, which invites interviewees to interpret and analyze their personal experiences through their own points of view and in their own words.
- ♦ *Preserving* the recorded interview fulfills the purpose of creating the oral history in the first place. Preservation begins with making recordings safe, advances to making them useful and accessible, and culminates with sharing them in creative ways with others.

Oral history projects are initiatives planned, designed, and executed by individuals or groups to create and preserve oral histories. (See page 3 for more about projects.)

Oral history programs carry out oral history projects on multiple major topics or focus on one major theme. Programs may offer training and consultation services for the broader community and they often partner with one another and network with other oral historians through the Oral History Association and its affiliates.

Oral history collections preserve oral histories, including the recording and accompanying derivative materials (i.e., index or transcript) and contextual materials (i.e., maps, correspondence, photographs, interview notes). Collections are usually administered by an archivist within a library, museum, or historical society. Collections are accessed through a catalog record, finding aid, or digital collection Web portal, and offered to researchers in accordance with legal agreements signed by the interviewees and interviewers.

Oral historians

- ♦ come from academic settings, government offices, libraries and museums, medical and military sites, community centers, families, and anywhere people are studying people and the past;
- ♦ stretch beyond their immediate research needs to gather broad-based information so that their interviews address multiple historical questions;
- ♦ seek out people who may otherwise leave behind little or no material record for future generations and ask questions that may have never before been asked about a topic or event;
- ♦ arrange ways to share the results of their interviews with interviewees and their communities;
- ♦ deposit recordings, transcripts, and related materials in archives or libraries;
- ♦ produce publications and programs to distribute widely the information gained in oral history; and
- ♦ promote professional standards for research through local, state, regional, national and international organizations.

Oral history helps round out the story of the past.

Oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by augmenting the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries, and other historical materials. Eyewitnesses to events contribute various viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written record. Interviewers are able to ask questions left out of other records and to interview people whose stories have been untold or forgotten. At times, an interview may serve as the only source of information available about a certain place, event, or person.

Oral history helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history.

Just think of the breadth and width of history that today's students have to learn! Traditional history courses in high school and college usually touch only on the major events of the past, covering the fundamentals of who, what, when, where, why, and so what. Oral history brings depth to our understanding of the past by carrying us into experience at an individual level. Thoughtful, personal answers to questions like What did *you* do in the war? reveal the ways decisions made by the movers and shakers of the day changed the lives of ordinary people and their families and communities.

Oral history teaches us what has changed and what has stayed the same over time.

Change is obvious to the eye, but oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change, from the simple things of life—wood stove to microwave, dial phone to cell phone, phonograph to I-Pod—to the more complex—Yellow Dog Democrat to Moral Majority, local production to global outsourcing, country living to suburban sprawl. During interviews, narrators may also reflect on ways their lives remained the same in spite of change, particularly in the area of values, traditions, and beliefs.

Oral history preserves for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past.

Inevitably, future generations will view—and judge—today's generation through the lens of their own experiences in their own time. The story of the past is continually revised in the light of new interpretations. Oral history enables people to share their stories in their own words, with their own voices, through their own understanding of what happened and why. With careful attention to preserving our sound recordings, the voices of our narrators will endure to speak for them when they are gone. By complicating the story with individual experience, oral histories will help future historians avoid sweeping generalizations that stereotype people, engender prejudice, and overlook important variables in the historical context.

Oral history projects may be carried out by one person or by a group of people and may result in a collection of interviews with an individual or with several people. At the outset of your project, ask yourself the following questions.

Why is the oral history project needed?

- ◆ Determine what information you are seeking, what information you already know about the topic, and what information is yet unknown.
- ◆ Make sure that oral history is the best way to gather the information you seek. Are there people you can reach who can and will tell you what you want to know?
- ◆ Seek advice on your research idea from persons with various viewpoints on the topic. Ask them to help you refine your topic, uncover background information, and locate persons to interview.

What are the goals & priorities of the project?

- ◆ Make it a goal to achieve the best possible recording under the most favorable conditions so that the interview can be duplicated and distributed and, as needed, upgraded to new formats.
- ◆ Determine what will happen to your recordings when they are done.
- ◆ Decide what you will do with the information you uncover through interviews.
- ◆ Create lists of persons able to provide recollections appropriate to your topic.
- ◆ Set target dates for completion of research, interviews, processing, and programming. Prepare to be flexible; oral history takes time!

What guidelines will the project follow?

- ◆ Develop legal forms to govern the interviews and additional donated materials, such as photographs. This step requires choosing who will hold copyright for the interview.
- ◆ Talk to the archivist of the depository to which you will donate your project. Ask what recording formats the depository accepts, what legal agreements are required, and what accompanying materials may be helpful (photographs, maps, interview notes, research materials, word lists, transcripts, indexes, et cetera). Ask how the archives will maintain the oral history and make it accessible to the public.
- ◆ Choose equipment that will best serve the project goals. Determine who funds, purchases, owns, uses, and maintains the equipment.
- ◆ Become familiar with the standards of the Oral History Association. (See page 4.)

Who will do what for the project?

- ◆ Fit individual skills and interests to the variety of tasks available: project director, researcher, interviewer, transcriber, and editor. Additional staff might include a photographer, archivist, equipment expert, Web designer, and fund raiser.
- ◆ Train staff or volunteers to produce and preserve professional quality oral histories.
- ◆ Plan regular meetings to assess progress toward goals.

What financial resources are available?

- ◆ Develop a budget based on your circumstances and stick by it.
- ◆ In addition to personnel costs, include funds for equipment, recording media, processing and storage, record-keeping, travel, publicity, and program production.
- ◆ Seek sources for support locally or through grants.

Oral history is person-centered research. The creation of a recorded interview is a partnership between the interviewee and interviewer. To succeed, the oral history partnership requires mutual respect and trust. With careful attention to the following matters, interviewers will go far toward establishing rapport with their interviewees and making the oral history experience mutually rewarding.

Informed consent

- ◆ Explain to interviewees their rights and interests in the recordings and the information they will share in the interview.
- ◆ Reveal to interviewees the purposes of the interviews and the goals of the project.
- ◆ Explain the procedures that will be used during and after the interview, including how the recording will be processed, where recordings and transcripts will be deposited, and potential uses of the memoir.

Long-range outlook

- ◆ Commit to producing the highest-quality interview possible.
- ◆ The useful life of the interview extends far beyond today, so strive to gather information that will be relevant to future users.
- ◆ You may be the only person who records your interviewees' stories, so take time to include their memories on subjects beyond your own immediate interests.
- ◆ Make every effort to place completed interviews in an archives where they can be preserved for the future and used by other interested researchers.

Relationships & reputations

- ◆ Be sensitive to real and perceived differences between you and your interviewee (age, gender, race, class, educational level, nationality, religion, et cetera) and take care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes.
- ◆ Respect the privacy of the individuals and communities from which you collect oral histories and avoid bringing them undue notoriety.
- ◆ Make your interviews accessible to your interviewees and their communities.

Correct representation of meaning

- ◆ Give interviewees the opportunity to respond to questions as freely as possible.
- ◆ Do not subject interviewees to biased assumptions.
- ◆ Give interviewees the opportunity to review transcripts created from the recordings and provide corrections as needed.

The Oral History Association sets the standards for interviewers to follow in establishing and maintaining ethical relationships with interviewees, the public, and the oral history profession in its *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*. The latest edition of the guidelines is available online at no charge at http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html.

Interviewees must give you permission to record, reproduce, or distribute their words. With the storyteller's written permission, an interview with an eyewitness to history can become a primary document that provides significant historical information for years—and hopefully, generations—to come. Every oral history legal-release form should address at least the following matters.

Donor agreement

Through a contract or deed of gift, interviewees agree to donate their interviews to the interviewer, the interviewer's sponsoring organization, or the designated depository. Specific language indicates whether the donor agreement is a contract or a deed of gift. Ask your chosen oral history depository what type of donor agreement they prefer.

Copyright assignment

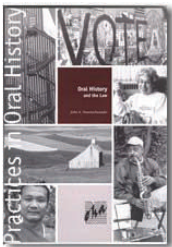
Oral history interviews are subject to U.S. copyright law, which protects fair use of the interview in reproduction, distribution, display, public performance, and the creation of derivative works. Before an interview is duplicated, transcribed or indexed (derivative works), made public as an audio file or transcript, quoted in a publication or broadcast, or deposited in an archive, the interviewee must transfer copyright ownership to the individual or organization sponsoring the project. When the interviewer is someone other than the designated copyright holder, the interviewer must also transfer copyright to the sponsor. Ideally, a release form should be signed before an interview series begins.

Future use

Interviewees have the right to know how their interviews will be used. Sponsoring organizations or individual interviewers will benefit from thinking broadly when explaining future use, as technological developments constantly create new avenues for publishing and distributing oral histories.

If for some reason interviewers want to restrict the use of their interviews, they have the right to state those restrictions, and the depository is obligated to protect the restrictions. To honor an interviewee's wish to restrict the use of an interview for a certain period of time or to limit future use in certain formats (such as on the Internet), provide a legal-release form that includes a section outlining the requested restriction or attach a form that supplements a general release form. It is very difficult to enforce restrictions that are linked to the duration of a lifetime, so ask the interviewee to specify a particular future date to end the restriction.

Interviewers and those who process recordings and transcripts should protect the interviewee's right to privacy by keeping all restricted materials totally confidential until the restriction period ends.



A full explanation of interviewee rights, samples of legal-release forms, language for restricting use, suggestions for avoiding potential legal claims, and more, are available in John A. Neuenschwander's *Oral History and the Law*, available from the Oral History Association, Dickinson College, PO Box 1773, Carlisle PA 17013-2896, or online at http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_ps.html.

Digital technologies allow listeners worldwide to access oral history recordings. A digital recording can be reproduced, duplicated, transferred to other formats, and edited without noticeable loss of quality. Software programs are available with features designed to attach metadata text to digital recordings, providing copyright, ownership, and contextual information, and to aid transcribing, with foot pedals included. With these advantages over analog recording, digital technology is enhancing the work of oral historians.

Choosing recorders

- ◆ Inquire about current technology being used at some of the major oral history centers which maintain updated technologies.
 - The Oral History Association , http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/org_cc.html, provides a list of oral history centers.
 - Andy Kolovos, archivist and folklorist, assesses a variety of digital recorders and media and provides guides for field recording and digital editing for the Vermont Folklife Center Archive at <http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/archive/archive-fieldguides.html>.
 - The oral history H-Net online discussion list, H-Oralhist, furnishes a searchable archive of topics, including equipment, at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>.
- ◆ Look for the most durable, dependable recorder you can afford. Favored among the current choices are solid-state memory card/flash card recorders.
- ◆ Choose solid-state recorders that create uncompressed WAV or AIFF audio files in PCM format of CD quality (16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling rate) or better. Avoid digital voice recorders that create highly compressed files in proprietary formats.
- ◆ Select a recorder with output terminals which will make possible cabled transfer of recordings from the recorder directly to a computer.
- ◆ Compare recordings made with the internal microphone and an external microphone and choose the method that works best for your recorder in your unique interview setting. Test the microphone carefully. Some digital recorders have excellent internal microphones.
- ◆ Look for recorders with lights or displays that indicate that the electrical power (battery or adapter) is working, the recording function is engaged, and the recording sound level is adequate.
- ◆ Select a recorder with both battery and electrical adapter capacities. Use electricity from a wall outlet with battery backup whenever possible. Include an extension cord in your interview pack.

Using digital media

- ◆ Record to a medium that allows easy transfer to a computer data storage device.
 - Consider the volume of sound data the medium will hold. A 1GB flash card holds 3 hours, 13 minutes of uncompressed WAV files in monaural PCM format at 44.1kHz.
 - Confirm that the hard drive has sufficient capacity for the sound files, which consume a lot of space, and that the hard drive will be backed up regularly.
 - Once the sound files are stored on a hard drive, an archival CD-R, and additional CDs/DVDs for processing, you may erase the file on the memory card and reuse the card.
- ◆ Store audio files on a hard drive and then copy them to high-quality, write-only CDs.
 - Ask your chosen archives what medium is acceptable for digital oral history recordings. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has not issued a standard for original digital audio recordings but does consider CD-ROM acceptable for the transfer and storage of electronic files.
 - Most archives use archival-quality gold CD-Rs for the preservation copy.
 - Use consumer quality CDs/DVDs for transcribing, reference, and complimentary copies.

The bottom line on equipment:

Before you go, practice. Before you begin, test. When you are done, protect your recording.

Analog cassette audiotapes have been the staple recording medium for most oral historians since the 1960s. Today, the transition from analog to digital recording is inevitable, but some individuals and organizations must postpone the switch until digital equipment becomes more affordable. Do not put off an interview just because you do not have a digital recorder. If analog equipment is your only choice, consider the following points.

Choosing & using tape recorders

- ◆ Choose a recorder with a digital tape counter, battery power and recording level indicators, a jack for an external microphone, and an electrical adapter.
- ◆ Avoid using the built-in microphone because an analog machine has moving parts that introduce noise onto the recording. A small, lightweight, battery-powered condenser microphone is a good choice for making rich, natural-sounding voice recordings.
- ◆ Use electricity from a wall outlet whenever possible, as it is more reliable than batteries. Include an extension cord in your interview pack.

Choosing & preserving tapes

- ◆ Choose C-60 (thirty minutes per side) audiocassette tapes, as the C-90 tapes are thinner and more prone to stretch, bleed, and break. Expensive stereo tapes are unnecessary, but use tapes with screw casings (tiny screws holding the tape together, not heat sealed).
- ◆ After the interview, duplicate each original tape. Store the original carefully and use only the copy when indexing or transcribing the interview. Use the same brand of tapes for both originals and duplicates.
- ◆ Protect each tape from accidental erasure or over-recording by punching out the tabs on the top of the tape case.
- ◆ Store tapes in a cool, dry place. Keep them free of dust.
- ◆ NARA standards still specify 1/4-inch, open-reel, professional, unrecorded, splice-free polyester tape, recorded full track at 3 3/4 or 7 1/2 inches per second, as the only acceptable medium for original analog audio recordings. The equipment to achieve that preservation goal is out of reach for most of us. For now, careful digitization of analog recordings seems to be the most affordable way of ensuring their future.

The bottom line on equipment:

Before you go, practice. Before you begin, test. When you are done, protect your recording.

Select a topic that

- ◆ fits the mission of the organization or individual researcher;
- ◆ interests the organization or individual researcher;
- ◆ can be readily researched;
- ◆ matches with available interviewees;
- ◆ can be completed in the allotted time;
- ◆ has potential for providing otherwise undocumented information; or
- ◆ has potential for confirming existing information.

Focus the topic.

- ◆ A topical focus highlights a single subject of historical interest, such as an event, a time era, an issue or idea, an organization, a place, a skill or occupation. Several interviewees may share their memories and distinct viewpoints on the subject.
- ◆ A biographical focus concentrates on the life experiences of an individual. Such life history projects may gather the subject's reflections on his or her life over several recording sessions, and they may include interviews with multiple generations of one family or selected representatives of a particular group who knew the individual.
- ◆ Some researchers collect oral traditions, including legends, folklore, and family stories passed down through the generations. When gathering oral tradition, document also the storytellers' accounts of how they received the tradition, from whom, when, where, and why.

*Research the topic.**Why?*

- ◆ To locate the story within its historical context
- ◆ To learn what is already known and where there are information gaps
- ◆ To learn more about the person to be interviewed
- ◆ To uncover details previously undocumented, contradictory, or forgotten
- ◆ To establish rapport with the narrator
- ◆ To create informed questions that prompt storytelling
- ◆ To create follow-up questions that encourage detailed responses
- ◆ To clarify names of people and places mentioned in an interview
- ◆ To keep the story on track

Where?

- ◆ Libraries, archives, and local historical groups
- ◆ Public records: deeds, probate records, map collections, military records
- ◆ Organizations affiliated with the interviewee (for example: schools and colleges; religious organizations; professional associations; military, social, service, and community organizations)
- ◆ Private collections, including photographs and mementos
- ◆ Newspapers; chronologies of the time
- ◆ A pre-interview visit with the interviewee may yield useful research materials.

When?

- ◆ Before an interview (to prepare)
- ◆ Between interviews (to clarify and verify)
- ◆ After an interview (for validity and accuracy)

Oral history interviewees have had first-hand experience related to the project topic. They were the doers of the experience or the eyewitnesses to the event.

- ◆ Locate interviewees
 - through your research on the topic;
 - by word-of-mouth, from advisors familiar with your project;
 - through notices in local news media publicizing the project;
 - during public events related to the topic (i.e., museum exhibits, town meetings, lectures);
 - through organizations related to your topic (i.e., veterans groups, political parties, neighborhood associations, professional organizations); or
 - through the “snowball effect” as one interviewee recommends another.
- ◆ Aim for a representative sample of people who can share insights from various perspectives. For example, for a project focusing on the World War II home front in your town, seek men and women who lived there during the period of 1942 to 1945. Choose representatives of various viewpoints, including people from the diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and socio-economic groups who made up your town during the war years. Include people who lived through those times at different life stages; in other words, in addition to people who were adults during the war years, also locate informants who were children or teenagers then and who can provide the perspective of a younger generation.

Maximize the interview experience

- ◆ **By getting to know your interviewee:** Whenever possible, visit with interviewees before the actual recording session to assess the extent of their experience with the topic, their recall ability, and their physical stamina. You may need to adjust your outline because they have limited or very specific experience with the topic or remember some things better than others. You may decide to stimulate their memory recall with some visual clues, such as maps or photographs. You may conclude that several brief interviews will accomplish more than a single long one because they tire easily.
- ◆ **By encouraging your interviewee:** For reluctant interviewees, explain why you think their personal accounts are important to the overall project. Assure them that oral history allows them to speak for themselves. Begin with simple, direct, open-ended questions and give them plenty of time to respond.
- ◆ **By interviewing one person at a time:** Set a project policy that interviewees will be interviewed one on one and inform interviewees of the policy when scheduling the interview. The policy provides justification to ask interviewees for individual attention and to request that others leave the room when the interview begins. The presence of an additional person may discourage probing questions and inhibit candid responses. One person may answer for, disagree with, or disparage the other, causing the preferred interviewee to retreat into silence. The unexpected participant may usurp the interviewer’s role by asking questions and guiding the discussion. Group interviews raise additional difficulties for transcribing the session and limit potential uses of the recordings in productions.

When necessary, partner or group interviews can be made successful with a few ground rules: the interviewee must agree to the guest’s presence; the guest must sign the legal-release form; the interviewer will address each question to one person, who alone responds; and no one will speak for or speak over another. Interviewers may want to request a follow-up one-on-one interview with the central narrator.

In the event two interviewers come together to question one interviewee, they should ask the interviewee’s permission to do so and agree at the outset who will operate the recording equipment and who will pursue which topics. The dual interviewers must listen carefully so as to not repeat a question and, of course, must never interrupt each other.

From your research notes, create a list of keywords and phrases representing the information you want to know. Writing out specific questions may hinder candid responses, prevent your following up for details, and impose a rigid agenda on what should be an open, conversational exchange.

During the interview, use your list of topics as a guide, like a road map, for directing the narrator's attention toward the topics you want to cover. Compose questions around each keyword or phrase that help interviewees recall the past and encourage them to tell stories in response.

Sometimes before the interview an interviewee wants to know what you are going to ask. In that case, supply the list of topics that you have created to help stimulate memories and build trust.

When an interviewee supplies information not on your list but worthy of further investigation, you may want to ask questions about the new topic right then. You can always bring the interview back to the next topic on your list once you have covered the new subject in full.

For example, an oral history with a former resident of a neighborhood that is the focus of a community history project might generate an interview outline similar to this:

Sandtown:

- description (boundaries)
- origin of name
- earliest memories
- what was there: residences, businesses, schools, churches, parks
- how people got around: modes of transportation
- times people got together: when, where, why (politics, sports, play, social life)
- racial/ethnic/economic makeup
- leaders, characters
- relationship to city and surrounding neighborhoods; reputation within the city
- holiday celebrations
- safety (health, crime, environmental concerns)
- effects of Depression, WWII, 1953 tornado; urban renewal; construction of interstate highway
- changes over time

Compose questions on the spot from your topic list, adapting the questions to the interviewee's individual experience with the topic.

♦ *Ask open-ended questions.*

Tell me about . . .

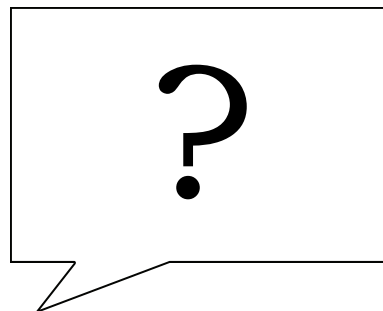
Why . . . ? Why not . . . ? How . . . ?

♦ *Probe for details.*

Describe . . . Explain . . .

How often . . .

Tell me more about . . .



♦ *Avoid leading questions* that reveal your biases and suggest you have already formed an opinion of what the answer might be.

Not: That neighborhood was a hard place to grow up in, I'll bet.

But: Tell me how you felt about the place where you grew up.

Not: Sandtown was settled in the early 1900s, so let's start your story there.

But: Why did your family come to live in Sandtown?

Not: I guess your family, being Mexican, was always Catholic.

But: Tell me about the role of religion in your family life.

♦ *Restate or summarize.*

You said . . . Tell me more about that.

Let me say that back to you and see if I understand. You said . . .

♦ *Ask for definitions and clarifications.*

Tell me what . . . means.

What is . . . ?

I know what . . . is, but future generations may not. Please tell me what a . . . was and how it was used.

♦ *Follow up.*

What else . . . ? Who else . . . ? What other reasons . . . ?

♦ *Turn things around.*

Some people say . . . What do you think about that?

Also,

Ask one question at a time.

Be prepared to get off the topic, then gently bring the narrator back to the subject.

Use the silent question. Keep quiet and wait.

Close with a thought question.

End with an expression of appreciation.

Arranging the interview

- ◆ In contacting persons whom you wish to interview, make clear to them how their names were obtained and explain your interest in them. Establish at the very outset that you feel that their lives and experiences are important. Explain the specific project for which you are conducting the interviews and be prepared to answer questions.
- ◆ Many oral historians introduce the project and extend the invitation first by mail and follow up with a telephone call. Then, when contact is made, the interviewee will be more clear about who is calling and what is wanted, and an appointment can be made.
- ◆ Accommodate the interviewee's convenience when setting a time and place for the interview. The interviewee's home or place of business may or may not furnish the privacy and quiet required for recording the interview. Have in mind a suitable alternative location.
- ◆ Make clear to interviewees from the start that the interview will be recorded and that they will be asked to sign a legal-release agreement form.

Waco History Coalition
PO Box 9222
Waco TX 77777

January 1, 2008

Mr. Arthur Santos
2222 West Drive
Waco TX 77776

Dear Mr. Santos:

The Waco History Coalition is currently working on a project to record stories and gather photographs of the old Sandtown neighborhood, which was home to generations of Wacoans before urban renewal and highway development forever changed the landscape. A mutual acquaintance, Mr. Edgar Smith, told me that you had been his neighbor in Sandtown. Little information exists to tell us today what it was like to live there. I am writing to invite you to share your memories of growing up in Sandtown by participating in a recorded oral history interview.

I have enclosed brochures explaining the goals of the Waco History Coalition and a copy of the legal-release form participants in the oral history of Sandtown sign, giving us permission to record the interview, deposit the recordings in the public library, and include your stories and recordings in an educational Web site for local students.

I will call you next week to tell you more about the project and answer any questions you have. I hope that we can also set up a time for an interview about Sandtown.

I look forward to visiting with you soon.

Sincerely,

John Sutcliffe

Setting up on location

- ◆ Demonstrate respect for the interviewee. Show up on time, be polite. Allow time to answer questions and engage in friendly conversation before and after the interview.
- ◆ Interview only one person at a time, if at all possible.
- ◆ Be very familiar with your recording equipment. The less attention you need to focus on your equipment, the more you will have to concentrate on your interviewee.
- ◆ Be flexible with your equipment so that the interviewee can sit wherever is most comfortable. Ask permission to rearrange light furniture, if necessary, so that the microphone and recorder are well placed between you and the interviewee.
- ◆ Bring extension cords if you plan to use A/C current. If you must rely on battery power, have extra batteries. A small, portable battery tester can save an interview.
- ◆ Arrange as quiet a spot as possible. Be aware of extraneous noises that will be picked up by the microphone—chiming clocks, humming refrigerators, clattering dishes, et cetera—and request permission to make changes to minimize background noise.
- ◆ Set up your recorder so that you can easily view recording levels and, when using analog tape, so that you reach the machine to turn over or change tapes.
- ◆ Place the microphone, whether internal or external, between you and the interviewee. Test the microphone before beginning the interview. Record both your voices, play back the test recording, and adjust the microphone placement and recorder settings as needed.

- ◆ Begin with a general introduction that serves as an audio label. For example:

“This is [your name]. Today is [month/day/year]. I am interviewing for the [first, second, etc.] time [full name of interviewee]. This interview is taking place at [address; may include description, such as home of, office of] in [town, state]. This interview is sponsored by [name of organization, if applicable] and is part of the [title or description] project.
- ◆ Compose questions from your outline of topics. Be flexible; each interview is a unique exchange with a unique individual. Let the train of memory association run its course, even if it means ignoring your outline momentarily.
 - ◆ Ask open-ended questions first, waiting to see what unfolds.
 - ◆ Tailor follow-up questions to the interviewee’s responses. Pursue in detail.
- ◆ Maintain a pattern of concentrated listening.
 - ◆ Provide feedback with silent encouragements: nod your head to indicate you are listening or smile when appropriate. Keep your feedback quiet, being aware that your sounds can override the interviewee’s voice during the recording. Keep your feedback neutral (such as, “I see” or “uh-huh”), indicating neither agreement nor disagreement.
 - ◆ Jot down a few notes as the interviewee is talking to remind you of subjects you want to cover in more detail. Rather than disrupt the interviewee’s train of thought by asking for spellings of unusual words, jot down a phonetic spelling and a clue to its place in the story, then after the interview ask for the correct spelling.
 - ◆ Give the interviewee time to answer each question fully and finish her/his train of thought, then just sit quietly for a few moments. Chances are excellent that the interviewee will think of something else to add. Silence is an integral, important part of the oral history interview process.
- ◆ Give the interviewee a chance to think through difficult subjects.
 - ◆ Challenge accounts that you think may be inaccurate , but do not question the interviewee’s memory or honesty. If you feel you must, refer to other accounts or interpretations you know, asking the interviewee for a response or clarification.
 - ◆ Avoid “off the record” information or switching the recorder off and on. Assure the interviewee that sensitive information may be restricted.
- ◆ Be aware of the interviewee’s age and physical condition when deciding how long to continue an interview. Sixty to ninety minutes is a good average length for an interview. Concentration diminishes if the interview becomes lengthy.
- ◆ Make sure that the interviewee has signed a release for the interview. The interviewer must also sign a release form in most instances.
- ◆ Continue to demonstrate respect for the interviewee. If you rearranged the furniture, return everything back to place before you leave. Send a thank-you note following the interview. Promise only what you actually will do, such as returning to visit again or furnishing copies of recordings or transcripts.

Protective measures

- ◆ Ensure against accidental erasure of the recording. For analog tapes, punch out the tabs on the top of tape casing. For digital recordings, download the files to a secure hard drive.
- ◆ As soon as the interview is over, label the recording. Include the names of the interviewee and interviewer, date and place of interview, project title (or institution), and numbered sequence of tapes or digital files. For digital recordings, software is available to embed information about the recording in the digital file.
- ◆ Save digital recordings on a hard drive under file and folder names that fit the project so that they can be easily recognized and retrieved. Create a backup digital file on CD or DVD and an archival file on gold CD-R. Original digital recording media, such as compact flash cards, may be erased and reused.
- ◆ Promptly duplicate analog tapes and store original tapes in a cool, dry place.
- ◆ Make sure all the necessary forms and significant contextual materials accompany the recording when it leaves your hands. A list of names and terms is especially useful for future abstracting and possible transcribing of the interview.

Preservation measures

- ◆ Make every effort to see that the sound recordings of your oral history project are deposited in a suitable library or archives where they will receive professional care and be made accessible to researchers. This may mean placing them in a local library, large metropolitan public library, nearby university library, museum, or state library and archives.
- ◆ Depositing oral history products in archives or using them in public programs or publications requires written permission from the interviewee and the interviewer. For complete information and sample forms, see John A. Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law*, 3d ed. (2002) available from the Oral History Association, http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_ps.html.
- ◆ Publicize the availability of the oral history interviews to local historical societies, other local libraries, and the news media. When your project accumulates a number of interviews, consider publishing a catalog of your collection and finding aids to inform other organizations and individuals of its existence and scope.
- ◆ Carefully label items to be archived. Identify original recordings as such; in most libraries and archives, the original recordings are stored for preservation and never used for public access. The librarian or archivist may ask you to supply duplicates for public use.
- ◆ Provide copies of your signed release agreement forms when you deposit interview materials. If you have prepared word lists, indexes, transcripts, or abstracts, provide copies of these as well. Include a description of your project, with identification of all the participants and any available photographs, maps, interview notes, and correspondence files. This information will help librarians prepare finding aids for your oral histories and will help researchers understand the context in which your interviews took place.

An oral history is a sound and/or video recording. With the proper technology and training, an oral historian may edit a recording to incorporate it into a museum display, Web site, documentary film, or other sound/visual production.

A first step toward making an oral history useful for future editing is to create an index or log of the recording, providing the location of subjects on the tape or digital file by minute and second. An index also serves researchers who study the content of the oral history by providing information about the topics covered in the interview in the order in which they appear on the tape.

Why index?

- ◆ Indexing makes information on recordings accessible by subject.
- ◆ Indexing helps the researcher identify information gaps to cover in future interviews.
- ◆ Indexing allows the researcher to spell out names and terms mentioned in the interview, thereby enhancing the accuracy of the information for future users or transcribers.

Indexing tips:

- ◆ Index soon after the interview.
- ◆ For tapes, use a stopwatch rather than the digital counter on the tape recorder to create a more accurate index by minute and second.
- ◆ Digital playback software usually provides a time log for the sound files.
- ◆ Index by obvious breaks in the topic or by time (every five minutes or less).
- ◆ The more details included in the index, the better.

Name: Arthur Louis Santos
Date of interview: January 15, 2008
Location: Santos home, 2222 West Drive, Waco, Texas
Interviewer: John Sutcliffe
Project: Waco History Coalition: Sandtown
Recording no. 0778; compact disc

H/M/S	Topic
00:00:03	Introduction
00:01:05	Description: between Brazos River and South 1st, below Clay St. to city dump; shotgun houses mixed with frame structures; railroad tracks; meat packing plants; unpaved streets
00:08:08	Name origin: not sure; speculates it is from sandy, unpaved streets
00:09:25	Came when he was a baby (he was born in 1930) family moved there from Coahuila, Mexico, because several uncles lived there; provides names of family members: father, Juan Reyes Santos; mother, María Zapata Lopez Santos; uncles, Julio and Ernesto Lopez
00:15:33	Childhood games, fishing and swimming in river, walking past city square to attend Sunday mass at St. Francis Catholic Church

A transcript represents in print the words and extraneous sounds present in the recorded interview. The transcriber's goal is to render as close a replica to the actual event as possible.

Why transcribe?

- ◆ Transcripts make the information on the recording easier to locate and assemble for use in media presentations, exhibits, and research publications.
- ◆ Researchers often prefer the ease of looking through a transcript for topics related to their interests over listening to a recording, especially if the recording format is outmoded.
- ◆ New technologies for online digital presentations allow the coordination of sound recordings and transcripts.
- ◆ Interviewees still attach prestige to having a print document of their stories.
- ◆ Interviewees may preview the draft transcript and provide spellings of proper names and clarification of misunderstood information, resulting in a more accurate account.
- ◆ Transcripts are easily indexed by name and subject.
- ◆ The shelf life of paper far exceeds the brief time a recording format exists before it is replaced by a newer, more advanced format. Even if the medium lasts, the playback equipment does not. Reformatting to new media is expensive.

That sounds good, but . . .

- ◆ transcribing is time-consuming. The approximate time required to transcribe one recorded hour is 10-12 hours, depending upon the quality of the sound recording and complexity of the interview.
- ◆ transcribing is labor-intensive work and therefore expensive. Also, extra administrative costs are involved.
- ◆ a transcript cannot help but distort what is actually on the sound recording—sarcasm may go unnoticed, for example. The unique personality of the narrator is missing no matter how verbatim the transcript. Many oral historians believe that researchers should listen to the recordings themselves, making their own interpretive judgments rather than relying on the transcript.

If you transcribe

- ◆ change as little as possible. The narrator's word choice, including grammar and speech patterns, should be accurately represented. Verbatim renderings of slang and regional pronunciations are the prerogative of each project, but, if used, should be consistent.
- ◆ adopt a standard format for manuscripts. The *Chicago Manual of Style* is recommended. Also, adopt one dictionary for use throughout the project. Many projects use the Style Guide furnished online by the Baylor Institute for Oral History at http://www.baylor.edu/oral_history/index.php?id=23607.
- ◆ standardize editorial practice and procedure. Allow the interviewee to preview the transcript, if feasible, and present her/him a copy of the final draft.

Analyze the content of an interview.

Like any other primary document, an oral history must be explored for validity and accuracy. Listen to the sound recording or read the transcript and ask yourself:

- ◆ What are the most important points made in this interview?
- ◆ What patterns, key phrases, themes emerge from the stories told?
- ◆ How does the interviewee express his/her feelings about the topic—not only what is said, but how it is said?
- ◆ What do these stories teach me about the topic?
- ◆ How are the interviewee's stories like and different from written versions of the topic? Why? What does this interview tell me that the written sources left out?
- ◆ What other questions might this interviewee be able to answer about the topic?
- ◆ Based on what this interview uncovers, what additional research do I need to do to learn more about the topic or verify these stories?

Evaluate recording and interviewing techniques.

- ◆ Learn from your mistakes by evaluating the sound quality of your recording.
Is the technical quality good? audio clear? volume strong?
Is there background noise? internal machine noise?
What should I do differently next time?
- ◆ Sharpen your interviewing skills by evaluating your participation in the interview.
Did I ask open-ended questions? leading questions? good follow-up questions?
What did I learn about doing interviews from this experience?
What should I do differently next time?

Cite use of oral history sources.

Consult your chosen literary style manual or publisher for formatting instructions for citing oral histories, which are usually considered unpublished primary materials. Bound, paginated transcripts deposited in an archives may be considered limited publications and citations may include page numbers.

Provide sufficient information to lead the interested reader to the physical location of the cited source: interviewee name (as author); interviewer name; date and place of interview; type of interview material (audio recording, transcript); and location of materials.

Examples of notes (N) and bibliographic forms (B):

Recordings:

N 1. Albert Harry Reed, interview by Stephen Sloan, October 9, 2007, in Waco, Texas, compact disc, Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

B Reed, Albert Harry. Interview by Stephen Sloan. October 9, 2007, in Waco, Texas. Compact disc. Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

N 2. Dave Alexander, interview by Jean Ann Boyd, August 24, 2003, in Burleson, Texas, audio cassette, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

B Alexander, Dave. Interview by Jean Ann Boyd. August 24, 2003, in Burleson, Texas. Audio cassette. The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Online transcripts:

N 3. Lonnie Belle Hodges, interview by Vivienne Malone-Mayes, August 30, 1990, in Waco, Texas, transcript, Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX, available online at <http://www.baylor.edu/transcripts/HodgesLB>.

B Hodges, Lonnie Belle. Interview by Vivienne Malone-Mayes. August 30, 1990, in Waco, Texas. Transcript. Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX. <http://www.baylor.edu/transcripts/HodgesLB> (accessed June 10, 2007).

Bound transcripts deposited in an archives:

N 4. Abner Anglin Hyden, "Oral Memoirs of Abner Anglin Hyden," interview by Lois E. Myers on January 20, 1998, in Waco, Texas (Waco, TX: Baylor University Institute for Oral History, 2001), 22.

B Hyden, Abner Anglin. "Oral Memoirs of Abner Anglin Hyden." Interviewed by Lois E. Myers on six occasions from 20 January to 19 August, 1998, in Waco, Texas. Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, TX.

If you do nothing more than collect and preserve interviews—a large undertaking in itself—you have rendered future generations a valuable service. But the outcomes of the interviewing process can be packaged in innovative ways to reach the public. Indeed, some oral historians argue that public programming not only educates the public about the past but motivates the participants in a project and perhaps inspires persons to volunteer as narrators and helpers.

The process from production through editing to publishing requires significant amounts of time, thought, planning, and energy, not to mention money; but the product, whether it is a radio series, video documentary, Internet site, or book, can repay the investment by increasing public enlightenment and creating favorable publicity for the project.

- ◆ If public programming or publication is your goal, remember to plan carefully from the outset. Go for the highest possible sound quality in your recordings and best visual interest in your video or digital pictures. Obtain the best recorders and microphones you can afford, even if you have to rent them. Then, practice using the equipment before every interview.
- ◆ You may wish to take photographs of interviewees for use later in slide shows, exhibits, or publications. Also, you may want to ask interviewees for permission to make copies of their personal photos or documents that might enhance the project.
- ◆ After the interview, an index or transcript will be most helpful, if not essential, for preparing publications or programs.
- ◆ A signed legal-release form transferring copyright is a must for those considering the creation of public programs. Ethical practice requires you to tell the narrator that the recording might be used in a production or publication. Because of user restrictions, subject, or quality, some interviews may not lend themselves to public distribution.

Consider these possibilities . . . and then think of more.

- ◆ Video or audio productions or simple PowerPoint or slide-tape shows incorporating oral history recordings, old photographs, and period music
- ◆ Plays, monologues, dramatic readings, art work, or musical compositions based on oral history stories and storytellers
- ◆ Productions or vignettes for radio stations and television. For this type of series, oral history recordings must be broadcast quality.
- ◆ Digital audio and/or transcripts or essays displayed on the World Wide Web
- ◆ Bound volumes of transcripts, possibly including photographs and other material relating to the narrators and the topic under study
- ◆ Regular columns in a hometown newspaper or Sunday supplement magazine
- ◆ Magazines, journals, or pamphlets of community oral history, folklore, and folk craft
- ◆ Tours of community sites based on information shared in oral histories
- ◆ Community-wide reception for participants in the project, including exhibits and listening stations
- ◆ Museum exhibits or traveling displays incorporating quotations or sound bites from audio recordings

Print Materials

- Charlton, Thomas L., Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Handbook of Oral History*. AltaMira Press, 2006. Reprinted in two parts, *History of Oral History* (2007) and *Thinking about Oral History* (2008).
- Dunaway, David K., and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. 2d ed. AltaMira Press, 1996.
- Ericson, Stacy. *A Field Notebook for Oral History*. 4th ed. Rev. by Troy Reeves. Boise: Idaho Oral History Center, 2001. To order, phone 208.334.3863.
- Gluck, Sherna Berger, and Daphne Patai. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. Routledge, 1991.
- Grele, Ronald J. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*. Praeger, 1991.
- Lanham, Barry A., and Laura M. Wendling. *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education*. AltaMira Press, 2006.
- Mackay, Nancy. *Curating Oral Histories: From Interview to Archive*. Left Coast Press, 2007.
- Matters, Marion, comp. *Oral History Cataloging Manual*. Society of American Archivists, 1995.
- Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thomson. *The Oral History Reader*. 2d ed. Routledge, 2006.
- Powers, Willow Roberts. *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*. AltaMira Press, 2005.
- Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. 2d ed. Twayne Publishers, 2003.
- Sommer, Barbara, and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*. AltaMira Press, 2002.
- Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. 3d ed. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Whitman, Glenn. *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students and Meeting Standards through Oral History*. AltaMira Press, 2004.
- Yow, Valerie Raleigh. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2d ed. Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

Internet Resources

- Baylor University Institute for Oral History. http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/
Introductory and advanced instruction in the Workshop on the Web
- Oral History Association. <http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/>
News on annual conferences, links to oral history centers throughout the world, OHA standards and principles. and ordering information for publications on oral history and the law, community oral history, family oral history, and oral history in the classroom
- Oral History List Serv. <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist>
Links to centers, methods, projects, state and regional oral history associations, plus searchable archives of the discussion list for oral historians worldwide
- Shopes, Linda, "What is Oral History?" <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>
Downloadable manual on interpreting oral history, from George Mason University, History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web, Making Sense of Evidence series
- Smithsonian Institution, "Smithsonian Folklore and Oral History Interviewing Guide"
http://www.folklife.si.edu/explore/educator_resources.html
- Texas Historical Commission, "Fundamentals of Oral History"
<http://www.thc.state.tx.us/publications/guidelines/OralHistory.pdf>
- Texas Oral History Association. <http://www.baylor.edu/toha/>
State network, with online newsletter and information on journal, awards, and membership