

ORAL HISTORY GUIDE

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Oral history refers to the recording of information through interviews with people having firsthand knowledge of past events.

It might be said that we have an almost instinctive desire to pass on our knowledge to future generations and to receive the acquired wisdom of our elders. We have all had the experience of listening to someone tell an interesting story and thought, “Someone really should record this.”

Today, thanks to modern technology, recording oral history has never been easier. There are, however, still decisions to make, standard practices to follow, and good interviewing techniques to be learned.

The following guide is designed to lead you through this process in a simple, informative way.

BEGINNING WITH THE END IN MIND

There are two main types of oral histories: the personal memoir and the structured oral history interview. Personal memoirs usually focus on an individual that one knows or that is one’s relation. The goal of this type of history is to record the events of the individual’s life as a kind of family record. The structured oral history interview, on the other hand, is designed to create a public record of historically relevant stories from an individual with the intention of archiving the interview or using it for research. Both types of oral history are valid, but each requires a somewhat different approach. Before beginning, therefore, decide what your goal is and who will eventually make use of the interview. The following questions may be of help.

1. *Do any of the interviewee’s stories have relevance to the community or to a larger audience; or are they something only family and friends would appreciate?*
2. *Who in the future might be interested in these stories?*
3. *Do any events in the interviewee’s life shed light on a historical event?*
4. *Are the interviewee’s experiences more than mere personal anecdotes?*

If the interviewee’s stories do not have relevance to the community or to some historical event, and if only family members and friends would likely be interested in the interview 10 or 15 years from now, then you should follow the steps in the guide under the heading Memoirs.

If, however, you feel that at least some aspects of the interviewee’s life are potentially valuable to a larger audience or to future historians, then proceed to the heading Structured Oral History Interview to learn how to collect, record and preserve a structured oral history document.

STEP ONE: Equipment and Setting**EQUIPMENT**

Depending on your skill and resources, there are many choices of equipment. Among others, there are laptop computers with built in microphones, video camcorders, digital cameras with video functions, small tabletop cameras that can record up to two hours of audiovisual material, and digital audio recorders of varying sound quality. Recordings made with all of these can be edited on the average home computer using free sound-editing software. The following questions may help you to decide which equipment to use.

1. *Will you be working alone or with someone who will operate the equipment?*

If you are working alone, keep it simple. The less time and attention you give to your equipment, the more time and attention you can devote to the interview itself. With or without an assistant, the key is to keep the equipment as unobtrusive as possible so that the interviewee will be able to relax and forget that the interview is being recorded.

2. *What are you most comfortable with and capable of operating?*

While it is best to choose the recording device you are most comfortable with, it is also essential that the person being interviewed agrees to the chosen medium. If, for example, you wish to record video but the interviewee is not comfortable with the presence of a camera, then you will probably have to limit yourself to audio. Respect and cooperation are the foundation of all oral history interviews.

3. *Will you be doing the editing, and if so, do you have the necessary software and knowledge?*

Some editing is always a good idea. For example, eliminating your interview questions can turn your interview into a narrative. However, if you want to do more, but do not have the necessary skills or the desire to learn them, then try to find someone who can help.

4. *Is your equipment digital?*

Make sure that your equipment is not outdated, such as a cassette tape recorder. Whatever you use must be digital. This will facilitate downloading and editing the interview on your computer, and copying it for family and friends. It will also mean that friends and family will be able to listen to your interview many years from now.

SETTING

1. *The room*

Find a room with as little extraneous noise as possible and eliminate mechanical sources of noise such as refrigerators, overhead fans and computers. These noises are hard to edit out later and often make it difficult to hear the person being interviewed, especially if you do not have a professional quality microphone. Minimize all unexpected noise, turn the ringer off telephones and turn cell phones off completely since even the noise from the vibration setting can be heard on a recording.

2. *Your position*

Both you and the recording device should be fairly close to the interviewee for the best sound. Sit beside and slightly in front of the camera so that the subject is simultaneously looking at you and the camera as the questions are answered.

3. *Sound and light check*

Do a sound and light check before beginning the interview. If you are using a video camera, make sure there is no window or door behind the person or you will create a silhouette effect. Bright, natural light is best. Focus the camera's viewfinder on the interviewee's upper torso, just above the elbows, and make sure that the interviewee is centred. Ask the interviewee a simple question and record it. Check to see that your recording device is capturing the subject's voice clearly.

4. *Memorabilia*

During an interview, memorabilia can act as a powerful memory trigger. If you plan to use some of the interviewee's memorabilia, identify the objects to be used and ask the interviewee to have them ready.

5. *Additional photos*

Even if you are only conducting an audio interview it is wise to take a photo of the person and any memorabilia you decide to use. These images can easily be incorporated into a small CD-sized booklet to accompany your audio interview.

6. *Practice*

Practice with your equipment. This will reduce stress the day of the interview.

STEP TWO: The pre-interview

You probably already know the person you want to interview but you must still meet with the individual to obtain his or her permission. Sometimes this is easy, but some individuals are shy, self-conscious, or doubt that their life experiences are interesting enough to record. Prepare to be a persuasive.

Stress the value that the interviewee's stories will have for future generations. Let the person know how much you personally enjoy listening to these stories. Sometimes it helps to have a second family member offer encouragement, but avoid pressuring the person.

Many people refuse to be interviewed out of fear of the unknown, so provide the interviewee with as much information as possible about the process. It also helps to give the individual some sense of control over the project. This includes collaborating on who should (and perhaps should not) be allowed to see the interview and choosing a method of recording that you are both comfortable with. If the person is still unsure, give him or her time to think the idea over.

Once you have obtained the individual's permission, the next decision is whether to record a full life story or just several episodes from the person's life. A full life story may take several sessions to complete. And while it offers a more complete picture of the individual's life, it can become long. Recording just the most interesting stories means that you have to be selective.

If you are not sure what stories will be the most interesting, here are some questions that may help. Be sure to take notes or record the interviewee's answers during the pre-interview. This will help you to formulate better questions for the actual interview.

Ten General Questions to ask in a pre-interview

1. *What was the most exciting experience of your life? The scariest?*
2. *What experience(s) taught you the most about life, yourself, or other people?*
3. *What experience(s) most defined or changed you as a person?*
4. *What do you think has been unique or unusual about your life?*
5. *What experience(s) did you have that you want future generations to know about?*
6. *What experience(s) in your life would no longer be possible today?*
7. *What are two or three memories that you most treasure?*
8. *What are some of your favorite childhood memories?*
9. *In what ways has society changed over your lifetime? Which of these changes have been for the better in your opinion? For the worse?*
10. *What is one piece of advice that you most want to pass on?*

Once you have this information, use the criteria below to help you decide which stories to record.

Four criteria to help you decide which stories to record

- *Stories with clearly remembered details, such as how things smelled, tasted, sounded, or what people said.*
- *Stories that the interviewee has told before, that are unique to the individual, or that the interviewee's family has enjoyed hearing many times.*
- *Experiences that are out of the ordinary or that typify a way of life that no longer exists.*
- *Stories that evoke strong emotions such as humor, sorrow, joy, anger, or fear, or that have a universal, enduring quality.*

STEP THREE: Questions: The art of the Interviewer

Knowing how to listen and how to ask questions are the two most important skills of a good interviewer.

1. *Arrange questions in chronological order*

If you want to ask about several different stories, each of them should be arranged chronologically, as well. This will help to prevent the person from forgetting details.

2. *Avoid complex questions*

Questions that ask for too much information, such as, “Can you tell us about your favorite aunt, why you liked her so much, and how she inspired you?” tend to confuse the interviewee and result in long, unfocused answers. Instead, ask a series of smaller questions, such as “Can you tell me about your favorite aunt?”

3. *Ask open-ended questions*

Whenever possible, ask questions that cannot be answered with just one word. Rather than asking, “Do you think society is better or worse today than it was 50 years ago?” ask, “In what ways has society improved over the past 50 years?” Open-ended questions encourage the interviewee to go into greater depth. Some examples of ways to phrase these questions are: “Can you describe...?”; “What was it like when...?”; “What did you do...?”; and “How do you feel about...?”

4. *Paraphrase where necessary*

Use paraphrasing to clarify a statement and/or deepen the line of questioning. For example, “So, if I understand you correctly, you liked the old wood stoves better than the electric ones. Why is that?”

5. *Use probing questions*

The following phrases are useful ways to begin a question when you want to encourage the interviewee to elaborate on a topic: “Can you elaborate on that?”; “Why do you say that?”; and “What did you learn from that?”

STEP FOUR: Best practices for conducting an interview

1. *Be sure to give the interviewee plenty of advanced notice of the date and time of the interview. Offer a copy of the questions or topics ahead of time if the individual is feeling nervous.*

2. *If the spouse is going to be present, request in advance that he or she sits in another room during the interview. This will prevent the temptation for cross-talk between them and diminish extraneous noise.*

3. *If you are recording audio without video and incorporating memorabilia be sure to have the interviewee describe the photo or object for the listener.*

4. *Even though your interview may only be intended for family members it is still a good practice to begin the recording by stating the name of the person, date, and location of the interview.*

5. *During the interview, concentrate on what the person is saying rather than mentally rehearsing what you*

are going to say next.

6. *Do as little talking as possible. Use a smile, nod of your head, eye contact, or a concerned look to let the individual know you are listening.*
7. *Maintain a relaxed posture, arms uncrossed, hands unclenched. Do not fidget with pencils, papers, jewelry, or shuffle your feet.*
8. *Be prepared for powerful emotions. Old stories often bring up unexpected tears or anger. Do not stop the interview unless asked to do so. Allow the interviewee to tell the story, emotions and all. Be sympathetic, but remain silent.*
9. *Be sure to schedule debriefing time after the interview. You both need time to share how you felt about the experience, discuss your reactions and decide if anything else needs to be added.*

STEP FIVE: Producing, preserving and presenting the interview

Editing an interview is an art in itself. It may be useful to have more than one family member help to decide what to keep and what to omit from the edited version. In addition to the edited version, you should also preserve the full, unedited interview for future generations.

All types of media can become corrupted over time. So it is best to save in more than one form, such as on a USB key, a CD, an external hard drive, as well as on your computer.

Respect the privacy of the person you have interviewed. Allow the interviewee to see/hear the final product before distributing it to other family members.

If possible, and if desired, recognize the individual's contribution by having some kind of celebration to honour the person and the memoir you have created for future generations.

Structured Oral History Interview

STEP ONE: Who, what, where

Sometimes an interest in oral history is sparked through meeting or hearing about a remarkable person in our community. Other times it grows out of a curiosity about some aspect of local culture or history.

Having arrived at this page, you have probably already decided that the story you want to record has significance for a larger audience and/or is likely to shed light on an event that would be of interest to future historians.

Before proceeding, it is crucial to decide where your interview will be accessible or archived. This first decision will affect many other choices throughout the process including the length of the interview, choice of interviewee, method of recording, type of consent form, and final edited form.

There are many different groups—tourism groups, local museums, and cultural or ethnic centres, for example—that are interested in archival-quality oral history interviews, particularly if the interviews focus on local culture.

In order to produce something that will be used, rather than simply stored, it is essential to consult with the targeted organization, before beginning your project to determine what type and length of recording is preferred. Many organizations also have websites and are looking for audio podcasts or short videos to include on their sites. Whether or not you find such an organization, it is crucial that you prepare a consent form that will give you the option of showing portions of the interview on the internet.

Once you have decided by whom, where, and in what form your interview will be made public, you may be able to use one of the organization's standard consent forms, or you can adapt a consent form using one of the templates provided in Appendix A. The consent form should be brought to the Pre-interview.

Now you can begin looking for the best interviewee for your project. If there's more than one potential subject available you might want to consider recording two or three people in order to present more information and different viewpoints. Although you may already have someone in mind, it is still worth looking over the list of qualities below. The more of these characteristics a subject has, the better the interview will be.

Qualities of a good oral history interviewee

- *has an engaging, extroverted personality*
- *has clear, detailed memories, especially of the things you want to record*
- *has personal memories, not just second-hand information from books or other people*
- *remembers the emotional subtext of the story and can communicate it*
- *has a strong, clear voice and can be easily understood*
- *has good pacing while speaking, (e.g., not too slow, not too quick)*
- *enjoys telling stories and wants to share his or her experiences with others*
- *has additional memorabilia (e.g., photographs, medals, artifacts, etc.)*

STEP TWO: The pre-interview

The pre-interview is another essential component of the process. Unlike with a personal memoir, where you usually know the interviewee, the pre-interview is often the first meeting with an individual and is an excellent way to get beyond your superficial knowledge of the interviewee. Before you ask people to share some of their personal lives with you, they need to be able to trust you and agree with the goals of your project. One of the purposes of a pre-interview, therefore, is to permit both of you to get to know each other. The pre-interview usually takes from 30 minutes to an hour. Its importance cannot be overstated, and eliminating it would be the equivalent of buying a car without having taken it for test drive.

The pre-interview checklist

- *Begin by introducing yourself, your project, and why you want to interview the individual.*
- *Explain how the interview will be recorded, who else, if anyone, will be present during the interview, and approximately how long the interview will take. The more details you provide, the greater the sense of transparency and trust you will create. (*See Equipment and Setting in the Structured Oral History Interview section of this guide),*
- *Most interviews take about 45 minutes. This allows both interviewer and interviewee to warm up, go into depth on a few significant stories, maintain concentration, and avoid fatigue.*
- *Explain who will have access to the interview and where will it be accessed and/or archived.*
- *Since the interview will be made public, the individual must sign a consent form. Have the form with you and be ready to explain it. Make a second copy to leave behind. This will enable the individual to take time to look it over and to confer with a family member or friend.*
- *Exchange contact information in case the interviewee thinks of questions after you leave. This will also enable you to send the individual information before of the actual interview.*
- *Have some prepared questions ready to ask at the pre-interview. If you already know the subject you are interested in exploring, it is better to confine your questions to that topic. If you are not sure, you can use the Ten General Questions to ask in a pre-interview in the Memoirs section of this guide.*
- *Take notes or bring an audio recorder so that afterwards you can decide the specific things you want to focus on in the actual interview.*
- *Pay attention to the interviewee's voice, speech, pacing and details of the stories as the individual responds to your questions. Keep in mind the Qualities of a good oral history interviewee to help you decide if this is the best person to interview.*
- *Find out if the interviewee has any photos or other memorabilia that can help to illustrate his or her stories, and ask for permission to use the memorabilia during the interview. Check the condition of these items and take a few photos. Later on, you can decide where and how to incorporate the memorabilia into the interview.*
- *Look over the house to see which room is the most appropriate for conducting the interview. (*See Equipment and Setting in the Structured Oral History Interview section of this guide)*

- *Ask if the interviewee would like to have a copy of the questions or general topics in advance. It helps decrease nervousness in some interviewees.*

STEP THREE: Questions: The Art of the Interviewer

As an interviewer, your greatest tools are your ability to listen and to ask questions that keep the interviewee focused, talking, and moving into ever richer veins of memory. It is a skill that almost everyone can acquire, but it requires practice.

GENERAL ADVICE

1. *Create subject headings*

Using your notes from the pre-interview, decide which experiences or stories are the most relevant, interesting and powerful. These will become your subject headings when you begin making your questions.

2. *Organize your questions in chronological order*

Arrange all questions in chronological order even within your subject headings. Using a time line helps a person access the memories and makes it easier to edit your interview into a narrative. It also helps prevent the interviewee from wandering off topic, becoming confused or forgetting parts of the story.

3. *Do your homework*

Research the topics you intend to ask about before writing your questions. This will help you to write meaningful questions and will provide you with the background knowledge to ask appropriate spontaneous questions.

4. *Avoid complex questions*

Questions that ask for too much information can be confusing. For example, rather than asking, "Can you tell us about your experiences in the Korean War and how these experiences changed you as a person?" it would be better to ask, "What specific tasks were you assigned to do as a medic in the Korean War?" Posing a series of smaller questions helps the interviewee to stay focused, and enables you to decide whether to pursue a line of questions or to move on, depending on what the person answers.

5. *Practice makes perfect, or at least better*

Practice your interview skills on friends or family members. Learning to listen and to ask open-ended and probing questions is a skill that can improve with practice.

Three Main Types of Interview Questions

1. *Open-ended Questions*

These are questions that cannot be answered with one or two words. These questions require longer, more elaborate answers and permit the interviewee a wide range of responses. For example, rather than asking,

“Do you think society has changed for the better or worse in the past 25 years?” it would be better to ask, “In what ways has society changed in the past 25 years?”

Some ways to phrase open-ended questions include: “Can you describe...?”; “What was it like when...?”; “Tell me more about...”; and “What did you do when...?”

For variety, you can occasionally ask a closed-ended question (which requires only a one-word answer). For example, “Did you like the village better before or after amalgamation?” However, this type of question should immediately be followed with “Why?” to elicit details.

2. *Probing Questions*

This type of question helps to deepen the conversation. Use it whenever you want to know more about an idea, experience, or emotional reaction. For example, “So, you say that it was more difficult fishing with the old-style nets. Can you explain why?”

Probing questions arise spontaneously out of what the interviewee has just said, so the key is to use active listening. This means concentrating on what the person is saying, rather than rehearsing what you are going to say next.

Pay attention to facial expressions, body language and tone of voice to sense whether to probe deeper or move on to another topic.

Do not get too attached to your script of pre-prepared questions. Relax, listen, and allow your questions to arise naturally.

Some ways of asking a probing question are: “Can you elaborate on that...?”; “Why do you say that...?”; “How did you come to that conclusion...?”; and “What did you learn from that...?”

3. *Paraphrasing Questions*

These are used primarily to clarify a previous comment or to have the interviewee define a technical term whose meaning has changed over time.

For example, if the interviewee describes how a task was performed in the past, you can check to see if you have understood the description by asking, “So, are you saying...” You may then summarize what you heard and ask if it is correct. You can also use a paraphrase style question to introduce another question.

STEP FOUR: Equipment and Setting

1. *Use the best equipment possible to record an archival-quality structured oral history interview. The microphone is especially crucial as the voice is far more important than the interviewee’s looks.*
2. *All equipment should be digital to facilitate downloading, editing, preserving and copying.*
3. *If you are working alone, set up your recording equipment in such a way that you do not have to adjust or think about it at all during the interview.*

4. *Bring a digital camera to photograph memorabilia. If possible, borrow the interviewee's old photos to scan at home. Scanning will produce a higher resolution image.*
5. *If someone else will be operating the equipment, make sure that this person is as unobtrusive as possible.*
6. *For a video recording, sit a little in front and to the side of the camera so that the interviewee will focus on you, rather than on the camera, and so that the audience will see the interviewee's full face rather than a side view.*
7. *For an audio recording, face the interviewee and sit as close as is comfortable in order to have both voices at the same volume.*
8. *The best location for the interview is usually the interviewee's own home. It is the place where the person is most comfortable and where the chosen items of memorabilia are easily accessible.*
9. *The choice of rooms is crucial. Select a room with natural lighting and a wall that is not cluttered with distracting background pictures. Avoid seating the interviewee in front of a window which will create a silhouette effect. Choose a room with as little distracting noise as possible. Be aware of traffic, overhead fans, refrigerators, computers and any other ambient or intermittent noise. These noises are hard to edit out later and often make it difficult to hear the person being interviewed, especially if you do not have a professional quality microphone.*
10. *If the spouse is going to be present, request that he or she sits in another room during the interview. This will prevent the temptation for cross-talk between the couple and diminish extraneous noise.*
11. *Pay attention to seating. Avoid chairs that squeak and, if possible, seat the interviewee at a table in a standard chair with the memorabilia nearby.*
12. *Minimize all unexpected noise. If possible, turn off the ringer on the telephone. Turn cell phones off, since even the noise from the vibration setting can be heard on a recording.*
13. *If it is not possible to use the interviewee's home, find an easily accessible, nearby location with a room that has as many of the above-mentioned features as possible.*

STEP FIVE: Best Practices during the Interview

1. *Do a sound and lighting check before beginning, and ask if the interviewee would prefer to be addressed during the interview by his or her first name or by Mr., Mrs. or Ms.*
2. *If you are recording a video, centre the person on the screen with only the upper torso (above the elbows) visible.*
3. *Begin the interview by identifying the interviewee, interviewer, date and location of the interview. Without this crucial information your interview cannot be properly archived.*
4. *Have your questions ready, but do not use staples. The less noise you make with your papers the better. Have a few pieces of blank paper and a pen (pencils are noisy) to jot down probing questions.*
5. *Remove any jewelry that could make noise, and avoid fidgeting with rings, pencils, paper, etc. Be aware of shuffling feet or fidgeting hands (interviewer and interviewee). If the sounds are repeated, pausing the*

interview to eliminate them is preferable to trying to eliminate them later.

6. *Be aware of your own body language. Keep a relaxed, open posture, with arms uncrossed and hands unclenched.*
7. *Speak slowly, enunciate clearly, and adjust your volume so that the interviewee does not have to strain to hear your question.*
8. *Acknowledge that you are listening by using non-verbal communication as much as possible. This includes a smile when appropriate, a nod of the head, eye contact, or a concerned look.*
9. *Be sensitive to silences, pauses, and the flow of emotions in people's voices or body language. Allow the interviewee time to collect his or her feelings or recall a memory, and let him/her know in advance that it is always an option not to answer a question.*
10. *Recalling old memories can stir up strong emotions. If the interviewee starts to cry or to choke up, stay in your role as interviewer and avoid words of sympathy. Show your compassion by being attentive, patient and silent. Only stop the interview if the person requests it.*
11. *Schedule debriefing time after the interview. It is important to help the individual process any thoughts and feelings that may have arisen during the interview. This is also an excellent time to relax together and share positive feelings about the experience.*
12. *The best way to thank an individual for participating in the project is to provide a copy of the unedited interview as well as the shorter, edited version that you create.*

STEP SIX: Producing and archiving a structured oral history interview

Once the interview is completed, you are ready to begin editing what might be several hours of recording time into something as short as just a few minutes.

Editing is an art in itself. If you have the knowledge and software you can do it alone. However, if you do not, it would be best to find someone who is willing to collaborate with you.

If you are producing a podcast, please see the document entitled Design Guide. This an excellent resource on how to create podcasts as well as other design elements. If you are producing a video documentary there are many user-friendly softwares available for both Macs and PCs.

For your own sake, remember that all media can become corrupted over time. It is best, therefore, to save your work in more than one format, such as on a USB key, a CD, an external hard drive, as well as on your computer.

An ethical consideration: Although you technically possess the “proprietary intellectual rights” to the oral history interview you produce, it is worth thinking about your motive for conducting the interview. If your goal is to create something for future historians, then it is better to donate your interview to a museum or similar institution, where it will be available to researchers for years to come. Sadly, many people who have collected old photos or made oral history recordings regard these as their own personal property and are unwilling to share them with others. The tragedy is that many wonderful documents end up getting lost, damaged, or thrown away. The choice of whether to donate or to retain ownership is yours, but it is a decision worth thinking about seriously.

CONSENT FORM 2

In contrast to the previous, detailed consent form, this form is extremely simple and wide-open. It is the best one to use if you do not have a museum or other organization with whom you are working.

This consent form asks the interviewee to give all reproduction and publication rights to you personally, with the understanding that it may, at some point, be shown in a public forum. It also allows you to sign over publication and reproduction rights at some future date when a suitable place is found to archive your interview.

CONSENT FORM

I hereby give my consent to _____ (*interviewer's name*) to be recorded in either audio or video format. I agree that my interview may be copied, edited, reproduced, translated, shown to the public, exhibited at a museum, cultural centre, etc., or edited and accessed on the internet.

I, _____ (*interviewee's name*) have read, understood and given my consent to the above.

Signature _____

Date _____

Location _____