

Intro to Oral History: Concepts, Best Practices, and Resources

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For additional resources and tutorials, visit www.usmcdh.org

Oral Histories as Digital Public Scholarship

Oral history is a technique for gathering and preserving original historical information from personal recollections through planned recorded interviews (audio or video). Oral histories are then stored in physical and/or digital archives, and made accessible to other researchers, students, and the community.

Oral history can be a powerful medium for collecting the voices, memories, and perspectives of people with first-hand insight into historical events. It is an important tool for documenting the lived experiences of those who are historically marginalized and underrepresented in traditional historical records. Through oral history, historians can challenge dominant narratives, fill gaps in the record, and create a more inclusive interpretation of the past. Oral histories bring depth and emotion to historical events, illuminating personal connections and attachment to the past. Because of this, it is critical to approach oral history work with respect; although sharing one's story can be a source of empowerment, it can also be a very vulnerable experience.

When oral history leverages technology and digital methods to record, preserve, and share stories while actively engaging with the public, it becomes a vital form of digital public scholarship. Digital technologies enable oral histories to be more accessible, interactive, and engaging, inviting broad engagement and collaboration. When narratives are available online, oral history projects democratize access to historical knowledge and promote deeper engagement with both academic research and community history.

Oral History Examples

- [Story Corps](#)
- [Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories](#)
- [Denim Day 40th Anniversary - Virginia Tech](#)
- [Bracero History Archive](#)

Recording + Editing Technology

Reserving equipment

Equipment from the Center for Digital Humanities can be reserved for three days at a time and can be used on or off campus. When you are ready to check out equipment, you can stop by the CDH manager's office during our open hours and check out the items you need. If you need help deciding which technology you need, the Center's staff can help you. A full list of our available technology can be found on our website's tutorials and equipment page. ***Please take care of the CDH's equipment as if it were your own, and be sure to confirm that your files have been exported from all SD cards.***

Recording



Blue Yeti USB Multi-pattern
Microphone | [Quickstart Guide]



Zoom H4N Pro Black Multi-track
Handy Recorder | [Quickstart Guide]

Editing

[Audacity](#) is a free and popular audio recording and editing app that can be downloaded to Mac, PC, or Linux systems (see our [Audacity Handout Guide](#))

Oral History Best Practices

There are four key elements in oral history work: preparation, interviewing, preservation, and access. The interviewer should strive to create a situation in which the narrator (interviewee) is able to reflect widely and freely on the subject of the interview, and to maintain a comfortable setting in which they are willing to articulate those recollections.

The Six R's of Oral History Interviewing According to Oral Historian Martha Ross

- **Research:** Thorough preparation enables the interviewer to know what questions to ask. Research can help the interview when the interviewer's knowledge of names, dates, and places may jog the interviewee's memory.
- **Rapport:** Take the time to establish a connection with the narrator and be transparent about the purpose of the project, their contribution, and their rights. A pre-interview call or visit to walk through the plan is recommended.
- **Restraint:** Practice good and consistent interview techniques: be efficient but unobtrusive with equipment, follow questions chronologically, ask open-ended questions, listen without interrupting, follow up on details or unexpected information in a non-threatening way, and maintain an atmosphere in which the narrator feels able to respond fully and truthfully.
- **Retreat:** Close each interview by asking the narrator to reflect on the experiences they just discussed, and if they have any closing remarks.
- **Review:** Interviewers should listen to their interviews soon afterwards to begin processing that information, and to follow up with any clarifications. Be sure to send a message to the narrator thanking them for their participation.
- **Respect:** Respect is at the foundation for oral history— respect for the narrator as an individual, their experience, the way they remember that experience, and for their willingness to share those recollections. Being respectful toward the narrator and toward the practice of oral history is essential for success as an interviewer.

Preparing for Oral History Interviews

Preparing and leading an oral history interview can require a lot of preparation. Take the time to:

- **Select a narrator and ask if they are interested and available to be interviewed.**

- **Set up a time and place for the interview** and request any background information that the narrator may want to provide. Additionally, send a follow-up email confirming plans for the interview that discusses the goals, legal rights, and how the interviews will be stored/used. You may also encourage the narrator to bring in objects, photos, or other media to support their narrative.
 - Interview participants often sign an interview agreement acknowledging how their recordings will be stored, used, and shared. The narrator has a right to maintain ownership of the interview and may request privacy over identifying information (may be redacted or replaced with an alias).
 - See a sample [Oral History Interview Agreement](#)
 - You can reserve the Abolition Lab's recording studio for your interview, or you can do the interview off-campus. Be sure to reserve equipment in advance.
- **Craft strong interview questions** that are open ended and encourage the narrator to be reflective.
 - Write more questions than you think you will need, and also be prepared for natural flows into other questions or conversations during the interview. Some interviewers share their questions ahead of time, but know that this can lead to an over-structured and over-prepared conversation. It is best to speak with your guest about their preferences.
- **Take the time to learn about your narrator** and their biographical background.
- **Take the time to practice using the recording equipment.** Make sure you are comfortable with the technology. ALWAYS have a backup recording device (phone, laptop) in case your technology fails.
- If possible, **bring a camera** (or use your phone) to take photos of the narrator and any of the items that they brought with them.

Recording the Interview:

Not everyone may have access to recording equipment or soundproof spaces, but some small adjustments can help improve your recording experience:

- If you are recording off-campus, **assess the room for sound quality.** Find a quiet space with soft surfaces (upholstered furniture, carpet) to keep sound from

echoing. Try to remove anything that produces “white noise” – fans, running water, vents, etc.

- **Setup:** Make sure you and the narrator have water, silence cell phones
- Do a **test-run with your equipment** and listen to it before starting an actual recording. Set up a secondary recording device as a backup
- When you are ready to begin, **go over the purpose of the interview, key topic areas, the narrator’s permissions, and how the oral history will be used.** Ask about any scrapbooks, news clippings, awards, etc., that the narrator might want to use as a reference as they talk.
- **Be an engaged, but not an “active” listener.** Oral history is not a conversation, but an opportunity for your narrator to document their story. Do not interrupt when they are talking and refrain from affirming verbal cues (mhmm’s and right’s). Instead, use eye contact and nod in affirmation to demonstrate listening.
- **Take notes** for follow-up questions. At the end of the interview, you should ask the narrator to spell any names/places you did not understand.
- **Be sure to thank your narrator** both immediately following the interview and in a follow-up message after the interview ends.
- **Record 5-10 seconds of silence** on the audio track at first– Audacity will use this sound profile to reduce background noise.

Asking Interview Questions

- **Begin with easy questions** such as their name and where and when they were born.
- **Ask "open-ended" questions** like: tell me about, describe, what do you remember about, etc.
- **Ask one question at a time** and try to ask simple questions. You can also ask follow up questions and politely ask for any clarification about details you missed/don’t understand.
- **Silence is okay;** let the narrator think and take their time before they answer.
- **Don’t be afraid to have a natural discussion;** you and the narrator may veer from the original question outline.
- Remember that **the purpose is to document** the narrator’s stories; let them do the talking

Post-Production

After recording your oral history interview, prepare your interview for post production:

1. **Gather all of your content** in one place: information about the interview, the audio files, and any photos you have of the narrator and/or the items they brought to the interview
2. Be sure to **import and save your original audio files** in multiple locations (your computer, email yourself, Google Drive).
3. **Edit your audio** using an editing software like [Audacity](#) (see the [Audacity Guide](#)) to edit your audio. You may trim long silences, cut any mistakes, and reduce background noise.
 - a. The Abolition Lab has Audacity installed on a few laptops if you do not wish to download it onto your own computer.
4. You may also wish to produce a transcript
5. **Export your audio as an MP3** file.
6. **Save this file in multiple locations** (your computer, email yourself, Google Drive)

Additional Resources

1. Oral History Association: oralhistory.org
2. [Smithsonian Institution Archives “How to Do Oral History”](#)
3. [Judith Moyer’s “Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History” \(1999\)](#)