



ORAL HISTORY APPROACHES

Oral history is the process of collecting and preserving history by means of interviewing. Ideally, the interviewee has first-hand knowledge of a historic event, an era, or combinations of both. The process is voluntary and is not similar to depositions, cross examinations, or the interview styles used by reporters or entertainers. The interview is recorded and the recording is identified and placed in an appropriate institution for preservation. Oral histories are often cataloged and transcribed.

I. COMMON APPROCHES TO ORAL HISTORY

1. General Collections are usually maintained by institutions such as archives, historical societies, universities, museums and libraries. They are often ongoing programs. Most are thematic and include some cataloging.
2. Family Collections (or Personal Collections) serve more personal purposes such as genealogy, but are also used by writers, historians, and others.
3. Project Collections are focused on a specific era, place, event, topic or person. Museum curators and writers use this type of collection. Social scientists, such as geographers or genealogists, also do oral histories. The project usually has a specific goal and the interviews are used to develop that goal.
4. Other collections include corporate archives, fraternal collections, church archives, and more.

II. MECHANICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Determine format of recordings:
 - a. Video: 8mm, miniD/V, other. (VHS is not recommended.)
 - b. Audio: cassette (60mins.) is standard.
2. Determine use of recordings, i.e.:
 - a. Only used in transcribed form.
 - b. Used as video or audio for exhibit, or similar project.
 - c. To be made available to other researchers, etc.
3. Recording the interview:

Recording with built-in mic limits quality in audio recordings but not always in video. Experiment with equipment before conducting first interview. Test the recorder every time the tape

is changed. Recording with out-board mics usually produces a better quality recording if a quality mic is used. Use a mic designed for a P.A. system if available. Experiment with mic and point mic toward the person to be interviewed. Experiment every time you use the equipment and test the tape each time you begin.

4. Recording environment:

Find a quiet place if possible, disconnect the phone or ask someone to answer it for you; use a comfortable position where outside influences are at a minimum. For audio use a table with nothing on it. For video make sure the background is not distracting and avoid “back lighting”.

5. Do an experimental interview. Experience makes for better recordings but some recordings will have flaws beyond anticipation.

6. Storage of recordings:

- a. Make copy original recording. Use copy for editing or transcriptions.
- b. Place original recording in library, archive or other protected environment.

III. PLANNING YOUR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

1. Compose a general statement to include the following:

- a. Title of project.
- b. How the project is to be used, i.e.: an exhibit, recording, written paper, posted on the Internet, etc.
- c. Scope of project. How many people are to be interviewed, how long will the project last, where are the interviews to be done.

2. Assemble equipment according to format chosen.

3. Compose introduction and closing to be used with each/every recording. This should include; name of interviewee, interviewer, date, location, and other project participants, and name of project/organization.

4. Compose release form that describes the use and limits of use of the interview. Names of interviewee and interviewer, their signatures, and date of recording should be included.

5. Compose a questionnaire to include introductory information such as birth date, location, occupation, brief family history, education, and relationship to project theme. Develop theme by asking about threshold values such as “the first time you saw, met, arrived, participated, noticed,” etc. “Describe your situation at that time or place.” “Why were you there?” Ask about contrasts in observations and experiences, i.e.: What were your emotions at different times during your observations. Ask questions to fill in time line of project. Encourage open-ended questions and avoid yes and no responses. Remember historic and geographic perspectives and include them in your interview. Ask the interviewee for his or her perspective on event(s) mentioned earlier in interview.

6. Close interview in a consistent form: “This concludes this interview with Mr. John Doe.” this will allow the transcriptionist to know the

recording is complete.

7. Mark the tapes with the interviewee's name, interviewer, date, location, and identification of each tape in the order, i.e.: tape 1 of 2 or tape 2 of 2.

IV. BEGINNING YOUR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

1. Complete a statement describing your project?
 - a. Does your project ask a question(s)?
 - b. Does your project expect to find answers to questions?
 - c. Is this an area of information yet unexplored?
 - d. Will this project be used as an exhibit, video, article, etc.?
2. Consider the practical potential for the project.
 - a. Can you find people to interview as needed to support statement?
That is; can you find people to interview who have first hand experiences related to your subject matter.
 - b. Can you find secondary source information to support statement?
 - c. Can you find an advisor or historian for the project?
 - d. Do you have access to equipment needed?
 - e. Is travel needed?
3. Development tools to create questionnaire and for interpretation of oral histories.
 - a. Create a time line concerning the events, by decade (or other parameter), to keep track of the progress of information. Post information to your time line. This will show what's missing and suggest questions to ask your next interviewee.
 - b. Plot, on a self-drawn map, geographical information as revealed by interviews.
 - c. Note items presented as facts with other items that contrast. Seek other data to rectify contradictions. Make notes on contradictions as you progress in your project.
 - d. Consider some information as valuable because of contradictions with known facts. Perhaps this information is a myth developing, perhaps this demonstrates the emotional state, attitudes, and curiosities of memory.
 - e. Construct drawing(s), or diorama of paper, to help illustrate spatial relations. This has many applications: the farmer describes his farm, the soldier describes the battlefield, the storekeeper describes her store or the street her store was on. A second visit to an interviewee may be needed to clarify the drawings, etc.
 - f. Photographs may help the interviewee recall or describe certain facts.

V. ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRES

Introduction: “This interview is with John Doe, interviewing for the XYZ project is Tom Jones. Today’s date is Oct. 15, 1999 and the location of the interview is in Mr. Doe’s office in Central City, Oklahoma.”

1. Biographical information: Birthplace, birthdate, parents names, education, military, marriage, children, family names, etc.. Select from these items those appropriate for your purpose.
2. Chronology: Encourage the interviewee to tell his (her) life story in brief or in detail as needed. This may not be appropriate for all situations and projects.
3. Ask questions about the subject that brought you to this person for an interview.
 - a. First experience, encounter, “when did you start?”
 - b. Early experiences contrasted with later or present day observations.
 - c. Changes noted.
 - d. Conclusion of experience, job, trip, school, etc.
4. Encourage the interviewee to reflect on his (her) experiences.
5. Check notes taken for additional questions.
6. End the interview: “This concludes this interview with John Doe.”

A questionnaire is very helpful because it formalizes the preparation process. However almost every interview will reveal a direction for questions not anticipated by the interviewer. The interviewer should follow the unanticipated directions if these appear to contribute to the project. Also, the interviewer should feel free to skip questions eliminated by earlier responses. No questionnaire is perfect, no interview is perfect but should be considered an art and a skill made better with experience and preparation. Attention to your interviewee’s responses is paramount.

VI. ORAL HISTORY CHECKLIST

BEFORE YOUR INTERVIEW COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING:

1. Name, address (plus directions), and phone number of interviewee.
2. Questionnaire. The questionnaire is a guide not a step-by-step questioning of an interviewee.
3. Release forms.
4. Camera for still photo (optional).
5. Recording equipment: mic(s), tapes including spare tapes, extension cords and plug adaptors as needed, recorder or camcorder, tripod, masking tape (to help hold cords, etc. in place), lighting equipment as needed, spare bulbs, spare batteries as needed, note book or legal pad, pen and pencil.
6. A container to carry your equipment. The container might be a briefcase or something similar.
7. Review your project guidelines, etc.
8. Consider constructing a timeline. Post information collected in interviews to the timeline. This will help guide the interview process and insure that a more comprehensive collection is made.

VII. PROCESSING OF RECORDINGS AND STORAGE FOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

1. Check tapes for proper identification.

2. Remove the tab(s) from tapes or slide tabs to prevent tapes from being recorded over.
3. Check release form(s) for signatures, etc.
4. Complete a synopsis form on the interview. This might be as short as six or eight lines or as long as one or two pages, describing the content of the interview.
5. Copy tapes for transcription purposes and turn over tape copy to the transcriptionist.
6. Store original tapes in proper storage container such as acid free box and place in a protected environment. Avoid temperature extremes, excessive humidity, and above all avoid electro-magnetic fields such as computers, air conditioners, and any device with a flow of electrical current. This is to avoid erasing the tapes.
7. Enter the interview in your index showing who was interviewed, by whom, when, where, length, subject headings (from synopsis), when was original tape copied, and where the tape is stored.

VIII. HELPFUL HINTS FOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

1. Keep notes on each interview, including any borrowed or contributed photos, papers or artifacts. Place items in an envelope or box clearly marked with the source person's name.
2. Write a thank you note to all interviewees and contributors.
3. Consider that oral histories are volunteered. Oral historians should respect the personal nature of the information and the process. Oral history is not investigative reporting and challenges to your sources should be minimized.
4. Any request from the interviewee to discontinue the interview should be respected, and complied with, immediately. Oral history is volunteered and never captured without the permission or knowledge of the interviewee.
5. Some information is emotionally charged and it is common for interviewees to express those emotions during the process. Sometimes a brief break is in order so the person can compose themselves.
6. Some interviewees may be good candidates for interviews even in poor health. If they desire to tell their story you should make an effort to record it.
7. Never consider old age as a qualification for an interview.
8. Selection of interviewees should relate to the theme of the project, and especially "first-hand knowledge" of events, etc. is the primary consideration.

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