

BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY
Institute for Oral History

**Introduction
to
Oral History**

ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP ON THE WEB
http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History

Contents

What is oral history?	1
Managing an oral history project	2
Twenty questions for your project	3
Ethical and legal considerations	4
Choosing equipment	5
Developing a research focus	7
Creating an interview outline	8
Interviewees and interviewers	8
Composing questions	9
Interviewing	10
Beyond the interview: what next?	12
Outcomes of oral history research	15
Principles for the family oral historian	16
Basic oral history bibliography	17

Copyright © 2007 by BAYLOR UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE FOR ORAL HISTORY

Permission is granted to download, print, or duplicate this document for educational purposes only.

For any other use, please contact:
Baylor University Institute for Oral History
One Bear Place #97271
Waco TX 76798-7271
Phone (254) 710-3437

Composed before the introduction of digital recording, the following definition of oral history by esteemed oral historian Martha Ross, of Bethesda, Maryland, remains relevant:

Oral history is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information from personal recollections of individual participants in or witnesses to events under investigation, collected by means of tape-recorded or video-taped interviews.

The term **oral history** refers to

1. a qualitative research **process** based on personal interviewing, suited to understanding meanings, interpretations, relationships, and subjective experience; and
2. a **product**—an audio or video recording—that is an original historical document, a new primary source for further research.

Oral history interviews investigate interactions, relationships, dynamics, and contexts. Among the challenges inherent in gathering oral histories and interpreting them are building trust and rapport, balancing multiple perspectives, negotiating interview-interviewee roles, managing personal bias, and maintaining the ethics of the research partnership.

Oral historians seek broad-based information beyond their immediate research needs and arrange ways of sharing that information with the larger community by depositing recordings and transcripts and related materials in archives, libraries, and other special collections and by producing publications and programs aimed toward disseminating the information gained in the oral history partnership. Oral historians are found in academic settings, government offices, libraries and museums, medical and military settings, community centers, and anywhere people are studying people and the past. Through local, state, regional, national and international organizations, oral historians promote professional standards for research.

Oral history projects are initiatives planned, designed, and executed by individuals or groups to create and preserve oral histories. Projects may focus on a topic (a subject, event, or time period), a life history (biography), or community history (a place or group with common experiences, including families, businesses, organizations, ethnic groups, gender groups, et cetera).

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 interested in preserving oral histories, and they often partner with one another and network with other oral historians through the Oral History Association and its state and regional affiliates

Oral history collections preserve oral histories, including the recording and any derivative materials, such as an index or transcript, and any contextual materials (maps, correspondence, interview notes, et cetera). Collections are made accessible through a catalog record or finding aid and are offered to researchers in accordance to legal agreements signed by the interviewees and interviewers.

Organizations and independent researchers alike benefit from developing and following a cohesive plan for an oral history project.

1. Gather an **advisory committee** with representatives of various perspectives on your topic. A well-selected and dedicated committee can give consistent direction to a project as well as encourage participation and support.
2. Develop specific project **goals** and set priorities.
 - Determine what information you are seeking, what information you already know about the topic, and what information is yet unknown.
 - Will your research focus be topical or autobiographical?
 - Decide how you will use the information you find: in what form will it be maintained? who will have access to it? how will you share what you find?
 - Set target dates for completion of research, interviews, processing, programming. Prepare to be flexible; oral history takes time!
3. Develop project **guidelines**.
 - Think broadly, placing your topic within its historical, geographical, and cultural contexts.
 - Plan a research agenda to explore the written, public resources pertaining to your topic. Develop maps and/or time lines.
 - Where gaps exist in the written records, determine what persons might be able to fill in the gaps by sharing their personal papers, demonstrating skills, or providing recollections through taped interviews.
 - Develop legal forms for gathering and preserving donated materials, including interviews and photographs.
4. Assign project **staff**, including a director, researchers, interviewers, photographers, transcribers or editors, archivists, equipment experts, and program developers or fund raisers.
 - Fit individual skills and interests to the wide variety of tasks available within the project.
 - Train staff to produce professional quality oral histories.
 - Plan regular meetings to assess progress toward goals
5. Develop a **budget** based on your circumstances and stick by it.
 - Seek sources for support locally or through grants.
 - What resources are available for equipment, recording media, processing and storage, record-keeping, travel funds, program production?

1. **Why** is the oral history project needed?
2. What are the **goals and objectives** for the project?
3. What **approaches** will serve the objectives best?
4. Who will **direct** the project?
5. What organization or institution will **administer** the project?
6. Who **purchases, owns, and maintains** the **equipment** of the project?
7. Where will the generated oral history material be **deposited**, and under what terms and conditions?
8. What is to be the **legal status** of the interviews of the project?
9. Who **owns** the recordings and **controls** access to them?
10. Who may **use** the recordings and for what purpose?
11. Who are to be **interviewers** and **interviewees**?
12. What steps are needed to lend the project the necessary **prestige** and **authority** required to gain access to interviewees?
13. What kind of **staff** is needed?
14. What will be the **length** of the project?
15. What types of **equipment** will best serve the goals of the project?
16. What **processing** procedures will be used for the recorded interviews?
17. How will the project and its outcomes be **publicized**?
18. How will the generated oral history materials be **used**?
19. How much will the project **cost**?
20. How will the project be **funded**?

Ethical concerns

- Each oral history interviewer should be committed to producing the highest-quality interview possible. The interviewer should realize that the useful life of the interview extends far beyond its immediate use and the interviewer should therefore strive to gather information that will be relevant to future users.
- The interviewee should be informed of her/his rights and interests, the purposes of the program/project, interview and transcribing procedures, final location of recordings and transcripts, and potential use of the memoir.
- Interviewers should guard against any possible exploitation of interviewees and be sensitive to ways in which interviews might be used.
- Interviewers should be sensitive to the communities from which they have collected their oral histories, taking care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes or to bring undue notoriety to the communities. The resulting interviews should be made accessible to the communities.
- Interviewees should be given the opportunity to respond to questions as freely as possible and not be subjected to stereotyped assumptions.
- Interviewers should make every effort to place completed interviews in an archives or repository where they can be used by other interested researchers.

For more on ethical issues and oral history, see the latest edition of the *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines* from the Oral History Association, http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html.

Legal concerns

- Oral history interviews are subject to U.S. copyright law (1978).
- For public use of recordings/transcripts, both the interviewee and the interviewer must give written permission.
- Standardized release forms are useful; a general release and a separate form permitting restrictions or a time seal will be needed. You may adapt release forms from other projects or consult a lawyer and create your own form. The latter may be advisable if your project has any sensitive aspects.
- Ideally, a general release should be signed before an interview series begins. Restrictions may be added by supplemental agreement.
- Restricted oral memoirs should have specified opening dates. It is very difficult to enforce restrictions, for instance, that are linked to the duration of someone's lifetime.
- Oral history interviews are subject to libel and slander law. The interviewer should be sensitive to possible violations of this law and be prepared to seal this portion of the recording or edit the transcript so that the name of the person being slandered is not made public.

For more on legal matters, see John A. Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law*. 3d ed. (2002). Order from Oral History Association, http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_ps.html.

The interviews you conduct deserve a future. You will spend a lot of time preparing for and conducting each interview. Planning ahead will help ensure that all your hard work will result in a high quality recording.

Analog Or Digital?

In the twenty-first century, recording technology is changing rapidly. Analog recording remains an affordable format, but oral historians are finding increasing advantages in new, ever improving digital equipment.

Neither analog cassette tapes nor digital media have proven stability, and open reel tapes remain the archival standard for the U.S. Remember that you are creating important historical resources that can be of interest to citizens and historians for generations to come. Consider adding a technology expert to your oral history team to ensure that your equipment decisions are wise and appropriate.

For the latest discussions among oral historians on the issue of recording format choices, search the Oral History H-Net online discussion list, [H-Oralhist](http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/), at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>. For example, enter "digital" in the Search OralHist box.

For an excellent assessment of the various recording media available for oral historians, visit these sites available from the Vermont Folklife Center.

[Audio Field Recording Equipment Guide](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_audioequip.htm)

http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_audioequip.htm

[Field Recording in the Digital Age](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_digital-age.html)

http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_digital-age.html

[The Digital Editing of Field Audio](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_digitalediting.htm)

http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_digitalediting.htm

WHETHER YOU CHOOSE ANALOG OR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY, THE SAME TWO MAJOR PRINCIPLES APPLY:

- 1. USE A DURABLE, DEPENDABLE RECORDER AND A GOOD EXTERNAL MICROPHONE.**
- 2. PRACTICE WITH YOUR RECORDER AND MICROPHONE UNTIL YOU CAN OPERATE BOTH WITH SKILL AND CONFIDENCE.**

Recorders

Choose the best equipment your budget will allow, preferably with the following features:

- Digital tape counter (for analog tape recording)
- Battery power and recording level indicators
- Jack for external microphone (avoid using a built-in microphone)
- Capacity for use with batteries or electrical adapter. Use electricity from a wall outlet whenever possible, as it is more reliable than batteries. Include an extension cord in your interview pack.
- Avoid digital voice recorders that create highly compressed files in proprietary formats. 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.

Microphones

An external microphone connected to the recorder through a microphone jack usually generates recordings with the least background or machine noise. A small, lightweight, battery-powered condenser microphone is a good choice for making rich, natural-sounding voice recordings. Microphones come in a variety of pickup patterns.

- Omnidirectional microphones are more forgiving if the speaker shifts position or turns her/his head. If you choose an omnidirectional microphone, secure it on a stand or cushion it on a piece of foam and place it halfway between you and the interviewee.
- Turn directional microphones toward the narrator; if your recording equipment and budget allow, you can also use two directional microphones, one for each speaker.
- Lapel microphones can be used, but they tend to produce a noisy recording. You can clip a single microphone to the narrator's clothes; the narrator's voice will be clear and yours slightly muffled but audible. Somewhat better recordings can be obtained with lapel microphones for each participant, joined by a Y-cord adapter.

Recording Media

Because oral histories are destined to become primary historical documents with longtime value, choose the best quality medium you can afford for your original recordings and all subsequent copies.

- For analog recording, 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 not necessary, but use tapes with screw casings (tiny screws holding the tape together, not heat sealed).
- For digital recording, avoid compressed formats such as MP3. The best choices for archival recordings are uncompressed WAV or AIFF audio files in PCM format of CD quality (16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling rate) or better. Record to a medium that allows easy transfer to a computer data storage device. Audio files should be copied to high-quality, write-only CDs or DVDs and to a regularly backed up hard drive. If you plan to deposit recordings in an established archive, be sure to check with the archivist to determine the medium acceptable for digital oral history recordings.

Preserving the recording

After the interview follow these steps to preserve your valuable recording:

- Duplicate each original recording, store the original carefully, and use only the copy when indexing or transcribing the interview. For analog tapes, use the same brand of tapes for both originals and duplicates.
- Protect the media from accidental erasure or overrecording. On cassette tapes, punch out the tabs on the top of the tape case.
- Store recordings in a cool, dry place. Be sure to keep them free of dust.
- Standards of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) 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. 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.

1. Choose a research subject 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 allotted time
- has potential for providing otherwise undocumented information
- has potential for collaborating existing information

2. Focus the research subject.

A **topical** focus highlights a single subject of historical interest, such as:

- an event
- an issue or idea
- an era
- an organization
- a neighborhood
- a skill or occupation

A **biographical** focus concentrates on the life experiences

- of an individual
- of multiple generations of one family
- of selected representatives of a particular group

Some researchers collect **oral traditions**, including legends, folklore, and family stories passed down through the generations.

3. Research the subject.

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 ask informed questions
- To assist in following up answers for details
- To uncover details previously undocumented, contradictory, or forgotten
- To keep the story on track
- To establish rapport with the narrator
- To clarify names of people and places mentioned in an interview

Where?

- Libraries and archives and local historical groups
- Courthouse records: deeds, probate records, map collections
- Religious organizations and educational records
- Private collections, including photographs and mementos
- Newspapers; chronologies of the time
- A pre-interview visit with the interviewee can yield valuable materials

When?

- Before the interview (to prepare)
- During the interview (to clarify and verify)
- After the interview (for validity and accuracy)

From your research, create an outline of topics—not a list of specific questions.

For example, for a project focusing on a specific neighborhood, in an interview with a resident of the neighborhood, the outline might look like this:

The Sandtown Neighborhood:

- how neighborhood was named
- description (boundaries)
- beginnings
- changes over time
- what was there: residences, businesses, schools, churches, cultural sites, 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
- relation to city and surrounding neighborhoods
- holiday celebrations
- safety (health, crime, environmental concerns)
- effects of historical events, natural disasters

Interviewees and interviewers

An ideal oral history interviewee

- has life experience with your topic.
- is able to recall the past in a candid, relaxed way.
- has sufficient physical stamina for the interview process.
- is willing and able to reflect thoughtfully upon the past.
- is willing to be interviewed one-on-one.

An ideal oral history interviewer

- demonstrates respect for interviewees.
- uses best manners, arrives on time, dresses appropriately.
- informs interviewees of the project purposes and how their names were chosen; explains that interviews will be recorded, and tells what will become of the recordings.
- tells interviewees of their rights and privileges, answers their questions, and asks them to sign the release form.
- listens attentively
 - keeps quiet while interviewees speak.
 - does not interrupt interviewees.
 - becomes comfortable with silences in interviews
- assists memory recall
 - by researching the topic beforehand.
 - by asking good questions.

Compose questions from your topic list on the spot, 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 live, wasn't it?
 - But:* Tell me 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 that is, but future history students 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?
- **Ask one question at a time.**
- **Be prepared to get off the topic, then gently bring your 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

1. In contacting persons whom you wish to interview, make clear to them how their names were obtained and explain your interest in them. It is important to establish at the very outset why you feel that their lives and experiences are important. This might mean an explanation of the specific project for which you are conducting the interviews. Rapport is the goal.
2. Because it is often difficult for elderly people to hear well on the telephone, it is often best to try to communicate this introductory material 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.
3. Select a time of day for the interview that is best for the person being interviewed. Morning hours are often better times for elderly persons.

Setting Up at the Location of the Interview

1. Be very familiar with your recording equipment. Practice first so that everything will go smoothly. The less attention you need to focus on your equipment, the more you will be able to give your interviewee.
2. Be flexible enough with your equipment that the interviewee can sit wherever is most comfortable. Bring extension cords if you plan to use A/C current to power your recorder. If you must rely on battery power, have extra batteries. A small, portable battery tester can save an interview.
3. Test the equipment before each use and after arriving for the interview.
4. Interview only one person at a time, if at all possible.
5. Choose as quiet a spot as possible. Be aware of noises that will be picked up by the microphone—chiming clocks, phone, clatter of dishes, et cetera. Try to minimize these noises as much as possible without totally rearranging the environment in which the interview is taking place.
6. Use an external microphone and turn it toward the interviewee. Have the recorder conveniently located near you so that you can easily view recording levels and, when using analog tape, reach the machine to turn over or change tapes.

The Interview Process

1. Give, on tape, a general introduction to the interview including information that serves as an audio label for the recording. For example: "This is [your name]. Today is [month/day/year]. I am interviewing for the [first, second, etc.] time [Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., Dr., et cetera, and 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.
2. Work from your outline of topics rather than a set of formal questions. Allow yourself some flexibility, realizing that each interview is a unique exchange with a unique individual. Be prepared to let the train of memory association run its course, even if it means ignoring your outline to follow new avenues of inquiry.
3. Ask open-ended questions first, waiting to see where they lead.
4. Tailor your follow-up questions to the responses of the interviewee. Pursue in detail. Avoid leading questions that may suggest to the interviewee that you assume he/she will answer a certain way.
5. Listen well. The purpose of the interview is to hear what the interviewee has to say and to stimulate the narrative with understanding comments and intelligent questions.

6. While listening provide feedback by means of silent encouragements. Nod your head to indicate you are listening. Smile when appropriate to the story. Keep your feedback quiet, being aware that your sounds can override the interviewee's voice during the recording. Speak short phrases of understanding (such as, "I see" or "uh-huh") but keep your feedback neutral, indicating neither agreement nor disagreement.
7. Maintain eye contact and a pattern of concentrated listening—these behaviors are vital to the success of your oral history interview.
8. You may wish to jot down a few notes as the interviewee is talking to remind you of subjects you want to come back and 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.
9. Do not feel compelled to interrupt silences. 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 to the story. Silence is an integral, important part of the oral history interview process.
10. Do not challenge accounts that you think may be inaccurate in ways that seem to question the interviewee's memory or honesty. If you feel you must, refer to other accounts or interpretations you are aware of, asking the interviewee for a response or clarification.
11. Give the interviewee a chance to think through difficult subjects.
12. Try to avoid "off the record" information or switching the recorder off and on. Assure the interviewee that sensitive information may be restricted.
13. 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. Both interviewing and being interviewed are tiring, and concentration spans diminish if the interview is too lengthy.
14. Make sure that the interviewee has signed a release for the interview. The interviewer must also sign a release form in most instances.
15. Demonstrate your respect for the interviewee. Show up on time, be polite. Ask permission to move furniture to conduct the interview and return everything back to place before you leave. Send a thank-you note following the interview. Promise only what you actually will/can do, such as returning to visit again or furnishing copies of recordings or transcripts.

Processing the Tapes

1. When recording on analog tape, make sure tabs of cassettes are punched out to guard against accidental erasure.
2. 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. 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.
3. If at all possible, promptly duplicate tape(s); original tape(s) can then be stored, reducing danger of accidental erasure or damage. Upload digital files to a hard drive and create a backup digital file on CD. Original digital recording media, such as compact flash cards, may be erased and reused.
4. Make sure all the necessary forms and significant contextual materials accompany the interview. An administrative checklist of some kind should be used.

1. Preserve the sound recordings.

- Every effort should be made 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.
- To deposit oral history products in archives or to use them in public programs or publications, permission must be granted in writing by 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, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. 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. Original recordings should be identified 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 copies of the original recordings for public use.
- Provide copies of your signed release agreement forms when you deposit interview materials. If you have prepared indexes, transcripts, or abstracts, provide copies of these as well. It can also be helpful to provide a description of your project, including 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.

2. Make the recordings useful.

Indexing. A useful accompaniment to any recording, transcribed or not, is an index or log of the location of subjects on the tape or digital file by minute and second.

Why index?

- Indexing makes information on recordings accessible by subject.
- Indexing helps the researcher identify gaps in information to cover in future interviews.
- Indexing allows the researcher to spell out names and terms mentioned in the interview, which provides helpful 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 for creating a more accurate index by minute and second.
- Digital playback software usually provides a counter 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.

Transcribing. A transcript of a recorded interview represents in print the words and extraneous sounds present in the interview. The recording and its transcript—which is often edited—are primary historical sources. The transcriber’s most important task is to render as close a replica to the actual event as possible.

Advantages:

- The narrator can be given the chance to clarify information and check spellings of proper names.
- Transcripts are easily indexed by name and subject.
- Material is easier to locate and assemble for research use, media presentation, and exhibits.

Disadvantages:

- 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 decide to transcribe:

- Change as little as possible. The narrator’s word choice, including grammar and speech patterns, should be accurately represented.
- Adopt a standard format for manuscripts. The *Chicago Manual of Style* is recommended. Also, adopt one dictionary for use throughout the project.
- Standardize editorial practice and procedure. Verbatim renderings of slang and regional pronunciations are the prerogative of each project, but, if used, should be consistent.
- Revising the first draft transcript is optional. The edited, rough copy is just as informational and useful as a revision, though somewhat harder to read.

3. Analyze the interview.

Like any other primary document, an oral history interview must be explored for validity and accuracy.

Listen to the sound recording 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?

4. Evaluate the recording and the interview.

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?

5. Cite use of oral history sources.

Documentation of unpublished interview material in notes should provide sufficient information to lead the reader to the cited source.

Include the name of the interviewee (as author), the name of the interviewer, a description of the type of interview material cited (tape, digital file, or transcript), the date of the interview, and, if known, the place of the interview.

If the cited material is deposited in an archives or library, indicate where it may be found.

Consult your chosen reference style guide or publisher to determine whether to include interview materials in bibliographic lists.

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

N. 1. Marvin Engelbrecht, interview by Jaclyn Jeffrey, tape recording, April 10, 1997, Prairie Chapel, TX, in author's possession.

B. Engelbrecht, Marvin. Interview by Jaclyn Jeffrey. Tape recording. April 10, 1997, Prairie Chapel, TX. In author's possession.

N. 1. Edna Dreyer, interview by Lois Myers, transcript of tape recording, May 10, 1997, Gatesville, TX, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

B. Dreyer, Edna. Interview by Lois Myers. Transcript of tape recording. May 10, 1997, Gatesville, TX. The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Interview transcripts that have been bound, titled, and deposited in archives may be considered to have limited publication status and may be cited as follows:

N. 1. Charles Wallace Barrow, *Oral Memoirs of Charles Wallace Barrow*, transcript of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Rebecca Sharpless (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1997), 231.

B. Barrow, Charles Wallace. *Oral Memoirs of Charles Wallace Barrow*. Transcript of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Rebecca Sharpless. Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 1997.

If you do nothing more than collect interviews—a large undertaking in itself—you have rendered future generations a valuable service. But the outcome of the interviewing process—recordings and perhaps transcripts—can be packaged in many innovative ways to reach the public. Indeed, some practitioners of oral history argue that public programming not only can educate the public about the past but can be a strong motivating force for the participants in a project and perhaps inspire persons to volunteer as narrators and helpers.

Public Programs

- Video or digital productions or simple Power-point or slide-tape shows incorporating oral history recordings, old photographs, and period music have many uses, for example, as programming for meetings of local civic, cultural, and social organizations.
- Plays, monologues, and dramatic readings based on dialogues from oral history tapes can generate community interest.
- Some oral history projects produce brief programs or vignettes for radio stations and television. For this type of series, oral history recordings must be broadcast quality. The programs usually need some kind of background music and narration to introduce the actual excerpt from the tape.
- Digital recordings and/or transcripts of oral history interviews are used effectively on the World Wide Web.

Publications

- Prepare a transcript of particularly good interviews, add photographs and other material relating to the narrator(s) and his/ her times, and produce a book intended for community wide distribution and sale. While costs of printing vary, using camera-ready copy with minimal graphic work is an inexpensive way to produce such an oral history book.
- Oral history interviews are a natural subject for a weekly column in a hometown newspaper or Sunday supplement magazine.
- Cultural journalism classes produce magazines of community oral history, folklore, and folk craft. This type of team-effort publication has produced very positive public responses in schools and communities across the country. Examples include the Foxfire Magazine series, from Rabun Gap, Georgia, and the Loblolly Project of Gary, Texas.

Concluding Considerations

- 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 a photograph of each interviewee for use later in slide shows, exhibits, or publications. Also, you may want to ask your interviewees for permission to make copies of their personal historical photos or documents that might enhance the project.
- After the interview, a transcript will be most helpful, if not essential, for publication purposes.
- A signed interview agreement form transferring copyright is a must for those considering the creation of public programs. It is common courtesy to tell the narrator that you are planning to use the recording in a production. Because of user restrictions, subject, or quality, some interviews may not lend themselves to this type of public use.

1. Why study ordinary families such as ours?
 - To learn more about ourselves.
 - To fill in the missing gaps in the public record.
 - To understand how the forces of history affected our family and helped give it the shape and substance it has today.
 - To appreciate how the passage of time changed the way our family lives, and at the same time, discover some things that have stayed the same in our family through the years.
 - To preserve for our descendants the values and traditions that characterize our family today so that they can better find meaning and possibilities for the day and age in which they will live.
2. Before beginning an interview about the past, think far into the future to all the possibilities for using and preserving the historical document that will be created. Who will take care of the oral histories you collect? Since most family history also contains stories of community interest, consider placing copies of the interviews in a local archive or library. Because you want the oral history to last and be useful, choose equipment and tapes that will give good, clear recordings.
3. Develop an interview agreement form which acknowledges the informant's legal rights to the information shared and allows the informant to permit or restrict publication and distribution of the information. Yes, this is an important step, even for family history projects.
4. Whenever possible, make your family oral history an intergenerational experience. Invite young family members to contribute questions or do the interviews. Interview the children.
5. The best contributors to family oral histories are able to recall the past in a candid, relaxed way, have sufficient physical stamina for the interview process, and are willing and able to reflect thoughtfully upon their past experiences. Allow the informant time to prepare for the interview and explain to her/him the purpose of the interview and how you expect to use it in the future.
6. Prepare for the interview by researching the background and experience of the interviewee. Prompt memory recall through challenging and perceptive inquiries. Ask broad, open-ended questions. Above all, be a good listener. Allow the interviewee time to think.
7. Introduce every recording with a statement including the date and place of the interview, the full names of the interviewer and interviewee, and the purpose of the project.
8. Ways to organize a family oral history project:
 - Topical: focus on a particular historical event, such as World War II; a special family event, such as a wedding; or a place associated with the family over the years, such as a farm or neighborhood
 - Autobiographical: one person's life history
 - Genealogical: what can the interviewee tell about ancestors?
 - Skills or occupations: descriptions and demonstrations of how things were done in the past
 - Social history: includes ethnic culture, religious practices, gender roles, everyday life, et cetera
 - Folklore: favorite stories, songs, poems; local legends; games and other pastimes
9. When difficult situations arise, tact, persistence, and respect are the best responses. Allow narrators to give their own interpretations of their lives. Avoid burdening the story with your own views and perspectives that may not reflect the personal and historical context of the narrator's life and times.
10. Be creative in finding ways to share the oral histories among family members. Enjoy knowing you have given an irreplaceable gift to your family, present and future.

Print Materials

- Charlton, Thomas L., Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds. *Handbook of Oral History*. AltaMira Press, 2006.
- 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](#).

Provides introductory and advanced instruction in oral history methods in its Workshop of the Web. Includes the following publications online: *The Past Meets the Present: Essays on Oral History*, edited by David Stricklin and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988); and chapters on interviewing and on organizing projects from *Oral History for Texans*, 2d ed., by Thomas L. Charlton (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1985). Available at http://www.baylor.edu/Oral_History/.

[Oral History Association](#).

News on annual conferences, ordering information for publications, and links to oral history centers throughout the world, available at <http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/>.

[Oral History List Serv](#).

Links to centers, methods, projects, state and regional oral history associations, plus searchable archives of the popular discussion list for oral historians worldwide, available at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist>.

Shopes, Linda, "What is Oral History?"

Downloadable manual on interpreting oral history, available from George Mason University, History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web, Making Sense of Evidence series, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>.

Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

"Smithsonian Folklore and Oral History Interviewing Guide," is available from the Educators Resources page at http://www.folklife.si.edu/explore/educator_resources.html.

Texas Historical Commission.

"Fundamentals of Oral History: Texas Preservation Guidelines," downloadable pamphlet on oral history methodology, available at <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/oralhistory/ohdefault.html>.

Texas Oral History Association.

State network of oral historians, with online newsletter and information on Sound Historian, the TOHA journal, annual meetings, and links to regional history sites, available at <http://www.baylor.edu/toha/>.

Museum of London.

"London's Voices: Sharing Oral History," provides downloadable resource for community projects, from conception to creation of online access and production of exhibits, available at <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/londonsvoices>.

Oral History Association Pamphlet Series

The following pamphlet is available online at http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html:

"Oral History Evaluation Guidelines," Revised, 2000.

Adopted by the National Endowment for the Humanities as the standard for conducting oral history..

The following pamphlets are available for nominal cost from the Oral History Association, Dickinson College, PO Box 1773, Carlisle, PA 17013. To ask questions, contact Madelyn Campbell, Executive Secretary, 717/245-1036, or e-mail OHA@Dickinson.edu. Learn more at http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_ps.html.

"Oral History and the Law," by John A. Neuenschwander, 3d ed., 2002.
Appendices contain sample legal forms and copyright forms.

"Oral History Projects in Your Classroom," by Linda P. Wood, 2001.
Includes sample forms, handouts, curriculum suggestions, and discussion questions for classroom oral history projects.

"Using Oral History in Community History Projects," by Laurie Mercier and Madeline Buckendorf, 1992.
Concrete suggestions for oral history in community settings.

"Oral History for the Family Historian: A Basic Guide," by Linda Barnickel, 2006.
Includes sample questions, a sample release form, and other resources for preserving family history.