

TIP SHEET

Collecting Oral Histories (2014)

Collecting Oral Histories

Building a collection of oral history requires careful planning and a significant time commitment. While it may seem that conducting the interviews are most important, careful pre-interview planning and preparation as well as post-interview processing matter just as much.

Before the interview

Before you start interviewing, you'll need to acquire all necessary forms, decided on an interviewing method and recording medium, and considered the time it will take to transcribe and summarize each interview.ⁱ

Consent and Release Forms

Several documents need to accompany oral history interviews. These will state the conditions of access for each interview and provide context that researchers require in order to use them effectively and ethically. Whether organizing an oral history project that will include several interviewees or simply recording a personal history because an opportunity has presented itself, you need to prepare a *release agreement* and *consent form*.

The **release agreement** (or deed of gift) documents the interviewee's willingness to have their interview stored by a repository (such as the museum) and will indicate the interviewee's terms of access, such as having the interview closed to the public until after their death.

This deed also transfers the copyright from the interviewer to the repository so that it can care for the interview and provide other researchers with access to it.

Consult with the repository where the interview is to be stored: they may already have a release agreement for oral history interviews. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan can also help with the creation of such a document. Keep in mind that as soon as recording stops, a copyrighted "document" has been created.ⁱⁱ

A **consent form** will document that the interview was recorded in an ethical manner and that the interviewee agreed to the process with informed consent. Because these are legal papers, it is best to work with an affiliated institutional ethics board to design a consent form, as they may have a particular ethical standard that needs to be followed (such as the federally regulated *Tri Council Policy Statement 2*).ⁱⁱⁱ

Consent forms generally contain a project description, outline what the interviewee is expected to do in their role, and state that they have agreed to be interviewed and have the interview recorded. Consent forms also assure the interviewee that they do not have to discuss anything that they are not comfortable with and that they can discontinue the interview, or their participation, at any time.^{iv}

You must have the interviewee's explicit, documented consent for the interview to be used in any context including publications, media projects, and exhibitions.

Without a detailed consent form and release agreement the interview will not have a life beyond the original researcher/interviewer, because there may also be legal implications and consequences in using the interviews without the interviewee's explicit documented consent.^v

The release agreement is required to transfer the copyright to the repository. Without the transfer of copyright the repository will not be able to grant researchers access to the interviews. This makes it unlikely that the repository will agree to take on the collection.^{vi}

Oral history recordings often include the oral consent of the interviewee near the beginning of each recording. Although this oral consent is a good backup, it rarely includes the amount of detail in the consent form. If interviews are conducted without documented consent, disputes may arise with interviewees (or their family) regarding use. This may result in unusable research and legal disputes about a researcher's right to use or publish the material.

Ethical oral history practice includes ensuring that life stories are always used in accordance with the interviewee's wishes. Consent forms and release agreements are essential papers that ensure researchers can use the interviews ethically and respectfully. In fact, without them, researchers may not be able to use the interviews at all.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire asking interviewees for personal information, such as names of family members, dates of birth, and places they have lived, is extremely useful. This information helps researchers place the interview within the social picture of a larger community or group. A questionnaire also makes an interview go more smoothly: the interviewer will not need to interrupt to confirm details such as the spelling of names or to verify dates.

Since interviewees might not be comfortable with sharing some details, it is important to let them know that they may omit them.

Choosing a Recording Device

Is it better to make an audio or video recording? Video recordings can capture more information about the interview context and about the gestures, appearance, and facial expressions of the interviewee.

However, video recording requires a high level of technical expertise to achieve a high quality recording and requires significantly more money, time, and digital storage space than audio. The set up and operation of video recording devices also requires more than one person present at the interview.

Audio offers several advantages. Audio recording equipment costs much less, the recorders are easy to operate, and WAV audio files are a stable format for high quality audio files that will be readable by computer software well into the future. Audio recorders are also less intrusive in the interview space, take up little room, and require little adjustment.^{vii} For most researchers and institutions – especially where budgets are tight and trained workers are scarce – audio is usually a better choice.

Preparing for an Interview

Before you meet with potential interviewees, complete preliminary research that will help during the interview. Proceeding into the interview with knowledge about the particular time period, location, community, or culture of the interviewee will help to create a productive line of questioning.

Using this research, develop a question guide. Specific questions may be required, and you might want to focus on certain time periods or events. The guide will ensure you don't forget them.

However, do not let the question guide dictate the path of the interview. Always allow the interviewee to control their narrative to share their story.

Interviewees often follow a winding path through their experiences. Let them speak; they will answer your questions organically in their own time. The interviewee's way of telling their story and the conversational aspects of interviewing may render a question guide unnecessary. Refer to it if the interviewee needs prompting or if they cannot think of what to say next.

An interviewer's strict adherence to a question guide will often result in an interview that covers only a narrow range of topics and is of little research value in the long run.^{viii}

Meet with your potential interviewee for a pre-interview. This lets you review the consent form, discuss the goals and intentions of a project, and explain why their story is of interest.

Before the interview, the interviewee must provide informed consent about the process and has had the opportunity to ask any questions. A pre-interview allows you to do this.

The interviewee also needs to discuss with the interviewer what will happen to the recording. Reviewing these aspects allows the interviewee to proceed with confidence. Remember, each interviewee must sign the consent form for every interview session; provide them a copy of this. Remind interviewees that they do not have to discuss uncomfortable topics and may discontinue their participation. Going over these details will help to prevent any misunderstandings or disagreements and establishing a good rapport.^{ix}

Interviewing

Interpersonal dynamics and rapport

How the interviewer and interviewee relate to each other will influence the course of the interview. Race, class, age, gender, worldviews, and education can all influence how the interviewee and interviewer interact and perceive each other.

These factors also influence what the interviewee will be comfortable sharing and what the interviewer will be comfortable asking throughout the interview. An interviewer is there to hear the interviewee's story, understand their experiences, and not to judge. However, this does not mean that interviewers have to continue an interview that they are extremely uncomfortable with.^x

The interviewer's proximity to other community members will also affect the interview. "Insider" interviewers, who belong to the community, may have difficulty eliciting detailed stories from interviewees who suspect the interviewer knows as much as, or more, than they do.

Interviewees may feel more inclined to share their stories with community "outsiders" who may not have as much knowledge. On the other hand, some interviewees are only comfortable sharing their personal experiences with member of their own community, feeling an outsider may not understand.^{xi}

Interviewing Method

An interviewer must show respect for interviewees at all times. While setting up the equipment, explain to interviewees what you are doing. Making small talk during this phase can help put interviewees at ease, and will also prevent them from beginning their story before everything is ready.^{xiii}

Make sure you allow enough time to complete an interview. Generally, an interview lasts 1–2 hours. Do not schedule anything for after the interview, and do not cut the interviewee off or cut the interview short if the interviewee is still engaged.

Be prepared for multiple interview sessions. Memories can continue to surface for the interviewee and the interviewer may think of more things to ask.

As the interviewee and interviewer become more comfortable with each other, the stories shared often become more candid and detailed. When beginning a recording, always state the interviewer's and interviewee's name, the location of recording, the date, and record the interviewee's oral consent to being interviewed and recorded.^{xiv}

While there is no one method of interviewing, some approaches will yield more in depth interviews than others. Full life story interviewing, in which the interviewee shares their complete life story, more frequently results in rich interviews that explore a range of topics and are useful to a variety of researchers well into the future.

Another method of interviewing is question and answer style. In this method, the interviewer asks a question and allows the interviewee to respond fully before asking another. During question and response style interviewing, there are a few key things to keep in mind:

- An oral history interview is not an interrogation. The interviewee does not have to share anything they are not comfortable sharing.
- Ask mainly open-ended questions such as “Can you tell me about attending Sunday School?” or “What kinds of things did you learn about in Sunday School?” rather than closed questions such as “Did you go to Sunday School?” or “What time did Sunday School start?”

A more in depth method is to adopt a two-phase approach. In the first phase, the interviewer asks the interviewee to tell their complete life story and the interviewee can proceed in any way they wish – without any input or interruption from the interviewer.

Afterwards, phase two of this approach proceeds into question and response style interviewing. Using the two-phase approach is advantageous as it offers the same benefits of the question and answer style interview, but with an added dimension – this type of interview documents their life story as they remember it.^{xv}

After the Interview

Once you have finished the interview, transfer the interview to a safe place as soon as possible, labeling it using a consistent naming convention that will be applied to all interviews. With digital files, store a back up copy on a separate hard drive.

Write out notes on the interview context within twenty-four hours. In these notes, document the conditions of the recording, noting aspects such as interruptions, interpersonal dynamics, or if other factors such as a poor location, external noise, or time constraints impacted it.

Next, transcribe the interview. Transcriptions act as a backup document should the original recording ever be lost or destroyed. The transcript also acts as a map to the interview. Transcripts require no additional tools to access, such as a media player or computer hardware and software, and can be browsed through with ease.^{xvi} Electronic copies of transcripts can also be searched, allowing you to more quickly locate passages related to a particular subject.

In addition to the transcript, the transcriber should also write a concise interview summary. This summarizes what the interviewee speaks about during the interview. Whenever possible, write a summary for each interview session.

The minimum that should be done is to summarize the contents of the interview as a whole.^{xvii}

You should also create a short biography of the interviewee that summarizes points of note within their life history, such as where and when they were born, the places they've lived, and notable career and family milestones.^{xviii}

As entry points for interested parties, summaries provide easy access to the contents of the recording. Keep these summaries well organized according to project(s) and interviewee(s). If possible, scan all paper documents into high quality pdf files so that there is an easily accessed digital interview archive.

After the interview is transcribed, send a copy of the recorded interview and a copy of the transcript to the interviewee with a note of thanks for their participation. This ensures that the interviewee has a chance to review the interview(s) and finalize stipulations concerning public access as well as gives something back to the interviewee. These documents are often valued family keepsakes, preserving the life stories and voices of loved ones for future generations.

References

ⁱFor a detailed guide on planning a community oral history projects, including an outline and examples of the forms you will need, see: Mary Kay Quinlan with Nancy McKay and Barbara W. Somer, "Planning a Community Oral History Project," Volume 2 in *Community Oral History Toolkit* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013).

ⁱⁱIn Canada, the copyright belongs to the interviewer, where as in the U.S. it belongs to the interviewee. However, the ethical standard of oral history is to always respect the interviewee's wishes pertaining to the storage and subsequent use of that documents.

ⁱⁱⁱThese guidelines and a tutorial are available online at: <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/>

^{iv}Part of establishing informed consent is establishing a reasonable limit to the right to withdraw. For example, if an exhibition is already opened or a book is already gone to printing, it is too late to effectively edit the interviewee out of the project

^vSee: Quinlan, McKay, and Somer, "Planning a Community Oral History Project," Volume 2 in *Community Oral History Toolkit* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), specifically Chapter 2. While this is a useful guide, keep in mind that this guide was written in the U.S. and a project in Canada must reflect Canadian Law.

^{vi}Although in Canada the interviewer holds copyright over the interviews, it is an ethical standard within oral history practice to ensure the interviews are always stored and used in accordance with the interviewee's stipulations.

^{vii}The Oral History Centre at the University of Winnipeg has several online tutorials including an orientation for the ZoomH2n digital recorder <http://www.oralhistorycentre.ca/tutorials>

^{viii}Valerie Raleigh Yow offers several useful tips on how to conceptualize and create a useful question guide and how it should be used within the interview. See: *Recording Oral Histories: A Guide for Humanities and Social Sciences* 2nd ed (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2005), 68-74.

^{ix}For more on the importance of a preliminary meeting, see Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 92–95.

^xOral Historian Linda Shopes has provided very clear overview of interpersonal dynamics online in “Making Sense of Oral History,” <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/question1.html>; for a more extensive of interpersonal dynamics in a interview, see Chapter 6, “Interpersonal Relations in the Interview,” in Yow’s *Recording Oral History*, 157 –187, and “Building Rapport,” 96–102 in which she also discusses causes and coping with “Diminishing Rapport.”

^{xi}For more on interpersonal dynamics and insider vs. outsider interviewing, see: Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past 3rd ed.*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 139–142. Using an interview checklist of equipment and supplies can be helpful in ensuring you have all you need, every time you conduct an interview.

^{xiii}For a tutorial on microphone placement see The Oral History Centre’s “Tutorials,” at <http://www.oralhistorycentre.ca/tutorials>

^{xiv}According to TCPS 2 guidelines, oral consent is legal valid consent. This can serve as a backup if the interview is ever separated from the interviewee’s consent form.

^{xv}For an in depth guide to community oral history interviewing see: Quinlan, McKay, and Somer, “Interviewing in Community Oral History,” Volume 4 in *Community Oral History Toolkit*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.

^{xvi}For more on transcribing see: Yow *Recording Oral History*, 315–324; Quinlan, McKay and Somer, “Planning a Community Oral History Project,” Volume 5, “After the Interview in Community Oral History,” Chapter 3 and Appendix F, p. 151 for a sample transcript.

^{xvii}Generally in oral history, a complete “interview” refers to all interview sessions conducted with an interviewee. For example, if you interviewed an individual on two separate occasions, these sessions together are considered one interview.

^{xviii}See Quinlan, McKay and Somer, “Planning a Community Oral History Project,” Volume 5, “After the Interview in Community Oral History,” 44–47 in *Community Oral History Toolkit*.

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