

How to Conduct Oral Histories of Your Family Members and Friends

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Knickerbocker Village, New York City. Public Domain

When my high school social studies teacher assigned us an oral history project, I saw an opportunity. I had long been fascinated by my father's stories of growing up near Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in Knickerbocker Village on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Dad had even gone to summer camp with the Rosenberg children.

So I knew right away that I wanted to interview my grandparents' surviving friends, all of whom had been politically active in leftist circles, to learn about the McCarthy era.

Looking back with the hindsight of having conducted more than one hundred interviews as a professional historian, I'm slightly chagrined by how my how my 11th-grade self violated the best practices of oral history: I knew nothing about release forms. My father interrupted the interviewees to ask leading questions. Most frustratingly, I

conducted a group interview which made deciphering who said what later very difficult.

And yet, more than two decades later, I use these recordings in my class on the history of Cold War America. Those interviews fired my passion for the past and shaped my belief that telling stories is central to understanding social change.

Passing down stories from generation to generation is the oldest form of preserving history in human existence, but interest in oral history has grown with technology. From twentieth-century reel-to-reel machines and tape recorders to today's digital audio and video recorders, improving technology has made collecting and preserving history very easy.

Recent initiatives such as the [StoryCorps](#) project have also inspired thousands of people to record the histories of everyday Americans.



Story Corps Poster, Courtesy Story Corps.

Unlike some forms of historical research, conducting oral history interviews requires little formal training to get started. But thinking critically about how to approach an oral history project is key if you want to create a record that will have meaning for future generations.

Interviewing anyone---a parent or grandparent, that fascinating friend or co-worker, or that neighbor with all the spellbinding stories---requires advance planning. You may want to conduct a full life history, or perhaps you're interested in a more specific set of stories: an uncle's military service in the Vietnam War, a minister's involvement in the civil rights movement, an aunt's lifelong passion for quilting, a grandmother's pioneering



WW II Era Soldiers, Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

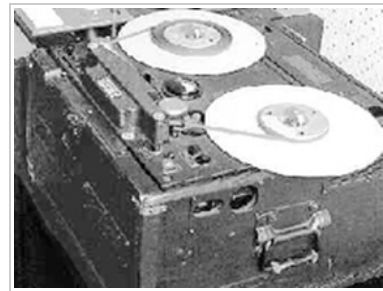
career in science when few women worked in the field. Whatever your goals, whomever you're interviewing, there are some key points to consider in advance:

Getting Ready...

Think about what you want to learn, and sketch out a list of topics you want to cover. This should be a guide from which you can improvise as the interview unfolds, not a formal questionnaire of items to be ticked off.

Schedule your interview at your narrator's convenience, in a quiet place where your interviewee will be comfortable talking and where the ambient noise will not drown out the interview on the audio recording. A quiet background is especially important if you plan to transcribe your interview, or to hire someone to do so for you. Few things are more exasperating than struggling to decipher a word obscured by loud extraneous conversations, passing trucks, or other background noise picked up by your microphone.

Research what you can about your interviewee ahead of time. Read books or newspaper articles about the topic. Search out photographs that may be used as a prod to memory. Scour the web for information (being careful, of course, to assess the quality of the available research). Ask any friends or acquaintances you have in common with the interviewee for information. Keep in mind that pieces of background information can be a spur to conversation (e.g., "My mother said that you went to Woodstock. What was that like for you?")



Reel to Reel Recorder from the 1930's. Public Domain.

Finally, know your equipment! Make sure you're familiar with how to use your recording or video equipment beforehand. Be especially sure that you understand recording varying sound levels. Lastly, always bring extra batteries!

Planning Ahead...



Congressmen at Oral History Project, Courtesy of GAHM.

Before you step into an interview, think about what you will do with the interview after you're done. There's no one right answer as to how to use your interview. Your or your interviewee may wish to keep it private, to share it only with family or friends, to publish it online, to create a podcast series or even to use it to develop a piece of theater.

There are countless ways oral histories are used and knowing how you intend to use the interview ahead of time can help shape the questions you ask.

A good interview is based on trust, and you should avoid surprising your interviewee with an unexpected use of their stories. Think about what will happen to the interview before you conduct it, so you can discuss your intentions, however specific or vague, with your interviewee.

If an interviewee tells you that a part of your conversation is off the record, honor their request.

If you plan to make any part of the interview, in print or digital form, public or to archive the interview in a library, you and your interviewee should sign a release form that covers how the interview can and cannot be used. Standard examples of release forms can be found at the [Library of Congress' American Folklore Center](#).

Listen Actively, Ask Judiciously...

Active listening is central to any interview.

Resist the urge to share your own experiences or to interrupt or correct your interviewer. If your interviewee asks for your stories, offer answers brief enough to demonstrate your empathy and understanding of the topic but return to your interviewee's story as soon as swiftly and politely as possible.

Always remember, this is an interview, not a conversation.

Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

Encourage your interviewee to share specific experiences or those of people close to them, and ask follow-up questions that solicit such stories (e.g., "How did your family experience the civil rights movement?" "Where were you on September 11th?" "What musical bands most influenced or inspired you?").

Even though you're recording the interview, always make sure to jot down notes so that you will remember to follow up on anything interesting that comes up.



Oral History Interview, Courtesy Southern Oral History Program.

Don't worry about silences in the interview. Allowing your interviewee time to think about his or her answers is crucial. This is especially important when covering difficult topics; think in advance about how to ask questions about potentially painful questions in a sensitive manner, give your interviewee the time to formulate his or her responses, and respect his or her request if they refuse to discuss the topic. You may well not agree with your interviewee on all matters, but keep any disagreements polite and respectful. Your task as an oral historian is to document the experiences of your interviewee, and how they came to their opinions, not to engage in debate nor try to convince them of your own point of view.

Pay attention to your interviewee's non-verbal cues – facial expressions, squirming, checking the time. Be sensitive to any possible discomfort with audio or video recording of their voices and images.

Beyond these starting points, there are many online resources worth consulting. Perhaps the two most comprehensive collections of resources are hosted by the [Oral History Association](#) and the [Baylor Institute for Oral History](#), including its [Introduction to Oral History](#), which is available for free download.

From these and many other sites, you can learn much more about the methods, technologies, ethical considerations, and uses of oral history.

Finally...

Whether you want to interview just one or two family members or launch a larger project in your community, the best way to develop skills as an oral historian is through practice, practice, practice.



Immigrants entering at Ellis Island, 1908 Public Domain

Conduct practice interviews and listen to/watch your recordings. See what solicited detailed stories and what needs adjustment for the next time.

Oral history may not require extensive training, but it does require that you, the interviewer, be prepared and that you pay close attention to the interviewee as he or she is speaking.

Conducting an oral history can be incredibly rewarding but be aware that it may also be time consuming. You might, for example, need to conduct an interview with a single individual over several sessions.

Oral history often reveals invaluable insights into the history of our families, our communities, and our nation. These stories provide personal perspectives often left out of the written record, and help us document the human impact of larger political, social, and cultural

changes. As such, oral history is an essential tool for any genealogist, community historian, or anyone else working to preserve the stories of everyday people.

Ian Lekus has taught at Harvard, Tufts, Duke, and several other universities, including oral history assignments in his classes whenever possible. In North Carolina, he founded the Rainbow Triangle Oral History project and taught a seminar at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies on recording and preserving the history of Raleigh-Durham's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Now living in Massachusetts, he works with The History Project, Boston's community LGBT history project to ensure that the voices of the past continue to be heard.



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