Story Preservation Initiative
Oral History Guide

Oral History Field Guide, Students Grades 7 – 12

The material outlined in this document is appropriate for written-word and audio & video-based projects.

As defined by the Oral History Association, Oral History is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.

As you develop your oral histories, you will make critical choices, take charge of your learning, and gain a set of valuable and transferable skills necessary to create authentic and ethical relationships with those you interview.

It is important to note that this guide is not intended to be a one-size-fits-all resource. Modify it as needed to fit your specific project.

PLANNING YOUR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Answering the questions outlined below is the first step in defining and, ultimately, carrying out research. Spelling out as many of the details of a project in advance of implementation is a necessary first step.

As you become more deeply immersed in what will indeed become a highly interpersonal and collaborative project, you may need to modify some of your initial planning-phase answers and/or early assumptions.

1. Determine Your Research Question
   As briefly as possible, define what you are seeking to understand better.

2. What is the purpose or intention behind your research topic & questions?

3. What will your main questions focus on?

4. Who will your participants be?

5. Define the number of people you would like to interview. Why?

6. Determine the timeframe you believe necessary to conduct research and interviews.

7. Find out if similar research has already been conducted.

8. If so, explain why it makes sense to conduct additional research. What is it that you can add to the existing body of work?

9. If similar research exists, review any published and/or unpublished material about your research topic.

10. Familiarize yourself with the Oral History Association's Code of Ethics found at https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics/.

11. Who will take the lead on this project? What will your research team look like?

12. Who needs to be involved? Who has a stake in your research project? Research potential initial contact(s) and determine means of introduction:
    Once this is done, identify and research subsequent contact(s).

12. How will you recruit participants? Posters?
    Fliers? Via email and social media invites? Through word-of-mouth/social networks? Through community organizations?

13. Define Method and Medium
    Interviews / Audio and / or video / Field notes
    Participatory Research Methods (e.g., Photovoice)

14. What supplies and/or equipment will be needed? List.

15. What products will result from the project?

16. How will they be preserved?

17. How will the final product be shared?
    Display type (in-person, virtual, digital)?

18. Define the target audience(s)?

19. Develop a budget and identify funding sources
    Create a detailed estimate of everything needed to complete the project, i.e., rental equipment, transportation, supplies, postage and shipping expenses, etc. Identify funding sources.

20. How will you evaluate the success/impact of your project?

MAKING INITIAL CONTACT

Often initial contacts and/or potential contributors to the project are known to the individual conducting research or to those in his / her / their sphere.

If they are not, depending upon the subject matter of the research, consideration should be given to contacting local:
- Chambers of Commerce
- Town Clerks and Administrators
- Advocacy Groups & Non-Profit Organizations
- K-12 School Administrators
- Colleges and Universities
- Hospital Administrators

You should then determine the best means of introduction, i.e., letter, email, telephone, and how to best craft the communication.

Trust and respect between you and/or your team and the interviewee/community members is essential, as is complete transparency in the process. During the planning stages of your project, it is helpful to set up non-recorded introductory meetings with potential participants and community partners. Use these meetings to get an initial sense of questions, needs, challenges, and new ideas for your project.

ADVANCE PREP FOR INTERVIEWS / OBTAINING PERMISSIONS

1. Make a list of all participants and obtain permission to interview/record before the recording date. A Standard SPI Release Form is included with this document. Modify as necessary.

2. If you have determined that your work will be field note-based, you may want to consider recording the conversation for backup and "note-taking purposes."

3. Accurately record and make a log of all visual material shared by the participant.

4. Set a location, date, and time for recording. Make sure that it is a location conducive to recording, if doing so, i.e., be aware of any ambient noise, construction, traffic, etc., as well as visual distractions if videotaping. If you are using equipment, inform the participant that you will need to arrive early to set it up.

5. Confirm recording location/date with the participant(s) at least two days before the event.

6. If using equipment, do a dry run and check it. Ensure you have everything you need for a successful recording/photo session, i.e., extension cords, cables, lighting, three-to-two prong grounding adapters, pens, paper, memory cards, etc.

7. Recheck your equipment.

8. Arrive no less than 30 minutes before the scheduled recording time to set up and test equipment.

INTERVIEWING

1. Determine if your interview will take place in person or remotely.

2. At the start of the recording, make a "slate" that affixes the date and place of the recording, the names of the researcher and participant, and the interview topic.

3. Make the format of the interview clear to the participant(s).

4. Don't talk over / interrupt the participant(s) when answering a question or reflecting on the topic. Use non-verbal communication when possible.

5. Respect silence. It encourages reflection and often leads to more complete and often surprising answers to interviewer questions.

6. When appropriate, ask the participant(s) to elaborate on a point.

7. If something is unclear, ask the interviewee to restate.

8. It is suggested that interviews should not run more than 90 minutes. If the participant(s) requires additional time to finish their story, set another recording date, if possible.

9. Save the recording in multiple formats and locations, i.e., on a memory card, uploaded to a computer hard drive, and, if appropriate, shared with an off-site third-party team member.

EDITING

If you choose to edit the raw audio/video, you must keep multiple copies of the original, unedited material.

Permissible edits include:
- Cutting audio that is extraneous to the subject matter and focus of the research
- Long pauses, stumbling over a word, frequent use of sentence "fillers" such as ahhh and ummm.
- Restructuring the material to flow correctly by content or chronology.

TRANSCRIBING

Most, but not all, oral historians adhere to the belief that transcriptions are a valuable tool. They help researchers find the information contained in the recording more efficiently and offer a faster understanding of the content as a whole vs. listening or viewing the recording. Others disagree, feeling that a transcription can distort meaning, i.e., sarcasm will go unnoticed, as might sorrow or anger often expressed by inflection.

The latter think that researchers should listen to the recording themselves and determine what the interviewee is communicating.

Attached: Standard Release Form

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPH RELEASE FORM

Project name/ number:_____

Date: _____

Interviewer:_____

Name of person(s) interviewed:_____

Address:_____

Telephone number:_____

Date of birth:_____

By signing the form below, you give your permission for Story Preservation Initiative™ to edit, copy, reproduce, copyright, publish, exhibit, distribute, license, display and otherwise utilize this recording and any photographs taken at the time of the interview or made available by you in any way, using all media now known or hereafter devised.

I agree to the uses of these materials described above, except for any restrictions, noted below.

Name (please print)_____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Restriction description: _____