

# Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History

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## I. Introduction

- [Just Do It](#)
- [What is Oral History?](#)
- [Sequence for Oral History Research](#)

## II. Guidelines and Suggestions

- [Oral History Reminder List](#)
- [How Do I Ask the Questions?](#)

## III. Paperwork

- [Interviewer's Field Notes](#)
- [Life History Forms](#)
- [Release Forms](#)
- [Tracking Your Progress](#)

## IV. Issues in Oral History Research

- [How Accurate Is This Oral history?](#)
- [Note of Encouragement](#)
- [Pinpointing Problems in Your Interview](#)
- [Questions for Thinking About Your Interview](#)

## V. Bibliography

- [Books to Get You Started in Oral History](#)
- [Books About Oral History and Teaching](#)
- [Books for More Details and Ideas About Oral History](#)
- [Audiovisual Sources](#)

## VI. Oral History Links

[top of page](#)

# I. Introduction

- [Just Do It](#)
- [What is Oral History?](#)
- [Sequence For Oral History Research](#)

## Just Do It

We all have stories to tell, stories we have lived from the inside out. We give our experiences an order. We organize the memories of our lives into stories.

Oral history listens to these stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Historians have finally recognized that the everyday memories of everyday people, not just the rich and famous, have historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories, those stories, then one day they will disappear forever.

Your stories and the stories of the people around you are unique, valuable treasures for your family and your community. You and your family members can preserve unwritten family history using oral history techniques. Likewise you and your community can discover and preserve unwritten history large and small. Oral history is so flexible that people of all ages can adapt the techniques of asking and listening to create and learn about history and historical narratives.

As a door into the world of oral history, these pages give basic suggestions for collecting and preserving the valuable oral treasures around you, to enrich you and future generations.

Many people become concerned about "doing it right," yet they also recognize that a voice on tape is better than nothing at all. So they try just a simple interview, just talking to someone for an hour. Ten years later such people are thankful that they made the effort, and those who did not ...well, they have regrets.

I hope that these pages will encourage you to take the time

and make the effort! GOOD LUCK!

## What Is Oral History?

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not **folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor**. **Oral historians** attempt to **verify** their findings, **analyze** them, and place them in an accurate **historical context**. Oral historians are also concerned with **storage** of their findings for use by later scholars.

In oral history projects, an interviewee recalls an event for an interviewer who records the recollections and creates a historical record.

**event ► interviewee ► interviewer ► historical record**

Oral history depends upon human memory and the spoken word. The means of collection can vary from taking notes by hand to elaborate electronic aural and video recordings.

The human life span puts boundaries on the subject matter that we collect with oral history. We can only go back one lifetime, so our limits move forward in time with each generation. This leads to the Oral Historian's Anxiety Syndrome, that panicky realization that irretrievable information is slipping away from us with every moment.

Oral history, well done, gives one a sense of accomplishment. Collecting oral history, we have a sense of catching and holding something valuable from the receding tide of the past.

## Sequence for Oral History Research

1. Formulate a central question or issue.
2. Plan the project. Consider such things as end products, budget, publicity, evaluation, personnel, equipment, and time frames.
3. Conduct background research.
4. Interview.
5. Process interviews.

6. Evaluate research and interviews and cycle back to step 1 or go on to step 7.
7. Organize and present results.
8. Store materials archivally.

**Now read on for some guidelines and suggestions. You can make your project complicated or you can make it simple. Pick and choose. Use only what you need to reach your project goals.**

[top of page](#)

## II. Guidelines and Suggestions

- [Oral History Reminder List](#)
- [How Do I Ask the Questions?](#)

### Oral History Reminder List

1. Decide your research goals and determine if oral history will help you reach them. You may find that your goals change. Do, however, focus.
2. Conduct preliminary research using non-oral sources.
3. Define your population sample. How will you select the people you will interview? Contact potential interviewees, explain your project, and ask for help.
4. Assemble your equipment to fit your purposes. Research and choose the kind of recording that you need to produce and then choose your equipment. For example, does it need to be broadcast quality? Does it need a long life? What can you afford?
5. Use an external microphone for better sound quality. This also applies to video.
6. Test your equipment beforehand and get to know how it works under various conditions. Practice using your equipment before you go to the real interview.
7. If audio cassette taping, use sixty-minute tapes that screw together.
8. Compile a list of topics or questions.
9. Practice interviewing.
10. Make a personalized checklist of things you must remember to do before, during, and after the interview.
11. Verify your appointment a day or two before the interview.
12. On the day of the interview, give yourself extra time to get there.
13. Interview and record in a quiet place. When setting up, listen for a

moment. Make adjustments, such as stopping the pendulum on the tick-tock clock, putting out the dog that's chewing noisily on the recorder cord, and closing the door on the noisy traffic.

14. Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it. This is not a private conversation.
15. Start each recording with a statement of who, what, when, and where you are interviewing.
16. Listen actively and intently.
17. Speak one at a time.
18. Allow silence. Give the interviewee time to think. Silence will work for you.
19. Ask one question at a time.
20. Follow up your current question thoroughly before moving to the next.
21. Usually ask questions open enough to get "essay" answers unless you are looking for specific short-answer "facts."
22. Start with less probing questions.
23. Ask more probing questions later in the interview.
24. Wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.
25. Be aware of and sensitive to the psychological forces at work during the interview.
26. Limit interviews to about one to two hours in length, depending on the fatigue levels of you and your interviewee.
27. In general, don't count on photos to structure your interview, but you can use them as initial prompts. Carry large envelopes for borrowed and labeled artifacts such as photos.
28. Label and number all recordings immediately.
29. Have the interviewee sign the release form before you leave or send a transcript to the interviewee for correction before the release form is signed.
30. After the interview, make field notes about the interview.
31. Write a thank-you note.
32. Have a system to label and file everything. Do it.
33. Copy borrowed photos immediately and return the originals. Handle all photos by the edges and transport them protected by stiff cardboard in envelopes. Make photocopies for an interim record.
34. Copy each interview tape. Store the original in a separate place and use only the duplicate.
35. Transcribe or index the recordings. Assign accession numbers to recordings and transcripts. Make copies of all work. Store separately.
36. Analyze the interview. Verify facts. Compare your results with your

research design. Did you get what you need? What further questions do the interview results suggest? What improvements in your method do the interview results suggest?

37. Go back for another interview if necessary.
38. If you decide to, give the interviewee a copy of the recording or transcript. Ask for transcript corrections and a release form.
39. Make provisions for long-term storage.

## How do I ask the questions?

1. In general, have a list of topics in mind, not specific questions, word-for-word, and not a specific sequence. You may, however, want to have a start-up list of questions to get your interviewee and yourself comfortable before you change to your topic list.
2. Do plan the topic and form of your first substantial question after the "settling down" phase. Ask a question that will prompt a long answer and "get the subject going."
3. Ask easy questions first, such as brief biographical queries. Ask very personal or emotionally demanding questions after a rapport has developed. End as you began, not with bombshells, but gently with lighter questions.
4. Ask questions one at a time.
5. Allow silence to work for you. Wait.
6. Be a good listener, using body language such as looking at the interviewee, nodding, and smiling to encourage and give the message, "I am interested."
7. If necessary, use verbal encouragement such as "This is wonderful information!" or "How interesting!" Be careful, however, not to pepper the interview with verbal encouragement such as "uh-huh," said at the same time that the interviewee is speaking.
8. Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and you need to know more. Or you might say, "I don't understand. Could you explain that in more detail?"
9. Ask for definitions and explanations of words that the interviewee uses and that have critical meaning for the interview. For example, ask a horseman what he means by the *shaft* of the buggy. How was it used? What was its purpose?
10. Rephrase and re-ask an important question several times, if you must, to get the full amount of information the interviewee knows.
11. Unless you want one-word answers, phrase your questions so that they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Don't ask, "Were you a farmer on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask instead, "What was it like farming up on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask "essay"

questions that prompt long answers whenever you can. Find out not only what the person did, but also what she thought and felt about what she did.

12. Ask follow-up questions and then ask some more.
13. Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee, even if the topics are not on your interview guide sheet.

[top of page](#)

### III. Paperwork

- [Interviewer's Field Notes](#)
- [Life History Forms](#)
- [Release Forms](#)
- [Tracking Your Progress](#)

#### Interviewer's Field Notes

Very soon after the interview, the interviewer should sit down and make notes in an organized fashion, before time dulls the details. The notes are something like the anthropologist's field notes. The interviewer's notes tell who, what, when, and where. They add anything that will help the transcriber or future scholars to understand the interview. If the project is in a school setting, teachers or students need to create a form to fit their particular projects' needs and goals, as well as the students' abilities.

#### Life History Forms

The life history form can contain very little or a great deal, depending on the project's purposes. Personal data is very useful and particularly recommended if the interview is a family history project or if interviews are to be archived for future use. The form needs to contain information that helps scholars understand, use, and interpret the interview. Aside from interviewee's name, address, telephone number, birthdate, and birthplace, the form might ask for the names, birth dates, and dates of death for parents, siblings, spouses, and children. It could ask for places lived in as well as for education and work histories. It could ask for listings of special

skills and for memberships in organizations.

## Release Forms

Release forms can become rather full of legal-sounding language, but most oral historians manage to find a form with which they are comfortable. Release forms make it clear to the interviewee, without question, how the interviews will be used, minimizing the chances for misunderstanding. In addition to offering some protection, release forms also remind the oral historian that the interviewee grants us the privilege of using something that does not belong to us. There are many versions of releases possible. For instance, you could check Ives, *The Tape-recorded Interview*, Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law*, or Sitton et al., *Oral History*, for some tried and true examples. A release usually includes the interviewee's name and signature, the interviewer's name, the date, a statement of permission to use the interview, the name of the person or institution receiving the permission, and the purposes to which the interview will be put. It is recommended that school projects clear release forms with the school's legal counsel.

Especially if the interviews are to be archived for future use, the interviewers also need to sign releases. If the project is in a school, since students are likely to be underage, parents or guardians should sign.



## Tracking Your Progress

[Interview](#)

[Tracking Form](#)

Depending on the project goals and archival plans, the paperwork can get quite involved or it can stay simple.

A simple system to keep track of the stage of each interview is to keep a file for each interviewee. All paperwork and copies of the recordings are kept there. A sequence of steps to track progress is listed on the front of the file and checked off as steps are completed.

[top of page](#)

## IV. Issues in Oral History Research

- [How Accurate Is This Oral history?](#)
- [Note of Encouragement](#)
- [Pinpointing Problems in Your Interview](#)
- [Questions for Thinking About Your Interview](#)

### How Accurate Is This Oral History?

Once a project is under way, we need to assess and ensure the accuracy of the data gathered. We have to face the question: how accurate is this oral history? At the very least, we must be aware of the limitations of oral history in order not to mislead ourselves into believing that oral history automatically yields accurate renditions of past events.

Because oral history depends upon living people as sources, we have limits; we can go back one lifetime. Because oral history uses spoken, not written sources, the allowable evidence expands. Even in the absence of written documentation, groups such as women, minorities, and the not-famous have been able to record their own histories and the histories of those they consider important using oral history. History is no longer limited to the powerful, famous, and rich, and literate. Now history can give us a much more inclusive, and, one hopes, accurate picture of the past.

Used to accurately record oral narratives, the inexpensive

portable tape recorder helped democratize the gathering of history. Interestingly, while technology in the form of the tape recorder is responsible in part for the spread of oral history techniques, technology is also to blame in part for the need for oral history. Rather than write letters, for instance, people travel to see each other or they make telephone calls that dissolve into air. Now electronic mail via computers may make written records even more scarce.

Trained to depend on written records, traditional historians have been known to shudder in horror at the potential problems and inherent weaknesses of oral history. What of the failings of human memory? What of the human tendency to impose a narrative structure on events that may not be closely connected? What of the self-serving motives of the story teller? What of the power relationships between interviewer and interviewee that affect what and how events are reported? What of the differences between the spoken and written word? What of the inaccuracies that creep into meaning when trying to put a conversation onto paper?

Well, many of the same problems arise in using written records. Written sources can carry personal or social biases. Written sources occur within a social context. As an example, newspaper accounts contemporary with events often suffer from historical inaccuracy because of the ideological slants of reporters and editorial staff, because of the availability of sources, because of advertisers' interests, and because of the need to sell interesting stories that the public wants to buy. Yet these same newspaper accounts can be used as historical evidence of people's attitudes and interpretations. Even historical analysis published by professional historians intent on upholding the best standards in their field still falls short of that elusive goal, a complete and totally objective account of events.

How about films and photographs? Can the camera remain objective and give us an accurate view of events? No. Even visual media give only fragments. Furthermore, the photographer chooses to record a portion of an event, and her point of view suggests an interpretation. The equipment, social context, and intent of the photographer affect what photographs will be recorded, what will be printed, and how it

will be presented to viewers.

In oral history, in addition to asking all of the historian's usual questions about accuracy, one must also ask questions about putting spoken words on paper. At first one tends to assume that a transcription of a tape-recorded interview of an eyewitness would be a very accurate record of an event. As historians we must examine that assumption.

We all know how hard it is to find the right words for our thoughts. In an interview, with a stranger listening and a tape recorder running, how closely can the actual words of the interviewee approximate the thoughts that the interviewee wants to communicate? We all know the tricks that memory plays on us, even just trying to recall what happened last week. In recalling memories from a long-ago event, how closely do the memories of the narrator approximate a true rendering of the actual experience?

Our problem becomes more complicated when we try to write down what has been said. People don't always speak in complete sentences. They repeat themselves and leave things out. They talk in circles and tell fragments of the same story out of chronological sequence. They mumble incoherently and use wrong names. When they speak, they don't use punctuation. How is the transcriber to put spoken words onto paper with a semblance of written coherence without changing the narrator's meaning?

Finally, the transcript does not carry inflections of voice and body language. Therefore the reader of the transcript does not have all of the information that the interviewer had originally. In addition, readers and listeners will add their own interpretations in trying to understand what the narrator said.

We come to realize, then, that every person, every step, removes one farther from the event as it happened.

Questions of accuracy are not unique to oral history. Problems of accuracy hound us no matter what sources of historical data we use. If we understand the characteristics of our sources, however, we have a better chance of controlling

the process to minimize inaccuracies. As a methodological balance to oral history, one can enlist other sources of data such as related artifacts, written documentation, and other interviews. A single interview by itself can pose frustrating questions, while an interview in a context of other data can clarify details and create a sense of the whole.

Therefore, the users of oral history, aware of the characteristics of their medium, may proceed cautiously without apology. Oral history has come of age and now commands a receptive, respectful audience.

## **Note of Encouragement**

At this point, some people feel overwhelmed. Be assured! As long as you are aware of the pitfalls, you will be fine. Proceed step-by-step, discover the problems, and work through to the solutions. At the end of an oral history project you will understand the oral historian's challenges from the inside-out, and you will forever after look at historical documents of any kind with a wider eye. When in doubt, keep it simple. Part of the process is enjoyment and part of the adventure is learning from mistakes.

## **Pinpointing Problems in Your Interview**

### **The interviewee...**

1. is afraid of the recording equipment.
2. doesn't believe she has anything of value to tell you, and doesn't understand why you would want to interview her.
3. doesn't remember.
4. has a series of stock stories that he has developed and is used to telling, almost according to a script. This interviewee is not about to let you deviate from his script.
5. is not used to telling her or his story publicly and needs much coaxing and reinforcement. This person needs questions to get warmed up and more questions to keep going.
6. does not feel comfortable talking to you about the topics you have in mind. For instance, a modest woman

might not feel comfortable talking to a male about birth experiences.

7. meanders through the story, and not according to the beginning-middle-end model that you have in your mind. The memories have a form other than linear time and you have to figure out how to allow the narrator to tell these memories in a way that makes sense to both teller and listener.
8. is afraid to give private or personal information and thus gives you information that will preserve his or her public "mask."
9. prefers or is used to building and sharing a story with others in a group rather than telling a story solo.

### **The interviewer...**

1. is too nervous to think calmly and clearly about what to say next.
2. is disorganized.
3. is not really listening to what the interviewee is trying to say.
4. has expectations about what she or he wants to hear and is closed to other avenues of inquiry.
5. appears critical to the interviewee.
6. is from a different class or ethnic group than the interviewee and so is behaving and speaking in a socioeconomic "foreign language."

### **The sound...**

1. is too faint.
2. contains noise that overrides or confuses the voices.
3. has more than one person speaking at once.
4. is distorted.

## **Questions For Thinking About Your Interview**

1. How did I choose the person to be interviewed? Were the people I interviewed the right ones for my research?
2. How did I prepare for the interview? Did I prepare enough?
3. What did I use for equipment? Did it work satisfactorily? What changes should I make?

4. What kinds of questions did I ask? What kinds of questions worked well? Not so well?
5. Where did I conduct the interview? What in the environment affected my interview? How?
6. Did my subject want to talk? How did I encourage my subject to talk? What "masks" did my subject wear? Did my subject drop the masks?
7. When did I tell my subject the purpose of the interview and how it would be used? Did my plans to use the interview seem to matter to the subject?
8. How accurate were my subject's memories?
9. How accurate was my subject's reporting of her memories? How do I know? Does it matter?
10. Who controlled the interview? How?
11. How did I feel while interviewing?
12. How did my subject feel while being interviewed?
13. Would it be useful and possible to return for another interview?
14. How do these results affect my original goals? Do I need to adjust my research design?
15. When I transcribe, will I write exactly what was said or will I begin light editing right from the start? How will I decide what to write and what not to write?
16. How can I ensure that the transcription is accurate? How can I ensure that the transcription reports what the subject wanted to say?
17. Who owns the interview and has the right to decide how the completed interview and transcription will be used?
18. Next time, what would I do the same? What would I do differently?

[top of page](#)

## V. Bibliography

- [Books to Get You Started in Oral History](#)
- [Books About Oral History and Teaching](#)
- [Books for More Details and Ideas About Oral History](#)
- [Audiovisual Sources](#)

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  - Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
  - Vasina, Jan. *Oral Tradition*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965.

Most of the above sources contain bibliographies. There are also many, many excellent books that use oral history interviews; the bibliographies in the above books offer some titles, and your librarian can probably suggest others.

## Audiovisual Sources

- Ives, Sandy. *An Oral Historian's Work*. Northeast Archives. VHS. 33 minutes. Color. Distributed by Northeast Historic Film, P.O. Box 900, Bucksport, ME 04416.

[top of page](#)

## VI. Oral History Links

American Association for State and Local History  
1717 Church Street  
Nashville, TN 37203-2991  
[www.aaslh.org/publicat.htm](http://www.aaslh.org/publicat.htm)

American Folklife Center  
Library of Congress  
101 Independence Ave., SE  
Washington, DC 20540  
[lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/](http://lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/)

American Folklore Society  
4350N. Fairfax Drive  
Suite 640  
Arlington, VA 22203  
[afsnet.org/index.html](http://afsnet.org/index.html)

International Oral History Association  
Alexander Von Plato, Secretary  
Fernuniversitat Hagen  
Leibigstr. 11  
D-58511 Ludenscheid  
Germany  
[www.filo.uba.ar/Institutos/ravigni/historal/loha.htm](http://www.filo.uba.ar/Institutos/ravigni/historal/loha.htm)

Oral History Association  
Dickinson College  
PO Box 1773  
Carlisle, PA 17013  
[www.baylor.edu/~OHA/Othersites.html](http://www.baylor.edu/~OHA/Othersites.html)

[top of page](#)

<a href="#">home</a>	<a href="#">your interests</a>	<a href="#">who was Martha?</a>	<a href="#">Martha's diary</a>	<a href="#">book</a>	<a href="#">film</a>	<a href="#">doing history</a>	<a href="#">archive</a>	<a href="#">on your own</a>
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