

Doing Oral History



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What We'll Cover Today:

- What is oral history and why use it
- Oral history project development
- Composing interview questions
- Interview ethics, skills, and strategies
- Post-interview considerations

What Is Oral History?

- It's About History
- It's Oral
- It's a Dialogue
- It's Recorded

When to Use Oral History

- Eyewitnesses or People with Expert Information
- The Written Record is Unreliable or Incomplete
- No Written Record Exists
- To Move Beyond “Official” History

Before the Interview

- What You Want to Learn
- What Product(s) to be Made
- What Primary & Secondary Sources
- Who are Potential Interviewees
- Develop a List of Questions/Topics
- Address Ethics and Equipment

Equipment Choices

- Project Goals & Costs
- Audio or Video
- Digital Considerations
- Transcription Equipment/Software
- L.O.C.K.S.S.

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Ethics and Legalities

- Ethical Practice
- Informed Consent
- Human Subjects Committees
- Release Form (Copyright)

Interview Question Basics

- Group questions logically
- Make a frame, not a straitjacket
- Ask open-ended, concrete questions
- Ask simple questions
- Avoid leading questions

Kinds of Interview Questions

- “Who, what, when, where, why, how”
- Time-line questions
- Role-based questions
- Values, beliefs, opinions
- Two-sentence format questions
- Follow-up questions

Oral History Interviewing

“Each has his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart, and his friends can only read the title.”

Virginia Woolfe

Interview Preparation

- Send list of questions or topics
- One on one vs. group interviews
- Choosing the interview setting
- Review project with the interviewee
- Do paperwork & check equipment

During the Interview

- Focus on the interviewee
- Set the tone and pace
- Don't interrupt a response
- Be aware of your own responses
- Building rapport and its challenges

Other Interview Resources

- Spaces
- Objects
- Senses
- Traditions
- Popular culture

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After the Interview

- With the interviewee
 - Post-interview procedures
 - Collateral materials and follow-up
- With the interview
 - Labeling recordings
 - Accessioning information
 - Transcription options
 - The future of the interview

The Value of Oral History

“Oral history can tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.”

Alessandro Portelli

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