

BASICS OF ORAL HISTORY
 A BRIEF HISTORY AND GUIDE TO CREATING AN
 ORAL HISTORY
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WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY?

- "The term oral history is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition-bearers; to informal conversations about "the old days" among family members, neighbors, or coworkers; to printed compilations of stories told about past times and present experiences; and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell."

-History Matters




WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY?

- "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. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies."

-Oral History Association




WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY?

- A sound recording of historical information obtained through an interview that preserves a person's life history or eyewitness account of a past experience
- Tool to preserve meaningful and relevant stories, folklore, skills and practices (oral traditions)
- Distinct in content and extent
 - In-depth account of personal reflections from past
 - Sufficient length allotted for story telling
 - Focused on sharing knowledge gained with the public and future generations



WHY IS ORAL HISTORY IMPORTANT?

Goal of oral history is long term preservation

- Accessibility and preservation is essential
- Open to future researchers and the public
- Use of updated technology is crucial

Strengths of oral histories

- Great primary sources
- Supplement to textbook teaching
- Subjectivity: what happened and how someone felt about it; helping to round out the story of the past
- Partnership of co-creation: narrator's interpretation and viewpoint on experiences



DOING ORAL HISTORY

Pre-Interview

- What you need to prepare before you conduct the interview

The Interview

- Tips to remember when conducting the interview

Post-Interview

- Things to do after you have completed your interview



PRE-INTERVIEW

Equipment

- Recording device - video camera, audio recorder, or cell phone
- Microphone

Make sure all electronic equipment is fully charged!

- Equipment failure during interview
- Bring backup batteries or a charger if possible

Make sure you know how to operate the equipment!

- Equipment fumbling during the interview

Make sure your equipment is on (and recording) before the interview!



PRE-INTERVIEW

Time

- Plan adequate time to capture the entirety of narrators' stories
 - 1.5 to 2 hours per session; Plan multiple sessions if necessary

Location

- Quiet room with good lighting
- Check the sound quality before recording the interview
- Make sure both you and the interviewee speak loud and clear
 - Don't be afraid to ask your interviewee to speak up



PRE-INTERVIEW

Research

- Before an interview - Understand historical context; prepare to ask questions of historical significance

Subjects

- What subject(s) are you going to cover?
 - Example: Latino Houston Restaurant Owners
 - Example: War Veterans
 - Example: 1950s Houston
 - Example: Houston Sports Teams



PRE-INTERVIEW

Topics and Questions

- Think of your talking points more as topics rather than questions
- Aim for open-ended questions
 - Avoid questions with "Yes/No" answers
 - "Were you afraid to go overseas?" versus "What were your feelings toward travelling overseas?"
 - "Did you miss your family?" versus "How did you being away from your family?"



PRE-INTERVIEW

Think "5W-H"

- Who, What, Where, When, Why and How
 - Who helped you get started? Who were your commanders?
 - What were some of your daily duties? What was your average day like?
 - Where was your first station?
 - When did you "ship out"? When did you return?
 - Why did you choose to join the service? (Can get branch specific)
 - How did you cope with being away from home?



PRE-INTERVIEW

Most important over all :

Make sure you have a signed release form from the interviewee!!!



THE INTERVIEW

Introduction

- Your introduction should include the following :
 - Your name
 - The name of your institution
 - The interviewee's name and institution
 - Project name
 - Date
 - Location*



THE INTERVIEW

- Smile and be mindful of your temperament
- Don't be afraid of silence
- Speak clearly & maintain eye contact
- Avoid talking over the interviewee
- Pay attention to what is being said
- Follow-up questions are your friends



POST INTERVIEW

Make sure you thank the interviewee for his /her participation in the project

- Email, letter, thank you card, etc.

Download your interview to a stable platform

- External hard drive, thumb drive, CD
- LOCKSS! (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe)

Fill out your Metadata Template

- It's much easier to fill out right after the interview than to try to remember what was discussed later
- Transcribe (if necessary) and/or create an index



PARTNER EXERCISE

Grab a partner and practice the following:

- Your introduction
- Ask the following questions (Aim for open-ended, 5W-H)
 - What is your name? Where are you from?
 - What type of library are you affiliated with (K-12, academic, public, special, etc.)? What is your position there?
 - How long have you been in the library field?
 - What is something that sets your library apart from others?
 - When did you become interested in libraries?
 - Where is your favorite library or archive?
 - Why do you think libraries are important?



QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, CONCERNS




Thank You!

Contact Information

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