



Recording Oral Histories

Oral history checklist

Before the recording

- Decide on your topic and research it in advance
- Choose who you would like to speak to. Ask them if they would be willing to participate and let them know why you want to record their story. Set a date and time to meet (about 1-1.5 hours)
- Create a list of topics and questions to use as a guide during the oral history
- Practice using the digital recorder

During the recording

- Pick a quiet room to record in with no distractions
- Ask the narrator sign a release form and explain the recording process to them
- Record a “lead” at the beginning of the recording: your name and the narrator’s name; the time, date, and location of the recording; and the main topics you will talk about
- Ask open-ended questions and leave room for silence
- Let the narrator lead the session. Stay quiet except when you ask questions and use body language to show your interest and attentiveness (nod, lean forward, smile)
- Take a photo of the narrator (with their permission) to keep with the recording

After the recording

- Write a short description of what the narrator spoke about
- Download the recording to one or more places, like the cloud or your hard drive
- Save the release form, the photograph, and any other oral history materials
- Transcribe or index the recording to make it easier for you and others to use
- Send a thank you letter and a copy of the recording to the narrator
- Share the oral history (with the narrator’s permission)



Created by Rebecca Hopman, 2022. Find more at: rebeccahopman.com/resources.
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Sample questions

- What's your full name? Do you know why your parents gave you that name?
- What did your childhood bedroom look like?
- What did you do with your first paycheck?
- How has the world changed since you've been young?
- What haven't we talked about that you'd like to share?

Definitions

- **Oral history** – a recording of a person's memories of the past and historical events
- **Narrator** – the “storyteller” or the person who is recounting their memories
- **Interviewer** – the person who sets up the oral history and asks the narrator questions
- **Lead** – the first part of a recording that typically includes: participant names; the date, time, and location of the recording; and the major topics or themes covered
- **Transcript** – the written record of the oral history recording; avoid edits
- **Index** – a time-stamped guide to the major topics covered in the recording

Equipment

- Portable digital audio recorder or video camera
- External microphones and headphones
- Pen and paper (permission form, questions, and note-taking materials)
- Memory prompts, camera, portable scanner
- Transcription software, editing software, storage devices (cloud, hard drive, DVD-Rs)

Remote recording

- Audio (mobile and landline): JK Audio QuickTap & Zoom H5; FreeConferenceCall.com; Rev Call Recorder, Google Voice, Automatic Call Recorder Pro, TapeACall (mobile apps)
- Audio (online): Zencast, Squadcast, Cleanfeed.net
- Video (online): Zoom, Skype

Additional resources

- Oral History Association (<https://www.oralhistory.org/>)
- Oral History in the Digital Age (<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>)
- Baylor Institute for Oral History (<https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974108>)