

UTAH STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY INTRODUCTION TO ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP

1. Definitions of Oral History
2. Why We Collect Oral History
3. The Interviewer
4. The Interview Process
5. How to Proceed
 - A. Before the Interview
 - B. To Start the Interview
 - C. During the Interview
 - D. After the Interview
6. Transcribing the Interview
7. The Release Form
8. Do's and Don'ts for Oral History Interviewing
9. Bibliography
 - A. Books on doing Oral History
 - B. Utah History books that are based on Oral History
10. Examples of Oral Histories
11. Your Oral History Project
12. Oral History Association Guidelines: General Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History

1. DEFINITIONS OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is the tape-recording of reminiscences about which the narrator can speak from first-hand knowledge. Through pre-planned interviews, the information is captured in question and answer form by oral history interviewers. (Willa K. Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society, p. 1)

"Remembered Experience." Thomas L. Charlton

"Recorded interviews which preserve historically significant memories for future use."
Charles Morrissey

Oral History is three things—

The research method that involves in-depth interviewing
it is the taped memoir;
it is the typewritten transcript.

Oral History is the tape recording of a knowledgeable person, by questions and answers, about what he/she did or observed of an event or events or way of life of historical interest. The purpose is to preserve that account for users, both present but especially future users, and make it available for us." (Willa K. Baum, "The Other Uses of Oral History, Oral History Review, Winter/Spring 2007 Volume 34 # 1)

Oral history interviews differ from journalistic or specific historical research interviews in that they are intended for use in the future by a wide variety of researchers; therefore their scope should be broader than what would be covered for immediate or specific use. A plan for preservation and use is essential to oral history. (Willa K. Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society, p. 1)

The use of oral history has democratized history and as the widening of history has broadened, so has its content. Much of the new social history is based on oral history.

Oral histories may indeed be a modern-day counterpart to nineteenth-century migrants' diaries, letters, and memoirs: they can reveal much about first-hand experience, even as we continue to ask what other narratives have helped shape the reminiscences themselves. (Scott E. Casper, Introduction to Moving Stories: Migration and the American West: 1850-2000.)

Goals for Oral History

1. A good, accurate historical account of what happened;
2. First-hand—that is, not folk tradition, not oral hearsay;
3. Questions and answers
4. It is preserved, that is, safe in a library;
5. Available, that is, legally open for research; and
6. Findable, that is, it is possible to find information within the transcript or tape.

Willa Baum, "The Other Uses of Oral History," *Oral History Review* Winter/Spring 2007, p. 15

2. WHY WE COLLECT ORAL HISTORY

It is part of our effort to preserve the past—an effort that includes preserving historical records, documents and photographs, preserving and restoring historic sites, writing histories, placing markers, offering historical tours, lectures or other programs.

Oral history offers an opportunity to fill in the gaps especially in our technological world of telephones, e-mail, face-to-face meetings.

There are many classes of people who will not set down in writing the description of their way of life although they may have a very rich oral tradition and may be able to talk with much color and accuracy about this life. (Willa Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society, 3)

Oral history can serve as a link from the immediate present to the immediate past in an understandable and very human way that can give the young and the newcomers a way of sinking their roots into the community.

The in-depth interview can reveal a psychological reality that is the basis for ideals the individual holds and for the things he or she does....Closely related to psychological disclosures is the way individuals see their own histories, both personal histories and the history of the group with which they identify....They had felt a need to make clear the place that their group and they as individuals occupied in history. (Valerie Raleigh Yow Recording Oral History, p.15)

I have found that people tend with the passage of time to be more rather than less candid. When a career is in progress, there is much to lose by an untoward admission. Near the end of life, there is a need to look at things as honestly as possible to make sense of experiences over a lifetime: This need strongly competes with the need to make oneself look good. (Valerie Raleigh Yow, Recording Oral History, p. 18)

We collect oral histories to use them—in books, articles, exhibits, tours, family histories, films, pageants, programs, and in other ways that help illuminate, depict, and explain our human experience.

By participating in oral history projects—from the most naïve to the most sophisticated, from grade school to college—students and teachers learn that education is not something you receive and imbibe (or impart and impose), but rather something you create. In oral history, one is part of the creation of the sources. Instead of studying only texts written by others, or examining documents written by others, the students work on sources of their own creation and thus become aware of how sources are created at the same time as they take an active, protagonist, hands-on role in their own education. (Alessandro Portelli, Oral Historian and Professor of American Literature, University of Rome—Forward to Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education By Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling, p. xiv)

Oral history can be fun for the interviewer, the narrator, and anyone else concerned with the work.

I count now my fortune in the treasury of lives opened to me in trust, they live in me, resonate in me, and teach me every day that no age or event can of itself prevent the human spirit from outstretching its former boundaries. (Gail Sheeny, *Passages*,)

Oral History allows the community to recognize and honor individuals by the implication that their lives do count, that what they did does matter and that it has value to others.
(KP)

3. The Interviewer

The interviewer should be someone who can sit quietly and listen, who is willing to let the narrator express an opinion contrary to his own without feeling compelled to contradict or re-educate the narrator, who is not afraid to break in occasionally with a question or guiding comment, who is firm enough to end the interview on time and to keep it within the bounds of whatever lines of inquiry have been planned, who is alert enough and knowledgeable enough to recognize when the narrator brings up an unplanned but valuable subject, and who is able to pursue that new subject with questions....Two types of people who should not be assigned to interviewing. They are the compulsive talker and the compulsive director. Both types will end up with interviews of themselves. (Willa K. Baum, Oral History for the Local Historical Society, 28)

Checklist for Critiquing Interviewing Skills

Positives

1. Indicate empathy when appropriate.
2. Show appreciation for narrator's help.
3. Listen carefully.
4. Follow narrator's pacing
5. Explain the reason for change in topic.
6. Use a two-sentence format when introducing line of questions
7. Probe when appropriate.
8. Use a follow-up question when more information is needed.
9. Ask a challenge question in a sensitive manner.
10. Request clarification when needed.

Negatives

1. Interrupt the narrator.
2. Keep repeating what the narrator has just said.
3. Infer something the narrator has not said.
4. Fail to pick up on a topic the narrator indicates is important.
5. Make irrelevant, distracting comments.
6. Ignore narrator's feelings and fail to give empathic response.
7. Fail to check the sound on the recorder.
8. Let the narrator sidetrack the conversation with a long monologue on an irrelevant topic.
9. Ask a leading question.
10. Ask several questions at the same time.

4. THE ORAL HISTORY PROCESS

The Pre-Interview

- Explain what an oral history interview is
- Prepare a general chronology and list of topics
- The Release Form
- Photograph

The Interview or Interviews

- Follow-up Questions
- Plans for the next interview

Transcribing

Audio Editing

Interviewee Edit

The Release Form

Final Edit and Corrections

Placement and Distribution of Copies

- Interviewee
- Repositories
- Others

5. HOW TO PROCEED

Before The Interview

1. Call or write the respondent well before the time you would like to conduct the interview. Explain your plans and purposes, set the time for the interview.
2. Gather as much background information about the respondent as you can and familiarize yourself thoroughly with the relationship between the respondent and the project you are working on.
3. Outline the main points of interest for your interview. You don't need to write out specific questions, but have some general or main points that you want to cover, but don't feel bound by your outline.
4. Become thoroughly acquainted with the operation of the tape recorder, especially the microphone, volume controls, and tape-changing procedures.
5. Organize what you need to take with you for the interview. recorder, tapes, notes, photographs, extra tapes, batteries, extension cord.

To Start The Interview

1. Situate yourself and the respondent in comfortable positions, keep the recorder within easy reach, but not so that the respondent will be too conscious of it. Try to avoid distractions, interruptions, and background noises from radios, television sets, traffic, or birds.
2. If you can do so, begin the interview with identifying information: name the interviewer, the respondent, the date, the place, and the subject of the interview. A conversational style will provide a nice transition between the informal conversation and the interview which follows, establishing the basis for an easy flow between questions and answers.
3. Be sure to check the time and to know the length of your tape so that you will not have to look constantly to see how much recording time remains.
4. Unless other circumstances dictate, interviews should not be scheduled for longer than an hour or hour and a half.

During the Interview

1. Remind yourself that the interview is not intended to show off your knowledge--though you must appear knowledgeable to the respondent--but to elicit from the respondent clear responses to your questions. Above all, do not dominate the conversation with displays of knowledge.
2. Avoid asking questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Useful leads include: "What led up to...?" "Tell me about..." "What did you feel when...?" and "I would like to hear about..."
3. Ask only one question at a time; that is avoid running questions together or protracting them so that the respondent is confused regarding which one to answer.
4. Keep your questions brief and to the point.
5. Start with non-controversial matters, saving more delicate ones until good rapport has been established.
6. Listen.
7. Don't let periods of silence fluster you; the respondent needs time to think.
8. Don't worry excessively about a question that seems to be clumsily worded. A little fumbling by the interviewer may help to put the respondent at ease.
9. Do not interrupt a good story simply because another question has occurred to you or because the respondent has wandered from the planned framework of questions. If you do, valuable remembrances might escape. Try to find gentle ways and the appropriate time for pulling the conversation back on track.
10. To help the respondent describe persons, ask about their appearance, then about their personality, character, and activities.
11. Remember that persons being interviewed are likely to give more interesting and more vigorous responses to questions or statements that imply uncertainty on your part than to ones that suggest that you are merely seeking agreement. A phrase like "I'm not sure I understand" or "this can be confusing to someone who wasn't there" may elicit useful information.
12. Try to establish where the respondent was at the time of the events being described as well as his or her role in them. Determine whether the respondent was a participant or a passive witness.
13. Use the interview to verify information gained from other sources. Do not take issue with accounts given by the respondent even if you believe another version to be more accurate. Be content to elicit as much information as possible, possibly offering alternative versions: "Some people say..." or "I have heard..." You can decide later which version of a story is accurate.

14. Try to avoid off-the-record comments; try instead to get the respondent to speak in terms that permit the statement to be part of the record. Sensitive materials can be protected by closing the tape for an agreed-upon period of years, that is, by sealing it so that researchers will not have access to it until the material in question is less sensitive. It is better to have such material recorded and waiting for later use than to let it escape entirely.

15. Do not interrupt the respondent unless the story strays too far from its course. Interruptions, when necessary, should begin with phrases like "let's go back to where you..." or "a moment ago you were telling me about..."

16. Avoid turning the machine off and on unless the respondent becomes unduly agitated or uncommunicative. Having some irrelevant material on the tape is better than losing the flow of the conversation by switching the recorder off and on again.

17. If there are interruptions, a telephone call, a visitor, etc., then turn off the machine and start up again when the informant is ready.

18. Be alert to points in the interview when special factual information is brought out. Take note of this information by writing it down. Asking the respondent to spell names is not at all inappropriate. Accuracy is more important than an uninterrupted interview.

19. Use photographs, clippings, or other documents to encourage the respondent to talk about persons or events that are of particular interest to you and about which his or her memory might need some jostling. Asking respondents to dig out photographs and other memory-prompting materials before the interview may be a way of inviting them to think about the topics you want to discuss. If possible, make copies of these documents and include them with the tape when you deposit it in the archives.

20. At the end of the interview, repeat the identifying information: the interviewer, the respondent, the date, the place, and the subject of the interview.

After the Interview

1. Secure the written permission of the respondent to use the tape and transcription.
2. Record the identifying information in writing on a card to be placed in an interview file. On the same card should be a summary of the major topics discussed, along with the time in the interview when discussion begins. The time-topic index, which requires the use of a stopwatch, makes the tape useful to researchers before a typed transcript becomes available. Such an index is important even when the researcher is also the interviewer.
3. Store the tape in a place where it can be preserved without damage, which means low humidity and temperature that avoids extremes of heat and cold.
4. Arrange for the tapes to be transcribed.

UTAH STATE HISTORY/
UTAH HUMANITIES COUNCIL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT AND DEED OF GIFT

I hereby give to the Utah State History and the Utah Humanities Council the recordings and transcriptions of the interview/interviews recorded on _____ and grant the Utah State History and the Utah Humanities Council the right to make the recordings and transcriptions available to the public for such educational and research purposes that are in accordance with the policies and procedures of the Society's Utah History Information Center or the Utah Humanities Council's policies, including (but not limited to) posting on a dedicated oral history website.

NARRATOR _____

ADDRESS _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

INTERVIEWER _____

ADDRESS _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

6. Transcribing the Interview

Procedures

At the end of the interview, when you get back to the office or your home, listen to the tape and make a rough table of tape contents. Also jot down questions for subsequent interviews. You can use both a minute and counter index. This will help decide whether to transcribe the interview and its priority for transcription.

Poke out the two tabs on the cassette so that the tape cannot be recorded over.

Make a working copy of the original tape.

As a general rule, try and transcribe all the interviews and try to transcribe them as soon after the interview is completed as possible.

Keep a copy of the initial transcription, subsequent edited versions, and the final edited and corrected transcription.

Why Transcribe Oral Histories:

The transcribed interview is much easier for researchers to use than an audio tape.

The reason for transcripts—are to record, to illuminate, to re-present, and to facilitate analysis. Willow Roberts Powers, *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*, 2.

A corrected transcript may be more accurate and complete because the recorded works were put down in writing while the narrator was still available to clear up obscurities. Words that are hard to hear can be checked by the actual speaker; questions that were inadequately answered can be expanded by written comment.

You do have something to show for your efforts. A permanent record. A monument to a life.

Transcribing is hard, time-consuming work. Many people think it is also mechanical, neither challenging nor interesting. They are, ultimately, wrong. For those of us with an interest in human beings and language, the work of transcribing broadens our experience of speech, gives the analytical mind much more to play with than the text itself ever will, and strengthens our memory for the work that lies ahead. . . . We talk a great deal; the opportunity to do nothing but listen is a rare treat." (Willow Roberts Powers, *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*, " 10.)

The Time and Cost of Transcribing.

You can expect to expend an average of six to twelve typing hours for each hour of recording. Then it will have to be edited, corrected, and final editing.

Transcribers currently charge between \$4.50 and \$5.00 a transcribed page which is about \$75.00 for an hour interview.

Questions

Transcribing is not as straightforward as it might seem. Speaking and writing are different, and turning the spoken word into writing requires careful thought. Should you transcribe exactly what was said or a version that might be easier to read or understand? Which is more important, content or spoken form? Meaning or style? Broken sentences or intent? How should emotion appear in the written text? To what extent should characteristics of performance be included? Can we truly capture any of these things? (Willow Roberts Powers, *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*, 9)

The verbatim Transcript

Advise to the Transcriber

(Willa K. Baum Transcribing and Editing Oral History, pp. 28-33)

1. Listen to about 10 minutes before starting to type in order to catch the manner of speaking, special pronunciations, crutch words, etc. Listen ahead at least a phrase before typing. If the narrator is prone to many false starts, you will have to listen ahead more. If the narrator is fairly deliberate, you can type almost as the words are spoken.
2. Type the words you hear, in the order they are spoken. Listen and type with understanding of what the speaker means, but be careful not to get rolling with the speaker so well that you are inadvertently putting words and phrases into his mouth. Even if the speaker may be awkward, forgetful, or nonverbal, resist the temptation to help out with your own superior vocabulary.
3. Punctuate according to the sense of the words as spoken. Try to use only periods, commas, and long dashes (em dashes). Avoid exclamation points, bold letters, colons and semi-colons. Do not use ellipsis points (...) as they indicate something has been left out. Follow your project's style sheet. A transcriber has to do the best he can to indicate how the words were spoken. No changing of word order is allowed.
4. Listen for the end of a sentence; even if it isn't a complete sentence, stop, and start a new sentence. Many narrators go on and on, using an "and" instead of a period. End those run-on sentences at reasonable points, but do not break down a complex clause-speaker into short sentences.

5. Paragraph when the subject changes.
6. Unusual pronunciation and fropped word endings should not be indicated by phonetic spelling. It is almost impossible to convey pronunciation phonetically, and narrators are offended by a sprinkling of “yeahs,” “yups,” and “goin’s,” throughout the transcript even if they said it that way.
7. Contractions should be typed as spoken. “I’ll look that up; I’m not sure what year it was” offends no one and is more natural than “I will look that up; I am not sure what year it was.”
8. Crutch words. Almost everyone speaks with a plentitude of crutch words and gurgles such as “ah,” “well,” “and then,” “of course,” “you know,” “understand?” “right?” which serve the purpose of either a pause to think of the next thing to say, or a check as to whether the other person is listening. It is unlikely a narrator will approve and release a transcript full of crutch words; even if she does they will serve to impede the reader and to make the narrator look inadequate. Leave out most crutch words in transcribing if it is apparent that they are just pauses for thought. Leave in a few to show the narrator uses them, that this is an informal conversation. Leave them in if they have meaning.
9. Interviewer’s approval words. Do not transcribe comments of the interviewer which are clearly only to indicate he is listening, such as “my, my,” “how interesting,” “really?” Like crutch words, they only serve to impede the reader and make the interviewer look like a scatterbrain.
10. Do not transcribe false starts or unfinished sentences if the interviewee clearly reconsiders, stops, and then states it otherwise. Do transcribe if it is information she does not repeat in the revised sentence. In other words, get down all the information, but if she fumbles and then starts again, leave out the fumble.
11. Portions you cannot hear. Listen again. Ask someone else in the office to listen. Don’t waste too much time trying to hear what you can’t. If you still can’t make it out, leave a blank about as long as you think the phrase is (don’t underscore) and pencil in lightly the counter number. The interviewer or editor may be able to hear it later. You can also use brackets to indicate [an inaudible word], a word or name you are not sure about or how they are spelled Bob [Siciliano?], or words you do not understand or are from a different language whose spelling and meaning you don’t know. [gemutlichkeit--German] These can be clarified for the final draft. Avoid using such words as [garbled or nonsense] that may be offensive to the interviewee.
12. Portions to be left out. The interviewer may indicate on the interview notes that certain portions are not to be typed, perhaps chit-chat, an irrelevant story, or a repetition of an already told tale. If one aims for an informal interview, it is better to leave the tape running during the interview and then not transcribe irrelevant portions than to call attention to the recorder by turning the tape on and off. Omissions may or may not be indicated, according to the interviewer’s request.

For example (Interruption by take-off of an airplane, conversation about the hazards of living near an airport) may be fine, but omit (Fourth telling of how she walked ten miles to school and never missed a day.)

13. State directions, descriptions of what is happening, or how words are spoken. Use these with discretion and put them in parenthesis. Some are necessary to understand the action, such as (reading from newspaper), (goes to bookcase to get scrapbook), (interruption for telephone call), (pause while fire engines go by).
14. Others are interpretations of the sound and must be used with care lest they offend the narrator. For example, (laughter) is fine if it follows a genuine joke, but may be offensive if it is in an inappropriate place or in fact represents a nervous giggle. The transcriber can try to indicate how the words were spoken – (softly), (sadly), (whispering)—and can underline words to indicate heavy emphasis, or put in ALL CAPS words that are spoken loudly for emphasis, but keep in mind the narrator’s feelings. Some indications of emotion are best limited to the tape where they can be evaluated in their full sound context.
15. Proper names and places. Use the notes that come with the interview. The interviewer should have written down names and places, and checked the spelling with the narrator. If not in the notes, look up any names if you can in such reference works as the telephone directory, who’s who, almanac, atlas, and history books. If nowhere to be found, spell phonetically. The names that cannot be checked should be called to the attention of the narrator when she reviews the transcript.

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Editing—Historians and Ethnographers

Verbatim transcript

Did I what, uh, did I uh well, let me think uh yeah now sure, yeah sure I uh drove the uh uh the Kennebec River one no it was one spring yes.

Historian—Edward Ives transcription

Well, let me think. Yeah, I drove the Kennebec River one spring.

Ethnographer—Willow Roberts Powers

Punctuate differently:

Did I what—uh, did I—uh, well, let me think. Uh, yeah, now sure, yeah, sure—I, uh, drove the, uh, uh, the Kennebec River one—no, it was one spring, yes.

Omit the nonwords:

Did I what—did I—well, let me think, Yeah, now sure, yeah, sure—I drove the Kennebec River one—no, it was one spring, yes.

A more radical editing—for the ethnographer

Did I what—well, let me think. Yeah, now sure, yeah, sure—I drove the Kennebec River one—no, it was one spring, yes.

Edward Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual for Field Workers in Folklore and Oral History*, 80.

Willow Roberts Powers, *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*, 65-66

Did I what, uh, did I uh well, let me think uh yeah now sure, yeah sure I uh drove the uh uh the Kennebec River one no it was one spring yes.