

# LSU LIBRARIES T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Workshop



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## Oral History Project Will Involve:

- Project Planning & Pre-Interview Research
- Fieldwork: Creation of Primary Source
  - Interviews, photo, video, additional mtl's
- Creation of Secondary Source from above
- Transfer of materials to repository



## Oral History, Defined:

A qualitative research process based on personal interviewing, suited to understanding meanings, interpretations, relationships, and subjective experience

- Life narrative/biographical
- Project-oriented/topical

A product that is preserved —an audio or video tape recording—that is an original historical document, a new primary source for further research.



## Three Stages of Oral History Project:

1. Interview
2. Preservation
3. Public Access



## Oral History Interview Focus:

- Behavior and experiences
- Concrete examples from which to infer subjective orientations
- Develop facts and events first, then explore feelings and values
- Memory is most **fallible** regarding previous attitudes and feelings
- Stimulate the respondent's memory or reduce chronological confusion by supplying facts learned from background research



## Rewards:

Multiple perspectives

Primary sources to document every day peoples' lives

An opportunity to explore community memories





## Challenges in Conducting Oral Histories

- Time Management & Project Organization
- Maintaining the ethics of the research partnership
- Building trust and rapport
- Balancing multiple perspectives
- Negotiating interview-interviewee roles
- Managing personal bias



## Expectations

- What is your overall goal?
- Who do you want to interview (# of people)?
- When are you planning to begin?
- What's your time frame? Duration?
- What main question do you have today?





## Project Planning:

- Think of end result and work backwards
- So what? (niche)
- Clear, do-able goals
- Task Division: who will do what?
- Reasonable timetable
- Actionable Items



## Project Planning--Consider the following:

- Who do you want to interview and why?
- What do you want to do with the interviews?
- How much time do you have?
- What kind of help will you need and where can you get it?
- With whom might you form partnerships?



## Project Planning: Choosing and Researching Topics

- Start small, manageable
- Topic have some historical analysis available in published biographies or secondary sources which provide background, context, and a basis of authority for their research
- Topic can be researched through oral history that have happened in lifetime of people living today



## Project Planning--Topics Must be:

- Focused
- Do-able in allotted time
- Do-able in the local area
- Matched to available interviewees



## Project Planning—Preliminary Research on Topic

- To establish its historical context; to learn more about who would make the best interviewees
- Visit libraries, archives, museums
- Start Basic Topic Outline to ask informed questions



## Project Planning: Locating Interviewees

- Start close to home: relatives, neighbors, family friends
- Community: retirement homes, churches, community service organizations
- Through your research, word of mouth, local media announcements



## Project Planning: Interviewee Selection

- Biographical Data Form
- Select respondents who will be able and willing to provide information you need, whose life experience fits your topic
- Interviewees may be chosen because their lives illustrate certain historical processes or because they have special knowledge of or occupy a unique position in an historical event, movement, or institution.



## Project Planning: Release Forms

- Audio Recordings are an individual's intellectual property and are subject to copyright law.
- Interviewees must sign Copyright Release Forms before students can use the recordings
- Interviewers must sign a Copyright Release Form
- Repositories require completed forms
- Signed forms do not preclude the interviewer or interviewee from using the recordings
- For more info, see ["Oral History and the Law"](#)





## Project Planning: Release Forms

- Interviewee & Interviewer Release Forms
  - To be signed after the interview



## Pre-Interview Research/Background Research

- Ten Hours Per Hour of Tape
- Create Topical Outline: Mostly Open-Ended
  - Williams Center Sample (10 pp)



## Pre-Interview Research: Know Yourself & Embrace Diversity:

- Leave baggage at the door
- Respect, genuine interest



## How to Get a Good Interview:

### Interview Tips

- Test your equipment
- Record an Intro: names, date, location, project
- Start w/ Biographical Info
- Progress to more difficult questions



## At the Interview

### DO

- Respect the Respondent: dress, punctual, manners
- Be a good listener:
- Ask Follow-Up Questions
- Assist memory recall
- Use body Language
- Watch for signs of tiring
- Spell out difficult names of persons and places specify lengths...



## At the Interview

### DO

- Ask Open-Ended Questions
  - Who, What, Where, When, Why,
  - “Tell Me about....”; “Please describe ....”
- **Avoid:** Yes or no questions, leading questions
  - “Do you know...?” *instead* “What do you know about...?”
  - “Have you noticed...?” *instead* “What have you noticed about...?”
  - “Have you experienced...?” *instead* “What have you experienced in regards to...?”



## At the Interview

### DO

- Ask closed questions at the **right** times
  - Answered in 1 or 2 words
  - After a story, use to gather details
    - What was your mother's maiden name?
    - What was your rank?
    - How long has your family lived here?
    - How did your parents make a living?



## At the Interview

### DO

- Ask for definitions: “What does \_\_\_\_\_ mean?”
- Ask follow-up questions. Solicit details.

What happened next? Where were you living at the time? Who else participated? How long did it take? How did you get there?

- Ask experiential questions:
  - What did you hear? What did you see? How heavy was it? How did he appear? How did it taste? Smell? Feel?





## DON'T

- Interrupt
- Ask “Yes” or “No” Questions
- Ask Leading Questions
  - “Was your neighborhood tight-knit?”
- Ask More than One Question @ a Time
- Talk too Much
- Argue with the interviewee
- “You’ve Got to Hear This Story!”
  - Disaster: 4:30-5:42; Don’ts: 5:42-16:20; age, gender, race: 21:31-25:00



## Balancing Act:

- Allow respondents to express the logic of their lives as they understand them
- Simultaneously maintain control over the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions so as to elicit information which is relevant, reliable, and valid.
  - Listen carefully.
  - Embrace silence.
  - Take notes, rather than interrupt
- If way off track, ask a direct question to get back on track



## Common Mistakes (Student) Interviewers Make

- Lack of practice
- Improper introduction/labeling/incomplete forms
- Not listening/talking too much
- More than one question at a time
- “Yes” or “no” questions
- No follow-up questions
- Reading off the guide/not engaging
- Looking disinterested
- Misplacement of emotional or controversial questions
- Cutting the interview short



## Photographs and Video

- Natural light is best, if possible
- Photos:
  - Interviewees
  - Interviewees with important objects
  - Important objects
  - Take before and after interview, and during interview, if possible, get a few shots of interviewer and interviewee
  - Be subtle, do not interrupt flow



## Additional Materials

- Copies of:
  - Photographs
  - Maps
  - Letters
  - Papers
- How?
  - Portable scanner
  - Digital Scanner
  - iPhone or Droid app



## How to Get a Good Interview Pt. II: Equipment

### The Importance of Archival Quality Audio

- Reel-to-Reel: 70 year
- Cassette: 25 year
- CD/DVD: 10-15 year
- Uncompressed digital audio file stored on server with tape back-up: perpetuity

### Why store oral histories in a repository?

- Preservation
- Processing
- Public Access



## How to Get a Good Interview Pt. II

### Tips on Using a Digital Recorder

### See Field Recorder Tutorial

- Types of Recorders:
  - Solid State Recorder (Flash Memory)
- File Formats:
  - Compressed VS Uncompressed
  - Archival VS User-Friendly
  - Need both for present and future



## How to Get a Good Interview Pt. II

Tips on Using a Digital Recorder

See Field Recorder Tutorial

- [Adjusting Recording Levels on Recorder](#)
- [Marantz PMD620 Quick Tips](#)
- [Opportunity for a pre-project individual consultation](#)





## Post Interview Pt. 1: Preserve the Interview

### Transcribing the Interview

#### Express Scribe Software:

- 10 hours of transcribing per 1 hour of recording
- Use a style guide: Chicago Manual of Style
- Use a dictionary
- Be accurate. Do not correct grammar
- Teamwork: divide transcribing and auditing tasks
- Guideline



## Evaluate Recordings and Content Analysis

Questions to guide evaluation/interpretation/presentations:

- Quality of Recording? Clear audio? Volume?
- Ask open-ended questions? Follow-up questions?  
Interrupt or listen well?
- What to do differently next time?
- Important points in interview?
- How are the interviewees' stories different from textbook history? Why?
- How do these interviews compare to each other? Patterns, Themes?



## Post Interview Pt. 2: Share

### Secondary Source examples (see slide #21)

- Books, articles, or essays, podcasts, radio/TV drama scripts, poems, a web site, a media presentation, readers' theater, art, music, neighborhood tours, exhibits, or dance
- Community event to honor interviewees