

C  
A  
L  
S

BOBBY L. ROBERTS  
LIBRARY OF  
ARKANSAS  
HISTORY & ART

# COMMUNITY ORAL HISTORY TOOLKIT



INSTITUTE of  
Museum and Library  
SERVICES

# INTRODUCTION TO ORAL HISTORY

## WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is a recorded conversation between at least two people coming together to talk about the past and what it means.

## WHO SHOULD CONDUCT ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS?

The best person to do an interview is YOU! Although historians, folklorists, and social scientists participate in oral history interviews in their research, ANYONE can conduct an oral history interview. The most important thing is to record the experiences of people so those stories can be remembered and preserved.

## WHO SHOULD BE INTERVIEWED?

Everyone makes history—not just politicians, authors, and celebrities. The oral history interviews of everyday people are just as important to historians, researchers, and fellow citizens as the experiences of famous people. And you don't have to just interview older people—people of all ages have stories to tell, and these need to be captured for future generations.

## WHO IS THE “NARRATOR”?

The narrator is the person telling the story. Sometimes this person is also referred to as the interviewee or the storyteller.

## ARE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS ONLY AUDIO RECORDINGS?

Oral history interviews are typically an audio recording of the voice of the narrator, also including the voice of the interviewer, or can sometimes be a video recording of the interview session.

# **CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW**

## **HOW LONG SHOULD THE INTERVIEW BE?**

Oral histories can range in length. Professional oral historians tend to interview a narrator for 2 to 3 hours at a time. But the comfort of the narrator needs to be guiding your decision when it comes to interview length. If you try to record for more than an hour, you and your storyteller might become tired or distracted. So take your time! You will get better stories if you plan to do several small recordings. Don't try and get a person's entire life story in one session.

## **WHAT IF THE NARRATOR IS HAVING TROUBLE REMEMBERING OR DOESN'T SEEM COMFORTABLE ANSWERING A CERTAIN QUESTION?**

Don't be afraid to sit in silence with your narrator. Your relationship with the narrator will dictate the length of comfortable silences. If your narrator is having trouble remembering part of their story or if your narrator doesn't seem comfortable answering a certain question, ask the narrator if they are ready to move on. Not everyone is an open book.

## **HOW DO YOU MAKE THE NARRATOR COMFORTABLE WITH THE INTERVIEW PROCESS?**

Doing the interview in the narrator's home or another quiet place they are familiar with can help the narrator be at ease, so stories can flow. If you conduct the interview in the narrator's home, remember to ask them to turn off the TV or radio and try to limit any other sounds or distractions during the interview.

# **CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW**

## **WHAT IF THE RECORDER MAKES THE NARRATOR NERVOUS?**

Reassure the narrator that the interview is just a conversation between the two of you.

## **HOW MANY PEOPLE SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE INTERVIEW SESSION?**

Oral histories are typically one-on-one conversations. If your narrator wants to include other people in the interview room, explain to them how multiple voices can be confusing on the audio recording. But don't let their insistence on having a friend or relative with them prevent the interview from happening. If the narrator wants to have other storytellers participate in the interview with them, have each narrator say their name at the beginning of the recording so listeners can identify them later.

## **WHAT IF THE NARRATOR WANTS TO TALK ABOUT A PHOTOGRAPH OR OTHER VISUAL ITEM DURING THE INTERVIEW?**

Encourage the narrator to describe the visual item they are talking about in as much detail as possible. If they have trouble describing it, then have a conversation with them on the recording about the visual item. Ask them questions to help them describe it better. And of course, you can describe the item as you see it, too. You can also describe gestures the narrator uses. These gestures can add to the picture of the narrator for the listener.

## **REMEMBER TO TAKE A PICTURE OF YOUR NARRATOR TO GO ALONG WITH THE INTERVIEW**

# GET A GOOD RECORDING

**Make sure to test the recorder in the location you will be conducting the interview.** Then you can test your volume level for your narrator. Many older people talk softly because of hearing issues, so you want to make sure the built-in microphone on the recorder is picking up the full story.

**Try to conduct the interview in a quiet space.** Pay attention to any background noise that you can hear. Ambient noise like birds chirping outside a window can be a nice effect, but a jackhammer can distract from the storytelling as well as the listening later.

**Have tissues, a trash can, and water available for your narrator.** But avoid plastic water bottles or cups with ice. These make noise and the mic will pick it up.

**Be aware of your own active listening.** You are a part of the conversation but instead of umm-ing or uh-huh-ing (which can be very distracting on the recording), smile and nod quietly to show your interest in the story and encourage your narrator to continue.

## REMEMBER TO LISTEN...

# **START YOUR INTERVIEW**

At the beginning of the interview, be sure to start with the narrator saying their name, you saying your name, and you saying the date (with year) of the interview.

Here is a sample statement you can read at the beginning of the recording.

**My name is**

---

**Today is xx/xx/yyyy. I am interviewing**

---

# WHAT TO TALK ABOUT

Remember, this is a conversation with your narrator, so avoid using a list of questions like a questionnaire about their life. Take time to think about what you want to talk about with the narrator.

Remember that you are not trying to capture their whole life story in one recording.

## SHOULD YOU DO A PRE-INTERVIEW?

It is a good idea to do a pre-interview. This can be a simple conversation over the phone or in person. The point of this conversation is to get the narrator comfortable talking and to get the memory going. Try taking a few notes that could help you structure the recorded interview. If the narrator is someone you know well, you may have been conducting pre-interviews without knowing it.

### Possible topics:

- End of World War II (V-E Day and V-J Day)
- JFK's assassination (1963)
- Moon landing (1969)
- Challenger explosion (1986)
- Fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)
- Oklahoma City bombing (1995)
- 9/11 (2001)
- Holiday celebrations like 4th of July or Halloween
- Teacher who had a profound effect
- First memory from childhood
- Memory of first time voting
- Razorbacks or other sports teams

# WHAT MAKES A GOOD FOLLOW-UP QUESTION?

- Ask for more information.
- Ask them to expand, to unpack, to evaluate, to further describe, to help you fully picture and understand whatever it is they're talking about.
- If you're confused about something, that's a sure sign of needing a follow-up!
- Everyone's life is full of interesting details and connections; follow-up questions bring these to the surface.
- Good follow-up questions show you've been listening and are taking your narrator's stories and observations seriously.

## LIST OF POSSIBLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A list of possible interview questions is available at

**RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/**



# HOW TO USE THE RECORDING DEVICE

for CALS recording device available on loan  
from select CALS branches

**Microphone is here.**  
**Point it towards the speaker**

When  
recording,  
light is on.



Press and  
hold to  
turn on  
and off.

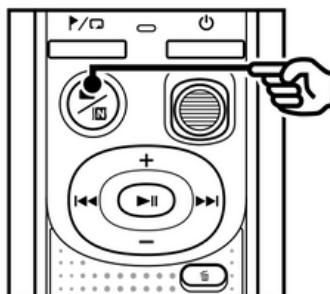
Slide up to  
start  
recording

Slide down  
to stop  
recording

# HOW TO USE THE RECORDING DEVICE

*for CALS recording device available on loan  
from select CALS branches*

- Turn PowerOn. Press and hold power button to turn recorder on.
- Press the Folder button and set to LP.



- Make sure microphone is pointed toward person speaking.
- Slide orange button up to start recording and slide down to stop recording.
- Small light below screen will turn on when recording.

To view the complete user manual  
for the Olympus VN-541PC recorder, go to  
[RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/](http://RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/)



# OTHER WAYS TO RECORD AN ORAL HISTORY

Although an in-person interview is the ideal way to record an oral history, there are alternatives:

## **Record audio only on a smartphone**

If you and the narrator cannot meet in person, recording the phone call might be the way to go. Go to [RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/](http://RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/) for recommended apps to use on iPhones or Android devices.

We do not recommend using Facetime or the Android equivalent to conduct an oral history interview.

## **Record via Zoom or other video meeting service**

Zoom, Cisco Webex, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts and other video chat programs are great for oral history interviews when you cannot meet in person. Just record the video chat with all participants' audio and video feeds on.

Once you have finished the oral history interview, we recommend saving the files to an external hard drive or cloud-based storage platform for safekeeping.

*Remember that it is important to inform your narrator that you are recording the conversation, whether it is audio or video. Make sure your narrator states, during the recording, that they understand they are being recorded for an oral history interview.*

# SAVING YOUR FINISHED INTERVIEW

*Once you've finished your interview...*

- Connect the USB cable to the USB port of the PC/Mac.
- After making sure the voice recorder is ON and in STOP MODE, connect the USB cable to the connecting port on this recorder.
- **Windows:** The voice recorder is recognized and displayed in the [Computer] folder with the model name as the drive name.
- **Macintosh:** The voice recorder is recognized and displayed on the desktop with the model name as the drive name.
- Save your files that are in the RECORDER folder to a folder on the computer hard drive, external hard drive, flash drive or cloud-based storage by copy-and-pasting or dragging-and-dropping. (It is a good idea to save the files multiple places for backup.)
- Do not disconnect the USB cable from the computer or recorder while the LED indicator light is flashing.

## GET THE RECORDER READY FOR THE NEXT PATRON

*Once you have saved all your files to a computer (and made a backup copy), please erase all your files before returning the recorder to the library...*

- Select the folder on the recorder with your files.
- Press the TRASH CAN button on the recorder while recorder is in STOP MODE.
- Press the TRASH CAN button again.
- YES and NO will appear on the LED screen.
- Press the REWIND arrow to select YES.
- Press the PLAY/PAUSE button to complete the process and once END appears on the LED screen, the files have been deleted.

## DONATE YOUR INTERVIEW

*Would you like to donate your interview to the Central Arkansas Library System?*

The CALS Butler Center for Arkansas Studies collects oral history interviews and we would like to help you preserve your interview file and add it to our archival collection.

To submit your interview, visit **RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/** and upload your file. Please complete the donation/consent form to the best of your ability and attach your .MP3 file from the recorder. Click "Submit."

**RobertsLibrary.org/oral-history/**



# SPIRIT OF ORAL HISTORY - FINAL THOUGHTS

In oral history, we refer to the person being interviewed as the narrator or storyteller. That's because we are seeking more than just information about past events; we are seeking to understand how those events connect and what they mean to the person who is telling us about them.

For that reason, an oral history interview is not a questionnaire; it is an attempt to prompt the narrator's account of their life journey, along with the many rich details and reflections on life that come with it. These are the gifts that oral histories give to future generations.

Oral history interviews should never feel rushed. There is a real benefit to starting at the beginning of your narrator's life. Take your time getting to know their childhood and background. Ask them to tell you about the experiences, people, and environments that they have found meaningful and formative as they got older. Spend time developing their memories.

Sometimes the most useful question is a basic one: "And then what happened?" "What led you to make that decision?" "Do you think back on that time differently now? Has its meaning evolved for you?" If there are specific topics or experiences you want to ask about, see how you might weave those questions into the narrator's broader life story.

The cardinal virtues of oral history are empathy, humility, and curiosity. Our ethics all come down to the idea of a "shared authority" between the interviewer and the narrator. The interview is a co-creation between both individuals. You will each have your

## **SPIRIT OF ORAL HISTORY - FINAL THOUGHTS**

own agendas for participating, and your job as interviewer is to gently negotiate and bring these together. This is much more of an art than a science. Smart improvisation is the key!

You should certainly have a plan for the interview, but practice letting the narrator decide where the stories will go. Yes, it can be scary to give up that control, but you will find that many of the best stories are the ones that you never knew to ask about! The best oral historians give the narrator plenty of room to talk, but know when to jump in with a good follow up question or observation, and gently provide the interview with a structure that respects and appreciates the fullness of the narrator's humanity.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION  
ABOUT CALS ROBERTS LIBRARY  
DIY MEMORY LAB PROJECT, VISIT [ROBERTSLIBRARY.ORG](http://ROBERTSLIBRARY.ORG)**