How to do oral History:
Step by Step Video topics for AV Barn website

1. What is oral history?

Oral History occurs every day. (First person Observations)

-Friends telling stories
-Teachers lecturing
-Family recollections
-Formal interviews

According to some experts, oral history is the transmission of stories that have passed through numerous generations (Sommer & Quinlan, 2008, p. 3). Oral history is the systematic collection and recording of living people’s personal testimony about their own historic experiences (Moyer, 1999, p. 3; Ritchie, 2003, p. 19). Oral history interviews contain information that is not available anywhere else (Proctor, 1975, p. 3).

2. How do you conduct an oral history?

**Topic A:** Deciding on type of interview/s to conduct
- Life History (Usually conducted with an older interviewee that has experienced a lot and looks at history through their eyes.)
- Topical (Usually done with numerous interviewees to look at a specific topic like Agriculture)
- Family (Usually done with in a family for genealogical purposes)
- Blend (Any blend of the above types of interviews)

**Topic B:** Picking an Interviewee.
- Any one willing to do a recorded interview could be an interviewee
- Make sure the interviewee fits the type of project
  - Cannot have a ten year old give a life history or a commercial pilot give an interview on Agriculture except under very special circumstances.
- Could be
  - Parents
  - Grand Parents
  - Neighbor
  - Local government official
**Topic C:** Contacting the prospective interviewee  
- Be polite  
- Usually contact by phone or mail  
- Explain why you are doing an interview  
- Explain that it would be recorded  
- Ask if they would like to do the interview  
- Set up a date, time, and location  
  - Usually of the interviewee’s choosing

**Topic D:** Preparing for the interview  
- Do your research on:  
  - Who the person is that you are interviewing  
  - What they do or did  
  - And general history of the era in question  
- Places to look  
  - Internet  
    - Search engines  
    - Research databases  
  - Library

**Topic E:** Preparing Questions  
- One of the most important parts to the interview  
- Questions should be  
  - Non biased  
  - Non leading  
  - Open ended  
- Some people prepare lists of topics  
- Always be ready to ask questions not on the paper  
- Be ready to deviate from the paper  
- Start with easy questions

**Topic F:** Equipment  
- What equipment should I use?  
  - Audio  
    - Things to consider  
      - Format  
      - Limited  
      - Easy to archive  
      - Easily manipulated  
  - Video  
    - Things to consider  
      - Lighting  
      - Adding a third dimension (action)
-What should I do before the interview?
  -practice with the equipment
  -check batteries and have spares
  -have an extra tape

**Topic G: At the Interview**

- Dress appropriately
  - dress to the same level as the interviewee
- Bring materials on your project for the interviewee
- explain all the recording equipment
- explain the use of questions or topic sheet
- Begin recording
  - check sound
- Start interview with date, project, and location
- have fun
- Get deed of gift signed
- maybe have the interviewee fill out a biography form

**3. What do you do with the interview once it has been completed?**

**Topic A: Processing**

- If Digital
  - download
  - name files
  - back up
  - make copy for interviewee
- If Analogue
  - duplicate
  - possibly digitize
  - label
  - make copy for interviewee

**Topic B: Transcription**

- Standard for using interview
  - cover page with abstract
- transcribe exactly as said in interview
- second: edit out um’s and uhh’s and check spelling
  - send to interviewee for review and suggestions
- third: edit make changes as requested by interviewee
Topic C: Using Oral Histories in Research

- Oral Histories are a great place for primary source material but not always accurate
- needs to be backed up in a separate place

  Outside source method
  - use a secondary outside source to corroborate what is said in the interview
  - Could be: newspaper article, book, journal

  Triangulation method
  - Use numerous oral histories to demonstrate that different individuals had similar or different experiences of the same thing

- Don’t forget to cite the interview appropriately
Works Cited


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<sup>1</sup> Most of the sources in this section could become a recommended readings section for those interested in Oral History methods.