

ORAL HISTORY:

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is the collecting of stories and narratives from individuals in order to preserve voices, experiences, and history.

It can be a life history, a community or group history, or a history of a specific event or issue.

WHY DO ORAL HISTORY?

Because stories matter!

Oral history is a way of honoring and amplifying voices that may be overlooked in other records.

It helps us understand the past and present, and allows us to share stories and wisdom with future generations.

WHO CAN DO ORAL HISTORY?

Anyone!

Doing your own oral history project doesn't take much formal training, just some basic planning and a curiosity about the stories that we all have to share.

WHAT DO I NEED?

> A smart phone or tablet.

You can download a free/cheap app that records audio files such as:

- > Voice Record Pro
- > TASCAM Portastudio



> A simple audio recorder and headphones.

Basic, quality audio recorders cost about \$100 – \$150, such as:

- > Zoom – H1, H2
- > Tascam – DR-05, DR-07

EXAMPLES OF ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

- > **CITIZENS COMMITTEE FOR NEW YORK CITY:** Stories from community organizers around NYC.
- > **CREEKSPEAK:** Focused on experiences around a particular issue, the Newton Creek Superfund Site.
- > **CROSSING BORDERS, BRIDGING GENERATIONS:** Personal histories of identity and culture in NYC.
- > **MAPPING THE LONG WOMEN'S MOVEMENT:** Uses maps and audio to tell the history of the women's movement.
- > **MYSTUY:** Local neighborhood history
- > **NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY - A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF HARLEM:** Individual stories collected to create a popular history of Harlem.
- > **TELEM CENTER FOR THE AFRICAN CHILD:** Teens interviewing community and family members about specific topics to create short audio pieces.

ORAL HISTORY RESOURCES

- > **COLUMBIA CENTER FOR ORAL HISTORY:** A wealth of knowledge, project assistance, and an oral history archive.
- > **DOING HISTORY:** A simple guide to starting and doing your own oral history project.
- > **ORAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION:** A list of resources, how-to guides, and relevant articles.
- > **ORAL HISTORY SUMMER SCHOOL:** An annual 8-day Long oral history intensive course in Hudson, NY.
- > **RADIO ROOKIES TOOLKITS:** Info on interviewing, editing, and creating a final product with your audio or video.
- > **SMITHSONIAN CENTER FOR FOLK LIFE:** The center has a great 'guide to interviewing' on their website: www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/interviewingguide.pdf

HOW TO:

PREPARE

- > **PROJECT PLAN:** Create a simple project plan:
 - What is the purpose of the project? What do you want learn about or preserve?
 - Who are you interviewing?
 - What will you do with the interview(s)?
- > **PRACTICE:** Practice with a friend to test out your recorder/recorder app, interview set-up, and some basic questions.
- > **INVITE:** Decide who you want to interview, and ask your narrator for an interview in person, over the phone, or by letter. Explain your project, what you want to do with the audio, and answer any questions they have.

A BASIC STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW

- > **WHERE:** Set up an interview in a quiet, private, comfortable space where you can sit and record.
- > **WHEN:** Allow at least 2 hours for the interview, so you are not rushed.
- > **BE SURE TO BRING:**
 - your recorder & extra batteries or a charger
 - a pen and paper
 - a camera, or a phone with a camera
 - a simple legal release (find an example online)
- > **PHOTOS:** Take a picture after the interview. Collect any other pictures or documents, if needed - make copies and return the originals quickly.

> Ask open-ended questions that allow narrators to share stories rather than 'yes' or 'no' questions.

> If needed, ask follow-up questions for more details or clarification.

> Ask only one question at a time.

> Silence is okay!

> You are there to listen; offer some affirmation or feedback, but keep your talking to a minimum.

> Relax! This is a chance for you to listen and the narrator to share their story. No two interviews are the same.

PROJECT IDEAS

> **FAMILY HISTORY:** Interview your parents or grandparents and get a basic family history. Share the full or edited audio with family members and future generations.

> **NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY:** New to a neighborhood? Introduce yourself to a neighbor and interview them about living in the community. Create a blog and share it with your block association or neighborhood group.

> **GROUP HISTORY:** Ask elders from your community garden or community group about the group's history. Organize a listening party to share the stories.

AFTER

> **SAVE:** Stay organized. Take the audio files off your recorder or phone and onto a computer. Create a folder that contains an audio file (in .wav and .mp3 format) and any other interview documents or photos.

> **RECIPROCITY:** Send a copy of the interview and a thank you note to the narrator as soon as possible.

> **TRANSCRIBE OR INDEX:** Transcribing is writing out the interview word-for-word; indexing is writing a summary of the interview. Decide which makes sense for your project.

> **EDITING:** If you decide to edit your audio, you can use a free, simple editing software called Audacity.