

Arizona Historical Society

Oral History
Handbook

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Note: Oro Valley Historical Society Notes Included in Italics Bold...

Preface

This handbook is a work in progress, gleaned from textbooks, articles, and web sites pertaining to oral history. More importantly, it is the shared experience of the author and others who have listened nervously for background noise, eyed the tape, and prayed during moments of silence for memories to jog and words to flow.

This short text is a distillation of many warnings, trials, tribulations, and triumphs. It doesn't purport to cover all aspects and fine points of the art of oral history, but should serve as a foundation, blueprint, and encouragement to get out there and tape!

The handbook comes from notes presented at a workshop in the Verde Valley, Arizona, June 29, 2002, and was edited for presentation on the Arizona Historical Society Website.

Definition of History

The Purposes of History

History is an extremely broad field, difficult to describe, but we can identify some of the things it does, and thus be able to recognize it in action.

History preserves:

Knowledge, Records, and Instructions – they can be as basic as how to cook your favorite dish, or as complex as how to run a government.

History transmits:

Values – Describes heroes and villains, indicates what good and bad deeds were.

Cultural information about where people come from and why they do things the way they do.

It passes on art, literature, dreams and goals. It fosters intercultural understanding.

History serves as a basis of law and political authority:

Historical records provide authority for ownership and human rights.

History is a valuable planning tool.

That's why we preserve the words of George Santayana:

“He who fails to learn from history is doomed to repeat it.”

History is also used in a smaller focus for projects such as organizational plans or even vacations.

History builds self worth for individuals and for groups.

History records and transmits successes over trials and tribulations, virtues maintained, goals sought, principles upheld, lessons learned. It allows us to take pride in those who went before us and in ourselves for being a part of that group, preserving the same virtues and values.

Self worth ties in closely with community. No man is an island; history describes how people have worked together to survive and make progress.

Why Oral History?

“Every old man that dies is a library that burns”

— Amadou Hampate Ba, African ethnographer

First and foremost, oral history is a ‘dying art.’ Photographs, books and documents sit on dusty shelves until we have time to examine their offerings. When someone dies, his or her information is lost forever – unless it has been captured on paper, on tape, or electronically to preserve it and pass it on to future generations.

Oral history fills in the gaps of history. All too often the conquerors write history – politicians, military officers, for the most part upper class white males. Oral history allows many other voices a chance to tell their story. Women, minorities, laborers, and immigrants – people from all walks of life share their knowledge, experience, and values with a greater number of people as a result of oral history.

Oral history is an easy way to increase the body of information. With an inexpensive tape recorder and a little training, almost anyone can become a part of the oral history process.

It gathers data not available in written records about events, people, decisions, and processes. The local perspective, grassroots history of an area can be presented through oral history when no other means works. Only those who have lived in an area know the “real story.” Publishers rarely publish books for limited interest groups or local markets.

Consider history’s purposes when planning your project, selecting narrators, and writing interview questions.

The personal benefits of participating in oral history, whether you are the interviewer or the narrator, are indescribable. Everyone has a story, words of wisdom to pass on, triumphs and tragedies. They want to relive romances fondly remembered, good times, things we no longer do. And everyone can learn from narrators, what is of value in life, how we came to be the way we are.

There are also practical applications. Why did the town chose to grow this way, how did companies succeed, “what worked and what didn’t” in all areas of our lives. How did things change, and by what actions, what we can do to prevent bad things from repeating themselves, and how we can encourage and help people. Much of this information is in the minds of our elderly, not on paper.

The History of Oral History

Thucydides wrote in *History of the Peloponnesian War* [431 BCE]

"And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eyewitnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible."

Thucydides set a precedent for the judicious use of oral testimony, and historians following in his footsteps continue to debate the proper handling of evidence offered in personal accounts.

Oral history preserves the personal recollections of participants and witnesses to unique historically and culturally valuable information. It is not an end in itself but another lens through which to view the past. It not only serves history, but also anthropology, political science, psychology, sociology and many other disciplines.

With preparation and empathy, interviewers help retrieve distant memories. The interactive process clarifies patterns from their experience that narrators might not have realized on their own.

Memory is a subjective instrument for recording the past, shaped by the present moment and the individual psyche. Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.

Kinds of Oral history

Oral history has been used for many purposes and today's oral historian should be aware of their motives and those of their benefactors.

Oral histories have been, and are, used for political purposes both by those in power and those seeking to gain power. For instance, tape recorders are taken into third world countries in turmoil to get interviews of the people most affected by the circumstances, instead of just those with access to the media.

The testimonies collected in this kind of project are called "advocacy testimonies." They often conclude with an "analysis and call to action," usually calling for drastic changes in the current government. This "testimonio" style of life history speech was used extensively in Central America during their liberation movements of the 1970s. This process is similar to a religious testimony. These interviews are usually not just a one-time recording for the record, but are repeated and refined in order to produce a more compelling story. In Latin American countries, these testimonies by strong charismatic leaders are called "pronunciamentos" and are often one of the steps in the revolution process.

In England, Socialist historian EP Thompson used oral histories to build a sense of community in lower-class mining areas. His extension courses and oral histories lead to his writing of "The Making of the English Working Class." Awareness of their common problems has the potential to galvanize communities for social action to improve conditions.

On a less radical note, community oral histories are often used to bridge the generation gap and help preserve cultural traditions, folkways, and heritage. Community histories promote public awareness of diversity within a larger area, compassion for common experiences and a better understanding of differences.

While the best product of a traditional oral history may be a thoroughly indexed transcript placed in a historical archive for the benefit of future historians and researchers, community histories better serve the public through inexpensive booklets containing excerpted quotes from interviews and pictures of the participants and their neighborhood. In some cases, unique products, such as videotapes, cable TV productions, calendars, or even a hip-hop rap CD can represent a community.

The Legalities and Ethics of Oral History

You may be thinking this section does not apply to you, but if you are interviewing someone it does. One author suggests these we approach these topics like “a cat in a yard full of dogs” – be extremely cautious, consider the impact of what you are doing, know the law, use a release form, and save a potential lawsuit. And even if you are not legally at risk, you have a moral obligation to be sure that your actions are not causing, or contributing to, the harm of other human beings. Oral historians, whether professionals, amateurs or family members, should be responsible to truth in research and the protection of human rights.

Legal Issues Copyright

The Copyright Act of 1976 governs concerns with copyright issues. Tapes and materials generated by oral history processes belong to both narrator and interviewer, in joint copyright because both parties create them in tandem. In order to make the information available, the narrator must sign a release form granting permission to use the materials, transferring copyright rights to the institution for specific purposes. If the interviewer is working on behalf of an institution, that person should sign over their rights to the institution.

Once the interviews are concluded and the tapes are transcribed, summarized, or merely brought to a repository, an archivist needs both parties’ permission to let the public listen to, or read, the transcript. If the material is intended for publication, museum exhibits, web site display, or any other purpose, the narrator must be made aware of these uses and sign a release for that specific purpose.

A release is form not a guarantee against lawsuits, but helps in court. At the outset, explain to the narrator that you need to have them sign a form after the interview. Do not have them sign the release form until after the interview is over, however. Signing before speaking would be like signing a blank check. Explain the how and why of the release form before they sign, and also explain the purpose for the interview. “This will allow me to use this information in my book,” or “so others can use your knowledge for research.”

In the event that some of the material is delicate but you still feel it important to have it on record, tell the narrator about options such as sealing the tape (prohibiting anyone from looking at it or listening to it). This can be done for a specific number of years, or just specific portions can be sealed. If there are restrictions, write the narrator’s wishes on the form. It is the responsibility of both the interviewer and any librarians, archivists, and assistants to respect these wishes, and make it known to anyone else who may have access to the materials.

If there are no restrictions to the use of the materials, ask the narrator to write “None” and initial it. Do not pressure a narrator to tell all or give free access to their words. This infringes on their right to make their own decision on these matters.

Libel

Libel is published statement that is false and which is intended to harm a person’s reputation. If spoken, it’s slander. The court says that “anyone who repeats, republishes, or redistributes a defamatory statement . . .” may be guilty of libel. This means that if by your tapes, transcripts or other uses of the interview materials you are helping to pass on slander that was told to you, you may also be found guilty of libel.

In order to be considered libel, the information must usually fit these criteria:

- 1) Dishonesty or fraud
- 2) Crime or immorality
- 3) Injuring professional reputation
- 4) Lack of fitness for, or misconduct while in office or employment

The court must prove that the statements are false, that they have been communicated to at least one third party, that the person libeled can be identified, that their reputation suffered harm as a result of the statement, and that the defendant had a part in communicating the libel.

Public figures are exempt from libel laws because it is assumed that by entering into the public view, whether performers or politicians, that they have willingly given up their right to privacy.

Libel does not apply to a person's opinion, as long as they don't try to pass it off as factual material. Your narrator may say that they think their former boss, John Smith, was a crook. But cannot say that he "was" a crook unless they have proof. If harmful, false statements are made by the narrator but they were unintentional and no malice was intended, the defendants may be found not guilty. Libel does not apply to dead persons unless they are considered to have an ongoing career or reputation.

If a narrator seems to be heading for libelous area, it is suggested that you stop the tape and explain to the narrator that you perceive that you might be bordering on a legal difficulty. If the narrator continues, you will probably want to delete libelous portions or omit the victim's name from your tapes.

Privacy

It is the interviewers legal obligation to respect the narrator's right to privacy. This includes asking questions which may be damaging to the narrator, or restricting their personal freedom by invading their private space and depriving them of control of their personal information. Recording without the speaker's knowledge is an invasion of privacy. Ask permission to tape.

The interviewer should be wary of questions that reveal a person's private life. Statements can be true but too personal to be included in an interview. If events in their personal life did not affect their conduct in office or business, the public does not necessarily have a right to know.

In addition, the narrator has the right to tell you their own secrets, although it is not advisable for you to ask, or they to tell. However, the narrator does not have the right to tell you anyone else's secrets. In those cases you may be inviting a libel suit.

Ethics

Although some practices regarding oral histories may be strictly illegal, there are many cases where the oral historian has a professional responsibility to decide whether what they are doing is morally right, regardless of the interpretation of the law. Ethical questions require individual choices, but historians should understand guidelines established by professionals and examine their own actions accordingly. Oral historians should keep in mind the protection of individuals, groups and communities and should serve the basic value of truth in publication.

The interviewer has an ethical duty to tell each narrator the goals of the oral history project, the stages of research, explain how the tapes will be used. Honesty the best policy. Do not create a project where you can not tell the subjects what the goal or expected outcome of the project is.

The narrator should be informed of their rights, such as limiting private information, sealing parts of the tape, choosing anonymity and not being pressured into talking about material they would rather not speak about, or they can choose to stop the interview at any time. They should be told that they could refuse to answer any question or topic. Narrators should be told where the tapes will wind up and who can listen to them. Use your own judgment about sealing tapes. Sometimes the elderly do not understand the consequences and just want to please you. Or maybe they have a grudge. Ask a second time if you are not sure about their wishes.

The general guideline for oral historians and other researchers is, "the risks of harm to participants must be small in comparison to the good resulting from the research." As a manager of oral history projects, it is your responsibility to teach your volunteers to respect the narrator. Failure to do so may bring regretful consequences to you, your narrators and interviewers, and to organizations involved in the project.

Sensitivity

The interviewer should be aware that personal questions might disrupt family relations. Interviews should be conducted with each family member separately whenever possible and it may be wise not to publish materials that could be sensitive to other family members.

Although the narrator has the right to remain anonymous, the veracity of the information is difficult for researchers to judge if they do not know the narrator's identity and how they are in a position to know the information they are relating. One can not tell their involvement in the event, whether they would know, or what their bias might be. If parties have asked to remain anonymous, it is up to those in the archives to protect the materials, especially from journalists or others that may make the information public. Sensitive tapes should be flagged as such. One method of protection is to make copies of the original and seal them, and then release edited versions for public use. On the other hand, give credit where credit is due. If your subject founded an arts league, by all means give them credit for it.

When you learn to be an interested and empathetic listener, you will win the confidence and sometimes affection of the narrator, especially if they are elderly and experiencing lack of attention and loneliness. Be careful not to be such a good confidante that the narrator tells all, or at least don't let them put it on tape if you feel it's not in their best interest.

Interviewers should be careful not to talk about the people they have interviewed, especially if sensitive material is involved. This includes conversations with office staff, family and friends. Even when signed release forms are obtained, word of mouth information may jeopardize your professional ethics.

Relationships and Reputations

The interviewer should tell the narrator when the stories they are relating might be harmful to others. The people mentioned may listen to the tapes or read the transcriptions, and the material related by someone else could hurt their feelings. You may want to suggest that the narrator could be more general about who did what but still get the point across that certain things were done wrong.

If the interviewer knows about interpersonal conflicts, they can create questions that approach the situation tactfully. Rather than saying, "John Doe said you got him fired," you might ask: "how did you feel about Mr. Doe's performance while working at Bland Corp.? "Did you mention it to anyone at the time?"

Ethics of the Profession vs. Humanitarian Concerns

The oral historian must always answer to a higher standard and consider the bigger picture before making information available to the public. In many cases the historian has the legal right to publish. Participants gave their stories willingly, proper release forms were signed, and the official laws of slander, copyright, and privacy have not been broken.

However, looking at the larger perspective you may feel that making the material public would cause harm to certain persons, groups or communities. The statements are true, and you have not manipulated pieces of them to change their meaning, but at a gut level you believe that your work might cause harm and your conscience would make you feel bad about your actions. The guiding rule of ethics should be: "do not harm others, reduce their wellbeing, or inhibit their freedom to express and develop themselves."

In many cases, publishing the narrator's minor character flaws, or those of his family or acquaintances, is not an integral piece of the history you are trying to relate. On the other hand, if an administrator's actions affected the future of an institution, the historian has a duty to describe the character's actions as they relate to the cause and effect outcome of historical events.

The interviewer must decide what materials to include, what questions to ask and how to ask them. While printing too much may cause harm to individuals and groups, the historical record can be damaged if the tough questions are not asked and the bad news is not published along with the good. Constantly ask yourself:

“am I getting the whole story from my subject, or just the usual stories that they have told and perhaps embellished over the years?”

Independence, Integrity and Control of Outcome

In the pursuit of truth, historians should strive to remain independent of those who support them. If funding is received to conduct a series of oral histories to create a company history, or the chamber of commerce or city council sponsors the project, the oral historian should beware of whom is in control of editing and publication of the materials. The goals of the funding agencies may differ greatly from those of professional oral historians, and their control of the project may greatly affect the outcome.

The glowing nostalgia of an “Our Town” narrative may increase the gaps in the historical record instead of filling them in. Legends may be perpetuated, and dark incidents swept even farther under the carpet. History should be presented “warts and all,” but not so far on the bad side that it becomes muckraking. Don’t leave the hard questions unasked. Tapes should reveal discrimination, business ethics, and the character of the people the narrators knew. When working for public institutions, such as state or local governments, a shift in public opinion as a result of your project could jeopardize the institution’s wellbeing, yet is the historian’s obligation to record the good, bad and the ugly.

When material is controversial, the historian would do well to write an introduction to caution the reader about not judging the past through today’s moral standards, to maintain empathy for the times in which events took place and choices were made. As a historian, you have an obligation to present as many sides as possible as faithfully as possible.

Personal Bias

When planning projects, choosing narrators, writing interview questions, conducting interviews, and editing transcripts, beware of your biases: liberal as well as conservative, regional – country vs. city – gender stereotypes, culture and class. While the historian may strive to overcome these, they should also be accepted and taken into account throughout the project.

Beware also of “unconscious advocacy,” that subtle attachment to the company or town who supports us, to whom bad reporting would appear to be biting the hand that feeds us. After some time on a project, interviewers may start to empathize with their subjects, and may get too friendly to give unbiased picture.

The Power of the Interviewer

On the surface, it appears that the interviewer is completely neutral. They just turn on the tape recorder, ask a few questions and then just nod, and try not to interrupt, right? Nothing could be further from the truth. The oral historian has a great deal of power in what topics will be used to create a project, who the subjects will be, what questions will be asked, and what will be transcribed, edited and eventually presented, and to whom it will be available. All of the above are necessary choices in each project, and with them the oral historian has a great deal of power and responsibility.

These people open their lives, and the lives of those they knew, and we make them public. Will our work change the public’s view of a particular community, or perpetuate a false view? Oral history is a vital part of recording posterity, explaining the past, transferring culture and pointing the way to the future and progress of civilization. The oral historian should learn as much as possible about the art, practice it to the best of one’s ability, and continually evaluate not only practical performance but legal and ethical actions as well.

Planning Your Project

Because of the urgent sense of timeliness connected with this kind of project, oral histories are often rushed into and as a result proceed haphazardly. We have to get grandpa on tape before he goes, so we wait until the last minute and then just turn on the tape and start talking (yes, that should be listening, but without planning and practice it isn't always the case).

The same happens in a community. If the town is small enough, we know who the prime suspects are, and we can easily make a "hit list" of the most important people to capture on tape. We all agree that we have to get them before it's too late, so sometimes we just charge ahead in all directions.

However, time, money, and personnel do not allow us to create a complete biography of each person. Even if we could, the result would be 20-page documents that even the subject's children wouldn't take the time to plod through.

The skill then, is to distill unique information from as many people as possible and sort it in such a manner that future writers, historians and community members can access the knowledge and experiences of our narrators. They may use it as inspiration, a planning tool, or merely entertainment. The planning stage is a crucial step in producing useful history instead of dozens of tapes that wind up in a shoebox in someone's closet and will never be transcribed.

Advisory Panel

The best way to begin an oral history project is by forming an advisory panel of interested community members. Preferably these should be people who have lived in the area quite a while, or at the least people who have taken the time to learn about the community and have gotten to know many of its long time residents. Potential panel members should be aware that this is a working committee, and reliability and dedication will be required for its success. Rather than just a hobby, these people will be contributing a valuable service to the community, but it will take time and effort to produce lasting history.

The panel should begin by brainstorming, the most enjoyable parts of the planning stage. Have panel members discuss all the potential narrators each of them can think of and give their reasons why each candidate should be on the list. Yes, "they're old" is a good reason, but what information or experiences have they to share? Were they involved in the community and did they know leading figures? Do they represent a particular culture or lifestyle that is in danger of fading away? Once you have a list of who they are and why they're on the list, you can create topics from the overlapping categories you have listed for each potential narrator.

Also, the panel should brainstorm about the community in general. Why did it come into being, what are the major industries and politics? What events have influenced its evolution, growth, or decline?

Once the narrators and the topic(s) have been chosen, the more practical matters of personnel, equipment, deadlines, and budget can be worked out.

Preparing a budget

Begin with possible monies available, sources of funding. This may determine the number of narrators for the project. You'll need: tapes, tape recorder, microphones, transcription machine, batteries, film, copying costs, paper. These are fixed costs, and may range anywhere from \$150 if you already have some equipment or can get by with lesser quality recorder and no transcription machine, or \$2500 for the works.

After equipment, transcribing could be your biggest expense. Volunteer transcriptionists are hard to come by. It is estimated that each hour of tape takes four hours to transcribe. A modest project of 10 narrators could take up more than 40 hours of a volunteer's time. *Burnout is common among these volunteers, treat them like saints.* If you can afford to pay a transcriptionist, estimate about \$20 per hour but make the best deal you can. For the same 10-person project, your transcription budget will be approximately \$1,000. Gas money,

workshops for training interviewers, per diem, travel — all of these should not apply to volunteer organizations, but you should be aware that they will be incurred and must be absorbed by someone.

24 Easy Steps for Oral History Projects

1. Appoint an advisory board to meet on a consistent schedule
2. Consult community members for background history, potential narrators
3. Brainstorm on a “most wanted” list of possible narrators and why
4. Set realistic goals — why do the project, who will benefit? Contact State Library and Archives, AHS Division, nearby universities and libraries for collaborative help
5. Create a budget, make an equipment list.
6. Estimate the number and type of volunteers; interviewers, transcribers, archivists
7. Set deadlines for each step of the process and review them often.
8. Research: review local state, and U.S. history, especially eras and topics common to narrators in your area — ranching, tourism, WWII, the Depression
9. Consider “big picture” questions: immigration, economy, gender roles, occupations, politics, social life, religion, folkways, traditions
10. List expected information sought
11. Create a list of possible questions, topics, and groups of people to interview.
12. Develop budget — clerical, equipment, supplies
13. Seek funding
14. Locate similar projects already done or in process in other areas
15. Assemble personnel, begin training
16. Set out a time schedule for interviews, transcription, publication
17. Create a list possible Narrators
18. Select and contact the Narrators, get biographical information on each
19. Research specific Narrators, tailor questions to each one
20. Determine order of interviews; the information from one may suggest questions for others
21. Interview the Narrators
22. Process the tapes
23. Make the information available; cataloged in an archive, published form, etc.
24. Evaluate the process, BEGIN AGAIN!!

Before the Interview

By now you have brainstormed about a list of important events and topics you want to cover, and also have an idea of who you want to interview and what your final product will be. The following are some steps you should take before you start the tape recorder.

1. Research

This important step often makes the difference between a valuable record and a reminiscing chat. Whether you are a professional historian, relative or amateur, we hope you will take your responsibility seriously and learn about the times and people surrounding your subject first.

Nothing takes place in a vacuum. Geography, past events and their participants influence your subject. The more you learn about these influences the better questions you can ask, leading to a clearer understanding of why things happened and the lessons we can learn from them.

If you are not already a history fan, skimming basic world history and American history texts will be helpful. Libraries often have audio or video history series if that is more convenient. You should focus on 20th century American history, but events in previous centuries influenced immigration patterns and choice of settlement areas, as well as economic, political and social hierarchies.

When you've absorbed the general history of the era and location, narrow your focus by reading books or pamphlets about local history. Visit your local historical society or museums and attend lectures or local tours. You may want to read about various professions (i.e. mining or ranching) or the histories of various cultures or historical events your narrator may have experienced.

Once you have a list of prospective narrators, you may be able to find newspaper clippings about them at your historical society or library. Also, talk to longtime community residents, relatives or people in the same or related professions as your narrator to see what they are noted for.

2. Contact

Call the narrator and introduce yourself, explain your project and their importance to it. This is your first chance to establish rapport with your subject. Present your information clearly, pleasantly, and with respect. Let them know that their experiences will be valued and respected.

The Arizona Historical Society has developed a "Biographical Information Form" that the narrator or a relative can fill out. Ask the narrator to fill out the form and arrange to drop it off and pick up the completed form in time to review it before your interview. Give your narrator a general idea of the subject matter you hope to cover, but avoid detailed descriptions. Specific questions may lead to prepared responses, affecting the spontaneity and candor of the interview.

Set a specific time and place for the interview. The time should be most convenient for them, and the narrator's home is usually the best place. Avoid locations with distractions.

3. Make a List of Questions

Once you've done your research and reviewed the biographical form, prepare an outline or list of questions to be asked at the interview. You don't have to stick directly to them; in fact, interviews where questions are curtly and quickly asked give an impression that the interviewer does not care and is not listening to the responses. Your list of questions should serve as a road map and can help get you back on track if the narrator, or you, digresses. It also avoids leaving something out.

4. Reminder call

Call the narrator the day before the interview to confirm your appointment. Remind them of the general topics you hope to cover, and reassure them that their experience and information is important to the project. Suggest that they might bring out yearbooks, clippings, photos, etc. If you found photos or clippings about them in your research, bring them along and make copies for narrator to keep.

During the Interview

1. Test the equipment
2. Slate (record the date, project, people involved at the beginning of the tape) and label tapes.
3. Break the ice with pleasantries, weather, surroundings, and people you both know and respect. Then begin with brief, guiding questions. “I understand your grandfather came around the Horn to California. What did he tell you about the trip?”
4. Ask questions that cannot be answered “yes” or “no”. “What did the cowhands think of the ranch owner?”
5. Ask one brief question at a time, get all information possible, move on.
6. Check off questions as you go and note topics already discussed.
7. Write down follow-up questions, new directions, and other possible narrators while listening to responses.
8. Start with less controversial questions to establish rapport and pace, build up to and end with “interview stoppers” (i. e. why did you bulldoze that land?)
9. Do not pass judgement or give opinions, not even with expressions or body language.
10. Don’t fear silence. Relax, jot some notes and wait while they consider their response.
11. Give physical cues, nod and smile. Make eye contact if appropriate for their culture.
12. Assure them that names and dates aren’t all that important, you can look them up. It’s personal experience we’re looking for, and a rough sequence of what happened.
13. Don’t be too polished, it’s okay to fumble questions, puts them at ease.
14. Ask probing questions with sensitivity — back off if you are upsetting the narrator.
15. DON’T INTERRUPT a good story because you’ve thought of a question. Jot it down and ask it later.
16. DON’T TALK TOO MUCH! This is the hardest part, continue to watch for it.
17. Shepherd the narrator back onto the topic. Don’t get interested in divergences. “Before we move on, I’d like to ask . . .” can help put you back on track.
18. Take your time and make sure you’ve covered what you came for.
19. Ask for a physical description if narrator can’t describe someone’s personality.
20. Find out narrator’s involvement in events. Where you there when . . ., Did you work for . . ., Did you know Mr. Greenway?
21. Don’t challenge what you think may not be true. Ask more about why they think that. Point out that others have related something differently, see what they say. “I have read. . . I have heard . . .”
22. Avoid off the record information. Promise that you will erase it later. You are obligated to do that if you said you would.
23. Keep the tape running, even after you think you’re done. Don’t hide it, but sometimes as you’re leaving they add good information. Watch the sound level meter or light to make sure they are coming across loud enough.
24. Beware of background noise. Ask to move to another room, have workers move to a different chore, etc.
25. Interviews usually work better if no one else is in the room. If there are more narrators, each should be recorded separately. There are exceptions, when the narrator is too shy, that a friend may help.
26. End after an hour and a half. This helps you, too. Sharp listening takes energy.
27. Don’t use the interview to show off your knowledge, vocabulary, or charm.
28. Get release forms signed.
29. Tell narrator what happens next.
30. Write or record impressions of setting, mood, weather, and circumstances right afterward.

Interview Checklist

You may find it helpful to get a large book bag and keep all your oral history tools there so they are always with you and you don't have to round them up.

Tape recorder	Extra batteries	Release forms
Notepads	Pen/pencil	Microphones
Labeled tapes	Camera	List of questions
Biographical form	Photos and clippings	Tape measure

Photographs may be appropriate to:

- 1) Record the setting
- 2) Capture personality or flavor
- 3) Illustrate a skill or process
- 4) Show characteristic lifestyle and household details

Get permission to photograph, note it on the release, and tell the narrator if you plan to give them a copy.

After the Interview

1. Listen to the tape, jot down major topics, interesting answers, missed cues to new questions.
2. Note places where subject could have said more on a subject.
3. Were the “Big Questions” addressed?
4. Was it unique material or just another “how we fed the pigs story?” Was it a mere listing of teachers’ names, or socially informative details of classroom life?
5. Is another interview warranted? If so, develop new questions from your tape notes and perhaps new research.
6. Evaluate subject’s cooperation, reliability.
7. How successful was the interview? What could be improved for next time?
8. How does the information fit with what we already have for the whole project?
9. Does it validate or refute earlier information?
10. Does this interview fill in gaps, or is it just more of the same?
11. Meet with advisory board and/or other interviewers, share topics and information gathered; consider new questions.
12. Consider enlisting other narrators suggested by this interview.

Processing Materials

1. Make copies of the tapes.
2. If transcribed by someone else, have interviewer read the notes and edit.
3. If a full transcription is made, give a copy to narrator for editing and approval.
4. If the tape is for public access without transcription, create an abstract or tape log
5. For Cataloging, Finding Aids: Collaborate with local library, university, or larger historical society. Contact Melanie Sturgeon or Gladys Ann Wells at Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records. www.dlapr.lib.az.us (602) 542-4159
6. Don't let everything sit in a shoebox! Catalog, index, and make accessible.
7. Use quality tapes. 60-minute cassettes are not as thin, less likely to break or jam.
8. Make working copies to avoid wear and tear on the originals. Store back up tapes in a separate building from originals, if possible.
9. Store in a cool, clean, dry area away from magnetic fields (microwaves, computers). Avoid fluctuations in temperature. Store off the floor to prevent flood damage.
10. Place tapes vertically on the shelf.
11. Store tapes in the original containers. For additional protection, place in plastic bags.
12. Airport security x-rays will not damage tapes — metal detectors?

Transcribing tips

1. Start each page with narrator name, date, project name
2. Number the pages
3. Type with one-inch margins, double-spaced.
4. When necessary for clarity, identify each speaker with initials and colon — JT:
5. Omit “umms” and “ahhs”, but do type uh-huh for yes if that’s what they said.
6. Enter the tape recorder footage meter reading every quarter page.
7. Retain speech patterns whenever possible. Note foreign language in [brackets].
8. Question mark before and after if not sure of what you heard — ?employed?
9. Bracket interruptions [phone call].
10. Mark inaudible words with “___” — indicate multiple words with “__+” estimate time elapsed when narrator pauses for considerable time.

Final Project Evaluation

If you have been evaluating your performance and the quality of the interviews as you go along, you will already have valuable data for the final overall evaluation of your oral history project. Go through each interview and create categories, then list common problems and ways you got around them.

Then look at the overall goals and plans for the project. Were they realistic? How well did you meet the objectives you set for the project? What were the major blocks from complete success?

Did you choose the best narrators, interviewers, and questions for the project's goals? If not, who or what was left out, and why? Was the subject matter properly researched? Were the interviewers trained well, and provided with good questions?

Does the material gathered add information to understanding history? Do the stories complement each other, or is there too much of the same material? Does the information seem valid, and are many sides of the story presented? Were new topics followed up as they appeared in interviews? Was the material corroborated after the interview with other sources?

With regard to the final product: are the materials transcribed, summarized, indexed, cataloged and available for access by researchers and/or the public?

Were the proper release and donation forms signed? Did the narrator understand their rights regarding privacy and copyright? Was anyone upset by the interview process? If so, why? What lessons were learned that can be applied to future projects? How successful was your choice of topic, size of project, types of questions, preparations, scheduling, etc.