

# Conducting Oral History Interviews: A Practical Guide

## What is Oral History?

Oral history is a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people who participated in historical events. Unlike traditional documentary research, oral history creates new primary sources through structured interviews.

## Before the Interview

### Research Preparation

- Study the historical context thoroughly
- Learn about your narrator's background
- Identify key events, dates, and people to explore
- Prepare open-ended questions that invite storytelling
- Avoid questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”

### Technical Preparation

- Test all recording equipment beforehand
- Bring backup batteries and storage media
- Choose a quiet location with minimal background noise
- Position the microphone properly (lapel mics work best)
- Do a brief test recording and play it back

### Ethical Considerations

- Obtain informed consent in writing
- Explain how the interview will be used and stored
- Clarify whether the narrator can review transcripts
- Discuss any topics that may be off-limits
- Be clear about rights to the recording

## During the Interview

### Building Rapport

The first few minutes set the tone. Begin with: - Comfortable small talk - Easy biographical questions (where they grew up, family) - Let the narrator settle into the role of storyteller

### Effective Questioning

**DO:** - Ask one question at a time - Use follow-up questions: “Can you tell me more about that?” - Allow silences—narrators often fill them with valuable

details - Show genuine interest through body language - Let the narrator lead when they have momentum

**DON'T:** - Interrupt or finish their sentences - Express judgment about their experiences - Challenge their memory directly - Rush to the next question - Share your own opinions excessively

### Handling Difficult Moments

Oral history often touches on painful memories. If a narrator becomes emotional:  
- Offer to pause the recording - Provide tissues and water - Ask if they want to continue - Never pressure them to discuss traumatic events

### After the Interview

#### Processing

1. **Label everything** - Date, narrator name, location, interviewer
2. **Create a log** - Note timestamps for key topics
3. **Transcribe carefully** - Include pauses, laughter, emphasis
4. **Send for review** - Allow narrator to clarify or redact

#### Preservation

- Store recordings in multiple formats and locations
- Create metadata describing the collection
- Consider donation to an archive
- Maintain contact information for the narrator

### Common Pitfalls

- **Over-preparing questions** - This leads to rigid interviews
- **Ignoring tangents** - Sometimes the best material comes unexpectedly
- **Forgetting context** - Always record date, location, and circumstances
- **Technical failures** - The most important interview is the one you lose

### Conclusion

Oral history is both a research method and a human encounter. The best interviewers combine scholarly rigor with genuine empathy, creating spaces where people feel safe to share their stories.