

# Putting Together an Oral History Project: General Guidelines

---

## Pre-Interview

1. Prepare for your interview by researching the subject at hand. Oral Histories should be about a specific topic, not general experiences. Narrators should be carefully selected based on their experiences with the topic.
2. Identify your narrator- who can tell interesting stories, who has lived through a unique time period, who can document an era for which little other information exists. Make sure this person is in reasonable health with a good memory, and preferably an enjoyment for conversation. Courteously ask the possible narrator to a meeting to discuss the project and if he or she would be interested in contributing.
3. Be sure the narrator understands why this interview is important and what your plans are once the interview is completed. Consider this a pre-interview session. This should be done a few days before the scheduled interview, so the narrator can collect their thoughts and assemble possible “memory cues”. These can include scrapbooks, heirlooms, and old photos. Schedule times and dates for the interview, and where it will take place. The interview should be a private unhurried appointment in a quiet location, to limit environmental feedback.
4. Prepare a general list of questions or topics that cover the subject. Be sure you have done enough research to ask intelligent, probing questions. The interviewer should be familiar with names and terms that are part of the narrator’s experience.
5. Before the interview, test your equipment. Familiarize yourself with the equipment so during the interview you can adjust with ease. It is better to rely on electricity rather than batteries. Pack an extension cord and/or power strip. Ensure your recording device has enough storage space or pack additional tapes. Make sure that the microphones or cameras are set up properly to optimize the quality of the interview. Situate the equipment so you can monitor storage space, battery life, etc.

## Interview

1. During set-up be sure to reiterate why you are interviewing the narrator. Make the narrator as relaxed as possible. If the interview is taking place at the narrator’s home, have him or her sit in their favorite location. Eliminate as many distractions as possible with respect to the narrator’s requests.



2. Both parties should agree to an approximate length of time. Most interviews last about two hours, but if the narrator wishes to stop or continue at any time, those wishes should be honored. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to notice if the narrator is fatigued. If this occurs ask if the narrator would like to continue this at another time.
3. Record an introduction containing narrator name, interviewer name, date and location. *Example:* “This is John Doe interviewing Mary Smith, on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. The interview is taking place at Mrs. Smith’s home in Saint Paul, MN at 2000 Montrose Street.”
4. Begin with simple questions, such as those relating to the narrator’s background. Cover the material chronologically wherever possible; as this is the way most people best remember events. Go through your list of topics, without interrupting the narrator or disturbing the flow of the interview. As new questions or areas of interest emerge, take note to follow up.
5. Listen carefully, and be prepared to ask follow-up questions when necessary. Be especially alert to shorthand or slang many people use in conversation. For instance, use follow-ups questions to clarify the identity of people mentioned by first name.
6. After the interview, be sure to review the spellings of names and places that the narrator has mentioned. Make note of any information regarding photographs or other materials that your narrator has identified during the interview. Double-check any dates or biographical information that the narrator has discussed. If possible, take photos of your narrator.
7. Carefully explain the importance of a signed donor agreement form. Make sure the narrator signs the original and receives a copy for his or her own records.

## Post- Interview

1. Name the file, or label the tapes, with the narrator’s name, the interviewer’s name, and the date of the interview. Imbed metadata into video or audio file to ensure that information is not lost in any of the copies.
2. The value in these projects is maintaining it for long-term use. A copy should be made immediately and stored in a different format and/or location from the original. The ideal archiving practice for Oral History projects is the 3,2,1 standard ([link](#)).
3. Send a thank you note to the narrator.
4. The interview should be transcribed. You should consider who will do the work-yourself, a volunteer, a secretarial service, or a professional oral history transcriber. For more information on transcription see the transcribing and editing

page. If you would like a list of transcription services, please contact the Minnesota Historical Society Department of Oral Histories.

5. Consider the potential uses for the finished interview. For grants, be sure to adhere to all the requirements of that specific program. If you and your project are unaffiliated with an institution, you should evaluate the possibility of depositing your interview in a public repository.