

A Guide for Recording Oral History

Glen Park Neighborhoods History Project
San Francisco, California

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Summary: This guide attempts to establish guidelines and procedures for collecting, processing, and using local oral histories, in a way that are appropriate to our Project's goals and capacities. It describes steps to prepare for and execute the interview process, and propose some ways to publish and use the material collected. It offers examples to follow or avoid in published video oral histories. Lastly, there is a highly condensed pocket version of the guide at the end.

Goals: This guide aims to make numerous steps in the oral history process clear and succinct, while addressing the various aspects of human relations, good setup, careful recordkeeping, historical accuracy, and legal permissions. A future addendum will describe some more adaptable and flexible methods for recording oral history in less formalized circumstances.

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Supplemental Documents

- ["Oral History Tips"](#) from The Oral History Center at UC Berkeley
- Biography Form [\[PDF\]](#)
- Legal Forms: Informed Consent and Deed of Gift [\[PDF\]](#)

Pocket Oral History Guide [\[link\]](#)

I. Finding the Oral History Subject

People with stories to tell about local history can be found in any number of ways. Each of us in working in local history have happened upon people we believe to have significant stories to tell.

We can expand this list by asking people in various contexts:

1. At our meetings
2. In the email newsletters
3. On online community messaging boards
4. In the context of collaboration with other history groups
5. In our neighborhoods; at shops, barbers, salons, etc.
6. After getting ideas from old neighborhood newsletters

We can assemble a list from these sources, and begin arranging dates for an interview. Anyone whose health is fragile might be approached sooner rather than later.

Finding the right interviewer is next. Working in a team of two for video interviews is a minimum, as the actual interview process can be fussy and detailed, and there may not be a second chance should something not go right. Having the help of a local volunteer who is adept at video and audio would be a great boon.

Some subjects may be adverse to a formalized video interview, yet open to being recorded in audio in a less formal way. Others may agree to write their stories, and not want to be recorded. This is why flexibility is important: no one is overlooked simply because they are shy or have different preferences.

II. Preparing for the Interview

The elements of preparation:

1. Pre-interview Work
2. Preparing Questions
3. Arranging a Time and Place

Pre-interview Work

The preparation needed is **for both parties**: the interviewer should come to know the subject's background and life well enough ahead of time that s/he can ask just those questions that elicit the best and most important stories. The interviewee should be given a good understanding of the interview process and the things s/he'll be asked, in advance, so that s/he understands what is happening and can give some thought to responses before the actual interview. Both these conditions are ideal, but may not always be met.

For the **pre-interview process**, the interviewer should:

- **Talk with the subject** on the phone or in person beforehand, obtaining their trust, familiarity, and comfort with you as a person;
- Fill out the **Biography Form** with the subject;
- Identify **important stories** and experiences of the subject;
- Ask about **photos** and other artifacts;
- **Do some research** in the public record to help fill out your understanding;
- Let subject know what the **questions** will generally be (either written or orally);
- **Set expectations** and understandings about the process with the subject;
- Fill out and have subject sign the **Informed Consent Form**; and
- Discuss **Deed of Gift Form** (may be signed by subject at interview or after).

It can take quite a while to come to know a subject's stories related to local events, so having at least one, perhaps more, **pre-interview talks** (phone or in-person, without recording equipment) is an important preparation for subjects who might not know which of the stories they can tell are the more vital ones. By coming to know what a subject has seen and done, an interviewer can better choose the questions and guide the interview.

Your subject must understand and agree to the potential interview, and agree to being recorded either as video or audio—and then sign the **Informed Consent Form** [combined with Deed of Gift [in this pdf](#)]. Discuss what will likely be done with the resulting recording, pending their approval. Discuss the legal aspects—the rights of the subject regarding permissions and copyright, and the **Deed of Gift Form** that s/he will be asked to sign at or after the interview.

For the skeptical subject, perhaps offering that s/he could talk to other people who have been so interviewed and are willing to share their feelings about it may help. For stories that the subject wishes to remain confidential until a particular date, discuss the details of “sealing” this portion of the interview by specifying details in the Deed of Gift Form, until an agreed-upon point in the future.

Preparing Questions

Here is an excellent set of [tips about the question process](#), from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley (located at the end of this Guide). Read and review often.

One reason for thinking carefully about crafting good questions is to **get your subject past his or her canned stories**—those preset memories that may have been recounted many times, and into a fresher place—without intruding your own presence into the interview process. Another reason for thoughtful question-making is to make sure you as the interviewer don't end up telling the story.

Separate research on the part of the interviewer helps the process of creating questions and conducting the interview. It provides background and sparks additional questions. Looking into the background of other individuals involved in the events to be discussed, as well as news reports and other items from the public record, can enhance the interview process. Do your homework!

The number and type of written questions should take account of the likely length of the interview. The questions can be general and adjusted during the actual interview. **Ask early about those stories that are the most important**; no subject should be asked to endure a three-hour interview for you to get to the crux of things, especially the older subject. On the other side of things, an interviewer should consider keeping a few extra questions in reserve, should things begin to flag during the interview.

Give your subject time to consider what s/he will be asked about. Generally this means presenting something to your subject in a written form, but if there are eyesight or disability issues, it could mean orally. Listen to feedback from your subject about the questions or stories you propose—there may be important things you’ve missed. By having time to consider the questions, the subject can also reflect and recall additional material or dig out old photos and artifacts.

Arranging a Time and Place

The place where the interview is arranged to take place should firstly be **comfortable to the subject**, and perhaps be relevant to the stories to be told. Noise levels and light levels should be considered and tested beforehand (see Equipment section).

III. The Oral History Interview

The ideal oral history interview does one thing well, and one thing only: it gets the subject to tell his or her story in the most engaging, direct, and truthful way. Everything else is there to enable that one goal, and should be basically invisible—whether that is the interviewer’s sparkling personality, the bells and whistles on the video equipment, or the fancy house where it is recorded. **The interviewee and the story should always remain the focus.**

The elements of the interview process:

1. Equipment and Helpers
2. Setup and Preparation
3. Lighting
4. Microphone and Sound Issues
5. Setting and Participants
6. Framing
7. Question Time

Equipment and Helpers

You may already have the equipment you need. Many cellphones and compact cameras today have good video and audio capacity. Microphones on these devices are often very good. **Always test your chosen equipment beforehand** to find out what the quality is like, including processing your test through to a finished product. You must be comfortable with it, and confident of what result you will get with it.

Alternately, more advanced equipment can be bought. Finding the volunteer help of a professional videographer, especially if a two-camera set-up, could make for a better interview (e.g. if there are two people being interviewed together).

A video interview generally needs at least **two people**: one to ask questions and one to set up and monitor the camera and other equipment. An audio interview is simpler, and can be done by just one interviewer if s/he knows the recording device well.

Oral histories that are **audio-only** may be done with the audio recorder on a camera or cellphone (if tested to be of sufficient quality) or a dedicated digital audio recorder, which can be bought for a reasonable price. Whatever audio equipment that is used, it must not be voice-activated, whether a cellphone or a dedicated recorder. Test this beforehand. Voice-activated recorders often clip off the first few milliseconds of speech.

A **tripod** for the camera is essential for a static setup with a seated subject and a long video interview. A full sized tripod is almost always necessary; there are small table-top types and “gorilla” types that can attach to objects in the environment, but these would only be useful in unusual places or for ad-hoc spontaneous interviews.

Make sure the **memory card** in your camera or the **memory capacity** of your phone is sufficient for the expected length of the interview, whether audio or video. Test this capacity beforehand. Cameras with removable cards are handy, because by bringing extra cards(s) and changing them when needed, you are never caught short of storage space.

Know your own stuff: Whatever the equipment, the most important thing is for the interviewer or helper to be **very familiar with his or her own recording device**. By using it in similar circumstances and then processing that video or audio an interviewer or helper can understand its capacities and limitations—which is key for getting the best results. One way to do this is to shoot a short interview with your friend or mate, and make a short video of it, just for practice.

My personal philosophy is: **the camera you know well and have worked with is worth more than fancier models just out of the box.**

Setup and Preparation

The interview questions have been thought out and shared with the subject, and the place and time has been chosen. **When the day arrives, give yourself time to set up**—before any talking begins. Run a test on the sound, lighting, and positioning of the subject. Read the sections below carefully, because all the factors interact with each other. One way to check what the final result will be is to bring a laptop, shoot a short sequence on camera or phone, upload to the laptop, and see how the sound and light look with the subject on the big screen. Familiarity with your computer and your camera will make this faster and easier.

Lighting

Bearing in mind that the focus should be on the face and perhaps shoulders of your subject, **lighting matters a great deal**. Ideally you should have some leeway to move your subject to a place in the environment where his or her face will be well lighted. Strong direct sunlight is almost always a bad idea. If using light from a window, make sure it is indirect. Bright overcast skies make for excellent lighting. Fluorescent lighting creates a color cast that is impossible to remove, so avoid it. Incandescent bulbs are usually pleasant, if a bit yellowy, though often too dim. In the interior of a house at midday there is usually at least one good spot to video. **Even a small changes in the angle of a chair can sometimes correct a lighting problem**. There is a set of oral histories at the end of this guide that will quickly show you how inadequate lighting can make for a less-than-excellent end result.

If you are doing **an outdoor ad-hoc interview**, watch out for strong shadows in direct sunlight. Get whatever light you have on your subject's face, but avoid harsh sun.

There may be times or places where the addition of **added lights** is necessary. The simplest solution can be a clip-on light from the hardware store with a regular or flood bulb, clipped to a chair or shelf near the subject. There are LED array lights for video work available for a fairly low price or, for more money, dedicated photographic lights on tripods.

If the subject wears glasses, try to place the camera so that there is **no reflection of light off the glasses**, disguising the eyes. Usually only a small shift in camera angle solves this problem. Don't ask the subject to tilt their face differently, as they are very likely to return to their usual angle as the interview proceeds.

Microphones and Sound Issues

The sound levels should be loud enough, but not distorted or turned up too high. Although software can correct some mistakes, it is always better to avoid the mistakes in the first place. **Always test your sound level before beginning**. You can test your sound by taking a recording and playing it back on a laptop.

Although it might seem that a clip-on microphone would give a better result, most microphones in devices are extremely sensitive these days, and **a clip-on mike can have**

two drawbacks: it can make some subjects selfconscious, and it can create extra noise when clothing brushes against it. There are also mikes that sit on a table in front of the subject.

Sometimes there is unavoidable background noise present. One precaution that will assist in the processing later is to **take a 5-second recording before beginning**—without any other noises or speech, etc. This can be used electronically later to remove the background noise using software, and is an invaluable precaution to take.

If you are doing **an outdoor ad-hoc interview**, be aware that wind blowing will create difficult background noise interference. Anyone who plans to do this, might consider a remote microphone, which can be fitted with a noise dampener, which could simply be held near the subject for the duration of the question.

Setting and Participants

As above, the place of the longer interview should be **comfortable for the subject and arranged ahead of time**. Ideally, the only persons present should be the subject, the interviewer, and perhaps the videographer if there is one.

Despite the desire for family members to help the subject, it was impressed upon me at the CCHS workshop that **the presence of such loved ones is rarely helpful to the process**, and often hinders it.

There is one circumstance in which the presence of a loved one (spouse or child) is a welcome addition: if the subject's memory or constitution is not strong, and the loved one is helpful in the process of evoking memories, and not overly intrusive, then this is a positive benefit. Consider this during the preparation period.

Framing

If video is being used, then the face is a vital part of the story; ensure that the video is **focused on your subject's face**. We are watching his or her face for the ways that memory has left its imprints of emotion and experience. If the interview is shot from across the room or with poor light, this is lost. The background should not distract the viewer. Some examples:



Left: Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Oral History Project. Right: the Computer History Museum.



Left: The Computer History Museum. Right: Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Oral History Project.

There are two exceptions to the general principle of close framing. More room is needed around the subject under two circumstances—when there is an object included in the interview, like this musician’s guitar (below left), or if the subject habitually uses his or her hands while speaking (find this out during those pre-interview talks)—to prevent the hands from being cut out of the frame (below right).



Left: The Snapshots Foundation. Right: Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Oral History Project. All screenshots from YouTube.com.

The TV show “60 Minutes” is shot the way it is for a good reason (not that we intend to grill anyone about corporate wrongdoings)—we want to see **the full expression of the subject**, because that is an integral part of the story. The camera doesn’t need to be disturbingly close to the subject—all cameras have telephoto settings these days. Even a street interview should aim to focus in on the subject’s face.

Place the camera so that it is **level with the gaze of the subject**. When the camera is placed above the subject, it “looks down” on the subject. When placed below the gaze, there is a sense of too much exposure of the underside of the chin—the viewer can feel as if the subject is looking down on her or him. So seek the level of the subject’s gaze, and then position the camera to one side of the interviewer. This is why a fully adjustable tripod is important.

The aim of this setup is for the camera to see the subject’s face just to one side—nearly, but not quite, from the front—as you can see in the example images above. It is also important to **avoid tempting the subject into looking into the camera itself**. Try to prevent your

subject from facing into the camera at any time. It has become accepted and preferred convention over many years of TV interviewing that the viewer is watching the subject, but the subject does not confront the viewer with a head-on gaze. As the interviewer, you want to engage and keep the gaze of the subject so that his or her eyes do not stray to the camera.

Unless the subject has some direct interaction with an object like a musical instrument, **avoid panning out to take in an item in the environment**, even if it is part of the story being talked about. If part of the person's story includes about some element of the environment (other than a small object that could be held), consider preparing for this by spending time shooting some video of that element either before or after questions, but not during the interview. Even the crudest video editing software will allow you to inter-cut a few seconds of these shots into the interview. No need to pan around, or change the camera during the question time. Keep the focus on the subject while s/he is talking.

If only audio is used, the quality of that audio recording becomes very important; it is a serious loss to the quality of the oral history if ambient noise interferes with the subtle nuances in voice that the listener needs to hear for a rich story. **Test your sound first** to make sure it is recording clearly. And take the 5-second noise sample at the beginning, as mentioned above.

[Here is a collection of oral-history videos](#) that help to illustrate some common mistakes in setup and questioning.

Question Time

The most detailed guide to the actual question time of the interview is this [set of oral history tips](#)—written by a very experienced oral historian. **Read carefully and refer to it often.**

Three basics are: don't interrupt your subject, don't ask yes/no questions, and don't ask longwinded questions that give away the story you are trying to elicit from your subject.

Or to put it in the positive: **be an active listener** (which does not mean frequent interjections), **ask the simplest question** that brings forth the best story, and **let your subject talk freely**. The ideal interviewer could in the end edit out all the questions during after-interview processing—because the subject has told the whole story. Aim for that. It's not about what you know, it's about what you can get your subject to tell the listener/viewer.

At the beginning of the interview, **include the basic information about the interview** on the audio: the name of the subject, the date, the place, and the interviewer's name. This isn't usually included in the final product, but forms a minimal set of reference information that attaches to your unedited file permanently. If you stop recording and re-start, repeat this basic information at the beginning of the new recording.

Have patience—your subject may need time and quiet to think about what s/he wants to share, or just to remember clearly. **Allow silences without interrupting.** It's okay to return to a story or event later in the interview by reframing your original question. It may take talking about something more than once for your subject to tell the whole story.

You should have a good idea **how long you will need to get through the questions.** Arrange two or more sessions if the material warrants it. But don't rush, and don't tire your subject. Take breaks during the process if needed. Have water nearby for your subject. If you're working alone, check your recording device often to make sure it is on.

As discussed in the framing section, **have the subject look at you as the interviewer** during the entire time—not at the camera lens. If the subject looks at the camera, consider re-asking the question, this time requesting that s/he look at you, and then cut the first part later in after-interview processing. Or if this continues, a slight repositioning away of the camera could help prevent it.

Your questions are the guide, but **don't be afraid to go with the flow**—to take detours if the subject brings up something interesting. Conversely, if a detour is going down a road that doesn't look promising and seems to be off the subject of local history and interest, politely direct the subject back to those stories you know s/he has to offer.

There are different opinions about this, but I think you have the right to **challenge your subject**, if you know the version of events they have just given you diverges from accounts you know from other sources. However, it may harm the greater goals of the process if you force the issue beyond a certain point or the exchange becomes confrontational. People have a right to their stories.

After the interview, **review with the subject what will happen next**, including approximately when s/he will be able to review the video and sign the Deed of Gift Form that grants permission for GPNHP to the material s/he has shared. Offer to give a DVD of the final cut for his or her keeping. Get any photos s/he is willing to donate, and say they will be returned them after digitizing. Your subject can sign the **Deed of Gift** now, or later after viewing recorded and edited material.

IV. After the Interview

The process of following up after the interview includes:

1. Processing and editing the video or audio
2. To transcribe or not to transcribe
3. Following up with the subject
4. Thinking about uses
5. Some online examples
6. Archiving

Processing the Video or Audio

Download the video or audio file onto a computer as soon as you can and give the file an accurate and useful name. Back it up, even if just on a thumbdrive.

Here is the file naming protocol from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Let's make up an example, an interview on December 25th of last year with the renowned Behrend Joost. The first raw video file should be given the following filename:

```
joost_behrend_01_12-25-2015.mov [or whatever the file format of your device]
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If there are more than one raw file, then they are numbered "02" and so on. After editing or other processing, related files are similarly named, for example a transcript PDF or audio file:

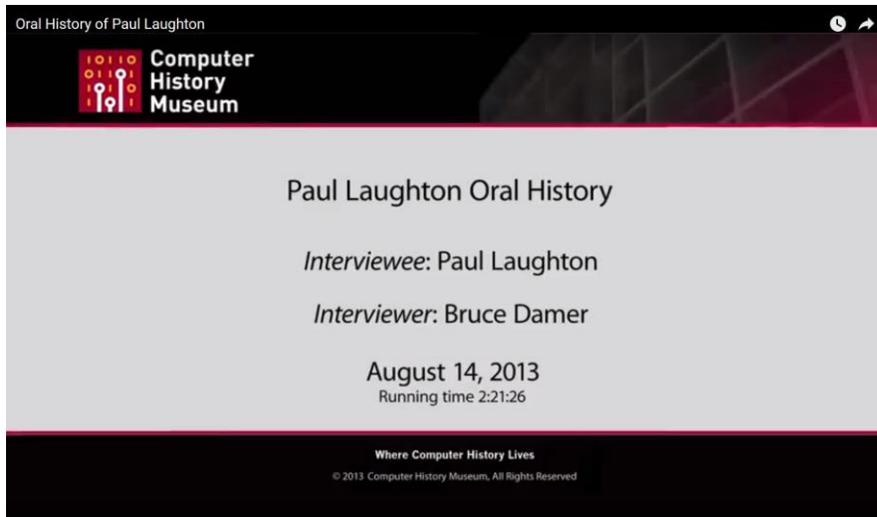
```
joost_behrend_2015.pdf or joost_behrend_2015.mp3
```

...So all will be grouped together, sorted by the subjects' last names. Be tidy and create fresh files as needed, so if something goes wrong, not much is lost, because you have the last version under a different name. And back files up often.

Software for editing video is widely available. I have used a simple and free one, Microsoft Movie Maker, but it contains a couple of bugs that can be annoying. Adobe makes a well-recommended product, Premiere Elements, which goes for \$70 on Amazon.

Give yourself time to watch the raw footage a few times and reflect on what is to be done with it. **The first job is to make a full-length archival version** that is edited only to remove long silences or truly irrelevant material. This version may never be published in its entirety, but remains for the record. It will probably be nearly as long as the interview, i.e. 1 or 2 hours.

This archival version needs a **basic title page** that captures the vital information about the interview—interviewee, interviewer, date, and length of video. (See example screen shot below.) Optional information can be the location of the interview or the particular story/subject being related (its date, place, or event). But keep this simple, and don't editorialize (e.g. by adding opinions like "Leader of the Most Important Sonora Anti-Supermarket Sit-in of 1971!"). Avoid moving text, special effects, patterned backgrounds, etc. Include a discreet logo or other graphics that are used on the website or PR materials.



Basic title page. The Computer History Museum, Yourtube.com.

Create this **archival full-length version**, and give it a new filename, including “full_length” or some such in the filename. At this point, always save at maximum quality. Back up your precious work as you go, even if just on a thumbdrive.

Audio editing software is easy to come by. I have used a free audio software called Audacity with good results. Adobe also makes one called Audition. Others recommended in the CCHS workshop were Sony Sound Forge and ProTools.

If you have problems with the sound track on the video, e.g. noise or distortion, it may require extracting a separate audio file, fixing it on dedicated audio software, and then putting it back into the video, tidied up. This sounds harder than it really is.

Transcription (or maybe not)

Transcribing an hour of audio or video takes on average six hours of work. Alternately, you can send your files overseas and they can be transcribed for about \$100 a page. **It is time-consuming work.** I propose the GPNHP use transcription only to produce useful quotes or brief passages, for use in the context of larger historical events, or to accompany an oral-history video serving as an example of what the subject talks about in it.

Following Up with the Subject

When you have your full-length archival video file, **arrange for the subject to view it, so s/he can then sign the Deed of Gift [\[PDF\]](#), allowing the GPNHP to have the right to use it.** Do not publish any portion of it until this legal document is signed.

If s/he objects to some portion of the video, remove it and destroy that portion. Then have the subject again view the now edited video, and sign the Deed of Gift. Try to discourage a subject from asking for things to be edited for frivolous reasons, like they thought their hair

looked odd, etc. **Emphasize the importance and value of his or her contribution to local history, and thank him or her for sharing these stories.** Scan and return any photos you have borrowed from the subject. Give your subject a copy of the video on a DVD, with a nice cover that includes a photo and title.

Thinking about Uses

Now there are editorial decisions to be made: how will the video serve the purposes of sharing local history? The entire file (audio or video) can be put on the Internet Archive or YouTube, but it may remain obscure and unwatched; certainly the view counts on YT suggest this. If the video material can be used to help fill out a larger story, then one or more (or a series) of **short video excerpts can be extracted from the longer video.**

If your subject took a while to get going, or was at his or her best only during the first thirty minutes, maybe this can help clarify which are the best bits. Other interviews may end up as **a series of short interesting portions** that can be grouped together. The video may be excerpted in different ways over time, depending on needs and projects. When the subject signs the Deed of Gift, s/he gives the GPNHP the right to do just this.

Always give a fresh filename to any of these short pieces, including “excerpt_01” or similar in the new filename. If these are to be embedded in a post or the like, they might be saved at a lower resolution. If that doesn’t work well, you can always return to the precious max-resolution full-length file to extract the portion again and save at a better resolution.

Avoid the use of hokey gimmicks in videos, such as moving text and odd transitions between sections. Such things almost always detract. Even most music can feel amateurish and irrelevant in oral-history videos. **If your work is going to last for the ages, forget any of the tricks** that most software offers in the “Effects” menu. Use static text with a typeface that is sober (no Comic Sans, please) and leave the music out unless it is specific to that person’s story.

Some Online Examples

Examples of full-length oral histories:

- Many of the oral history videos from the Computer Museum are models of restraint—they focus on the subject and leave the gimmicks out. For example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7f6NMOR9ho> .
- This one uses music, but the subject is a musician! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4JWqK6r6N4>

Examples of excerpts and collected excerpts:

- Here is another excerpted video, also about Carol Kaye above. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9WQTrr3GZ4>

- This modest video excerpt is still a good example of framing and clarity (though sound is not perfect). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6fLAaDJamE>
- Here is a video from the Rosie the Riveter Project, as an example of a brief excerpted portion. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DW9Hd9rWCh8>
- Video from the Rosie the Riveter Project (5 min) shows what “cutting to the chase” can mean – how to use pieces from several OHs to create a short video that tells us something, without needing to be exhaustive. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txkMFGP6Xbk>

Archiving

Right now there is YouTube and the Internet Archive. The former is commercial, the latter is unassailable, but can be pokey and slow. There is also Vimeo, but that platform can also be slow. The Project can't use the video or the excerpts embedded in webpages without uploading them to one of these streaming services. At this point I don't know what the best solution is. This section is unfinished.

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Appendix

Video Gallery: several earnest but somewhat unfortunate examples to learn from:

- Video from the Bancroft Center that shows even experienced oral historians can make mistakes in the setup – somewhat spoiling a great story! This video contains some examples of common set-up problems. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReIiFyni8uc> Second subject: camera was too far above his head—“looking down.” Third one, Ritterbush, not enough light on face. Fourth: his habitual gesture puts his fist between his own face and the camera too often, which could have been avoided by a practice run and different camera position. Fifth (Shafer) is strangely off center, could be tighter. Next one, Cronk, also shot from above, with mike wire showing, unnecessarily. Just put the camera where a third person would be.
- This video shows why you should not ask questions that can be answered with Yes or No—because all you will get is your subject nodding in agreement with you! Happens just at the beginning of this interview, which is a critical time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVlvK7Et-4g> An alternative way to begin: “Please tell me about [specific thing you already know is a thing s/he has a story about].” Aim to enable the subject's recollection, not supply the information yourself.

- This video frames the subject beautifully, but starts out with the least interesting bits, things that might be better included in text below the video. We want to know **why we should care to know this person’s story** within the first half-minute of a video presented for public consumption. Other things can be interwoven later. What is the larger context of this person’s life?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqW2rg0boKk>
- Here is another one from the Computer History Museum, but this one tells us right off the bat why this person’s story matters. Also, the framing is excellent—you can see the expression in the subject’s face. The lighting is perfect, and the background is subtle and unobtrusive. When the subject speaks about his father, you can feel the affection and sense of positive influence in the man’s face.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeEGJg6vXCg>
- Here is another well-shot one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sALW7E6Uwrc>
- In this video the camera is level with the gaze of the subject, but the setup makes the mistake of positioning the camera too close to the interviewer, so that the subject is too often tempted to look into the camera, rather than at the interviewer. If the camera had been positioned just a bit further to one side, this could have been avoided. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CynDRfbN5wE>
- This video shows why light on the face is important:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRTClwRw1LQ>
- Finally, in this video you may be able to see why the two-people-in-the-frame interview is **almost always a poor choice**: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQ-C2SRDlv0> Unless you are using two cameras, the viewer will always be looking at the cheek side of the subject’s face, as she faces her interviewer to one side. Thus the viewer will never see the full expression of the subject’s face. Better to never see the interviewer’s face at all, than to sacrifice the pleasure of watching the subject’s face as s/he talks about her life! The only way to successfully include the interviewer visually is to have two cameras (like “60 Minutes”), and even then I think there is rarely a good reason for this.

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Online bibliography

- Video about arranging yourself and your subject in the interview space.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTCzxWt1RQk>

- Various Guides to Oral history: <http://www.oralhistory.org/web-guides-to-doing-oral-history/>
- Primer from UC Santa Cruz <https://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/oral-history-primer>
- Guide from UCLA: <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/interviewGuidelines.html>
- Basic outline about oral history practice: <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>
- Oral history and the Law <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/a-guide-to-oral-history-and-the-law-9780199342518?cc=us&lang=en&>
- Using Oral History in Community Projects [book]: <http://www.amazon.com/Using-Oral-History-Community-Projects/dp/098459471X>
- Guide from Family Search <https://familysearch.org/blog/en/online-resources-learning-creating-oral-histories/>
- Page about equipment from someone who does audio oral history: <http://familyoralhistory.us/equipment>
- More on audio equipment: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/askjack/2013/mar/21/which-voice-recorder-capture-parents-history>
- From the 1990s, but still has good advice: http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

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Supplemental Documents

- **“Oral History Tips”** from The Oral History Center in Berkeley [\[see below\]](#)
- **Biography Form** [\[pdf\]](#)
- **Legal Forms: Informed Consent and Deed of Gift** [\[pdf\]](#)

Oral History Tips

The following tips were developed and published by the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, and reprinted from: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/bancroft-library/oral-history-center/oral-history-tips>

By longtime OHC director Willa Baum (1926-2006), a founder of professional oral history in the US.

1. An interview is not a dialogue. The whole point of the interview is to get the narrator to tell her story. Limit your own remarks to a few pleasantries to break the ice, then brief questions to guide her along. It is not necessary to give her the details of your great-grandmother's trip in a covered wagon in order to get her to tell you about her grandfather's trip to California. Just say, "I understand your grandfather came around the Horn to California. What did he tell you about the trip?"
2. Ask questions that require more of an answer than "yes" or "no." Start with "why," "how," "where," "what kind of ..." Instead of "Was Henry Miller a good boss?" ask "What did the cowhands think of Henry Miller as a boss?"
3. Ask one question at a time. Sometimes interviewers ask a series of questions all at once. Probably the narrator will answer only the first or last one. You will catch this kind of questioning when you listen through the tape after the session, and you can avoid it the next time.
4. Ask brief questions. We all know the irrepressible speech-maker who, when questions are called for at the end of a lecture, gets up and asks five-minute questions. It is unlikely that the narrator is so dull that it takes more than a sentence or two for her to understand the question.
5. Start with questions that are not controversial; save the delicate questions, if there are any, until you have become better acquainted. A good place to begin is with the narrator's youth and background.
6. Don't let periods of silence fluster you. Give your narrator a chance to think of what she wants to add before you hustle her along with the next question. Relax, write a few words on your notepad. The sure sign of a beginning interviewer is a tape where every brief pause signals the next question.
7. Don't worry if your questions are not as beautifully phrased as you would like them to be for posterity. A few fumbled questions will help put your narrator at ease as she realizes that you are not perfect and she need not worry if she isn't

either. It is not necessary to practice fumbling a few questions; most of us are nervous enough to do that naturally.

8. Don't interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question, or because your narrator is straying from the planned outline. If the information is pertinent, let her go on, but jot down your questions on your notepad so you will remember to ask it later.

9. If your narrator does stray into subjects that are not pertinent (the most common problems are to follow some family member's children or to get into a series of family medical problems), try to pull her back as quickly as possible. "Before we move on, I'd like to find out how the closing of the mine in 1935 affected your family's finances. Do you remember that?"

10. It is often hard for a narrator to describe people. An easy way to begin is to ask her to describe the person's appearance. From there, the narrator is more likely to move into character description.

11. Interviewing is one time when a negative approach is more effective than a positive one. Ask about the negative aspects of a situation. For example, in asking about a person, do not begin with a glowing description. "I know the mayor was a very generous and wise person. Did you find him so?" Few narrators will quarrel with a statement like that even though they may have found the mayor a disagreeable person. You will get a more lively answer if you start out in the negative. "Despite the mayor's reputation for good works, I hear he was a very difficult man for his immediate employees to get along with." If your narrator admired the mayor greatly, she will spring to his defense with an apt illustration of why your statement is wrong. If she did find him hard to get along with, your remark has given her a chance to illustrate some of the mayor's more unpleasant characteristics.

12. Try to establish at every important point in the story where the narrator was or what her role was in this event, in order to indicate how much is eyewitness information and how much is based on reports of others. "Where were you at the time of the mine disaster?" "Did you talk to any of the survivors later?" Work around these questions carefully, so that you will not appear to be doubting the accuracy of the narrator's account.

13. Do not challenge accounts you think might be inaccurate. Instead, try to develop as much information as possible that can be used by later researchers in establishing what probably happened. Your narrator may be telling you quite accurately what she saw. As Walter Lord explained when describing his interviews with survivors of the Titanic, "Every lady I interviewed had left the sinking ship in

the last lifeboat. As I later found out from studying the placement of the lifeboats, no group of lifeboats was in view of another and each lady probably was in the last lifeboat she could see leaving the ship."

14. Tactfully point out to your narrator that there is a different account of what she is describing, if there is. Start out by saying, "I have heard ..." or "I have read ..." This is not to challenge her account, but rather an opportunity for her to bring up further evidence to refute the opposing view, or to explain how that view got established, or to temper what she has already said. If done skillfully, some of your best information can come from this juxtaposition of differing accounts.

15. Try to avoid "off the record" information--the times when your narrator asks you to turn off the recorder while she tells you a good story. Ask her to let you record the whole thing and promise that you will erase that portion if she asks you to after further consideration. You may have to erase it later, or she may not tell you the story at all, but once you allow "off the record" stories, she may continue with more and more, and you will end up with almost no recorded interview at all. "Off the record" information is only useful if you yourself are researching a subject and this is the only way you can get the information. It has no value if your purpose is to collect information for later use by other researchers.

16. Don't switch the recorder off and on. It is much better to waste a little tape on irrelevant material than to call attention to the tape recorder by a constant on-off operation. For this reason, I do not recommend the stop-start switches available on some mikes. If your mike has such a switch, tape it to the "on" position--then forget it. Of course you can turn off the recorder if the telephone rings or if someone interrupts your session.

17. Interviews usually work out better if there is no one present except the narrator and the interviewer. Sometimes two or more narrators can be successfully recorded, but usually each one of them would have been better alone.

18. End the interview at a reasonable time. An hour and a half is probably the maximum. First, you must protect your narrator against overfatigue; second, you will be tired even if she isn't. Some narrators tell you very frankly if they are tired, or their spouses will. Otherwise, you must plead fatigue, another appointment, or no more tape.

19. Don't use the interview to show off your knowledge, vocabulary, charm, or other abilities. Good interviewers do not shine; only their interviews do.

From Willa Baum's *Oral History for the Local Historical Society* (1971)

Pocket Oral History Guide

Very brief summary of the points covered in this Guide.

Pocket Oral History Guide

❖ Before the interview

- Talk with subject, come to know her and her stories;
- Fill out **Biography Form**;
- Do your research and prepare general questions;
- Discuss interview with subject, set time(s) and place;
- Have subject sign **Informed Consent Form**.

❖ The Interview

- Know your equipment;
- Set up with care and test it well;
- Header on video for each session, basic info;
- Focus on the subject's well-lighted face;
- Camera level with gaze;
- Relax; allow silence; don't tell the story for her;
- Questions are to enable the stories—the subject is always the focus;
- Don't tire subject; take breaks; offer water.

❖ After the interview

- Save files and label with care;
- Create full-length archival version with titles;
- Backup your work, as you go;
- Follow up with subject—thanks, DVD, return photos;
- Have subject sign **Deed of Gift** upon approval;
- Edit and create excerpts/versions as needed;
- Transcribe if/as needed;
- Avoid gimmicks in editing software;
- Archive video/audio on publicly available service.

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