

Guidelines and Recommendations for Oral History Projects

PART II: BEST PRACTICES FOR COLLECTING VETERANS ORAL HISTORIES

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This section deals with oral history projects focused on veterans, including suggested ways to approach interviews with veterans as a civilian and handling sensitive and/or traumatic subjects.

Bridging the gap between your audience and service members

While having a good rapport with a narrator, making a narrator comfortable and satisfying a narrator's family are all very important goals that you should keep in mind for each interview, your principal objective should be to create a primary historical resource. Oral histories are invaluable because they give us first-hand experiences of history, and, in the case of interviews with veterans, allow a glimpse into the personal details of what it means to serve in the military.

For many projects, your current and/or future audiences will be civilians. It is best to keep the narrator AND the audience in mind during an interview, and to serve as the pipeline for these narratives. In turn, your work may inspire in civilians not only a sense of respect for our veterans but also a responsibility to them, what they have been asked to do and what they may be dealing with as a result.

Handling sensitive topics in interviews with military veterans

The number one thing I have learned about post-traumatic stress, moral injury and confronting difficult stories in an oral history interview is how very important it is to draw a line between what is and is not the role of oral history and what is and is not my role as an oral historian.

A narrator's mental health and stability is ALWAYS more important than recording their story. There is some thought that telling a story can ingrain the story further within the teller. This means that if a narrator is telling a particularly painful story that they are not yet ready to tell or that they are telling in a negative way, they could potentially be doing more damage to themselves.

Oral History is (about):

- History
- Bridging a gap between narrator and audience (veterans and civilians)
- Education
- Honoring what the narrator has been through

Oral History should be:

- Personal

Oral History can be:

- Therapeutic

Oral History is NOT (about):

- Therapy
- Healing

Therefore, we need to recognize our limits as interviewers and the limits of oral history, just as therapists and caregivers have had to recognize the limits of talk therapy and other more conventional therapy methods. An interviewer should not allow family members, caregivers, coworkers or narrators themselves to pressure them into making an oral history interview something it is not.

So, how to ensure that a narrator understands the above? Connect with the narrator before the interview. This may include contact with family members or caregivers. Send them information about your project and what to expect from the interview process. Try to speak with them at least once before an interview. Narrators may not always fully understand, but it is still your obligation to be as straightforward with them as possible and do your best to explain yourself and the purpose of your oral history interview.

Despite all the research and preparation you do for your interviews, despite how honest you are with yourself and your narrators, there is always the chance that you will encounter aversion and discomfort. Here are some suggestions for helping to mitigate these situations.

DO:

Slow down. When you know or think a narrator is anxious, your initial instinct may be to back away from the source of the anxiety because you don't want to be the cause of pain or discomfort. Instead, try easing into the source of the anxiety. Ask small, easy to answer questions about details that might seem mundane but can paint a picture around the sensitive topic.

Have an exit strategy. Try to formulate a seemingly natural segue out of the conversation in case the narrator brings it to a halt abruptly and can't continue or if a topic is clearly too difficult for the narrator to handle.

MAYBE:

Point out the discomfort. "Is this a topic that it is always difficult to talk about?" "Are you comfortable continuing this conversation or would you like to take a break?"

Take a break, if you feel like you and your narrator could benefit from one.

DO NOT:

Move on too quickly. This can make a narrator feel like what they've said wasn't heard or was irrelevant. Even if there are difficult emotions or discomfort, learn to sit with that so that you don't instinctively look for a quick transition to get out of the moment.

Constantly search for a silver lining. While it is tempting to turn the conversation to something more cheerful, that is not your role in the interview. This is why it helps to have relevant transition questions at the ready, so you can respectfully and thoughtfully keep the interview moving WHEN the time is right.

Library of Congress Veterans History Project

[Field Kit](#)

[Doing Veterans Oral History](#)
by Barbara W. Sommer

Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program

<https://www.wisvetsmuseum.com/oral-histories>

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