



Guidelines and Recommendations for Oral History Projects

PART I: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

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We love oral history: the way it can bring a family member's voice back to life, the way it can give voice to those underrepresented in history's texts, the way it can humanize historical exhibits and websites. We wish others -- particularly historical and cultural memory organizations -- could use it and love it as much as we do, and go on to share with their own audiences. To assist in that, we have created this short guide to help Wisconsinites interested in designing and implementing an oral history interview or project. Every project and organization is unique, so we've provided guidance in the form of questions to ask about your goals and limitations before beginning.

Oral history -- defined as a method of gathering a person's memories that, through a recording device, creates a digital file that can be preserved for current and future generations -- differs from other types of interviews in two major ways. **First**, it should encompass as much as of the narrator's entire lived experience as possible. **Second**, it calls for a trained and well-prepared interviewer, willing to conduct enough sessions to gather and preserve the aforementioned "entire lived experience." In short, oral history takes research, practice, planning and thought.

Planning questions:

- Why are you doing this project/interview? Who or what is your focus?
Community elders, veterans, immigrant groups? A specific event, industry or other topic?
- What is your desired final result or product? How will you provide access to the recordings?
A website, an exhibit, a book, an archival collection?
- Do you feel comfortable doing an oral history interview?
Participate in workshops or webinars, read guidelines, talk to oral historians.
- How will you find your narrators? How will you contact them?
If possible, meet for a pre-interview to introduce them to the project and build rapport with each other.
- How will you find background information on your topic?
Conduct research at local libraries, historical societies, etc.
- How will you structure your interview?
Prepare a list of questions to ask or topics to address.
- How will you record your interview?
Audio or video? Keep in mind that digital video files are very large, and video can make narrators uncomfortable. See Part III for audio and video recording equipment options.
- How will you get permission to record and share your interview?
Obtain a signed legal release form from the narrator. See Part III for examples.

In the interview space:

- Where will you record the interview?
Choose a quiet space with limited distractions.
- How will you respect your narrator?
Be on time. Agree on length. Be present. Listen well.
- How will you structure the interview?
Ask open-ended questions. Ask follow-up questions. Let the narrator have the last word on all topics.
- How will you keep your narrator on topic?
If the narrator strays into non-pertinent areas, try to pull him/her back politely by asking another question. Ask one question at a time.
- When will your narrator sign the legal release form?
Before? After? After reviewing the interview?
- How will you consider future audiences?
Explain any visual materials that are referenced in the interview, if recording is audio-only. Ask the narrator to explain any jargon used. Follow up on complex subjects that may be unfamiliar.

In the long term:

- How will you preserve the digital files?
Consider partnering with or donating to an archive: Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Library of Congress Veterans History Project. Or save them yourself, in which case, ask one of the above organizations for guidance and/or see Part III for suggestions.
- What paperwork/project documentation will you preserve?
Project plan, including question list; interviewer notes; research; legal release forms.
- What supplemental materials could you gather to accompany the oral history?
Photos, correspondence, maps, biographical information.
- How will you process each interview for preservation and access?
Write an abstract or index to describe the interview. Consider creating a full transcript.
- How will you work with your narrator/community to make this material accessible to them?
Stay in touch with your narrators. Plan an event, press release or other ways to showcase your final product.

