



Guidelines and Recommendations for Oral History Projects

PART I: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

By Dana Gerber-Margie, Ellen Brooks and Troy Reeves

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.



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PART II: BEST PRACTICES FOR COLLECTING VETERANS ORAL HISTORIES

By Ellen Brooks, Oral Historian, Wisconsin Veterans Museum

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>

Contact the Oral Historian:
oralhistory@dva.wisconsin.gov
(608) 261-0537

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PART III: CURATED RESOURCE LIST

General/Foundational Resources

[Oral History Association](#) (OHA)

The OHA website includes information about its annual meeting, a link to its journal *The Oral History Review*, and its own guide to [OHA Principles and Best Practices](#) in oral history.

[Baylor University's Institute for Oral History "Introduction to Oral History"](#)

The go-to online reference from one of the oldest and best oral history programs in the U.S.

[Oral History in the Digital Age](#) (OHDA)

While the OHDA website can appear daunting, its creators have created "playlists" to help ease oral history neophytes into the site.

[OUPBlog: Oral History](#)

The goal of the OUP (Oxford University Press) blog is to further promote the mission of the Oral History Review, advancing the understanding of oral history among scholars, educators, practitioners, and the general public.

[Doing Oral History](#) by Don Ritchie

Considered the premier guidebook to oral history - this basic manual offers detailed advice for setting up an oral history project, conducting interviews, making video recordings, preserving oral history collections in archives and libraries, and teaching and presenting oral history.

[Society of American Archivist Oral History Roundtable](#) (listserv)

[H-OralHist](#) (listserv)

Legal Issues and Copyright

[Sample Legal Release Forms](#)

It is important to obtain a signed legal release form for every single interview, especially if you plan to make the interview available to the public at any point in the future. This link points to example release forms you can use as models for creating your own form.

[A Guide to Oral History and the Law](#) by John A. Neuenschwander

The go-to source for those needing basic legal advice and support, including those starting an oral history project and those with extant collections with unclear provenance.

[Copyright & Fair Use](#)

Up-to-date information on copyright and fair use issues, from Stanford University Libraries.

[Creative Commons](#)

A website offering a different way to legally share the oral histories you create.

Tools and Equipment

[Transom](#)

A website and organization dedicated to public radio and audio stories. Good resources for oral history projects and particularly [tips and advice on tools and equipment](#).

[Audacity](#)

This free software allows one to record or edit audio, including--with the proper set-up--digitized analog audio.

[Express Scribe](#) or [InqScribe](#)

Free or inexpensive transcription software options. Note: This is NOT automated transcription. For an example of automated transcription see [Pop Up Archive](#). Another option is to outsource transcription work to a freelance individual or to a company like [Audio Transcription Center](#).

[Ask Doug](#)

An interactive resource within the OHDA website. With answers to a couple of questions, “Doug” will offer recommendations for digital audio recording equipment.

[OHMS](#) (Oral History Metadata Synchronizer)

Created by the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries OHMS is “a web-based system to inexpensively and efficiently enhance access to oral history online.”

Digitization and Preservation

[Recollection Wisconsin Contributor Guidelines](#)

Basic steps in developing digitization projects, including selecting content, creating metadata and planning for long-term storage.

[Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects](#)

An extremely helpful website from the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives detailing the process of digitizing analog audio, including basic principles, metadata to record, archival storage and digital preservation, access, and more.

[CAVPP Audiovisual Formats Identification Guide](#)

This identification guide can help you with one of the scariest A/V issues around: figuring out what something actually is. Once you know what medium you’re working with, you can make better preservation decisions.

Three more of our favorite identification guides (choose which works best for you!):

- <http://www.obsoletemedia.org/>
- <http://avaa.bavc.org/artifactatlas/index.php/A/V> Artifact Atlas
- https://github.com/ablwr/media-id-posters/blob/master/tapes_table_white_hires.png