**Best Practices for Conducting an Oral History**

**Forgotten Frontera**

The following guide is intended to double as a checklist when conducting an oral history interview. Make sure to read through the document at least once before beginning your preparations for an interview.

***Pre-Interview***

* First time interviewers in the oral history field are encouraged to seek training to “prepare themselves for all stages” of the oral history interview process (OHA).
* Oral historians should select potential interviewees “based on the relevance of their experiences” to the subject of the research (OHA).
* In order to draft well-informed and relevant questions, interviewers should “conduct background research on the person, topic, and larger context” of the interview before contacting a potential narrator (OHA).
* When contacting a potential narrator, interviewers should “send via regular mail or email an introductory letter” which explicitly outlines the focus and purpose of the interview, providing multiple options of contact for the interviewee to reach the interviewer (OHA). Afterward, the interviewer should follow-up with “either a phone call or a return email,” depending on the interviewee’s preferred method of communication (OHA).
* After contacting a potential narrator as the previous bullet point outlines, the oral historian should schedule a non-recorded meeting with the interviewee, whether it be virtual or in-person, to allow “an exchange of information” regarding possible topics and questions which will be addressed in the interview, reasons for conducting the interview, the process which will be involved, and to exchange and explain consent and release forms (OHA).

***Drafting Questions and Topics***

* Ask questions that start with “why,” “how,” “where,” “what kind of…,” and so on. Avoid questions which require a simple “yes” or “no” answer (OHCB).
* The point of the interview is to get the narrator talking about his/her own story. Interviewers should limit their own remarks strictly to necessary pleasantries, polite responses, and guiding questions to further the interview. Keep this in mind when drafting potential interview questions (OHCB).
* Questions should be brief, and interviewers should ask one question at a time, avoiding strings of questions (OHCB).
* Interviewers should bring an outline of topics and questions to help guide the recorded interview, when the time comes, but be prepared to allow the interview to progress somewhat organically (OHA).

***Interview***

* Begin the interview with a “lead,” in which the interviewer and narrator both state their names, the date, location, and subject of recording (OHA).
* Save delicate/controversial questions (if any) for later in the interview. Instead, start the process with introductory questions which will allow the narrator to feel at ease and get him/her talking (OHCB).
* Be sure to bring a pen and paper to record potential questions which come up while the narrator is speaking. Never interrupt the narrator’s story with a question but write it down so the interview can circle back if necessary (OHCB).
* An interviewer should not challenge a narrator’s account which may be inaccurate. Instead, try to “develop as much information as possible that can be used by later researchers in establishing what probably happened” (OHCB).
* Avoid “off the record” information as much as possible within the interview—such information is of little to no use in oral history practices, as it cannot be recorded for further use (OHCB).
* Interviews should not typically last more than 90 minutes, unless specifically addressed by both interviewer and interviewee beforehand (OHCB).
* *Good interviewers do not shine; only their interviews do* (OHCB).

***Post-Interview***

* Interviewers should “document their preparation and methods, including the circumstances of the interviews” and openly provide that information to the organization which is “preserving and providing access” to the interview and its transcription (OHA).
* Information which is relevant for the interpretation of the oral history interview, including “photographs, documents, or other records should be collected” and such supplementary information and its connection to the history should be made available alongside the interview if at all possible. If not, the availability of such information should be stated alongside the transcription (OHA).
* Transcriptions should “retain the integrity of the narrator’s perspective, recognizing the subjectivity of the interview, and interpreting and contextualizing the narrative according to the professional standards” of the organization which the interviewer is supplying the research (OHA).
* Interviewers should be “sensitive to the community, taking care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes” and make the interviews accessible to the community, including “representatives of the community in public programs or presentations” of the material collected in obtaining oral histories (OHA).

***Regarding Citizenship***

Citizenship Status: In choosing an interview subject and arranging your interview, consider the sometimes-sensitive matter of citizenship status. Your subject must provide his or her name in this process, and while you may not need to directly address the matter of citizenship status, it needs to be clear that the interview will become a public document (insofar as it will be available to researchers at the PPHM archive). People have privacy concerns for many reasons; in this context, citizenship status, or the fear of misperception around these issues, may lead your desired subject to decline an interview, or to avoid aspects of his/her history. Ideally, we want subjects who are willing to speak without self-censoring. With all of this in mind, here are two recommendations:

1. Have a careful conversation about these matters prior to the interview, just in case your subject has not given this matter thought, and make sure he/she is comfortable. If your subject is elderly, make sure you include his/her caretaker in the conversation, as well.
2. When doing the interview, after starting your recording, say “Just to be clear, you do understand that we will be giving this interview to the museum archive to keep in their collection; are you comfortable with that?” It would be good to get an affirmation on the recording.

***Regarding Language***

This interview may be conducted in English, Spanish, or (typically) some combination of both. That’s all fine, but just make sure that you are comfortable with doing a translation into Spanish and English when you do your transcription. This can add a lot of work and time.

***Regarding Method and Technology of Recording***

In a perfect world, we can record these interviews on any device. However, for the best results, you should consult those in charge of the project you are working on and ask their preferred device and method.

Video recording can eat up a lot of data and storage space, so for ease of use and space saving, it’s best to use an audio recorder. [This audio recorder](https://www.amazon.com/Tascam-Four-Track-Digital-Recorder-SanDisk/dp/B07SKC6N5X/ref%3Dsr_1_1_sspa?gclid=CjwKCAjw6fyXBhBgEiwAhhiZskcosUKf3yC-Q1cUPvTjyb2ZkOAdlWnMmoKYEi8FGqiWfikeFdAelhoCaIIQAvD_BwE&hvadid=557153217984&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=9028392&hvnetw=g&hvqmt=e&hvrand=14580430209055082091&hvtargid=kwd-1038999793109&hydadcr=29974_14527172&keywords=tascam+dr-40x+4-channel&qid=1660938902&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEyV1JMQTVESVU0R1gxJmVuY3J5cHRlZElkPUEwNzY5NTcyMjFMTDdMWkxMSDFMQSZlbmNyeXB0ZWRBZElkPUEwMzYzMDg1M1JSUkZYQU43VVVXWiZ3aWRnZXROYW1lPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsaWNrPXRydWU=) is an easy-to-use device that captures and saves hundreds of hours of audio.

***Regarding Method and Technology of Preservation***

Once you have recorded your audio interviews, you will need to save the files in a manner and format that allows easy digital preservation and future use. It is recommended that the original audio files are saved as either .WAV or MP3 files.

From this point, you need to produce a written transcript of this recording so that a paper copy can be read by future researchers. This can be accomplished in a number of ways:

* Hire a stenographer to transcribe the audio for you.
* Listen to the audio and transcribe it by hand yourself.
* Upload the audio to a site that creates a rough transcription and revise as needed.

We at CSAW use the third method of transcription. Use the following [guide](https://wtamu0-my.sharepoint.com/%3Aw%3A/g/personal/kdenney_wtamu_edu1/EcHSkGtPVMdPkDz8zRxuvjwB3vTXudB0OAxP8iQy4fOvEQ?e=QpMHxf) to use YouTube to your transcription advantage.