



Documenting Family Memories

Oral History Activity

What are the advantages of oral history? Why should you learn to record and transcribe oral history?

Some of the best personal history our generation may leave to posterity will be that recorded on the convenient cassette tape recorder. Such history may be stored on the tapes themselves, or it may be transcribed into writing. Both the tape and the written transcription may be preserved.

Through cassette tapes, much history may be recorded that otherwise might never be written down. Most people probably will never write down the details of the most personal and inspirational parts of their lives, but they often will “talk” their histories—enthusiastically, and in marvelous detail.

Whose oral histories should you record?

You should undertake to record the personal histories of anyone whose life history (or parts of that history) has special value to you or your posterity. Certainly you should think first of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and other relatives who are advancing in age, for once such people are gone, their histories are lost. Then look to those who likely will never write their histories.

Your own children can provide much valuable history—for your own enjoyment and edification, as well as for their own posterity. Husbands and wives have a natural interest in each other’s histories. Spouses who have interviewed each other nearly always remark on how close such a project draws them together. Such histories are also full of surprises.

How long should an oral history be? What kinds of topics should it cover? How much detail should it include?

A complete oral history of an older adult might run from 15 to 30 hours, and transcribe into 10 to 30 written pages. This naturally depends on the willingness of the informant to go into details. But an oral history does not have to do the whole life of an individual; it might focus on just parts of an individual’s life. For example, you might want to

record one or two childhood recollections, spiritual experiences, outstanding accomplishments, a specific event, or whatever. In other words, your history can be as long or as short as you and your informant want to make it.

The agenda of topics to touch on should result from an agreement between the interviewer and the informant—a happy combination of the interests of the one and willingness of the other to talk on given topics.

In what order should the various topics be taken up?

For a complete life story, a general overall plan is certainly desirable. Many organizational options are possible: a chronology, followed by a treatment of special topics, a separate chronological treatment of a number of individual topics.

Here are sample agendas for 1-2 hour interview sessions. Note that each focuses on a specific topic or time period:

- Earliest recollections
- Childhood pastimes and activities
- Public school—early years
- Family activities
- Induction into the military
- Meeting spouse
- Wedding, reception, adjustments to in-laws
- Middle years
- Memorable experiences
- Advice to posterity

What is the ideal physical arrangement for an interview?

The best interviews take place where the informant is comfortable and relaxed—usually in his own home, office or another familiar setting.

Place the microphone on a soft or padded surface, as close to the informant’s mouth as possible, without creating awkwardness—two to three feet

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away. A chair arm, a table, or a bookshelf may be convenient. Clip-on microphones are ideal.

The interviewer should be a comfortable talking distance away, from 5 to 8 feet, and the recorder machine should be conveniently accessible to the interviewer, who will need to give attention to the controls and to the tape itself.

It is natural for most people to feel apprehensive and awkward at the beginning of an interview, but generally you can easily put them at ease. You should acknowledge their concern, reassuring them that such feelings are natural; and that the awkwardness will likely disappear a few minutes into the interview. This is usually the case.

A long, comfortable interview normally will last from 1 to 2 hours. Much depends on the interest, personality, and health of the informant, and on the physical setting of the interview.

What kind of recording equipment is necessary?

The battery-operated recorder. Most recorders operate on either batteries or regular electrical current. However, the use of batteries, except in unusual settings, is discouraged. Batteries are unpredictable; the voice signal distorts when the batteries begin to run down, and the batteries require constant checking.

Microphone. An extension microphone (on a separate cord) is usually best, though some high-quality machines do have excellent built-in mikes. Use a microphone that picks up and permits replay of clear, audible sound, with minimal interference. You can probably obtain an extension microphone for your machine at a local electronics store.

Extension cord. Always carry a 10-foot extension cord with you.

Using the machine. Become thoroughly acquainted with your recorder before you attempt to use it. Note ideal tone and volume control settings. Learn to use it with confidence: the ON, OFF, HOLD-PAUSE, RECORD and PLAY switches, and also the microphone switch. Practice on your equipment—in interviews with friends or family—until running it becomes virtually automatic to you.

If you plan to preserve your tapes, you will need to buy high quality tapes designed precisely to assure good sound and last long. Explain your need to a knowledgeable store clerk. Shop around. Watch for specials. Buy several tapes at a time for a good price.

Hour-long tapes are best—one-half hour on each side. Longer tapes are necessarily thinner, so there is danger of the voice transferring from one track to another and general deterioration.

How can recorded tapes best be organized and preserved?

Write the name of the informant, the time and place of the interview, topics covered, and the amount of tape used on each recorded tape. **Do this as soon after the interview as possible. This information may escape you, or you may forget what is on the tape.**

Oral history can be quite easily turned into excellent written history. The process is a bit time-consuming and requires patience and skill. But the product is more than worth the effort.

A skilled transcriber-editor can create a highly coherent, well organized manuscript that retains authentically (even often enhances) everything the informant has said—of course in the informant's own words. The questions and promptings of the interviewer are easily deleted; little evidence remains that the history was not written in the first place.

In short, transcription of oral interviews is highly recommended; the written record is a more permanent, usable history. And nearly any serious or amateur historian, even the amateur, can, with patient and persistent practice, learn that process.

Learning Activity

- A. Ask lesson participants to split into pairs or groups of three to four. Provide them with a pen and paper and ask them to “brainstorm” specific family memories or stories that they would like to record on tape for their families. Have them do this activity for 5-10 minutes.
- B. Provide each small group with a tape recorder and a cassette tape, unless lesson participants have been asked to bring these in preparation for participation in the lesson. Demonstrate how to use the recording equipment, etc. Have each person begin a cassette tape of their own on which they record one of the family memories or stories that they identified. Encourage them to continue this as an ongoing project to document family memories.