How to Create an Oral History Program

MARAC
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Outline

Getting Started
-Kelsey Duinkerken-
Thomas Jefferson University

The Interview
-Devin McKinney-
Gettysburg College

After the Interview
-Jenny Swadosh-
The New School
Getting Started

-Kelsey Duinkerken-
Thomas Jefferson University

- defining your focus
- doing preliminary research
- developing questions
- working with irb
- creating a release form
- choosing a recorder
defining your focus

○ What is the main topic that will be explored?
  ■ What is the scope of your oral history project? What questions will you ask?

○ Why is the project worth doing?
  ■ How will these oral histories supplement the archival record? Is this information available elsewhere?

○ What products will result from the project?
  ■ Will there be audio or video recordings? Do you have the time or money for transcription? Where will the completed materials be stored? How will people access the oral histories?
defining your focus

what is the focus of your proposed oral history project?
doing preliminary research

- Research your topic, time period, movements, population, context
  - Be an expert about the subject

- Create list of individuals to contact
  - How many? What geographic parameters? Are you traveling to them?

- Read up on oral history practices and techniques
  - The more, the better!
developing questions

- Create a list of core questions that will guide your interview
- Broad, open-ended questions - avoid leading questions
- Only one question at a time - avoid multi-part
- Think about the structure and flow of interview
- Don’t have too many - you’ll add in follow-up questions and probes in the moment
working with irb

From the Oral History Association:

“On September 8, 2015, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services... recommended that oral history be explicitly excluded from review by institutional review boards (IRBs), noting that oral history already has its own code of ethics, including the principle of informed consent.”
creating a release form

- Who will hold the copyright?
- How will the audio/video and transcript be used?
- Does the repository or institution have the right to publish material from the oral histories?
- Where will the resulting materials be stored? The Archives? Could they be de-accessioned?
- Can the oral histories be put on the Internet (and any successor technologies or future media)?
- Are there access restrictions?
choosing a recorder

- How much money do you want to spend?
- Video or audio recording?
- Does it create uncompressed WAV files?
- Will you be traveling with it?
- What is your level of expertise?

http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/askdoug/
The Interview

- Devin McKinney-
  Gettysburg College

○ making contact
○ conditions + location
○ what to bring
○ interview tips + techniques
introduction

people, not platforms
introduction

the learning curve
Publications from the Gettysburg College/Musselman Library Oral History Collection

Voices from D-Day: June 6, 1944

Encounters with Eisenhower
making contact

Choose the best method for the person

○ Email
○ Telephone
○ Letter
crafting the request

The subject line
  ○ Make it specific to the person

The request
  ○ Be humble
  ○ Give detail + background on yourself / your project / your institution
  ○ Stress the person’s importance
  ○ Schedule to their convenience
  ○ Provide contact information
  ○ Say thank you
state your conditions

- Control of questioning
- Personal or painful subjects
- Other considerations
determine the location

The person’s home
  ○ Must be quiet, distraction-free

Your institution
  ○ Quiet, controlled space
    ■ Conference/study room
    ■ Office

By telephone
  ○ Same principles apply
what to bring

○ Digital recorder
  ■ Backup batteries
○ Printed questions
○ Notebook
○ Pens/pencils
○ Timepiece
○ Water (if your institution)
○ 2 copies of release
Interview tips and techniques

Begin by stating facts for the record

- Your name
- Date
- Location
- Subject’s name
- Project name / subject matter
interview tips and techniques

ask your questions, don’t read them
okay to suggest answers — IF you have to
interview tips and techniques

check off questions as you go
interview tips and techniques

check your device occasionally
interview tips and techniques

Other types of recording devices

- Digital camera
- Video recorder
interview tips and techniques

multi-task
interview tips and techniques

Use affirmations

- Vocal ("Yes,", "Right,", "Sure,", "Mm-hmm")
- Physical (nodding, smiling, laughing)
Interview tips and techniques

Follow the chemistry of the encounter

- Modify or disregard guidelines, if necessary
- Don’t force the chemistry — let them determine it
interview tips and techniques

suppress yourself
interview tips and techniques

Care about the interview, even if they don’t

○ Be professional
○ Follow through
interview tips and techniques

Bring the release

○ 2 copies, both signed and dated by you
  ■ 1 for you
  ■ 1 for the person
interview tips and techniques

remember:
you’re doing something important
interview tips and techniques

develop — and trust —
your intuitions
After the Interview

-Jenny Swadosh-
The New School

- management
- audio editing + preservation
- transcription
- description
- access
- promotion + outreach
“Interviewers should document their preparation and methods, including the circumstances of the interviews and provide that information to whatever repository will be preserving and providing access to the interview.”
Management of Oral History Collections
Management of Oral History Collections

establish who is responsible for what, when they need to do it, and how it should be done.
Management of Oral History Collections

Establish file naming protocols and adhere to them

[File names shown: NS070101_Aubry_20140619, NS070101_Edwards_20150630, NS070101_Robinson_20150316, NS070101_Ross_20150310, NS070101_Worley_20140708]
Management of Oral History Collections

manage your files
audio editing and preservation

From the OHA's *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History*:

“This Interviewers, sponsoring institutions, and institutions charged with the preservation of oral history interviews should understand that appropriate care and storage of original recordings begins immediately after their creation.”
audio editing and preservation

“The recordings of the interviews should be stored, processed, refreshed and accessed according to established archival standards designated for the media format used. Whenever possible, all efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are cross platform and nonproprietary. Finally, the obsolescence of all media formats should be assumed and planned for.”
audio editing and preservation

treat your oral history sound or video file as you would any irreplaceable electronic file
audio editing and preservation

learn basic digital preservation techniques
transcription

From the OHA's *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History*:

“In order to augment the accessibility of the interview, repositories should make transcriptions, indexes, time tags, detailed descriptions or other written guides to the contents.”
transcription

in-house or outsource?
transcription

quality control is a must
transcription

preservation of transcript
oral histories deserve the same respect and treatment as any other collection in your repository
description: finding aids and cataloging

apply existing descriptive standards (such as DACS)
Related Materials note, from OHA’s Principles and Best Practices for Oral History:

“Information deemed relevant for the interpretation of the oral history by future users, such as photographs, documents, or other records should be collected, and archivists should make clear to users the availability and connection of these materials to the recorded interview.”
description: finding aids and cataloging

basic access points, such as interviewee and interviewer names/authorities, possibly also topical access points
description: finding aids and cataloging

bio notes for both interviewee and interviewer
In this audio interview with Martica Sawin, Mildred Constantine discusses joining the Graphic Design Department as an art and design history instructor at Parsons School of Design while also serving as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). She also describes her teaching methodologies and pedagogical philosophies during her time as an instructor of first-year students.
online or offline access

From the OHA's *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History*:

“Institutions charged with the preservation and access of oral history interviews should honor the stipulations of prior agreements made with the interviewers or sponsoring institutions including restrictions on access and methods of distribution.”
online or offline access
promotion and outreach

From the OHA's *Principles and Best Practices for Oral History*:

“Interviewers should strive to make the interviews accessible to the community and where appropriate to include representatives of the community in public programs or presentations of the oral history material.”
promotion and outreach

need to actively and continuously publicize oral history collections’ existence
promotion and outreach

employ social media to alert your repository’s followers that new histories are available or highlight a relevant interview on a particular anniversary.
promotion and outreach

Week 6: Mobilization and “diversity”  
*Oct. 6

- New School archives – 1990-2000
- Celeste Lacy Davis oral history, [http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS070101_Davis_20131121](http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS070101_Davis_20131121)

If your repository is associated with a school, let teachers know that the histories are available for classroom use.
promotion and outreach

Professor Gabrielle Bendiner-Viani’s Visual Urbanism class visits the Archives (2012)
promotion and outreach

histories can be incorporated into physical or online exhibitions
promotion and outreach

New School Alumni Day Open House (2013)
promotion and outreach

Radical Shifts: Reshaping the Interior at Parsons exhibition, Sheila Johnson Design Center (2011)

Photograph by Lee Gibson
promotion and outreach

write a press release
-- or better yet, get someone to write one for you -- and send it to media outlets in your area
promotion and outreach

get out of your repository and talk up your oral history program at any chance you get -- and if you can’t find a pre-existing chance, make one yourself.
promotion and outreach

share your knowledge and your mistakes so others can benefit

#LearnGrowRepeat
RESOURCES

Describing Archives: A Content Standard
http://www2.archivists.org/standards/DACS

Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History
http://libraries.uky.edu/libpage.php?lweb_id=11&llib_id=13&ltab_id=1369#libscroller

Oral History in the Digital Age
http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/

Oral History Association Principles and Best Practices
http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/

Public Broadcasting Metadata Dictionary Project
http://pbcore.org/

Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide
http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/interviewingguide.pdf

Archives of American Art. (2013). Draft Guidelines for Audiovisual Description in Archivists’ Toolkit in AAA. https://docs.google.com/a/newschool.edu/file/d/0B6DD1e2ac0hXM25RcHNtNklKd28/edit


