

## ORAL HISTORY 101: LHP GUIDE '26

**WHAT** is oral history?

“Oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives. These interviews may be used for research or excerpted in a publication, radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other form of public presentation. Recordings, transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials can also be posted on the Internet. Oral history does not include random taping, such as President Richard Nixon’s surreptitious recording of his White House conversations, nor does it refer to recorded speeches, wiretapping, personal diaries on tape, or other sound recordings that lack the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.” - Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*

**\*DISCUSS:** Is this a good definition? What does it leave out? How would you define what is (and what is *not*) an oral history?

“You know the person’s identity, but you look for tell-tale signs and clues to help you understand and evaluate the stories they tell you, and if you’re wise, you also observe how your subject is seen through eyes other than yours, refracted through the perceptions of those who know your subject better and closer and more fiercely than you ever will.” - Catherine A. Stewart, author of [\*Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project\*](#)

**\*DISCUSS:** What does Stewart’s description of oral history add to our understanding that Ritchie’s does not?

## **KEY IDEAS:**

- Oral storytelling traditions have existed in basically every global culture for as long as we've had written accounts of them.
- Oral history is based on the relationship between interviewer and subject (narrator); it is intimately affected by positionality, circumstances, and emotional dynamics.
- Oral history is primarily grounded in recollections of the past, rather than the contemporary.
- Oral history is time-dependent; oral historians have to be proactive about finding narrators while they're still here to share their stories.

***Narratives that end up in history books, museums, and textbooks are anything but neutral. Similar processes of knowledge, power, and exclusion shape what ends up in the archive, and what is treated as historically significant and worth preserving.***

**\*DISCUSS:** What are some of the limitations of the written archive, especially in context with what you've learned in prior sessions?

- The process of making decisions on what history is "significant" often excludes the lived experiences of ordinary people and people on the margins of society.
- Oral history as a practice believes that everyone has a unique, significant perspective on their own history and connected histories.
- Oral history can be used as a tool to fill gaps in the archive.
- Oral history prioritizes a people's history - one that tries to capture a variety of experiences, not just the experiences and biases of a small group.

**\*DISCUSS:** Particularly in the classroom, primary sources are often treated as either 1) visual or 2) textual. How can you imagine teaching with oral histories? What entry points might they offer students that text-based sources cannot? What are some potential difficulties you can think of?

**HOW** have oral histories been used?

- **In national memory initiatives like the Federal Writers' Project**, a WPA-funded project under FDR's presidency in the 1930s
  - The FWP trained hundreds of interviewers who were sent out across the country to record the experiences of formerly enslaved people. The people they talked to were either people with direct experience with enslavement or one generation removed.
  - Critiques: many interviewers were white and college-educated, and didn't interrogate the profound differences in their social positions that shaped the oral histories.
  - Others, like Zora Neale Hurston, did oral history that looked more like showing up daily in a community, forging connections, and slowly gaining trust.
- **In the context of documenting experiences of collective violence or genocide**: examples include post-Holocaust, in Guatemala, in Cambodia, in Rwanda, and in Armenia.
  - These often take the forms of "testimonials" — the interviewer is still present in the back-and-forth dynamic, but the priority is highlighting an individual experience, which will then be taken in context with the other testimonials to form a new type of counter-memory
- **In documenting family histories, migration and immigration stories, and narratives of community formation**
  - In a local context: the Center for Brooklyn History's oral history collections, like "Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations" (histories of mixed-heritage families in Brooklyn) or "Voices of Crown Heights" (histories and reflections on the 1991 neighborhood conflicts)

**KEY IDEA:** Michael Frisch's concept of "**shared authority.**" In short: when we're working on telling a story or crafting a history, the people we engage with are not just sources of knowledge, but **partners in creating something entirely new.**

Shared authority tries to break down **the boundaries between scholar and subject**. Narrators aren't just a source for knowledge to be consumed and used, but dynamic individuals who we are responsible for establishing trust and relationships with that have meaning beyond the interview itself.

Shared authority also means interrogating some of our assumptions about expertise and facts, and what either of those things actually means.

- Narrators are the experts in their own stories.
- The role of an oral historian is not necessarily to fact-check narrators as they retell their stories and experiences. In fact, an important part of oral history is the slippery nature of memory: over time, the ways that people remember a particular event, individual, or feeling may shift.

**\*DISCUSS:** What are some ways you might discuss with students the idea of an “incorrect” history being significant and useful?

**“The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning.** This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes... Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.” - Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*

**“All memories are a mixture of facts and opinions, and both are important.** The way in which people make sense of their lives is valuable historical evidence in itself. Few of us are good at remembering dates, and we tend to telescope two similar events into a single memory. So when we interview people it is important to get them to tell us about direct personal experiences – eye-witness testimony – rather than things that might have been heard second-hand.” - Oral History Society

## **WHO** does oral history?

Oral histories can be conducted with anyone. For a family history, you might want to interview elders or family members about their life experiences and their experiences with particular themes or topics. This could span anything from cultural traditions to political involvement. Researchers might use oral history to collect firsthand accounts from people who took part in a social movement, or to collect the perspectives of people from a particular neighborhood. The possibilities are endless.

## **WHERE** can we do oral history?

More places than you think! One of the beautiful things about oral history is that you don't need fancy gear or software to conduct one. As long as you have a device that can record an audio file — your phone, computer, or something else — and a quiet space, the tools to conduct an oral history are at your fingertips. The only MUSTS in an oral history are 1) the audio and 2) the transcript. That's it! If you're able to record an audio file and you have a word processing program to transcribe your file (you can do this by hand, or by using various free/paid softwares), you're in business.

## **LHP EXHIBITS** that highlight student-conducted oral histories:

- *From Bangladesh to Brooklyn: Mapping the Narratives of Immigrant Women*
- *Indo-Trinidadian Music, Migration, and Resistance in NYC*
- *When We Come Together, We Win*
- *Youth Social Consciousness and Place-Based Education in 1970s Chinatown*
- *It's Not Yet Spring, Unless All Flowers Blossom: the 1982 Chinatown Garment Workers' Strike*
- *A Chinese Latino Migration Archive*
- *Pinoys in Flatbush: A Fil-Am Family History*
- *Claiming Belonging: Uzbek Migration during the 21st Century*

**HOW** do we help students craft good questions?

Two golden rules, and a few suggestions:

**Rule #1: Ask, don't tell.** Once the narrator starts talking, try to avoid interruptions.

**Rule #2: Avoid yes or no questions, if possible;** avoid leading questions or leading language.

- Avoid interjecting with a personal opinion that might affect how comfortable your narrator feels responding. Open-ended, non-judgmental, probing questions yield the richest, fullest answers.
- Give the interviewee time and space to think about and answer each question, particularly if you're not speaking in person and if English is not their first language. Better to wait than to interrupt.
- Be patient with where the interview goes — what seems like a digression can often be the most fruitful part of the interview.
- Listen carefully. Whatever planning you do beforehand doesn't account for the actual interview itself: an oral history interviewer is constantly thinking of follow-up questions, clarifications, and ways to expand upon the interviewee's prior statements. Taking notes is ideal.
- Offering the transitions between questions/topics is the interviewer's responsibility; the narrator can't read your mind! To avoid questions feeling choppy and disconnected, make logical connections between sections of the oral history. This can look something like: "We've been talking a lot about your early life, and now I'd like to shift gears a little bit to talk about \_\_\_\_\_."
- If a narrator is clearly uncomfortable exploring a certain subject, read the room and shift away from it. The oral history interview should be a space of respect, and part of that dynamic depends on you taking in body language/tone.

## **ORAL HISTORY CHECKLIST:**

### *1) Pick your topic.*

Ask students: What are you interested in? How can oral history help supplement your research? Where have you done preliminary research so far, and what dead ends are you hitting?

### *2) Connect with your narrator(s).*

Ask students: How are you going to find people to interview? Are they family members? Are they located in a particular neighborhood, or do they gather in a particular community space? How can you use your network?

### *3) Plan your questions.*

It's often helpful to work chronologically in an oral history, i.e., working roughly around the arc of a person's life history. Craft basic life history questions and then work on some open-ended, topic-specific questions.

### *4) Prep your materials.*

Schedule a date and time with your narrator. Pick what format you're going to do the oral history in (remotely, on phone or Zoom, or in-person) and prep what you need accordingly. You can record on your phone's voice notes app, using other recording apps, or on a laptop or external recorder.

### *5) Interview.*

Meet your narrator at your agreed-upon time. Talk through any questions/concerns they might have before starting your recording. Work through your questions, and ask at the end if there's anything else they'd like to share.

### *6) Transcribe your interview.*

You can either transcribe your audio file on a word processing program (Microsoft Word, Google Docs, etc) or use a program that will generate a transcript. Some good examples of this are otter.ai, Descript, Trint, or Vibe.

### *7) Get your narrator's signed release form.*

This is a basic courtesy to make sure your narrator understands how their interview might be used and how far it might be distributed, i.e., in online

materials, exhibits, or something else. This is an important step for doing ethical oral history and should not be skipped.

*What other steps would you add?*

## **ACTIVITIES WITH STUDENTS:**

- What makes a good question? What makes a BAD question? What are some questions that you'd ask a family member or family friend?
- Pair up and swap a family story. If it's not something you experienced firsthand, pay particular attention to how you tell the story.
- As a large group, discuss: how did you first hear the story you shared? Who was telling it? Is it retold in your family? Do you think the story has changed in its retellings over the years? How might it change depending on who's telling it and in what context?
- In small groups, draft some sample questions that you might ask in a life history. Try to include a range of basic closed-end factual questions (when were you born, etc) and open-ended interpretive questions (i.e., how did you feel about \_\_\_\_\_, what was your experience of \_\_\_\_\_). If you have time, see how it feels to ask each other some of them!
- As a large group, discuss: Share out some of the open-ended questions and think about how different phrasings of them might yield different answers. How does the language we use in an interview impact the answers we get? What role does establishing a comfortable rapport with your narrator play in a good oral history? What are some prompts you might use to jog your narrator's memories — i.e., photographs, maps, etc?