HOW TO PLAN AN ORAL HISTORY

vol. 2

What questions do you still have about doing oral history?

step #1:

Narrow the scope of your topic.

*What are you hoping to learn more about?

*Where have you already found information, and what have you learned? How have you searched for info so far?

*What kinds of gaps or dead ends are you running into in your research? Is oral history the right tool to help fill it?

step #2:

Who are the people you'd like to interview, and why?

*What will they (ideally) contribute to your project?

*What communities are your narrators a part of? What commonalities might they share: anything from age, location, language, religion, a shared space they gather in, etc.

*Do you have any existing connections? Either through family, friends, or otherwise?

step #3:

Make a list of potential interviewees, AKA narrators. Write a few lines of notes on their connection to you/your project and why you want to do an oral history with them.

step #4:

How are you going to get in touch with your narrator? Will you call, text, or email them, or ask them in person?

Even if your narrator is a relative or a close family friend, it's still important to clearly communicate with them beforehand what your project is and what you want to talk with them about.

Someone entrusting you with their memories is a choice, not a given. Building trust is important.

step #5:

What will the structure of your oral history be?

Though not every oral history is a life history (organized chronologically throughout the stages of someone's life), it's a useful foundation to build off of.

It's generally good practice to start with easier questions to warm your narrator up, then ease into more complex topics.

Start broad, get more specific. Keep in mind that an oral history rarely goes exactly to plan, and be ready to pivot.

step #6:

DO: Write yourself a starting set of questions: things that you want to be sure to ask.

DON'T: Expect your oral history to stick exactly to your written plan. The most interesting tangents often come out of nowhere.

DO: Plan to take notes, to listen attentively, and to write follow-up questions as you go.

DON'T: Rely too heavily (or at all!) on yes-or-no questions. You won't get very interesting answers, and it leaves you no room to follow up.