

SIXTY-MINUTE GUIDE TO ORAL HISTORY

Conducting an Oral History

- Plan your project
- Engage willing narrator(s)
- Research narrator's background
- Schedule appointments
- Obtain signed release agreement
- Record interviews
- Transcribe interviews
- Review transcript—have narrator review transcript
- Deposit corrected transcript, recordings, release agreements, notes and correspondence in library, archives, or other institutional repository

Tips for Oral History Interviewing

- Ensure that equipment is functioning properly
- Label tapes with names of interviewer, narrator, date and tape number
- Take taperecorder, outline, and research to interview
- Obtain signature on release agreement
- Development rapport, but remain neutral
- Ask who, what, where, when, why, how
- Listen carefully and guide the interview
- Use silence
- Ask for examples and anecdotes as illustration

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☞ INTERVIEW TIPS ☞

- Get the interviewee to tell his/her story.
- Ask only one question at a time and ask brief questions.
- Phrase questions so more than a "yes" or "no" answer is required. Use words such as "Why," "How," "Where," "When," "What kind of . . ."
- Ask non-controversial, easy questions first. A good place to begin is with the interviewee's childhood.
- Don't worry about brief periods of silence—these may allow the interviewee to think of what s/he wishes to add.
- Listen quietly, carefully and actively. Encourage the interviewee with a smile or a nod. Do not say things like "yes," "uh-huh," and "really" repeatedly. Maintain eye contact.
- Don't interrupt a good story because you have pre-determined a pattern of questioning and the interviewee seems to be straying from this.
- If the interviewee does drift into non-pertinent subjects, pull him/her back to the topic as quickly as possible.
- As it is frequently difficult to describe individual people, ask the interviewee to describe the person's appearance and then move to description of character.
- Use the negative approach to advantage. Ask about the negative aspects of a situation. An over-sympathetic, positive approach is likely to elicit non-involved agreement with little enlightenment.
- Try to establish at every important point in the story where the interviewee was or what his/her role was in this event in order to ascertain how much is based on eyewitness testimony and how much is based on secondhand information.
- Don't challenge accounts you believe to be inaccurate. Rather, try to develop information that can be used later in establishing what probably happened.
- Tactfully point out to your interviewee where his/her account differs from that of others.
- Interviews work the best when it is just the two of you—the interviewee and the interviewer. If another person is present who wants to contribute, such as a spouse, tactfully ask if perhaps s/he could be interviewed at another time.

QUESTION FORMATS

The way you ask a question will affect the answer you will get. You want to try to ask open-ended questions and avoid closed questions. Ask questions that require more than a one-word answer.

Closed Questions

Did you go to Sunday school?

Did you walk to church?

Do you remember church picnics?

Open-Ended Questions

What do you remember about Sunday school?

How did you get to church?

Tell me about the church picnics. What did you like or dislike about the church picnics?

A good way to help the interviewee recount their past experiences is to ask provocative questions. You can do this by asking questions in terms of Who did What?, Where?, When?, How?, and Why?

Start questions with:

- Tell me about....
- Describe...
- What do you remember about...
- Explain...
- Expand...

Avoid leading questions. These are questions which suggest a particular answer, or which influence the interviewee to answer in a certain way.

I understand Rev. Smith was a wonderful preacher. What did you think?

What can you tell me about Rev. Smith?
What did he look like?
What were his sermons like?

NINTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**125 South Grand Avenue
Pasadena, CA 91105
(626) 795-0266**

ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT

I, _____, do hereby grant to the Ninth Judicial Circuit Historical Society (hereinafter, the "Society") legal title and all literary rights including copyright to all material related to my oral history interview(s) listed below. It is agreed I agree that access to the audio tape and/or video recording(s) and edited manuscript of my oral history interview(s) shall be available under the Society's use policy, which I have reviewed. I hereby grant to the Society and its assigns the right to make electronic, photographic and any other manner of recordings of my interview(s), including written transcripts thereof, and the right to copy, exhibit, perform, display, distribute, make derivative works thereof and to otherwise use the same in the Society's sole discretion, and the right to use my name, voice and likeness in the same and in order to promote the same, in all media now known or hereafter devised, worldwide, in perpetuity, and I waive claim to all sums that may be received by the Society as a consequence thereof. This gift does not preclude any use that I may want to make of the information for myself.

This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Description of Material:

Tape recording(s) and transcript resulting from oral history sessions beginning on _____

Donor _____

Place _____

Date _____

Interviewer _____

Date _____

For the Society _____

Date _____

ORAL HISTORY

CHECKLIST

Equipment

- _____ Tape recorder
- _____ Tape recorder instruction manual
- _____ Tape recorder accessories
 - _____ AC adapter
 - _____ Power cord
 - _____ Extension cord
 - _____ Batteries
- _____ Microphone
 - _____ Mike stand
 - _____ Mike cord
- _____ Extra batteries
- _____ Blank tapes with labels
- _____ Notepad & pen
- _____ Watch

Forms

- _____ Release form
- _____ Biographical information
- _____ Topic outline

Idaho Oral History Center

Ericson, Stacy, compiler; revised by Troy Reeves. **A FIELD NOTEBOOK FOR ORAL HISTORY.** Boise: Idaho Oral History Center, 2001.

A Field Notebook for Oral History arose as a by-product of nearly twenty workshops held by the Idaho Oral History Center (IOHC) between 1978 and 1980. Originally published in 1980. The Center has revised and reprinted the **Field Notebook** now on three separate occasions. This book is an invaluable resource for individuals and organizations interested in preserving the past through this fascinating and unique method of documentation.

The **Field Notebook** is broken into four key sections including: pre-interview, interview, post-interview, and special topics (such as Oral History in Education) segments. The nearly 100-page volume also contains an updated bibliography, sample forms and letters, and addresses to professional oral history organizations. The work's compiler (and reviser) has written the **Field Notebook** in an easy-to-use outline format geared toward both first-time oral historians and others looking to refresh or update their oral history knowledge.

A Field Notebook for Oral History is available for \$8.00 (plus \$2.00 shipping/ handling). Idaho residents must add 6% sales tax. Inquire about discounts for resale or quantity purchases.



Please send:

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