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How to Create an Oral History Program

Devin McKinney
Gettysburg College

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How to Create an Oral History Program

Abstract
The archival literature is full of calls to document under-represented voices, to create participatory archives, and to be an activist archivist. However, when funds and time are limited, these ideals can seem impossible to implement. What's an archivist to do? One easy and affordable option is to create an oral history program. This workshop will give you the skills and the confidence to start an oral history program at your own institution. It will cover the main steps from performing preliminary research and developing questions all the way through thinking about how to promote and use your oral histories once they've been transcribed and edited. Participants will leave this workshop with a step-by-step plan to start an oral history program once they return to their institutions.

Keywords
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Comments
This session was presented at MARAC, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, held April 14–16, 2016, in Pittsburgh, PA.

Session description:

This mini-workshop will give you the skills and the confidence to start an oral history program at your own institution. It will cover the key steps from performing preliminary research and developing questions all the way through thinking about how to promote and use your oral histories once they've been transcribed and edited. Participants will leave this workshop with a step-by-step plan for starting an oral history program once they return to their institutions.

Moderator and Speaker:

- Kelsey Duinkerken, Thomas Jefferson University

Speakers:

- Jeanne Swadosh, The New School
- Devin McKinney, Gettysburg College

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"CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW"

Devin McKinney

Spring Conference, Mid-Atlantic Region Archives Conference (MARAC)

Pittsburgh, PA, April 15, 2016

[Note: This was the second segment of a three-part workshop presentation. The first segment, "Before the Interview," was delivered by Kelsey Duinkerken, Special Collections and Digitization Librarian, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA; the last, "After the Interview," was delivered by Jeanne Swadosh, Associate Archivist, New School for Social Research, New York, NY.]

Good morning. I'm going to be talking about the middle part of the oral history process – conducting the interview. In a way, that's the easiest part of all, because you're dealing with people, not platforms. In a way, it's the hardest part, because you're dealing with people, not platforms. But I'm confident in saying it's the part that will be richest in discovery for you – because you're dealing with people, not platforms. Not to derogate our good friend technology, but there's only going to be a finite number of devices, applications, and programs you need to be familiar with at any one time. But there are as many different people for you to experience as there are people for you to interview.

Three and a half years ago, I had never done an oral history in my life. I'd never had anything to do with oral histories, beyond reading them. Since then I've instigated, scheduled, researched, written questions for, conducted, transcribed, and followed up on roughly 60 such interviews. I've transcribed dozens more for other people. I've written metadata for and

uploaded to CONTENTdm hundreds of others. I've sifted and redacted and excerpted and edited parts of individual oral histories into collective oral histories which have been published by my institution, Gettysburg College. The learning curve was steep at first, especially since I'm not by nature the kind of person who contacts strangers asking if I can interview them about their lives. But if I can get a few basic things learned, to the point where I feel confident talking to the next person, and the next person, and the person after that, I have no doubt you can.

So let me take you through a few things that my experience has shown me.

Making contact. Most of the time, you're going to seek to interview someone you don't know. You're going to be contacting them out of the clear blue, asking them to open up about some potentially sensitive aspects of their personal and perhaps private history. That's a big deal. How often have *you* been asked that? You want to approach each subject as you'd approach a skittish horse, and the best method may depend on the person. For people over a certain age, who might not tend to be regular email users, the more old-fashioned methods – a letter, a cold call – might still be best. Older folks also tend not to be as suspicious of such approaches, so you stand a good chance of making positive contact with someone in the upper age brackets that way.

I prefer to contact people by email, if that's at all possible, simply because it seems the least intrusive method of approaching a complete stranger. With a phone call, you run the risk of catching her at a bad time and, bang, you're already an annoyance in her life. Avoid that at all costs. Actual letters to street addresses have, for me, been even less successful. Even if people read them, they're easy to throw on a pile, disregard, and forget about. But an email is convenient, because they're already there at their computer, and they can respond quickly and easily.

The trick to crafting the request is to A) put the person's mind at ease that you're not after anything material, or acting out of shady motives; and B) get them interested enough to respond positively – at least to the degree of requesting more information. Do that first with your subject line. Don't write something generic like "Oral History Request" or anything that sounds like a sleazy come-on, like "Hey! Can we talk?" Say something specific to this person's experience, and the narrower your interview focus, the easier it is to do that. For instance, I've spent the last couple of years doing oral histories with Gettysburg College alums who in early 1971 staged one of the first-ever productions of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. All I had to do was put "*Jesus Christ Superstar*" and "Gettysburg College" in the subject line – and instantly, they knew the email was for them, what it was regarding, and that it probably wasn't a scam or virus.

The request itself should be articulate, detailed, and supplicating. That is, **be humble**. Remember, you're asking this person for something that's of value to you, and offering nothing material in return. So apologize, first of all, for imposing on their time, and don't take the attitude that you're doing them a favor. **Give detail.** Say clearly who you are, and what you want of them. Explain who you work for and what your institutional backing is. **Give background.** Let them know what your program has already accomplished, and that they're invited to take part in something that's alive and growing. If they happen to be one of the first interviews in your project or program, emphasize that they're a pioneer, helping to lay groundwork for something important.

Stress their unique importance to the project. Let them know you appreciate the singularity of *their* experience, and its value to the historical record. Tell them that scheduling and location would be at their maximum convenience, and that you'll make every possible

accommodation. Include full contact information. And finally, thank them for considering your request.

State your conditions. Once your request is accepted, you want to do all you can to make the process smooth and even enjoyable for the subject. But it's okay to set a few guidelines of your own. For example, I like to tell people that they're free to ramble and digress, but that I will direct them back to the main path of questioning when I feel it's time. Most people are happy to hear that – they'll be self-conscious about talking long, sounding incoherent, and they'll welcome that kind of guidance. If you foresee asking questions of a private or painful nature, tell them they're free to decline to answer – but that you must ask the question. If they want to go off the record at any point, they have to state that clearly; otherwise, anything they say is presumed to be on the record. Specific terms of confidentiality and post-interview access should be written into your institutional release, but you may give your subjects whatever power you feel is reasonable to limit those rights.

Determining the location. If it's geographically feasible for you, always give your subject the option of doing the interview in his or her home. That may even be preferable to you – domestic surroundings always contribute to your sense of who a person is. But make sure they know the interview has to be done in a quiet place where the two of you can sit fairly close together for the purpose of making an audible, transcribable recording. It's not sufficient for the two of you to hear each other – the recorder has to hear both of you.

If you can't or prefer not to do it in their home, choose a place in your institution that you can control – a conference room, study room, or office. Needless to say, you should do all you can to make the environment welcoming and physically comfortable in terms of seating, lighting, and climate.

If you're doing the interview by phone, the same principles apply. Wherever they are, they have to be in a quiet place with no yapping dogs nearby, and you have to be in a quiet place with your recorder right next to your phone, with the speaker turned on and the phone plugged in, so you don't have to worry about battery failure. Part of the interesting unknown of oral history is your relative lack of control in a phone situation. A lot of times you have to hope for the best, or at least the good enough. You'll usually get it.

What to bring. Digital recorder with fresh batteries. A set of backup batteries. Your questions, printed out with checkboxes. Notebook. Pens and pencils. A watch or clock visible, in case either of you has a time restriction. Water for the subject to drink, if they're coming to a place selected by you. And very importantly, two copies of your release form. I'll come back to that in a moment.

So the moment of truth arrives. The interview begins. After you push the "record" button, read a prewritten statement, a kind of oral metadata. Give the date, say who you are, where you are, who you're interviewing, and what you're going to be interviewing them about. If there's a project title, give that. That's essential for bookkeeping, but it also lets your subject know that introductory chat is over, and starting now, you're on the record.

Ask your questions, don't read them. An oral history interview is not a conversation. It's a form of interrogation. But to get those memories flowing, you want to have a natural rhythm to your speech. Articulate questions conversationally, and most subjects will respond in kind. In general, do all you can to minimize the formality of the interaction while still maintaining control of the interview.

It's okay to suggest answers – IF you have to. Of course, you never put words into your subject's mouth, or maneuver him into statements he didn't intend. And as Kelsey pointed

out before, you shouldn't go in with leading questions. But in practice, a subject might need help in parsing a panorama of memory into the vignettes that are so much of the substance of oral history. The thing is, people store and access their memories in many different ways. Say you ask someone to describe her neighborhood growing up. She shrugs: "I don't know – it was just my neighborhood. It's where I grew up." That's a type of answer you're going to get. Now, it's not that she grew up in a futuristic cube free of all human detail. This is a bright woman with a long life and rich history. But like a lot of people, she's simply not used to breaking down her memories into details, or conjuring up phrases to describe her own experience.

In that case, it's perfectly okay to help out by offering a range of general realities, one of which is almost bound to apply to her as it would apply to anyone. "Did you live on a quiet street, or was there a lot of activity?" "Was it suburban, or in town?" "Did you have other kids to play with?" "Were the people mostly working class, middle class, upper class?" You're not leading them toward a desired answer, you're simply teasing out specifics they're not in the habit of verbalizing or perhaps even thinking about. That nudge – not a push, a nudge – can bring forth memories even the subject didn't realize she had. If, however, she doesn't respond even to a nudge, you realize that, and you move on.

Check off questions as you go. It's a simple point, but I've always found it helpful. You glance down, see the last checkmark you made, and you don't have to break the flow by stopping to regain your place. Plus, at any point you can estimate where you are in the overall course of the interview, which can be useful if time is limited.

Check your device occasionally. Every now and then, glance at your recorder to make sure the counter is still advancing and everything's fine. Again, do it seldom and do it subtly. Develop a third eye for things like that.

Other types of recording devices. It's never a bad idea to take along a camera to an interview, and ask the person to pose for a shot or two. It's a quick, unobtrusive way of adding to the record of the event – especially if it's in the person's house and you can capture the look of their lived-in environment. You can videotape an interview session – depending on the circumstances or the project, you may even want to. But be aware that added technology, especially visual, not only adds to your prep time but may make the subject more self-conscious. So my advice is, use only the technology that you need to get a clear, reliable record.

Multi-task. I mentioned your third eye just now. You need to be able to do several things at once while making it seem you're doing just one thing – listening to your subject. You need to be absorbing the current answer, thinking ahead to the next question, jotting new questions that are occurring to you for the first time. Get used to maintaining eye contact with the person while you make these notes and check-marks. They're going to accept a certain amount of looking down and looking away, but you never want to make them feel as you're checking *them* off.

Use affirmations. Either vocal or physical, they show that you're paying attention and that you're right there with this person. Don't be robotic about it, don't force it, just listen. Something as simple as a nod of the head, a smile of recognition, or saying "Uh-huh" at the right moment is essential to greasing the wheels of oral history. It encourages the subject to continue talking, to open up a little more, and a little more, and a little more. Almost everyone wants to be heard and understood. So let them know, in these subtle ways, that you're hearing, you're understanding, and you're **interested**. Again, the more interviews you do, the more naturally these indicators will come to you, and the more you'll be able to intuit the right moments for them.

Follow the chemistry of the encounter. What do I mean? I mean that, conducting an interview, you should be prepared to disregard or violate any of the guidelines I've just given you – depending on the person, depending on the moment. One thing that makes being an oral historian interesting is that each subject is different, each encounter is a new experience, and each interview situation will to a great degree determine itself. A certain chemistry will develop between you and each person you talk to. It may be good or bad, fertile or sterile. But you need to be responsive to it moment by moment, taking the tone or direction that makes the best use of it. If you're talking to someone who jokes a lot, laugh freely. If you're talking to someone who's very pious, adopt that demeanor. Don't try to impress yourself upon them. Feel the chemistry as they are determining it, and go with it.

Here's a related point. Back in the Eighties, Madonna had a hit called "Express Yourself." Your theme song is the opposite. **Suppress yourself**. You're there to engage this person, not necessarily to engage *with* them. That doesn't mean when the recorder goes on you cease to be a person with opinions, feelings, and ideas. It simply means you're not to **express** those opinions, feelings, and ideas unless specifically requested to by the subject. If you realize that before going in, you're less likely to be thrown off by anything jarring or unpleasant. For instance, say you're interviewing someone who considers it a national tragedy that the South lost the Civil War. You happen to disagree. Suppress your desire to debate with him. You can ask for clarification – but only insofar as it helps him to explain himself.

Don't let your questions or the tone in which you ask them be tainted by disapproval. Getting the story of a person's life should involve, to a great degree, not just data but impressions and opinions, values and biases. Sometimes those are going to go against your grain. When they

do, you need to clam up and do your job. Once again, the more you do this, the easier it will become, and you'll find that in dealing with some people, your objectivity is a very useful tool.

Care about the interview, even if they don't seem to. Some oral histories don't go so well. It just doesn't click. The subject is unresponsive or unremembering, every answer is yes or no, your follow-up questions don't go anywhere. People have problems in their lives, problems they're going to have to return to as soon as you walk out the door. This oral history that means so much to you may mean a lot less to them.

Sometimes you'll be sitting there, asking yourself, "Why did this person even agree to an interview?" In my experience, that's a rare occurrence, but it will happen. Hunter S. Thompson said, "When the going gets tough, the tough turn pro." This is a time when your job becomes to stay engaged, stay enthused, and carry it through. Even if you've got a dead fish across the table from you, realize that that's what he's showing you, that's at least one aspect of his character and self-presentation, and that will manifest in this record you're creating. In the rare encounter that feels laborious and pointless, caring about the process and the result is what will sustain you.

Bring the release. Bring the release, bring the release, and oh by the way, bring the release. Sign and date it yourself ahead of time, and have them sign and date it at the end of the interview. Bring a second copy, also signed and dated by you, in case they want it for their files. Whether they do or not, that's always a good thing to offer – it shows them that you've thought ahead, and that you think of them as a partner in the process. That puts you in a good position for post-interview follow-ups and future relationships.

If you've done the interview by phone, obviously you need to get an active mailing address from them. Send the two signed, dated releases with a brief cover letter thanking them

again for the interview, and including a self-addressed stamped envelope. Most people will return these fairly promptly, but be prepared to write a nudging email if you have to.

As we've already noted, the specific terms of the release are determined by you and your institution. What matters is to get the signature and the date when the person is in front of you. Most people have no problem signing right after the interview – by this point, they probably trust you enough to do that. I always inform people that their interview will be transcribed, and that they'll have a chance to see and approve that transcript before it becomes accessible to others. Once in a while, the person will want to see that transcript before signing the release. That can be a minor headache, but it's their right and you should make sure they know it.

Remember that you're doing something important. Getting an oral history down is like exercising – 10 minutes on the treadmill is better than none. By the same token, even a thin oral history is better than no oral history. Records are by their nature incomplete. They're never going to tell us everything. The best you can do as oral historian is to offer your subject every opportunity to remember, to analyze, to say who they are, where they came from and where they've been. And if over the course of the time you spend together they don't take those opportunities – guess what, that's the revelation. That's who they were on that day. But even that little bit of insight you got, from his or her mouth, in that moment, which you now have the ability to pass along into history – that is what will make you want to do the next interview, and the next one, and the one after that.

Develop – and trust – your intuition. The fact is, 95 percent of conducting an interview is purely intuitive. Unlike the before and the after, you really don't need a manual for it. Guidelines and tips can steer you around a few potholes, but the human intangibles of interaction are things you'll only really pick up by doing it. If you're curious about people, if you're well-

prepared on your subject, and if you care about the process as much as the product – and you should are about the product a lot – then you'll do fine.

And you'll come out of it with something that in historical, archival terms, cultural, and humanistic terms is really, uniquely valuable. The story of someone's life, or a part of her life, or a part of a part of a part of her life, told in her words, recorded in ways that are preserved and accessible – that's an important thing to have captured, and to pass on. Most people, you will find, want to tell their own stories, at whatever length and to whatever degree of introspection they're capable of, to someone who cares and is going to process it in a useful way. But the thing is – most people never get asked. You're the ones who are going to ask them. That's important.

So if I were going to boil all of this down to one aphorism, one Zen koan, it would be: Take it seriously – and take it as it comes. Thanks.