

3-10-2022

## Oral History Best Practices

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### Recommended Citation

Bakker, Rebecca J., "Oral History Best Practices" (2022). *Works of the FIU Libraries*. 110.  
<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/glworks/110>

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# ORAL HISTORY BEST PRACTICES

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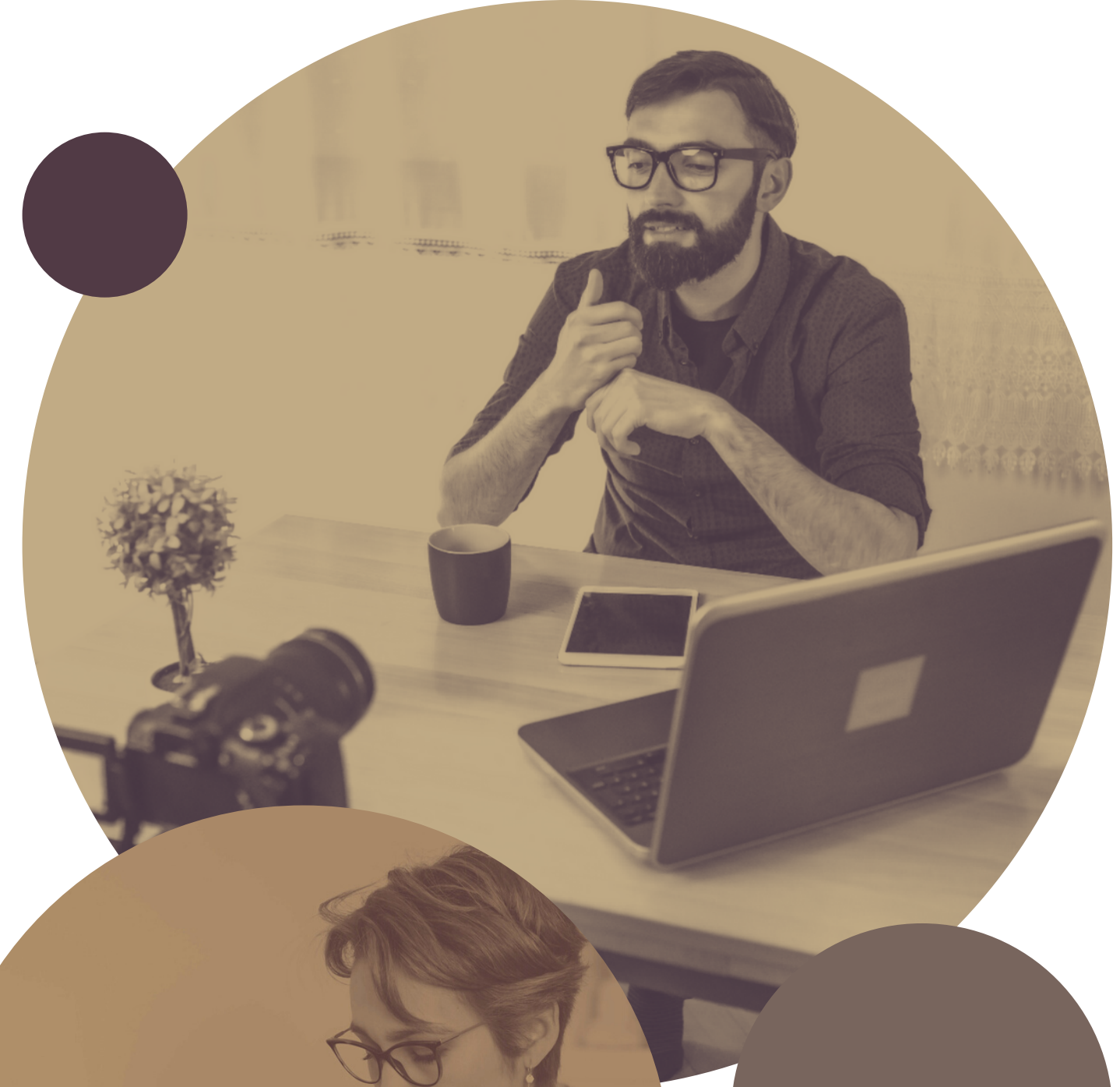


# What this presentation (hopefully) will cover

Oral History Project Overview

Where to find additional resources

Steps necessary to get you ready to  
create your own oral history!



# Why do Oral Histories?

Fill in the gaps of history

Preserves who we are in the present and what we remember about the past

Creation of a primary source for future researchers





# Oral History Resources

Oral History Association  
[oralhistory.org](http://oralhistory.org)

[Baylor University's Institute of Oral Histories](#)

[University of Florida's Samuel Proctor Oral History Program](#)

# Oral History Core Principles

Respect  
Transparency  
Awareness  
Preservation  
Do No Harm



<https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-core-principles/>



# Before the Interview

# First Steps

Think about who you want to interview and why:

- Why are you doing this project?
- What do you hope to learn?
- What kinds of questions will you ask?





# Communicating with your Narrator



Introduce yourself and describe the project.

Set clear expectations:

- Give your narrator an idea on what you will be asking
- Let them know the interview will be recorded
- Explain how the interview will be used
- Let them know they can decline to answer any questions
- Send them the release form to review and sign.

Schedule interview for when it is convenient for them.

Get some background information on the narrator. Ask if there are any items they would like to bring: awards, scrapbooks, photo albums, etc.

Thank them for their time and willingness to participate!

*Remember: you are building rapport and trust in these first communications!*

# Research

Do some background research on:

- Time period and locations that will likely be subject of interview
- Relevant news events that may have taken place
- Prominent people in the industry, organization, etc.
- Publications, interests, research areas of narrator
- Rough chronology of narrator's life



# FIU Resources

- **FIU Special Collections & University Archives** -  
<https://specialcollections.fiu.edu/>  
<http://dpanther.fiu.edu/sobek/l/ua/text>
- **FIU Course Catalogs** - <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/catalogs/>
- **FIU Yearbooks** - <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/yearbooks/>
- **FIU Employee Newsletters** -  
[http://dpanther.fiu.edu/dpanther/items?  
searchContent=Ivory+Tower+Florida+International+University&se  
archCode=TI](http://dpanther.fiu.edu/dpanther/items?searchContent=Ivory+Tower+Florida+International+University&searchCode=TI)
- **FIU Student Newspapers** -  
<http://dpanther.fiu.edu/dpanther/collections/bn>

# Prepare

Listen to other oral history interviews

Know your topic and participant

Think about the audience and final destination of interview

Anticipate challenges

Practice!



# Interview Questions

Have at least 10 prepared interview questions

- Open ended
- Historical interviewing NOT Job interviewing
- Ask specific follow up questions during interview

## Sample questions:

*Tell me about \_\_\_\_\_*

*What were some of the challenges you faced when you began your career?*

*How did working at FIU compare with your prior work experiences?*

*Why did you move to Miami?*



# Oral History Release Forms

Release forms make the narrator aware of how the interview will be used, and is essential to make the interview available to researchers.

The release form may indicate where interview will be housed, if it will be accessible online and any copyright restrictions.

Two forms should be submitted: one signed by interviewer and one signed by narrator.

Should be clear and concise! Make copies and keep them with the recorded interview files!

*Sample release forms:*

*The Claremont Colleges, Inc.*

*Library of Congress*

*FIU Photographic/Film Consent & Release Form*





# Setting up for the Interview

# Available Equipment

- Video Recorders
- Audio Recorders
- SD Cards
- Microphones

## FIU's Digital Scholar Studio

Green Library, MMC Campus, GL540

Contact:

Molly Castro, Digital Humanities Librarian

[mocastro@fiu.edu](mailto:mocastro@fiu.edu)

## FIU's Media & Instructional Technology Services

Green Library, MMC Campus, GL 177

Contact:

[mediaeqp@fiu.edu](mailto:mediaeqp@fiu.edu)

305-348-2815





# Recording Best Practices

AUDIO is the most important part of the interview

Uncompressed audio/video is preferred:

Video: AVI, MOV, MPEG-4

Audio: AIFF, WAV

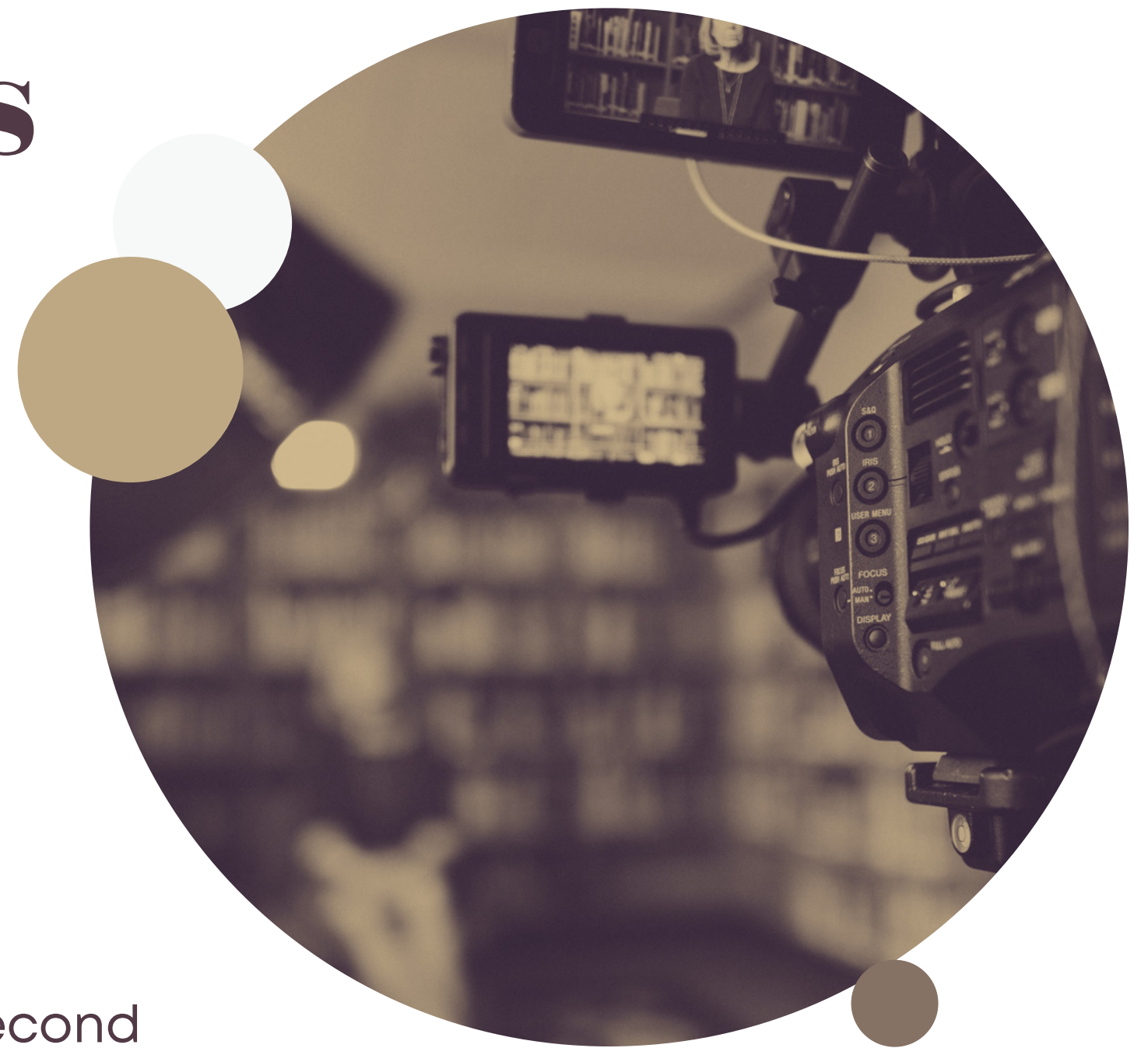
MP4 and MP3/M4A are OK

Preferred:

- codecs: uncompressed lossless
- bit depth: 24 bits per sample
- height and width: minimum 720x486 pixels at 30 frames per second
- sampling rate: minimum sample rate of 44.1 KHz, although sampling at 96 KHz is encouraged

Not preferred:

- Files created for "streaming" broadcast (e.g. RealAudio, Windows Media) - these files sacrifice quality for file size. They are often reduced from high resolution files by removing high and low frequency ranges and compressing the remaining signal.



# Interview Recording Tips

Frame your shot and pay attention to lighting on the interviewee's face.

Helpful if your shot gets a sense of the person in context of their surroundings.

Continually check your shot, as people shift out of the frame.

When possible, use an external mic.

Use a tripod or make sure camera is in a secure position.

Know how to edit the settings of your video, and how to get it off the device.

If possible, have a helper who is recording, listening to audio through headphones.

Know your equipment: Practice/test before recording!



# Recording Tips

Make sure narrator is comfortable. Remind them that they can choose what questions to answer, and that the camera can be turned off at any time they would like.

Quiet room – really be aware of ambient noise (fans, lawnmowers, traffic, cell phones). Audio is the most important part of the interview!

Agree to the length of time, and keep track. Make sure you can record that long on your device!

Ideally, one cut.

Redundant audio capturing, if at all possible. Have a second recorder running! Make a CLAP!

Make sure your device is plugged in or has enough battery life.

Make backup copies immediately! Keep with signed release forms.



# Cell Phone Recording Tips

Put it on airplane mode!

Make sure you have enough internal storage for the file size.

Be careful of apps that may violate privacy of narrator.

Make sure there are no time limits to record video/audio.

Make sure mic will capture audio for both interviewer and narrator.

Know how to get the file off your phone.



# Remote Oral Histories

Make sure narrator is comfortable with the format and has all necessary equipment.

Use external mic - smartphone earbuds are fine (and make sure computer knows the audio input is headphones!)

Close all applications that might make noise or pop up notifications (and recommend the same to narrator).

Test your internet speed before the interview.

Redundant capture, if possible.

Make sure you have a phone # for your narrator - just in case things go down!





# Recording the Interview

# Interview Tips

**Start with a “lead”!** The lead should consist of the names of narrator and interviewer, date of the session, interview’s location, and proposed subject of the recording.

Start with biographical questions: early life, education, family.

Ask controversial/sensitive topics after rapport has been established.

Ask one question at a time.

Don’t challenge answers.

Allow tangents and off-topic stories.

Be a curious and active listener!



# Interview Probes

Silence – give them time and space to answer

Encouragement – nod, smile, engage

Immediate elaboration – *Tell me more about that! And then what happened?*

Immediate clarification – *How did you feel about that? When did that occur?*

Retrospective elaboration – *A few minutes ago, you mentioned your mentor's influence in your life. Tell me about her.*

Reflective probe: Repeat what they said





# Ending Interview

Respect the narrator's time - stop at the agreed upon time

If narrator seems fatigued, stop or take breaks

Ask if there is anything they would like to mention that you did not ask about

Ask them to spell any names or places you did not understand

Close the session by asking them to assess the experience of being interviewed

Let the narrator know if you will be providing a copy of the interview and/or transcript

Thank the narrator for their involvement





# After the Interview

# After the Interview

Make notes immediately! Add some context, biographical information on the interviewee, or anything that might help the audience or transcriber understand the interview better.

Create a quick summary. This may be used to create an abstract that can be used as a finding aid later.

Make digital copies, and make sure copies are being preserved within accepted best practices (ask your local librarian/archivist for help, as needed!)

Send a thank you to the narrator for their time and involvement!



# Transcripts/Captions

- Makes the interviews more accessible
- Rough versions can be created through AI software
- Can be very time consuming!

Consider transcribing only relevant or important portions.

Send transcript to the narrator for review.

Ask your local librarian/archivist for assistance in creating transcripts!



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THANK YOU FOR  
BEING HERE!