

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OVERVIEW

Overview

Our class is organized around the design, implementation, and processing of an oral history project. You will design a hypothetical oral history project consisting of ten interviews, conduct and process one in-person, audio-recorded interview, and summarize your experience in a final paper. Our course readings and discussions support the steps in your project.

Themes. Develop your oral history project around one of these themes, or a theme of your choice with my permission.

- Immigration or cultural identity
- Occupations or the role of work on families and communities,
- Human ecology – the effect of humans on the natural world

Project Topic. A topic explores a particular question within a theme. Develop a topic and, in this early stage, express it in a single sentence. You will develop the topic in much greater detail as you design the project, but a simple one sentence statement will help you focus at first. It is fine to adjust the topic as you do more research and learn more about your narrator. Here are some examples:

- Explore attitudes and values that define cultural identity among second and third generation Hmong in Merced, California
- Document and compare the observations of native elders and scientists in a region experiencing severe drought.
- Conduct oral history interviews to supplement a scientific study that documents the diminishing oyster population in a California fishing village
- In order to understand the support system needed for military families, interview women in the military who leave families behind to serve overseas.

Tips for choosing a topic:

- Make sure the narrator you choose can address the topic and is available for an interview during the time period of our assignment.
- Generally, the more focused your topic is, the more successful your project will be.
- Develop your topic in historical, social or cultural context so the interview will be meaningful at many levels.
- Choose a topic that reveals new material or a new perspective to existing documentation.
- Choose a topic that is personally meaningful to you, or a question you want to learn more about.

Your Narrator. Sometimes oral history projects originate with a narrator in mind and the project is built around that person's story; other times an interesting topic inspires a project and narrators are found who can offer a unique perspective. Both approaches are common in oral history and you may choose either path for our class project.

Students often choose to interview a family member or someone they know well. This is fine, as long as you connect that person's story to a larger historical or cultural theme. We will discuss the interviewer-narrator relationship later in the semester and just how to prepare for the interview, depending on any previous relationship with the narrator.

Your Project as History. Oral history is usually done with the intention that the interviews become available to a broad audience over time, usually archived in a repository, and will contribute to the historical record. Though you are not expected to become an expert in your topic this semester, you should develop a certain level of understanding by conducting background research to prepare for your interview. Research falls into three categories:

- *Literature search.* Done at the beginning of the project, as you are developing your project plan. Identify sources to find general information about your topic. Consider primary and secondary sources, such as encyclopedia (including Wikipedia) articles, timelines, statistics, newspaper articles, contemporary accounts, photographs, letters, or other oral history interviews.
- *In depth background research.* Done after you have planned your project and selected a

narrator. Delve deeper into the sources you identified above, in order to understand your topic within a social, historical, or cultural context. The subject expertise you achieve from the research will help develop rapport with the narrator and enable you to ask more penetrating questions.

- *Narrator-specific research.* Done as you are preparing for the interview. Since the lives of most narrators don't have a substantial paper trail, the best source is the narrator him- or herself. Information about general life history and milestones can be obtained through a pre-interview meeting or a simple questionnaire. Collect basic biographical facts (birth date and place, places lived, family composition, occupations) as well as information about the narrator's experience or perspective on the topics you will cover in depth during the interview.

Develop interview questions based on this research and preparation.

Step-by-Step

We will follow these steps throughout the semester, and use a series of forms to organize our project. These are the forms you will fill out, turn in, and be graded on.

- Project Design Statement
- Narrator Profile
- Interview Summary
- Cataloging Workform
- Informed Consent Agreement, signed by the narrator

Here are the steps in our class oral history project

1. Define a topic based on one of the themes mentioned earlier,
2. Plan a (hypothetical) oral history project and select a narrator,
3. Conduct background research,
4. Conduct an in-person, audio-recorded interview,
5. Transcribe the interview,
6. Catalog an oral history (in this assignment you will catalog classmates' interviews)
7. Develop a plan for archiving and access,
8. Evaluate and reflect on the project

I. Planning (Weeks 4-6)

Planning an oral history project is as important as conducting the interviews and a well-conceived plan is a major ingredient for success. We will devote three weeks to planning – both to developing a project statement and selecting a narrator. These steps usually are done in conjunction with each other.

- a. *Complete Project Design Statement.* Adapt this form to the needs of your project, being sure to include the required sections. Since your project is hypothetical you can envision a “dream project.”
- b. *Select Narrator and Confirm Agreement to Participate.* Select someone to interview, contact that person, describe the project and secure his or her agreement. Generally, people are honored to be asked to participate, and delighted to help out with student projects. Adapt the *Narrator Profile* template to compile basic biographical information (date and place of birth, residence, education, family composition), and how this person is relevant to the project.

II. The Interview (Weeks 7-10)

- a. *Pre-interview meeting with narrator.* Once the narrator agrees to be interviewed, your interviewer/narrator relationship begins. Best practice recommends a face-to-face unrecorded meeting to get acquainted, if practical. If not, a meeting by phone, email, or Skype will suffice. Explain the oral history project, answer questions, explain the informed consent form, and set a time and date for the recorded interview. The primary purpose of this initial meeting is to build trust and rapport.

Interviewing a family member or someone you know well? If so, the pre-interview meeting is a time to talk about assuming different roles in this interview project – you as an objective interviewer, and the narrator as someone who has a story worthy of being recorded for history's sake

- b. *Background research.* This is the time to prepare for the interview by learning about the subjects you will be discussing and about the narrator's particular expertise. Interviewer expertise in the topic makes the difference between an outstanding interview that will be useful to researchers in the present and the future, and a mediocre one. Do enough background research to develop in-depth questions and be prepared to follow up on the narrator's answers.
- c. *Prepare interview questions.* Develop 20-30 questions for your interview, designed specifically for your narrator. You don't need to ask them all. Think about which of the questions would apply to all narrators in your hypothetical project, and which are specific to the person you choose to interview.
- d. *Select audio recorder and practice.* Any digital audio recorder with decent sound is acceptable for this project, including smart phones and computers. An external microphone is recommended for oral history interviews, but is not required for this class. (though I will take note of the sound quality in grading your interview). Practice ... Practice ... Practice. Make sure you are completely comfortable with the recorder and microphone *before* you go to the interview.

Tip: In addition to practicing with recording functions, make sure that your recorder has the storage space to save up to 90 minutes of audio in uncompressed format, and that you are able to successfully transfer the file from the recorder to your computer and an external server.
- e. *Conduct interview.* The interview is what we've been leading up to – the most important and most meaningful part of the project. Conduct an in-person, audio-recorded interview of about 60 minutes.
- f. *Have narrator sign the Informed Consent Agreement.* Oral history best practices state that written consent be obtained from the narrator for each interview via a Legal Release Form, which explains and clarifies copyright ownership. For this class we will use an *Informed Consent Agreement*, which is simpler. This form explains the purpose of the interview and that the narrator has control over the contents. You will scan the signed form and turn it in.
- g. *Thank the narrator and explain next steps.* Courtesy and follow-up are important components of oral history. Before you leave explain that you will transcribe the interview and ask the narrator to review and approve it. Answer any questions that come up at this time. Thank the narrator before you leave and follow-up with another thank you when the project is complete.
- h. *Take notes on the interview experience.* Immediately after the interview, take time to reflect on your interview while the experience is fresh in your mind. Using the *Interview Summary* form as a guide, Jot down notes about the physical environment of the interview, any unusual interruptions, difficulties with the interview process, lessons learned, and anything else you need to follow up on. You will use these notes to complete *the Interview Summary* form.

III. After the Interview (Weeks 11-15)

The processing steps you take after the interview will turn your recorded interview into an archive-ready oral history, along with the proper metadata and consent form, so it can be used by public audiences both now and far into the future.

Oral history best practices recommend that interviews reside in a repository. In this class we will explore various archiving options and the pros and cons of each.

- a. *Save digital file of the interview.* As soon as possible after the interview, save the audio file

onto your computer. To turn in the interview for the assignment, you will upload the audio file to an external storage area according to instructions provided at a later date. Upload the audio file ASAP after the interview to ensure it won't get lost. I retrieve the interview file and listen to every interview from beginning to end. Keep a copy of the audio file on your own computer till the end of the semester.

b. *Complete Interview Summary form.* This form will serve as the "authority" for the interview (i.e. if there is a conflict of information, this form overrides all others). With this in mind, fill it out with care. This form serves many purposes: it can go into the project master files, to the webmaster for creating metadata, to the repository for their master files, to the cataloger, and to the publicity agents. The interviewer should verify all information before completing and turning it in. We will use this form in the cataloging assignment.

c. *Transcribe interview.* Transcribe the complete interview according to a style guide I provide.

Then, proofread the transcript while listening to the recording. This is a good way to catch misspelled words, hard-to-hear sections, and other errors. Make necessary corrections before you send the transcript to the narrator for review.

d. *Submit transcript to narrator for approval.* Oral history best practices recommend that the narrator have the opportunity for a final review before the interview is released for public access. Even though our interviews will not go into a repository, we will follow this practice.

There are two big reasons for the narrator to review the transcript. The first one is to give the narrator a chance to approve the transcript as it stands, or to correct or restrict information from the transcript (discouraged). If there is no response within two weeks, we consider the transcript approved by default.

The second reason is to for the narrator to verify accuracy and spellings of names, places, and factual information. As information professionals we all understand the importance of correct spelling in a computerized environment, and that incorrect information will get repeated over and over through the public record. The interviewer is responsible for verifying as many proper names as possible, but there are some that only the narrator will know.

e. *Cataloging.* In this assignment you will switch roles and catalog a classmate's oral history based on their Interview Summary form. You will use the Cataloging Workform to do this.

f. *Final thank you and closure.* The oral history interview can be a profound and transformative experience for both the interviewer and the narrator. Contact the narrator when everything is complete to thank him or her in a personal way – it can be a meeting or lunch date, or simply a phone call or letter. It is fine (and commonly done in oral history) to give the narrator a copy of the recording and/or transcript.

You will conclude the project with the final class assignment: a paper reflecting on your experience, consisting of these four sections:

- Introduce your narrator
- Write a historical context essay
- Include a log of your experience
- Draw on readings as well as your own experience to assess oral history as a methodology

