

# Doing Oral History

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# Planning

- What Do You Want to Do?
  - Goals and objectives
  - Oral History unique
    - Can get information, opinions, and observations not available elsewhere
    - Must have well-defined scope so that fieldwork and interviews are manageable

# People: Who Do I Need?

- Staff
  - No set number
  - One person should be in charge
  - Paid and unpaid
  - Interviewers
  - Transcribers

# What About Equipment?

- Reliable equipment that works
- Shop around for digital recorders
  - Lots of information on web; especially useful is H-Oralhist listserv
  - External mike
    - Nice to have; not required

# Preparing for the Interview

- Familiarize yourself with information about the general subject matter
- Read or listen to other oral history interviews
- Research: Necessary and Important
  - Interviewees may bring up some entirely new subject that was not part of the original research
  - Although questions prepared in advance, must be willing to deviate
  - Must be willing to follow interviewees detours

# The Interviewees

- Interviewees
  - Word of mouth, the media—depends on the topic
  - Can write, email or phone to initiate contact
  - Schedule at interviewee's convenience

# Conducting the Interview

- What do I need?
  - Recorder
  - Fresh batteries
  - Paper and pen
  - List of questions
  - All forms

# What Makes a Good Question?

- Open ended questions (i.e. those that require more than a simple yes or no answer)
- Remember the who, what, when, where and especially why of history
- Elicit descriptions (i.e. “take me on a walking tour of your childhood neighborhood”)
- Do follow-up questions; ask the interviewee to elaborate or explain



# Course of the Interview

- Record an introduction to the interview, indicating who is involved, date and place
- Start with easy “ice breaker” questions
- Build up to difficult questions by establishing historical setting and creating rapport
- Set stage with general questions, then follow up with more specific ones
- Allow for pauses
- Look for natural wrap-up questions
- Thank the interviewee

# Paperwork

- Deed of Gift absolutely essential
- Interviewee and Interviewer should both sign DOG
- Other forms can be included to keep up paper trail of interview, especially in a larger project

# Audio Interview



# The Dreaded Transcribing

- Should I transcribe?
  - Transcribing preserves the interview forever, no matter what happens to the original audio/video recording
  - Makes the interview more accessible
  - Makes the interview easier to use as a source for research

# To Transcribe or Not?

- Assess program needs
- How much processing?
- What kind of processing?
- What do users want?

# So, What is a Verbatim Transcript?

- Convey the conversational quality of spoken language and each speaker's individuality
- “Verbatim” can mean different things for different programs
- What do you include in a transcript?
- How do we show emotion and action?
- How exactly do we convey the flavor of the interview?

# What Can I Eliminate?

- Crutch words are generally eliminated, especially stammering, supportive sounds like “hmm,” “mmm,” and “uh-huh,” as well as habitually used words like “you see,” “you know,” and “and.”
- V [verbatim]: I-I took the man in, you know, and tried to, you know, help him but he was not coop-uncooperative so we didn—couldn’ t help.
- E [edited]: I took the man in and tried to help him but he was uncooperative so we couldn’ t help.

# What About False Starts?

- Depending on the context, can eliminate
  - *Example—false start that should be kept:*
    - I would say yes, we were all—I would have to say I think we were all in it together. It was a group cause.
  - *Example—false start that could be eliminated:*
    - I was, I served in four or five different capacities at one time.



# How Can Punctuation Help?

- *Commas and ellipses can show pauses:*
  - *Example:*
  - “Cousin Lou, she ran to hide. And I—being the oldest one there—I gave, I think it was, three guns...let’s see, Ed and Bess and I had one, and I gave...Yes, four guns. So I gave each one a gun and I said, “Now, when I tell the youngest to open the door,” I says, “when I say shoot—shoot.”

# More Punctuation

- The bracket
  - Can be used to show explanatory additions to text
- *Examples:*
  - V: Some increases when you have a proven need.
  - E: Some increases [are allowed] when you have a proven need.
  - V: Well, according to him, it is under attack
  - E: Well, according to him, it [the institution of private property] is under attack

# And even more....

- The bracket can also be used to convey emotion:
  - Example:
  - Let's talk a little bit about your own style. How do you see your own style? What style would you say you practice in? That's kind of a loaded question.  
[Laughter]