

Oral History



Prep some questions

If you are especially interested in a certain aspect of someone's life, start out with some general questions about their background and then dive into the events you are more interested in. Odds are, you want to know the same things researchers will want to know. Find good question ideas here, tinyurl.com/5n7yt8t3.

Consider a legal release form

If you plan to post your oral history interviews for public use, have your interviewee sign a legal release form. Check out this tool from Creative Commons to create the right legal release form for your needs at chooser-beta.creativecommons.org/.



Use your smartphone

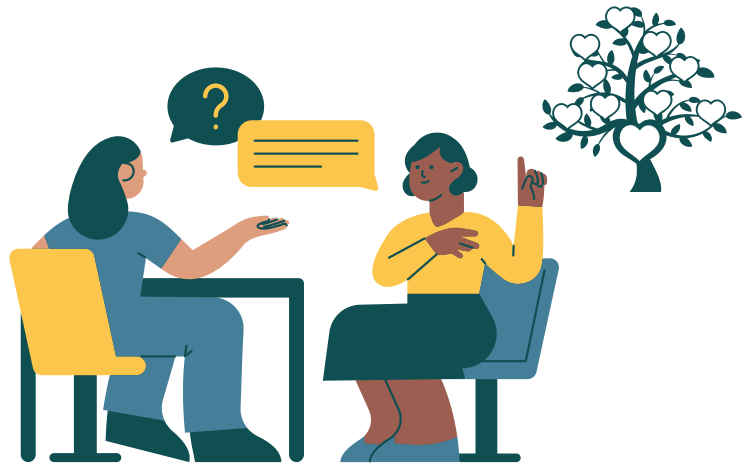
If equipment costs are holding you back, the microphone on your iPhone will do the trick. iPhones even automatically record in a wav format and have access to the cloud, which is ideal for preservation.

Have an interview opener

At the beginning of each interview, start off by stating the date of the interview, introducing yourself and the interviewee, and asking them to spell their name and provide their birthdate. This could help you later on, if files get mislabeled or need identification.

Don't overdo it

Interviews should be between 45 minutes and 2 hours. That way, you have enough time to get into the interviewee's background without exhausting everyone involved. If you have more to talk about, schedule a second interview.



Label your interviews

Label your audio files with the name of the interviewee and the date of the interview. This will make your interviews easier to find in the future!

Make copies and save them in different places

Remember LOCKSS (lots of copies keep stuff safe). We recommend saving one wav file to your computer and another to the cloud.

Save in wav, share in mp3

Wav is ideal for preservation, as there are more bits to a wav file than other formats. Think of wav files as a 10x10 grid and mp3s as a 3x3 grid, both showing the same picture. If you lose one of the squares in the 10x10 grid, you can still make out the picture. But, if you lose a square in the 3x3 grid, the whole picture becomes distorted! The downside of wav files' large size is that they are harder to share. Export a separate mp3 file from the original wav file when sharing to save time while maintaining quality.

Waste no time

The longer you wait, the higher the risk your interviewee will forget details. Also, your elder family members or friends may not be around to record their stories later.