

Interview Technique Samples

CHOOSING A TOPIC

- There are many possible topics for this project. BE ORIGINAL! Your end goal should be to present the most interesting and enjoyable version of folklore that you can find. There should be clearly identifiable artistic expression (lore) and it should be clear how this lore is part of a folk group.
- The main things to consider in choosing your topic are that it's a kind of folklore that you find interesting, and that you know or have access to someone who is very talented in performing this kind of folklore. Perhaps you know someone who has always told great stories or jokes, or someone who is a talented songwriter/singer, or someone who practices some kind of material culture and produces what you find to be artistically virtuosic. Perhaps you can think of interesting rituals, gestures, superstitions, or holiday traditions that you find to be highly symbolic, meaningful, or beautiful.
- Whatever branch and genre you focus on, be sure to also have a clear concept of the folk group, and at least one member of that folk group whom you can interview (on tape), who will have something very interesting to say about the topic. **THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO TO SUCCEED IS TO CHOOSE A GOOD SPEAKER TO INTERVIEW.** A lackluster interview produces a boring project.
- **EXAMPLES OF PAST SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS**
 - * Interviews with local experts on things like haunted houses, local legends, etc.
 - * Interviews with local experts on material culture like bee keeping, herbs, health food, wine making, quilt-making, ceramics, etc. (though be sure it's a folk example of the art).
 - * Interviews w/ family members who tell very interesting stories about their lives -- possibly significant events they participated in (like wars), or funny stories of childhood adventures, or how your grandparents met each other, etc.
 - * Interviews with family members who have personal experience narratives about significant events in their lives -- like unusual encounters, near-death experiences, lucky experiences, etc. (see PBS site on story corps)
 - * Interviews w/ college friends or professors about especially interesting pranks, hobbies (that are artful), travel experiences, foodways, etc. (but remember the focus is to get good stories)
- Narrow down your topic as much as possible. Do not try to collect "all the folklore" of a particular folk group. If you know a good talker, try to get that person to tell stories of a particular genre, or surrounding a particular topic. Even if you focus on a non-narrative genre, you should plan to do an interview (for 45 minutes with one person) in which they talk meaningfully and well on the topic (why and how they make quilts or lead summer camp song sessions, or how they carry out practical jokes, etc.). For instance, if you focus on holiday traditions, pick one holiday and one group and be sure it's a good one.

PLANNING THE INTERVIEW

- Make sure that you will actually be able to collect, observe, and document this folklore that interests you in the time frame we have. Remember that you must interview one person for at least 45 minutes. This does not mean interviewing 4 people for 10 minutes each. A good folklore interview takes at least 30 minutes to get going. If after 15 or 20 minutes into your interview you or your consultant thinks, “We’re done!” – that means you have not chosen a good person to interview or you have not conducted your interview well. Find a person who loves to talk and who can talk very well and at length about the topic.
- Consider how many people you will need to interview make your project convincing and effective. You can interview more than one person – but at least one of the interviews must be a full length, 45 minutes minimum interview with the main person. If you think additional interviews will help, you may do them, but it’s not necessary. Usually one good person in one good interview is enough.
- Plan in advance to have technology available to record an interview when you need to do so.
- Consider whether you can record this as a participant observer (in its natural context) or whether you will arrange a separate “performance” or situation in which to conduct the interview.
- Be sure to have a quiet place and enough time to conduct the full interview in one sitting. Be sure your consultant realizes that you will be recording the interview and knows how long it will last.
- Talk to people you plan to interview ASAP about dates and times you will BOTH be available. You should be flexible and adjust your schedule to fit your consultant, and not the other way around.
- Remember to create participant release (consent) forms for all those you will interview. The form you need to use is on the last page of this handout and on my website. Please use the exact language indicated, only substituting your specifics – name, title of your project, phone number, etc. Get signatures when you conduct the interview(s).
- Plan carefully and leave time for all parts of the project – AT LEAST a few weeks to complete everything.
- Reserve your equipment (recorders) ASAP if you plan to borrow them. The library has camcorders available, but you must reserve them in advance and may have to go through training to use them.
- When approaching people to interview, be very honest and clear about what you will be doing.
 - Introduce yourself, explain your project and ask for permission first before interviewing (or collecting/documenting). For instance, if you are interviewing about a place and will include footage of that place, get permission to do so and be very clear about what you are doing and why.
 - Explain that you are working on a collection project for class and that you chose this person to interview or place to study because of your genuine esteem for that person’s expertise on the topic.
 - Be clear from the outset that will need to tape record the interview (whether you use video or audio tape is your choice – but make it clear to the person).

- Audio tape can be less intimidating & with photos can be interesting and dynamic.
- Video tape can make it easier to explain and demonstrate some of the context.
- Be sure you are in control of your equipment: practice, test your batteries, have plenty of tape, film, etc.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

- Think of the person you are interviewing as a CONSULTANT rather than an informant (it gives more credit to the interviewee), who is after all, key to the project's success.
- Explain your project and plans completely to your consultant. Get all the necessary documents filled out and signed. Remember that EACH person interviewed must sign a standard consent form. Explain, as well, what folklore is, & how this isn't be a survey, but a chance to really perform and explain at length.
- Ask your consultant to be totally honest, to say what he/she really thinks and not what he/she thinks that you want to hear. Try to get the consultant to relax and enjoy the interview (you must also relax).
- Try to let the interview "flow" as naturally as possible. Get your consultant to open up, relax, and perform in that way that you presumably know they can (which is why you chose that person to interview).
- Do NOT judge what your consultant says during the interview (don't contradict or laugh at the person).
- LISTEN CAREFULLY during the interview. Be polite and show interest in his/her opinions/ideas.
 - Everyone likes to be listened to (if the listener is sincerely listening). Your listening should prompt the speaker to relax and want to open up more and tell his/her story more fluently and enjoyably.
 - Stay quiet as much as possibly. You will think you talk too much when you listen to the tape later.
- You may have a list of questions to start with, but try to let the conversation flow more naturally. A list of questions should be just a back-up, not the main thing you rely upon. This is not a survey or a study to which you want quick answers. The main goal is for your consultant to relax and start to tell really good stories or to speak freely and with enthusiasm and joy about the topic (or genre).
 - Rather than questions, try to have "prompts." For instance, rather than asking, "Do you know any stories?" try eliciting a specific story you have heard this person tell before, "Could you tell me that story you told the other night about your first kiss?" or "Remember that time you almost drowned as a little boy? What exactly happened?" Or if your focus is material culture or a holiday, you could prompt with, "Remember that face jug you made that you sold for \$300, tell me about how you made that?" Or, "Tell me about how you learned about that ritual and why you keep practicing it."
 - If the consultant has already anticipated and answered a question, do not ask that question again.
 - If the consultant brings up an aspect of the topic you had not anticipated, be prepared to pursue that line of inquiry (by thinking up new directions and possibly new questions as you do the interview).

- You should plan for each interview to last 45 minutes to an hour. But don't be surprised if it takes longer. Be flexible and allow plenty of time. Often the interview doesn't really get interesting until the consultant relaxes, which may take 20-30 minutes. Don't cut it off just as it's getting good.
- **Remember to thank the person afterward and offer to share the results of your project.**

TRANSCRIPTION (part of the required written portion of this project)

Listen to (or watch) your tape(s) shortly after you do the interview. Then listen again a few days later.

- Transcribing means typing WORD for WORD EXACTLY what is spoken during the interview. Your goal is to produce an exact TEXT of the story (or stories) that you are focusing on and analyzing.
- Be aware that it often takes up to 10 hours to transcribe 1 hour of tape (though you only need to transcribe the part you will play in class – or 900 words, not the whole interview). Keep re-listening to each sentence and correct what you transcribe. Accuracy matters most! You must include appropriate punctuation, correct spelling, and exactly what the words on the recording are (in that order).
- Try to transcribe with an eye to ethnopoetics (arranging spoken words on the page according to performance aspects of the speech event) if appropriate. Not everything should be transcribed as poetry, but perhaps some parts of your interview should be.
- If there is rhythm or dialect, how will you indicate it? Be creative but accurate.
- Try to also record significant contextual events that might have also occurred during the interview (such as laughter or sighing or someone else coming into the room, speaking, etc.).
- Significant gestures (especially if you are working with a recording with visuals – or if you remember) may also be indicated
- Typically non-spoken components of your recording are indicated within square brackets [like this].

REMEMBER TO ALSO MAKE YOUR CONSENT FORM (see below for model)! -- Do NOT just print this -- but cut and paste it into your word processor and fill in the required information (READ THE DIRECTIONS!!)

NOTE: The consent forms are to be SIGNED when you actually do the interview, due when you present your final project. Do not worry about getting signatures now (for the proposal) – just fill in the indicated spaces with your specific project info (title, name, phone number) and turn in the form for approval. Do not just cross out and write in your name, etc. Make it professional. You can cut and paste the form and easily type in your specific information (your project title -- be more creative than "folklore project," your name and your phone number) in the first few lines. That's all you need to do for now.

Folklore Fieldwork Project Consent Form

[-- FILL IN YOUR INFORMATION WHERE INDICATED -- for the proposal you only need to cut and paste this into your word processor and fill in the information in bold (your project title -- be creative and specific-- your name and your phone number).

DO NOT GET THE FORM SIGNED until you do the interview (after the proposal is approved). Note: The first blank space should be filled in by the person you interview (printed) WHEN YOU DO THE INTERVIEW, not now.

Do not keep these directions in the form you cut and paste -- delete everything between the "Folklore Fieldwork Project Consent Form" title and the end of this bracketed section]

I, _____, agree to be a participant in the folklore research project [**delete these directions and replace all bold, underlined type that follows here with your specific information for your project**] **the specific title reflective of YOUR Research Project (= your title)**, which is being conducted by **Name(s) of Researchers (= your name)**, who can be reached at **Researcher's Phone Number(s) (= your phone number)**. I understand this participation is voluntary and that I will not be reimbursed for my participation. I also understand that the material collected may be archived at Georgia College & State University libraries, and may therefore be used for future collection, publication, or research purposes. No financial gain is anticipated from any such study.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this study is to collect, record, analyze, and appreciate examples of folklore for a class project. This might include stories, songs, personal experience narratives, explanations of material folklore, discussions of architecture or other spaces, performances, or demonstrations of folklore, which is understood as creative expressions in context or artistic communications of small groups.
2. The procedures are as follows. You will be asked to share your stories or other lore or expertise on lore with the student researcher(s). You will be tape recorded (by video or audio means). These tapes may be archived in the university library or the class professor's files, possibly for use at a later date or in a later study. This archiving demonstrates and ensures that the recording of your performance, knowledge, expertise, and insight on the folklore in question is honored for future generations. There is no guarantee that every interview will be archived or used in the future.
3. You may choose to have your real, full, or partial name used in the study OR to have a pseudonym used in the study. Please indicate your preference by checking one of the following:
_____ Use my real name OR _____ Use a pseudonym.
Please indicate the name you wish to be known by in the study:
_____.

Therefore, the study will refer to you according to your wishes and consent, which will be essentially anonymous if you choose to use a pseudonym. You may change this name at a later date if desired.

4. You will be asked to sign two of these consent forms. One form will be returned to the investigator and the other consent form you will keep for your records.
5. If this interview becomes invasive or personal or you become uncomfortable, you may cease participation at that time. No discomforts or distresses will be faced during this research.
6. No physical, psychological, social or legal risks exist in this study.
7. The results of this participation may be anonymous and may be archived to preserve your stories for future generations.
8. The investigator will answer any further questions about the research (see above phone numbers).
9. In addition to the above, further information, including a full explanation of the purpose of this research, will be provided at the completion of the experiment, if requested.

Signature of Investigator Date

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Parent or Guardian Date
(if participant is under 18 years of age)

Research at Georgia College & State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to Mr. Quintus Sibley, Director of Legal Affairs, 212 Chappell Hall, CBX 041, GC&SU, (478) 445-2037.

Oral History Interview, Questions and Topics for Family Members

Following is a list of questions that may be used when interviewing an older member of the family. You can, of course, alter them to suit your particular family (cultural background, etc.).

Some questions to ask:

1. How old are you now?
2. When were you born?
3. Where were you born?
4. Where was your mother born?
5. Do you know what her maiden name was?
6. Do you know where your mother's mother (your grandmother on your mother's side) was born?
7. How about your mother's father? Where was your grandfather (on your mother's side) born?
8. What part of the country did your mother's ancestors come from?
9. Where was your father born?
10. Do you know where your father's mother (your grandmother on your father's side) was born?
11. What about your father's father (your grandfather on your father's side)? Do you know where he was born or where he came from?
12. Do you remember hearing any stories about why your ancestors -- either on your father's or mother's side of the family -- came to this area?
13. What kind of person was your grandmother? What did she look like? How many children did she have?
14. How many aunts and uncles do you have on your mother's side? On your father's side?
15. What were some of your grandmother's best qualities? Her worst qualities?
16. Did your grandmother have some special talents?
17. How important was your grandmother to you? Do you think she had any effect or influence on you?
18. Do you know what your grandmother died of?
19. Where is your grandmother buried?
20. What kind of work did your grandfather do?
21. Will you describe your grandfather? What did he look like? What kind of personality did he have? Did he influence you in any way? How?
22. Are you like him in any way?
23. Do you know how he died? When did he die? Where is he buried?

24. Can you tell me a story about either your grandmother or grandfather that would characterize her--perhaps something she did, or the way she reacted to something that happened to her or some member of her family?
25. How did your grandmother and grandfather meet?
26. Were there any family heirlooms/property, etc. that have been handed down from generation to generation? What are they? Where are they now?
27. Can you think of anything else about your grandparents?
28. Can you tell me about any "black sheep" in the family?
29. Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives on either side of the family?
30. What about your parents? Did they ever tell you how they met and fell in love? Tell me that story.
31. How and when did your parents decide to get married?
32. What did your parents do together before they got married? What kinds of places did they go for entertainment, for social life?
33. When and where was your mother born? Your father?
34. Where did they grow up?
35. Did your mother or father ever tell you what their childhood was like?
36. What did your mother do before she was married? Did she work? What kind of work did she do?
37. Was your mother previously married before she married your father?
38. How many children did your mother have?
39. Can you give me the names of your mother's children?
40. What year was each of your mother's children born?
41. Who is the oldest child? The youngest?
42. Can you describe your mother to me? What did she look like?
43. If you can remember the way your mother looked, what is she doing now, in your thoughts? How do you picture her now?
44. Did your mother or father have any birthmarks or scars? Do you know how they got the scars?
45. Can you tell me a story about your mother--something she did or the way she was--that you remember most?
46. Did your mother have any hobbies? Was she artistic? Musical? Did she sew or have any other "craft" hobbies? What were her hobbies?
47. Did your mother work outside of the home? What kind of work did she do?
48. Was your mother a good cook? What was her favorite meal? What meal did she make that was your favorite? Can you cook as well as your mother?
49. Did either of your parents read to you when you were small? Did they tell you bedtime stories?
50. Was either of your parents actively involved in the community?
51. What skills or talents did you learn from either your mother or father?

52. What important lesson or lessons did either one teach you?
53. Tell me about your mother's temper? Did she ever lose her temper that you remember? Why did she lose it? How did it finally end up?
54. Did your mother or father have a good sense of humor?
55. Can you remember when your mother or father cried? Why did they cry?
56. What is the saddest event you can remember?
57. Do you think you inherited some of your mother's emotional qualities? Which ones?
58. Tell me how you are like your mother? Your father?
59. How was your mother's health, generally?
60. Was she ever severely ill or injured? Tell me about it.
61. What religion was your mother raised in? Your father?
62. What do you think was the greatest tragedy your mother or father suffered in their lives?
63. When did your mother die? Your father?
64. What cemetery are they buried in?
65. Did your mother or father ever say how they felt about death or dying? What was their attitude about it?
66. Tell me about your parents' education (grandparents, etc.). How much education did they have? Where did they go to school? Can you remember if they ever said anything about their experiences at school?
67. What kinds of dreams of the future did your mother/father have? Did any of their dreams come true?
68. Did your parents/grandparents live through any wars? Which one? Was your father or grandfather in the military during the war? Did either one ever fight in a battle? Where? Were they ever wounded? Were any of your ancestors killed in battle?
69. Tell me a story about your father, something that stands out clearly in your mind.
70. Was your father or grandfather physically strong? Did either of them like to work outdoors? Did either of them have hobbies? What did they teach you, that you can remember?
71. Did your father or grandfather have lots of friends? Did they like lots of people around?
72. Describe your surroundings when you were a child? Can you picture the kitchen?
73. Tell me about your uncles or aunts. What are their names? Can you tell me what years they were born? What do you remember most about them? Does any ONE stand out in your memory? Why?
74. Who was your favorite cousin? Why?
75. Are you in touch with any of your aunts, uncles, cousins? Where do they live? How can I get in touch with them?

76. How many sisters and brothers do you have? What are their names? What years were they born? Did any of them die in childhood? Did any of them die when adults? What did they die of?
77. Did you have a favorite brother or sister? Why "favorite"?
78. What was the major news event of your life? How did you feel about it? What influence did it have on you?
79. What political party did your parents or grandparents belong to? Did they vote?
80. Do you remember your grandparents' parents (your great-grandparents)? What were their names? How old were they when they died? Where are they buried?
81. Did your parents or grandparents speak Irish or any other language? What language?

MORE SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about your family surname? Its origin? Its meaning? Did it undergo change coming from the old country to the United States? Are there stories about the change?
2. Are there any traditional first names, middle names, or nicknames in your family? Is there a naming tradition, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?
3. Can you sort out the traditions in your current family according to the branches of the larger family from which they have come? Does the overall tradition of a specific grandparent seem to be dominant?
4. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors? How have these relatives described their lives to you? What have you learned from them about their childhood, adolescence, schooling, marriage, work, religion, political activity, recreation? Are they anxious or reluctant to discuss the past? Do their memories tend to cluster about certain topics or time periods and avoid others? Are there certain things in your family history that you would like to know, but no one will tell you? Do various relatives tell the same stories in different ways? How do these versions differ?
5. Do you have a notorious or infamous character in your family's past? Do you relish stories about him/her? Do you feel that the infamy of the ancestor may have grown as stories passed down about him/her have been elaborated?
6. How did your parents, grandparents, and other relatives come to meet and marry? Are there family stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, elopements, runaway lovers?
7. Have any historical events affected your family? For example, how did

your family survive the Depression? Did conflict over some national event such as the Civil War or Vietnam War cause a serious break in family relationships?

8. Are there any stories in your family about how a great fortune was lost or almost (but not quite) made? Do you believe them? Are these incidents laughed about or deeply regretted? If a fortune was made, who was responsible and how was it achieved?

9. What expressions are used in your family? Did they come from specific incidents? Are there stories which explain their origin? Is a particular member of the family especially adept at creating expressions?

10. How are holidays celebrated in your family? What holidays are most important--national, religious, or family? What innovations has your family made in holiday celebrations? Has your family created entirely new holidays?

11. Does your family hold reunions? How often? When? Where? Who is invited? Who comes? Who are the organizers and hosts? What occurs during the reunion? Are there traditional foods, customs, activities? Are stories and photographs exchanged? Are records (oral, written, visual) kept? By whom?

12. Have any recipes been preserved in your family from past generations? What was their origin? How were they passed down--by word of mouth, by observation, in writing? Are they still in use today? When? By whom? Does grandmother's apple pie taste as good now that it's made by her granddaughter?

13. What other people (friends, household help, etc.) have been incorporated into your family? When? Why? Were these people given family titles such as aunt or cousin? Did they participate fully in family activities?

14. Is there a family cemetery or burial plot? Who is buried with whom? Why? Who makes burial place decisions? If there are gravemarkers, what type of information is recorded on them?

15. Does your family have any heirlooms, objects of sentimental or monetary value, that have been handed down? What are they? Are there stories connected with them? Do you know their origin and line of passage through the generations? If they pass to you, will you continue the tradition, sell the objects, or give them to museums?

16. Does your family have photo albums, scrapbooks, slides, home movies? Who created them? Whose pictures are contained in them? Whose responsibility is their upkeep? When are they displayed? To whom? Are they specially arranged and edited? Does their appearance elicit commentary? What kind? By whom? Is the showing of these images a happy occasion?

Paperwork

- [Interviewer's Field Notes](#)
- [Life History Forms](#)
- [Release Forms](#)
- [Tracking Your Progress](#)

Interviewer's Field Notes

Very soon after the interview, the interviewer should sit down and make notes in an organized fashion, before time dulls the details. The notes are something like the anthropologist's field notes. The interviewer's notes tell who, what, when, and where. They add anything that will help the transcriber or future scholars to understand the interview. If the project is in a school setting, teachers or students need to create a form to fit their particular projects' needs and goals, as well as the students' abilities.

Life History Forms

The life history form can contain very little or a great deal, depending on the project's purposes. Personal data is very useful and particularly recommended if the interview is a family history project or if interviews are to be archived for future use. The form needs to contain information that helps scholars understand, use, and interpret the interview. Aside from interviewee's name, address, telephone number, birthdate, and birthplace, the form might ask for the names, birth dates, and dates of death for parents, siblings, spouses, and children. It could ask for places lived in as well as for education and work histories. It could ask for listings of special skills and for memberships in organizations.

Release Forms

Release forms can become rather full of legal-sounding language, but most oral historians manage to find a form with which they are comfortable. Release forms make it clear to the interviewee, without question, how the interviews will be used, minimizing the chances for misunderstanding. In addition to offering some protection, release forms also remind the oral historian that the interviewee grants us the privilege of using something that does not belong to us. There are many versions of releases possible. For instance, you could check Ives, *The Tape-recorded Interview*, Neuenschwander, *Oral History and the Law*, or Sitton et al., *Oral History*, for some tried and true examples. A release usually includes the interviewee's name and signature, the interviewer's name, the date, a statement of permission to use the interview, the name of the person or institution receiving the permission, and the purposes to which the interview will be put. It is recommended that school projects clear release forms with the school's legal counsel.

If the interviews are to be archived for future use, the interviewers also need to sign releases. If the project is in a school, since students are likely to be underage parents or guardians should sign.

Tracking Your Progress

Depending on the project goals and archival plans, the paperwork can get quite involved or it can stay simple.

A simple system to keep track of the stage of each interview is to keep a file for each interviewee. All paperwork and copies of the recordings are kept there. A sequence of steps to track progress is listed on the front of the file and checked off as steps are completed.

Issues in Oral History Research

- **How Accurate Is This Oral history?**
- **Note of Encouragement**
- **Pinpointing Problems in Your Interview**
- **Questions for Thinking about your Interview**

How Accurate Is This Oral History?

Once a project is under way, we need to assess and ensure the accuracy of the data gathered. We have to face the question: how accurate is this oral history? At the very least, we must be aware of the limitations of oral history in order not to mislead ourselves into believing that oral history automatically yields accurate renditions of past events.

Because oral history depends upon living people as sources, we have limits; we can go back one lifetime. Because oral history uses spoken, not written sources, the allowable evidence expands. Even in the absence of written documentation, groups such as women, minorities, and the not-famous have been able to record their own histories and the histories of those they consider important using oral history. History is no longer limited to the powerful, famous, and rich, and literate. Now history can give us a much more inclusive, and, one hopes, accurate picture of the past.

Used to accurately record oral narratives, the inexpensive portable tape recorder helped democratize the gathering of history. Interestingly, while technology in the form of the tape recorder is responsible in part for the spread of oral history techniques, technology is also to blame in part for the

need for oral history. Rather than write letters, for instance, people travel to see each other or they make telephone calls that dissolve into air. Now electronic mail via computers may make written records even more scarce.

Trained to depend on written records, traditional historians have been known to shudder in horror at the potential problems and inherent weaknesses of oral history. What of the failings of human memory? What of the human tendency to impose a narrative structure on events that may not be closely connected? What of the self-serving motives of the story teller? What of the power relationships between interviewer and interviewee that affect what and how events are reported? What of the differences between the spoken and written word? What of the inaccuracies that creep into meaning when trying to put a conversation onto paper?

Well, many of the same problems arise in using written records. Written sources can carry personal or social biases. Written sources occur within a social context. As an example, newspaper accounts contemporary with events often suffer from historical inaccuracy because of the ideological slants of reporters and editorial staff, because of the availability of sources, because of advertisers' interests, and because of the need to sell interesting stories that the public wants to buy. Yet these same newspaper accounts can be used as historical evidence of people's attitudes and interpretations. Even historical analysis published by professional historians intent on upholding the best standards in their field still falls short of that elusive goal, a complete and totally objective account of events.

How about films and photographs? Can the camera remain objective and give us an accurate view of events? No. Even visual media give only fragments. Furthermore, the photographer chooses to record a portion of an event, and her point of view suggests an interpretation. The equipment, social context, and intent of the photographer affect what photographs will be recorded, what will be printed, and how it will be presented to viewers.

In oral history, in addition to asking all of the historian's usual questions about accuracy, one must also ask questions about putting spoken words on paper. At first one tends to assume that a transcription of a tape-recorded interview

of an eyewitness would be a very accurate record of an event. As historians we must examine that assumption.

We all know how hard it is to find the right words for our thoughts. In an interview, with a stranger listening and a tape recorder running, how closely can the actual words of the interviewee approximate the thoughts that the interviewee wants to communicate? We all know the tricks that memory plays on us, even just trying to recall what happened last week. In recalling memories from a long-ago event, how closely do the memories of the narrator approximate a true rendering of the actual experience?

Our problem becomes more complicated when we try to write down what has been said. People don't always speak in complete sentences. They repeat themselves and leave things out. They talk in circles and tell fragments of the same story out of chronological sequence. They mumble incoherently and use wrong names. When they speak, they don't use punctuation. How is the transcriber to put spoken words onto paper with a semblance of written coherence without changing the narrator's meaning?

Finally, the transcript does not carry inflections of voice and body language. Therefore the reader of the transcript does not have all of the information that the interviewer had originally. In addition, readers and listeners will add their own interpretations in trying to understand what the narrator said.

We come to realize, then, that every person, every step, removes one farther from the event as it happened.

Questions of accuracy are not unique to oral history. Problems of accuracy hound us no matter what sources of historical data we use. If we understand the characteristics of our sources, however, we have a better chance of controlling the process to minimize inaccuracies. As a methodological balance to oral history, one can enlist other sources of data such as related artifacts, written documentation, and other interviews. A single interview by itself can pose frustrating questions, while an interview in a context of other data can clarify details and create a sense of the whole.

Therefore, the users of oral history, aware of the characteristics of their medium, may proceed cautiously without apology. Oral history has come of age and now commands a receptive, respectful audience.

Note of Encouragement

At this point, some people feel overwhelmed. Be assured! As long as you are aware of the pitfalls, you will be fine. Proceed step-by-step, discover the problems, and work through to the solutions. At the end of an oral history project you will understand the oral historian's challenges from the inside-out, and you will forever after look at historical documents of any kind with a wider eye. When in doubt, keep it simple. Part of the process is enjoyment and part of the adventure is learning from mistakes.

Pinpointing Problems in Your Interview

The interviewee...

1. is afraid of the recording equipment.
2. doesn't believe she has anything of value to tell you, and doesn't understand why you would want to interview her.
3. doesn't remember.
4. has a series of stock stories that he has developed and is used to telling, almost according to a script. This interviewee is not about to let you deviate from his script.
5. is not used to telling her or his story publicly and needs much coaxing and reinforcement. This person needs questions to get warmed up and more questions to keep going.
6. does not feel comfortable talking to you about the topics you have in mind. For instance, a modest woman might not feel comfortable talking to a male about birth experiences.
7. meanders through the story, and not according to the beginning-middle-end model that you have in your mind. The memories have a form other than linear time and you have to figure out how to allow the narrator to tell these memories in a way that makes sense to both teller and listener.

8. is afraid to give private or personal information and thus gives you information that will preserve his or her public "mask."
9. prefers or is used to building and sharing a story with others in a group rather than telling a story solo.

The interviewer...

1. is too nervous to think calmly and clearly about what to say next.
2. is disorganized.
3. is not really listening to what the interviewee is trying to say.
4. has expectations about what she or he wants to hear and is closed to other avenues of inquiry.
5. appears critical to the interviewee.
6. is from a different class or ethnic group than the interviewee and so is behaving and speaking in a socioeconomic "foreign language."

The sound...

1. is too faint.
2. contains noise that overrides or confuses the voices.
3. has more than one person speaking at once.
4. is distorted.

Questions For Thinking About Your Interview

1. How did I choose the person to be interviewed? Were the people I interviewed the right ones for my research?
2. How did I prepare for the interview? Did I prepare enough?
3. What did I use for equipment? Did it work satisfactorily? What changes should I make?
4. What kinds of questions did I ask? What kinds of questions worked well? Not so well?

5. Where did I conduct the interview? What in the environment affected my interview? How?
6. Did my subject want to talk? How did I encourage my subject to talk? What "masks" did my subject wear? Did my subject drop the masks?
7. When did I tell my subject the purpose of the interview and how it would be used? Did my plans to use the interview seem to matter to the subject?
8. How accurate were my subject's memories?
9. How accurate was my subject's reporting of her memories? How do I know? Does it matter?
10. Who controlled the interview? How?
11. How did I feel while interviewing?
12. How did my subject feel while being interviewed?
13. Would it be useful and possible to return for another interview?
14. How do these results affect my original goals? Do I need to adjust my research design?
15. When I transcribe, will I write exactly what was said or will I begin light editing right from the start? How will I decide what to write and what not to write?
16. How can I ensure that the transcription is accurate? How can I ensure that the transcription reports what the subject wanted to say?
17. Who owns the interview and has the right to decide how the completed interview and transcription will be used?
18. Next time, what would I do the same? What would I do differently?

Bibliography

- Books to Get You Started in Oral History

- Books About Oral History and Teaching
- Books for More Details and Ideas About Oral History
- Audiovisual Sources

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Most of the above sources contain bibliographies. There are also many, many excellent books that use oral history interviews; the bibliographies in the above books offer some titles, and your librarian can probably suggest others.

Audiovisual Sources

- Ives, Sandy. An Oral Historian's Work. Northeast Archives. VHS. 33 minutes. Color. Distributed by Northeast Historic Film, P.O. Box 900, Bucksport, ME 04416.

VI. Oral History Links

American Association for State and Local History

1717 Church Street

Nashville, TN 37203-2991

www.aaslh.org/publicat.htm

American Folklife Center

Library of Congress

101 Independence Ave., SE

Washington, DC 20540

lcweb.loc.gov/folklife/

American Folklore Society

4350N. Fairfax Drive

Suite 640

Arlington, VA 22203

afsnet.org/index.html

International Oral History Association

Alexander Von Plato, Secretary

Fernuniversitat Hagen

Leibigstr. 11

D-58511 Ludenscheid

Germany

www.filo.uba.ar/Institutos/ravigni/historal/loha.htm

Oral History Association

Dickinson College

PO Box 1773

Carlisle, PA 17013

www.baylor.edu/~OHA/Othersites.html