Oral History Project Will Involve:

• Project Planning & Pre-Interview Research
• Fieldwork: Creation of Primary Source
  • Interviews, photo, video, additional mtls
• Creation of Secondary Source from above
• Transfer of materials to repository
Oral History, Defined:

A qualitative research process based on personal interviewing, suited to understanding meanings, interpretations, relationships, and subjective experience

- Life narrative/biographical
- Project-oriented/topical

A product that is preserved—an audio or video tape recording—that is an original historical document, a new primary source for further research.
Three Stages of Oral History Project:

1. Interview
2. Preservation
3. Public Access
Oral History Interview Focus:

- Behavior and experiences
- Concrete examples from which to infer subjective orientations
- Develop facts and events first, then explore feelings and values
- Memory is most fallible regarding previous attitudes and feelings
- Stimulate the respondent’s memory or reduce chronological confusion by supplying facts learned from background research
Rewards:

- Multiple perspectives
- Primary sources to document every day peoples’ lives
- An opportunity to explore community memories
Challenges in Conducting Oral Histories

- Time Management & Project Organization
- Maintaining the ethics of the research partnership
- Building trust and rapport
- Balancing multiple perspectives
- Negotiating interview-interviewee roles
- Managing personal bias
Expectations

- What is your overall goal?
- Who do you want to interview (# of people)?
- When are you planning to begin?
- What’s your time frame? Duration?
- What main question do you have today?
Project Planning:

• Think of end result and work backwards

• So what? (niche)

• Clear, do-able goals

• Task Division: who will do what?

• Reasonable timetable

• Actionable Items
Project Planning--Consider the following:

• Who do you want to interview and why?

• What do you want to do with the interviews?

• How much time do you have?

• What kind of help will you need and where can you get it?

• With whom might you form partnerships?
Project Planning: Choosing and Researching Topics

• Start small, manageable

• Topic have some historical analysis available in published biographies or secondary sources which provide background, context, and a basis of authority for their research

• Topic can be researched through oral history that have happened in lifetime of people living today
Project Planning--Topics Must be:

- Focused
- Do-able in allotted time
- Do-able in the local area
- Matched to available interviewees
Project Planning—Preliminary Research on Topic

- To establish its historical context; to learn more about who would make the best interviewees
- Visit libraries, archives, museums
- Start Basic Topic Outline to ask informed questions
Project Planning: Locating Interviewees

- Start close to home: relatives, neighbors, family, friends
- Community: retirement homes, churches, community service organizations
- Through your research, word of mouth, local media announcements
Project Planning: Interviewee Selection

• **Biographical Data Form**

• Select respondents who will be able and willing to provide information you need, whose life experience fits your topic

• Interviewees may be chosen because their lives illustrate certain historical processes or because they have special knowledge of or occupy a unique position in an historical event, movement, or institution.
Project Planning: Release Forms

- Audio Recordings are an individual’s intellectual property and are subject to copyright law.

- Interviewees must sign Copyright Release Forms before students can use the recordings.

- Interviewers must sign a Copyright Release Form.

- Repositories require completed forms.

- Signed forms do not preclude the interviewer or interviewee from using the recordings.

- For more info, see “Oral History and the Law”
Project Planning: Release Forms

• Interviewee & Interviewer Release Forms

• To be signed after the interview
Pre-Interview Research/Background Research

• Ten Hours Per Hour of Tape

• Create Topical Outline: Mostly Open-Ended
  • Williams Center Sample (10 pp)
Pre-Interview Research: Know Yourself & Embrace Diversity:

• Leave baggage at the door
• Respect, genuine interest
How to Get a Good Interview:

Interview Tips

• Test your equipment
• Record an Intro: names, date, location, project
• Start w/ Biographical Info
• Progress to more difficult questions
At the Interview

**DO**

- Respect the Respondent: dress, punctual, manners
- Be a good listener:
- Ask Follow-Up Questions
- Assist memory recall
- Use body Language
- Watch for signs of tiring
- Spell out difficult names of persons and places specify lengths...
At the Interview

DO

• Ask Open-Ended Questions
  • Who, What, Where, When, Why,
  • “Tell Me about....”; “Please describe ....”

• Avoid: Yes or no questions, leading questions
  • “Do you know...?” instead “What do you know about...?”
  • “Have you noticed...?” instead “What have you noticed about...?”
  • “Have you experienced...?” instead “What have you experienced in regards to...?”
At the Interview

DO

• Ask closed questions at the right times
  • Answered in 1 or 2 words
  • After a story, use to gather details
    • What was your mother’s maiden name?
    • What was your rank?
    • How long has your family lived here?
    • How did your parents make a living?
At the Interview

**DO**

- Ask for definitions: “What does _____ mean?”
- Ask follow-up questions. Solicit details.
  
  What happened next? Where were you living at the time? Who else participated? How long did it take? How did you get there?
- Ask experiential questions:
  
  - What did you hear? What did you see? How heavy was it? How did he appear? How did it taste? Smell? Feel?
DON’T

• Interrupt
• Ask “Yes” or “No” Questions
• Ask Leading Questions
  • “Was your neighborhood tight-knit?”
• Ask More than One Question @ a Time
• Talk too Much
• Argue with the interviewee
• “You’ve Got to Hear This Story!”
  • Disaster: 4:30-5:42; Don’ts: 5:42-16:20; age, gender, race: 21:31-25:00
Balancing Act:

- Allow respondents to express the logic of their lives as they understand them
- Simultaneously maintain control over the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions so as to elicit information which is relevant, reliable, and valid.
  
  - Listen carefully.
  - Embrace silence.
  - Take notes, rather than interrupt
- If way off track, ask a direct question to get back on track
Common Mistakes (Student) Interviewers Make

- Lack of practice
- Improper introduction/labeling/incomplete forms
- Not listening/talking too much
- More than one question at a time
- “Yes” or “no” questions
- No follow-up questions
- Reading off the guide/not engaging
- Looking disinterested
- Misplacement of emotional or controversial questions
- Cutting the interview short
Photographs and Video

• Natural light is best, if possible

• Photos:
  • Interviewees
  • Interviewees with important objects
  • Important objects
  • Take before and after interview, and during interview, if possible, get a few shots of interviewer and interviewee
  • Be subtle, do not interrupt flow
Additional Materials

• Copies of:
  • Photographs
  • Maps
  • Letters
  • Papers

• How?
  • Portable scanner
  • Digital Scanner
  • iPhone or Droid app
How to Get a Good Interview Pt. II: Equipment

The Importance of Archival Quality Audio
- Reel-to-Reel: 70 year
- Cassette: 25 year
- CD/DVD: 10-15 year
- Uncompressed digital audio file stored on server with tape back-up: perpetuity

Why store oral histories in a repository?
- Preservation
- Processing
- Public Access
How to Get a Good Interview Pt. II

Tips on Using a Digital Recorder

See Field Recorder Tutorial

• Types of Recorders:
  • Solid State Recorder (Flash Memory)

• File Formats:
  • Compressed VS Uncompressed
  • Archival VS User-Friendly
  • Need both for present and future
How to Get a Good Interview Pt. II

Tips on Using a Digital Recorder

See Field Recorder Tutorial

• Adjusting Recording Levels on Recorder
• Marantz PMD620 Quick Tips
• Opportunity for a pre-project individual consultation
Post Interview Pt. 1: Preserve the Interview

Transcribing the Interview

Express Scribe Software:

- 10 hours of transcribing per 1 hour of recording
- Use a style guide: Chicago Manual of Style
- Use a dictionary
- Be accurate. Do not correct grammar
- Teamwork: divide transcribing and auditing tasks
- Guideline
Evaluate Recordings and Content Analysis

Questions to guide evaluation/interpretation/presentations:

• Quality of Recording? Clear audio? Volume?

• Ask open-ended questions? Follow-up questions? Interrupt or listen well?

• What to do differently next time?

• Important points in interview?

• How are the interviewees’ stories different from textbook history? Why?

• How do these interviews compare to each other? Patterns, Themes?
Post Interview Pt. 2: Share

Secondary Source examples (see slide #21)

- Books, articles, or essays, podcasts, radio/TV drama scripts, poems, a web site, a media presentation, readers’ theater, art, music, neighborhood tours, exhibits, or dance

- Community event to honor interviewees