Oral History Guidelines

An oral history is the result of an interview (or a series of interviews) with a person who had experiences you intend to record. The term “oral history” refers to the manner in which the data is collected. Although you will conduct the interview orally (in the most convenient language, of course, including ASL), your report will be in writing. These guidelines will help you plan for the interview, conduct it, transcribe the result, and prepare your report.

Your Goal

You are trying to discover how some significant event in 20th century American history shaped your subject’s life. For many people, a certain event was a “watershed” event—it marked a transition from the life and world they had known previously to a new, often harsher, but frequently more significant life. To discover the effect the chosen event had on your subject, you will need to discover details of the person’s life during this period.

Setting up the Interview

Your first task is to identify a suitable subject for your interview. For this purpose of this assignment, you must find someone old enough to remember having lived through the event in question as an adult, and as a resident (not necessarily a citizen) of the United States. Family members, friends, and neighbors are good candidates, but if you have trouble identifying someone, try visiting a retirement home. You’ll probably have no trouble finding someone satisfactory. People who have already been interviewed for this project by members of my previous classes are not eligible candidates, so ask your potential subject whether he or she has been interviewed in the past.

You must obtain your subject’s consent before conducting the interview. The interviewee must be told the purpose of the interview, and the use that will be made of the results. To protect you, me, and Ohlone College, you must obtain your subject’s consent in writing, using the form attached to this handout, and submit the signed consent form with your paper. This is important: I cannot accept any histories that are not accompanied by a signed consent form! Notice that the form includes a space for an address, in case the subject would like to receive a copy of your paper. It is up to you to send your subject a copy of your paper.

Contact your subject to arrange a mutually-convenient time and place for the interview. Allow a minimum of an hour to conduct the interview, and try to conduct it somewhere free of distractions, such as a quiet, private room. Trying to interview someone in the kitchen, with the telephone ringing, a dog barking, and dinner on the stove, is not the best idea.

Preparing for Your Interview

Come to the interview prepared. This is only common courtesy and common sense—you don’t want to waste your subject’s time, or yours. Take the following materials with you to the interview:

1. A pad of paper and a pen or pencil.
2. A small battery-powered tape recorder (borrow one if you don’t own one), a blank tape capable of holding at least 90 minutes of conversation (so you don’t run out of tape in the middle of an important thought), and a set of spare batteries.
3. A list of questions to ask. During the interview, you may want to deviate from your list, but it will keep you from having to endure awkward silences in case your subject is not much of a talker.
4. A map of the United States or the portion of the world where the events being discussed took place.
5. Your consent form, which you will have the subject sign before you begin the interview.

Before you go to the interview, do your homework. At the very least, know when and where the event occurred, and who was President at the time. For background, read the appropriate chapter in your textbook before the interview. I do not want to see questions like, “Who were the Nazis?” in your interview—you should know details like that beforehand. On the other hand, “How did you feel about the German soldiers you were fighting?” is a perfectly good question.
**Good Interview Questions**

As part of your preparation, you should make a list of topics you want to discuss and questions you want to ask. Most of your questions should be *open-ended*; that is, they should take more than a “yes” or “no” to answer. Here are some examples of open-ended and closed-ended questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open-Ended</th>
<th>Closed-Ended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your family life during the Depression.</td>
<td>Did you always have enough to eat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you feel about moving?</td>
<td>Did you miss your friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your parents’ work during the Depression.</td>
<td>Did your parents lose their jobs?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Closed-ended questions have their place, however: If you need a specific piece of information, for example, a simple, direct question is called for (“Did you say you lived in Cleveland?”). Also, a closed-ended question can be followed by an open-ended one to get your subject to elaborate on a topic of your choice (Q: “Did you come from a large family?” A: “Yes, five brothers and three sisters.” Q: “Tell me about that. What were the advantages? What were the problems?”).

Closed-ended questions are also a good way to get the discussion back on track if your subject starts to wander off the topic. This is a difficult problem to deal with, because it calls for some judgment on your part. You want to let your subject talk as he or she sees fit, sometimes wandering quite far from where you started. If your subject starts wandering far off the subject, though, you can tactfully bring him or her back to the subject with a closed-ended question. Wait for a break in the story, then inject a question that brings the interview back to the subject. For example, if your subject starts talking about what he had for breakfast that morning, interject a question like, “That’s interesting. What did you usually have for breakfast during the 1930s?”

You should try to develop a reporter’s “nose” for a good story, and deviate from your prepared list of questions if it’s obvious that another path would be more fruitful. For example, if your subject makes a startling revelation about his experiences in Germany during World War II (“I know for a fact that the Russians were killing as many Americans as the Germans did.”), you’d follow up and ask for specifics (“How do you know that? What evidence do you have?”), and not jump right to your subject’s ship ride home in 1945 just because that’s the next question on your script.

Finally, be sure to thank the person at the end of the interview. If you promise to do something later, such as send them a copy of your paper or let them know how the assignment came out, be sure to do it! Even if you don’t send them a copy of your paper, at least send them a short thank-you note for helping you with your assignment.

**Preparing your Report**

You should transcribe your interview while it is still fresh in your mind. Your first transcription should be a fairly faithful copy of what’s on your tape, omitting only the “uhs” and similar fillers. Don’t try to clean up the grammar—we don’t use perfect grammar when we talk, so any transcription of an interview that doesn’t contain at least a few grammatical errors is suspicious.

Once you have a “raw” copy of your interview, you should edit it. This requires both careful judgment and strict adherence to rules of editing. The first thing you should do is decide whether you plan to use the entire interview in your paper. If you and your subject talked about many different topics, some more interesting than others, you might want to omit the less interesting topics altogether, and concentrate only on the most interesting ones. This is fine, as long as you preserve the general tone of the interview while you edit. For example, if your subject looked back on the Depression with fond memories, but recounted a few difficult times, you might want to present only the difficult times and omit all of the fond memories. Such editing clearly loses the context of the interview as a whole. If you do decide to omit significant parts of your interview, you can restore the balance by paraphrasing the parts you omit (see below for rules governing quoted and paraphrased material).

You can also rearrange parts of your interview to bring related topics together. For example, if you and your subject discussed problems of finding work during the Depression, but interspersed comments about family life, you may want to collect all the “work-related” portions of the interview in one section, and all the “family life” portions in another section. If you do this, limit your rearrangements to entire questions and answers—don’t take a sentence here and a sentence there and rearrange them to form paragraphs that your subject never said.
Finally, it may be desirable to omit short passages from your subject’s answers. If you omit portions of the conversation that bear no relationship to your interview at all (perhaps your subject excused himself to use the bathroom), you don’t have to mention this at all. If you exclude portions of your subject’s quotes because they are needlessly long-winded or repetitive, but they do relate to his or her experiences, use an ellipsis (…) in the quote to indicate that material was omitted at that point. For example:

Original quote: “My dad lost his job back in ’35—or was it ’34? No, it was 1935 because I remember that was after we sold the old Ford, the one with the leaf springs on the rear that bounced us near out of our seats every time we hit a railroad track—anyway, after that, times were really tough at home.”

One possible edit: “My dad lost his job back in ’35 … that was after we sold the old Ford, the one with the leaf springs on the rear that bounced us near out of our seats every time we hit a railroad track … after that, times were really tough at home.”

Another version: “My dad lost his job back in ’35 … after that, times were really tough at home.”

Which version you use will depend on your intent: The original emphasizes the way your subject remembers things; the first edited version takes out the uncertainty of your subject’s memory while retaining the anecdote about the car his family owned; the last version focuses on the problem of getting by with the father out of work.

Quoting and Paraphrasing

When you use someone else’s words, you must give him proper credit. This typically means putting his words in quotation marks. Remember that anything you put in quotation marks must be an exact transcription of what the person said, with two exceptions: Omissions, indicated with ellipses as discussed above; and clarifications, indicated with square brackets. Clarifications may be necessary if your subject uses a pronoun ambiguously, or uses a jargon term which your reader may not understand. For example:

“Roosevelt started off with the NRA [National Recovery Act] and the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. It [the NRA] was a disaster.”

(Presumably, you know that “it” refers to the NRA because you asked your subject.)

You can also use footnotes to explain jargon terms. If you do this, the quote above becomes:

“Roosevelt started off with the NRA and the WPA1. It [the NRA] was a disaster.”

1 National Recovery Act and Works Progress Administration.

Normally, you use footnotes to give the source of quotes. In an interview, however, there are only two people involved—you and your subject. Therefore, all you have to do is separate your questions from your subject’s answers. There are three good ways to do this:

1. Use Q and A in the left margin to indicate a question or answer.

2. Use the last names of the people speaking. If your name is Sally Smith and you are interviewing John Jones, you could use Smith and Jones in the left margin, as though you were writing a play (this, in fact, is called “playscript” format).

3. You can set your questions off in a typographically distinct way. For example, you could underline or italicize your questions, or start your questions at the left margin and indent your subject’s answers by five or ten spaces.

Whichever method you choose, be sure to start a new paragraph every time the speaker changes.

In some cases, your subject may say something important or interesting, but say it very indirectly. As we discussed above, you can omit words from quotes with ellipses, but occasionally the subject uses so many words, and digresses so often, that any such quote would contain an ellipsis every few words. In such cases, it may be better to paraphrase what your subject said, rather than quote it directly. Paraphrasing is especially useful for including background information about your subject that is not central to the ideas he expressed in the interview. Paraphrasing is not quoting, so you don’t use quotation marks. You also make it clear that you are paraphrasing your subject by introducing the paraphrased material with words such as, “Mr. Jones explained that … .”
Your Paper

Your paper is to consist of four parts. In Part I, give the biographical data on your subject: His or her name, age (or year of birth), a brief description of what the person did that made him or her an appropriate interview subject, and the date of your interview. If there was anyone else present during the interview, give his or her name here, along with the function he or she performed (if, for example, you used someone else to take notes or act as an interpreter).

Part II is your interview, edited as discussed above.

Part III is an analysis of your subject’s experiences. This is your opportunity to be an historian, by analyzing why your subject responded as he or she did during the interview. You may want to compare your interview with other oral histories, either done by one of your fellow students or ones that have been published. The premier oral historian was Studs Terkel (who just passed away at the age of 97), who essentially invented this genre. Terkel wrote many collections of oral histories, such as:

1. *Hard Times*, about the Great Depression;
2. *The Good War*, about World War II;
3. *Coming of Age*, in which Terkel interviewed people who were close to 100 as of the year 2000, and had therefore lived through the entire 20th century;
4. *Working* — people talking about their jobs;
5. *Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession*;
6. *Division Street: America*, in which he interviews people who have succeeded and those who have failed in their pursuit of the American dream;
7. *Hope Dies Last: Keeping the Faith in Difficult Times*, about the role of hope in surviving tough times;
8. *American Dreams: Lost and Found* — What, exactly, is the “American Dream”?

Other writers have also become oral historians, and you may use their works instead of (or in addition to) Terkel’s. The most notable one of these is Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*, about World War II. Some of Terkel’s books are now out of print, but you should be able to find them in libraries, used bookstores, or on line from places such as amazon.com. All of them are “trade paperbacks,” so they should only cost $10–$15 or so. Buy or borrow the volume that is most pertinent to your interview topic, and look for an interview in the book that seems similar to your subject’s experiences. Then compare the two. Point out the similarities and differences in their situations, and the similarities and differences in their responses to these situations. For example, perhaps both your interview subject and one of the characters in the book were involved in the union movement, but the character in the book became embittered by the experience, while your subject found it enriching and rewarding. How do you account for the difference in outlook?

Part IV of your paper is the signed copy of the “Consent for Oral History Interview” form. Let me stress again that I cannot accept your paper unless this form is attached to it! If you interviewed your subject over the telephone, you can get a signature on the form in one of two ways:

1. Mail or FAX him the form and ask him to sign it and mail or FAX it back to you.
2. Read the form to him over the telephone and ask for his consent. If he gives it, hand the telephone to someone else in the room and have him ask the subject for his consent. This person can then sign the form with the name of the subject, followed by his own name (printed) and his signature as a witness.

The length of your paper will of course depend on the length and significance of your interview. As a rough guideline, try to limit Part II to about four pages, typed and double-spaced (250 words per page), and Part III to no more than three pages.

Choice of Topic

You have a wide list to choose from. I offer the following as possibilities, but you may suggest another topic if you wish (clear it with me first). The important thing is to find someone who was actively involved in whatever topic you select—not merely someone who was alive at the time.
• World War II—someone who served in it, someone who worked in a war-related industry at home, or someone who opposed it
• Korean War, Vietnam War, Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq—either someone who served in it or someone who protested against it
• The Civil Rights movement for any group—African-Americans, Native Americans, women, homosexuals, Latinos, handicapped, etc.
• Trade Unions—for or against
• Immigrant issues—either the struggle to assimilate or the attempt to maintain a separate culture
• The environmentalist movement
• Entrepreneurs—someone who has built a successful business from nothing, or someone who tried to do so but was unsuccessful