

Oral History

What is oral history?

Oral History is usually a one-to-one recording. The interviewer asks questions but the interviewee does most of the talking. The subject of the history is usually the interviewees' life, including information on childhood, work, leisure and family. It can also be about significant events for society at large or for that one individual.

Why collect oral history?

Oral history is a great way to capture many different memories. Many historians and museums now choose to collect oral history in order to record the memories of individuals. The emphasis of an oral history interview is on recording how people felt about different experiences in their life.

Many communities are now getting involved in recording their own oral histories. By following a few simple rules it is possible for you to collect your own oral histories too.

Who can help?

Tyne & Wear Museums has purchased various pieces of equipment which communities may borrow to carry out their own recordings. These come with step by step instructions on how to use the equipment. When carrying out oral history interviews it is important to follow some simple guidelines set out in the following pages.

Oral History Guidelines

Initial Preparation

You will need to speak to your interviewee in some detail prior to arranging the interview. A face-to-face meeting might be appropriate. You should be able to explain in a few sentences what it is that your project is about. Check if there is any topic that your interviewee may not want to talk about. Give an idea of the range of questions you will be asking.

Explain to your interviewee that you will not talk much but that is because the interview is not about you. Explain what will happen to the recording once it is over, and how it might be used.

You need to put all of this and details of the date and time into writing.

The Interview

1. Before the interview be sure:

You have the equipment ready. Practice using it so that you are prepared to start the interview without complications - this will make the interviewee more confident in your abilities.

Check the batteries are fully charged or that you have an adapter to plug your equipment in. You have a copyright and consent form. Without a consent and copyright form you will be unable to use your recording!

2. Before the interview starts

If you are going into the interviewees' home check where they want to sit, perhaps they have their own chair? Set up a table for the microphone (remember not to tap the table whilst the interview is taking place.) Ensure that the microphone can pick up both the interviewee and interviewer.

You should explain that background noise needs to be kept to a minimum - check for ticking clocks, noisy pets, etc.

3. The Interview

At the start of the interview state

1 interviewer's name

2 date of interview

3 place of interview

4 interviewees' name and date of birth.

Try not to ask leading questions. For example, don't ask in what ways were women treated differently to men, you should ask if they were treated differently. Find other ways to find out about your topic such as asking factual questions; was there a difference in wages, entitlements, roles within the work place etc.

Try not to add your own opinions or add words of agreement since this will spoil recordings. Try nodding and non-verbal body language instead.

When you ask questions try not to be confrontational. If an interviewee says something that you do not believe as true try phrasing questions in such a way as to be tactful e.g. 'some people say this is true... How do you feel about that?'

Some useful questions start with 'how did you feel about' 'can you explain' or 'can you describe'?

When the interview is over it is useful to say "end of interview" for people who listen later to the recording. Keep a note of the length of the interview and add it to the record you create about the interview.

It may be useful to take a sheet with your questions into the interview. It is useful for summaries and transcription purposes if you could note the names of factories, places or people and check at the end of the interview that you have the correct spellings.

4. After the interview

Don't dash off - take time for winding down and thank you's.

Remember to get your copyright form signed.

Send a thank you letter with a copy of the recording to the interviewee.

Copies

You should make at least one copy of your recording and store it away from the original. That way if anything happens to either copy you have a back up. It is best to make your copy in a different format to the original. Tyne & Wear Museums copies recordings onto CD.

Label the CD and the CD box clearly in indelible ink.

Documenting

It is essential to clearly label the sound recordings with the name of who is being interviewed and when.

You should also create a paper or computer record of the interview. This should have information of who is interviewed, when and why. You should have basic details about the interviewee such as their birth date and their address. It is also important to write a brief description of what is talked about in the recording so that in the future they are easily searchable. You should mention subjects and themes covered such as work, leisure time and what the specifics are, for example where the person worked. Also mention if the recording is about a specific time, for example the 1920s.

Summarising

Next you should try to complete at least a detailed summary. You should make note of timings along side what is being said. Particularly make note of the time when there is a change of subject.

Use different words to indicate how long or in-depth a subject is talked about e.g. “mentions” for something talked about briefly or “describes” suggests something talked about more in-depth.

Storing your oral history

Store your oral history recordings in a cool dry place. Store them away from electrical equipment which could wipe the content. If you keep your oral history on computer clearly mark the recording so they are not at risk from being deleted or changed.



The Loans Box

As part of Memorynet Tyne & Wear Museums has put together equipment that can be loaned out to those wishing to carry out their own oral history recordings. These boxes contain:

- Marantz Solid State Recorder and instructions
- Edirol R1 Digital recorder and player and instructions
- Audio Technica AT804 Microphone and instructions
- Desktop Microphone stand
- Two Kingston Technology 1024MB Compact Flash Memory Cards

To access the loans box please contact:
Tyne & Wear Museums Outreach Team at Discovery Museum

Tel: (0191) 232 6789

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