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CAPTURING LIFE STORIES

The Definitive Guide To Conducting
Oral History Interviews

Bridget Reddick

Capturing Life Stories: The Definitive Guide to Conducting Oral Histories

By Bridget Reddick

FIRST EDITION

First Printing

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ISBN: 978-1-891743-13-9

Published by:

Heritage Werks, Inc.

Box 6473

Naperville, IL 60567

Printed in the United States of America

© *Capturing Life Stories: The Definitive Guide to Conducting Oral History Interviews* is printed on acid-free paper, which preserves the contents, reduces yellowing, and helps protect the environment.



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The interview techniques, tips and questions in this book are based on oral history best practices and industry guidelines.

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Introduction

Learning and recording someone's life story is one of the most rewarding projects you can undertake. It usually takes a lot of work and preparation, but with a few simple tips and the questions provided for you in this book, you can start almost immediately.

Capturing Life Stories Using Oral History Techniques

In this book you'll find advice, techniques, and questions designed to help you record the life stories of your family members or anyone important to you. The advice and techniques come from the guidelines and practices of oral historians and can be used in a variety of interview situations. You might use them to conduct interviews about the history of an organization or company. Or you might try to learn more about a specific time in history, just like a professional oral historian. The questions in this book, on the other hand, are written with a very specific purpose—to help you capture the life stories of the people who are important to you.

You can use life story interviews to supplement your ongoing genealogy research or help you gather materials to write your own biography or a narrative of your family's history. You can file your interviews in your family archive for future generations or even donate the transcripts and recordings of your interviews to a school, library, or historical society. And many of the materials here could help students and teachers create oral history projects for educational purposes. Churches, veterans' groups, and other community organizations can use the practical interview tips and questions to put together an archive of members' life stories.

If you want to use the questions and tips in this book just to start a family conversation at a holiday get together or over a meal, that's great, too.

And don't be limited by these suggestions. Oral history techniques are powerful tools for learning more about the people around us. Be creative. As long as you're responsible to the people you interview and protective of their privacy, an oral history project can be a moving and valuable experience for you and the people you interview.

The oral history techniques in this book will help you:

- Ask the questions you'll wish you'd asked years from now, when it may be too late
- Get the best, most interesting answers to your questions
- Learn more from your family than you can in everyday conversation
- Save time and effort—the questions in this book give you a head start on your oral history project

In this book you'll find advice, techniques, and questions designed to help you learn more about history and about your family (or about the lives of anyone important to you) through your own oral history project.

A Short History of Oral History

The field of oral history as we know it today has only been around for a few generations. Oral tradition, on the other hand, has existed for thousands of years. Before there were books or scrolls or even written language, people told and remembered stories about the past. But oral history and the traditional stories of oral tradition aren't quite the same thing. The field of oral history as we know it today, practiced by professional oral historians and using modern recording devices and interview techniques, is much newer than oral tradition. Here are just a few major milestones in the history of oral history:

In 1948, historian Allan Nevins founded what is often considered the first institutional oral history program—the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. There have been many institutional oral history programs since then and countless oral history research projects conducted by individual historians and teams of researchers.

One of the most widely known and distributed oral history programs was conducted by the Federal Writers' Project during the Great Depression. Writers were hired to interview Americans about their life histories. As part of the program, many writers interviewed surviving former slaves about their experiences from before the Civil War. The interviews they collected are some of the only sources available to historians in which former slaves' own memories have been recorded. Today, the interviews are available online through the Library of Congress's American Memory Collection.

Another important oral history program, the Veterans' History Project of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, was created by Congress in 2000. Through this program, volunteers collect interviews and narratives from wartime veterans. If you are interested in participating in this project, contact the Library of Congress. Parts of your family history project may be appropriate for donation to the Veterans' History Project, but there are rules about what can and cannot be accepted. So, please check with them before making your plans.

Chicago author and radio personality Studs Terkel wrote a number of books about Americans' work lives, race, the Great Depression, and other American experiences of the twentieth century based on his oral history interviews. He won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1985 for his book *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II*. His books are still widely respected.

Your Oral History Project

Right now, there are oral history projects being conducted in libraries, schools, historical societies, veterans' organizations, private homes, and government institutions everywhere. Your oral history project will be part of a great tradition and may one day help people of the future understand our shared history.

By conducting oral history interviews with your family, using the same techniques used by professional oral historians, you'll learn more from you family in a few short hours than most of us do in all the years we spend together.

Record a life story today and get an insider's look at the past.

Part I

How to Conduct Oral History Interviews

A Quick Start Guide to Using This Book

This book is designed to help you conduct oral history interviews of many types:

- Casual conversations about the past, one-on-one or with a group
- Educational interviews for school projects
- Recorded interviews for family or personal use
- Formal, professional-style interviews for both family use and for donating to historical societies, libraries, etc.
- Interviews with members of a veterans' organization, church, school, or business to create an organizational archive
- Research to write your own biography

Feel free to skip around and use the tips that are helpful to you. Some chapters will probably be of use to anyone and other chapters will only be important to some. That's fine—just be sure you cover the basics outlined in this chapter.

If you already know who you want to interview and want to get started right away, here are a few tips you need to get started.

Step-by-Step Interviewing

1. Set clear goals for your project (don't wait until it's too late).
 2. Choose who to interview according to what you want to learn.
 3. If you want to donate your project, talk to the library or archive before you start interviewing.
 4. Do a little research about each person you'll be interviewing.
 5. Choose your recording device carefully and practice before each interview.
 6. Make sure your interviewees feel respected and comfortable every step of the way—and be sure to get a signed permission form for each interview.
 7. Use the power of silence.
- Plus, **the most important rule of oral history interviewing**—avoid “leading” questions!

Thinking a little about your goals now helps you avoid regrets later.

A Few More Details about Each Step

1. Set clear goals for your project (don't wait until it's too late).

- You might have a straightforward goal such as “Learn more about Grandma’s life while she can still tell me,” or you might have a more complicated set of goals with lots of questions you hope to answer.
- Write yourself a few quick notes about why you’re doing an oral history project and what you want to learn. You can look back on your notes after each interview to see if you’ve fulfilled your goals and to plan your next steps.
- If you don’t think about your goals now, you’ll forget to ask important questions or make decisions you’ll regret later about who to interview or how to record.

2. Choose who to interview according to what you want to learn.

- You might start with a list of people to interview—that’s fine.
- You might start with a specific topic you want to know more about—maybe World War II or the Great Depression or your family’s childhood experiences or the history of your family business.
- Consider practical issues, such as who lives close to you or who will feel left out if you don’t ask them to be interviewed. You should also think about people who may not be around in the future to be interviewed.
- But don’t forget that oral history interviews can be conducted with people of every age, not just older people.

3. If you want to donate your project, talk to the library or archive before you start interviewing.

- Some big libraries and museums won’t accept donated family interviews at all, so if making a donation to a major institution is one of your goals, you’ll need to do some research to find one interested in your project.
- Libraries, museums, and other repositories are more likely to be interested in accepting your donation if they have a chance to work with you before the interview to make sure you’re following their rules. So call them before you get started, if you can.
- See Chapter 6: Letters & Permission Forms for sample letters for asking institutions about accepting donations.

4. Do a little research about each person you’ll be interviewing.

- There are two types of questions in this book—Popular Culture Questions about major events in American history and Life History Questions, which are more personal. To choose the appropriate questions, you need a few basic facts about the life of your interviewee.
- Approximate birth year will help you choose the appropriate Popular Culture Questions.
- For choosing Life History Questions, you’ll need a few personal details—which you might know off the top of your head. Find out about: marriages, children,

jobs or careers, special experiences such as military service or immigration to the U.S., places they've lived, and special hobbies such as music or sports or clubs and organizations.

5. Choose your recording device carefully and practice before each interview.

- Choose a recording device based on your comfort level with the technology and what type of recording will fulfill your goals. (If your goal is to make a documentary video, a tape recording won't work. But if your goal is to preserve memories of the past, a tape recording might be perfect.)
- Keep in mind that high quality sound is often of more lasting use than low quality sound and picture together.
- Be sure to test your equipment thoroughly and make sure you know how to use it. If you aren't that comfortable with technology, ask someone to help.
- See Chapter 7: Recording—Equipment & Preservation for more information about available technologies.

6. Make sure your interviewees feel respected and comfortable every step of the way—and be sure to get a signed permission form for each interview.

- Guard the privacy and integrity of the people you interview with all your attention.
- Don't make any promises you can't keep, and make sure that your interviewees fully understand your intentions for the future of their interviews.
- The Oral History Association's guidelines for oral history projects (available through the Association's web site) provide additional advice about being fair and respectful to people you interview. Use the guidelines whenever you have doubts about what to do.
- Don't forget to have your interviewee sign the release forms the day of the interview!
- See Chapter 6: Letters & Permission Forms for sample permission forms you can use.

7. Use the power of silence.

- It might feel uncomfortable at first, but staying quiet during your interviews is important.
- After each answer, don't rush in with the next question right away. Sit quietly for a moment. Sometimes the richest answers come in that moment of silence.
- During an oral history interview, your goal is to record what the other person says, not yourself saying "yeah" or "uh huh." Whenever you can, nod or smile instead of talking.
- See Chapter 4: The Art of Interviewing for more tips on getting the best answers to your questions.

→ Plus, the most important rule of oral history interviewing—avoid "leading" questions!

- A "leading" or biased question is one that subtly (or not so subtly) suggests that you only want to hear a certain answer.

Avoid leading questions!

- If you stick with questions provided in this guide, you'll have an easy way to avoid this mistake.
- But you'll probably want to ask some additional questions of your own. Just be sure all your questions are simple and straightforward and don't give any hints about your opinion or what you think the answer should be.
- For example, don't ask, "Wasn't Grandpa very brave?" Instead, try, "What was Grandpa like?" You'll get a more complete and truthful answer.
- See Chapter 3: Writing and Asking Great Questions for more advice about questions.

Starting an Oral History Project

Your oral history project will start with a few simple steps

- Set Goals
- Do Some Research
- Look into Donation Options
- Decide Who to Interview
- Choose a Location
- Schedule Your Interviews
- Invite Your Interviewees

Set Goals

When professional oral historians begin a new project, they ask themselves questions. What topic are we studying and who knows about it? What do we want to learn about our topic? How will our oral history project add to the total knowledge about our topic? These questions help them set goals for their projects.

The general purpose of oral history is to record memories that might not otherwise be written down or preserved. A professional oral history project might be intended to document the memories of a population whose stories are not represented in written historical sources or to record experiences of people who were affected by a historic event such as a major social movement or an important election.

For a family project, the goal might be smaller or more personal, but it's no less important. Sometimes a more personal oral history project might begin with someone to interview, rather than a larger goal. That's a great place to start! But it's still a good idea to think about what you want to learn from your interview and how you might use your interview in the future. That way you won't end up wishing you could make a video out of all those audio recordings or regretting that you didn't ask questions you didn't think of in time.

Your goals might be:

- To talk with people in your life and get to know them better than you can in day-to-day conversations
- To record the details of a specific event—maybe the story of a family business or of a major change in your community



For Your Oral History Project Files—

your notes about why you want to start an oral history project.

Your notes should answer the question, “What do I want to accomplish with my oral history project?”

- To learn more about your family’s experience of something historic such as the Civil Rights Movement, World War II, or the Great Depression
- To gather information about the life of a special individual
- To record the life story of a special individual while that person is still able to be interviewed
- To put together a comprehensive history of the lives of many of your family members to complement a genealogy project
- To gather stories of people with common experiences, such as immigration to the U.S., military service, or working in the same business
- To donate something about your family history to a library, school, historical society, or museum
- To write a book about your family or another group of people
- To write a personal memoir about your life story, informed by the memories of other people in your life
- To create a video documentary for a special occasion
- To gather life histories of members in a certain organization—a veterans group, a neighborhood establishment, a business, a church, or a community organization
- To educate students about the lives of people in their neighborhood or family
- To talk about something difficult, like alcoholism or drug abuse, in your family history—if this is your goal, it’s extra important to be really clear on what you want to accomplish and to make sure your expectations are realistic.

But don’t just think about your goals. Write them down.

The first thing you’ll add to your oral history project file is your own notes about what you hope to accomplish. These records will be useful to anyone who reads or listens to your interviews later. Your notes will help future users understand why you made the decisions you did about who to interview, what to ask, how to record, and what to do with your interviews later.

Do Some Research

This book contains questions about major historical events, as well as questions about the major life events that most Americans experience. These are designed to save you time and effort so you can start your oral history project right away. However—every oral history project is unique and you may have some unique research needs.

Before any oral history interview, you should know some basics about the person you plan to interview, including when and where they were born, if they were ever married, if they have had children, what they’ve done for a living over the years, what their special interests might be, and if there are any special experiences or events you want to discuss with them. Depending on your goals, the answers to those basic questions may be all you need.

You can learn about the person or people you plan to interview through a variety of sources:

- Family archives and records
- Local libraries and historical societies
- Church or community group archives
- Government records
- Internet research

If you already have a family archive—or if someone else in your family does—that’s a great place to start. You might find family trees, birth and marriage certificates, diplomas, letters, photographs, and more. These can be great sources for establishing basic information like dates and places.

Your local library or historical society also has records that might help you answer a few basic questions. Ask about city directories, which are kind of like phone books but contain extra information about the people living at a certain address at a certain time. Libraries also might have property records and microfilm census records for your area. Historical societies or local history museums often keep files on prominent community families—you might be surprised what they have.

If you’re trying to determine dates of major events, start with your local libraries before you check with government offices. Census records, for instance, are generally more easily accessible through libraries or online than through government offices. If you eventually need to turn to government offices because you haven’t been able to find answers elsewhere, someone at the local library can often help you find the right person to ask. Government offices, especially at the city and county levels, do often keep records of marriages, births, deaths, and property transfers, but these records can be time consuming and expensive to access. Try the local libraries first.

Don’t forget to check with university and school libraries in your area. Most college libraries welcome community members even if you have no connection to the school. Many will even give you a community member’s library card for a small fee or donation.

If someone in your family is well known, either locally or nationally, newspapers are an important source. Local libraries often can also help you access old newspapers and many have searchable databases. Don’t forget to look for information about employers and schools in newspapers, as well as for personal names. Obituaries often provide details about family members that can be hard to find elsewhere.

Church and community groups often keep archival records that might include clues about your family history, although they are sometimes unorganized. It might take some digging or help from someone who knows where to look, but church records might include dates of marriages, baptisms, funerals, and other events. Community group records and church archives might also contain letters or articles that members of your family have written over the years.

In addition, every day there are new resources available for family research on the internet. If your family is scattered across the country or if you live far from the local resources likely to contain your family records, online sources can be very valuable. However, it’s important to use internet sources with caution. Misinformation and crazy theories fill some web sites, so be careful and always think about who is presenting the information and what their agendas might be. When it’s possible, choose web sites that



For Your Oral History Project Files—

your research.

Your research files should, ideally, document the dates, places, and other important information about the people you'll be interviewing. You may not have all of these records, but make sure the documents you collect (originals or copies) go into your files.

have pictures of the actual documents you need rather than notes someone else has written about what the documents say. The good news is that such records are becoming more and more available. Even many historical U.S. Census records, previously only available on microfilm at libraries, are now available online.

Don't forget that internet research can get expensive—you might be asked to pay fees to see some records online that are available for free elsewhere. So, if you're worried about costs, try the local library first.

The goal of your research should probably be to establish a rough timeline of the events of your interviewee's life, including birth date, marriages, important jobs or moves, and major events in local and national history. But don't get bogged down in research and lose track of time.

If your goal is to conduct oral history interviews for fun or personal use, you don't need much research beforehand.

Finally, keep copies of the research you gather, and add what you've collected to your oral history files.

Look into Donation Options

If you think a local library or historical society or even a major museum or archive of some type might be interested in having transcripts or copies of your oral history interviews, talk with them before you start interviewing.

Libraries and archives sometimes have specific requirements about what they can accept, and they may have extra requirements for oral history projects about permissions, types of recordings, and documentation about the oral history project and your goals. If you talk to them before you start, you won't miss your chance to make sure your oral history interviews fit their requirements.

Many of the bigger libraries, museums, and archives have very strict limitations on what they will add to their collections. If they say they aren't interested in adding your family history project to their collection, don't be discouraged—think about your larger purpose for recording your family history and find other ways you can preserve and share your family history project through other institutions.

You may have more luck talking with libraries with specific collecting missions that fit with your family history. For instance, if your family lived in a certain area for a long time, the local or state historical society is more likely to be interested in your family history. There are also historical societies and archives organized around collecting history from certain ethnic or religious groups, and your family history may be appropriate for them.

Decide Who to Interview

Sometimes a family history project starts with a list of people to interview, rather than with a specific goal. That's fine—although it doesn't mean you shouldn't think carefully about what you want to learn and what purposes the interviews can serve. Use the questions in this book to help you brainstorm about the types of things you can learn and what topics interest you. Then, think about who in your family has experience that relates to the topics you want to hear about.

If you want to hear about family stories from a long time ago, you might start with the life stories of your oldest living relatives. If you want to hear stories about the country your family came from originally, you could focus on family members who immigrated to the U.S. (Don't forget to include younger family members who immigrated recently.) If you want to hear about World War II, record life stories of family members who were alive during that time, including people on the home front as well as veterans.'

Practical concerns are perfectly good reasons for making decisions about who you interview, as well. You'll have to think about who lives close to you or close to each other and how easy it will be for you to get to them. You might have family members who will want to be included even if their experiences don't match up with what you're researching, and that's fine. Maintaining good family relationships is certainly a worthy goal in any family history project. If someone really wants you to record their life history as part of your project, it's okay to include them just for that reason.

Don't forget that oral history interviews can be and often are conducted with people of every age, not just older people. So think about the unique experiences of all the members of your family that might fit the purposes of your oral history project.

If you have a few people on your list to interview, think about the order of your interviews.

- You may want to prioritize certain family members by age and health, to record their memories while they're still able.
- You may want to save potentially difficult interviews for later, so you'll have a chance to practice a bit first.

Choose a Location

In most cases, the home of the person you're interviewing will make the most sense. It's convenient for the interviewee, and it usually puts them at ease to be in a comfortable, familiar place. However, their home **isn't** the right choice if:

- Interruptions, distractions, and noise can't be controlled.
- The interviewee prefers to be interviewed at their office or other acceptable location.
- There might be an audience who would make the interview uncomfortable at home.

The most important things you need in an interview location are:

- Comfort for the person being interviewed
- Quiet
- Freedom from interruptions, including the phone
- Good lighting (especially if you're planning to videotape)
- Plenty of power outlets for your recording equipment

If you're conducting your interviews in a home, choose a room that is comfortable, quiet, and free of distractions. Noisy appliances usually rule out kitchens. In an office setting, make sure to unplug phones and intercoms to prevent interruptions. Fans, heaters, and air conditioners can also make recording in some rooms difficult. If the temperature

Research Can Be Distracting

When conducting research, stay focused on your ultimate goals. Research is fun, but it can take your attention away from your interviews.

Don't lose sight of your oral history project.

Where to Interview?

The most important things to think about when choosing a location are:

- The comfort of the person being interviewed
- The conditions for recording—sound, light, and power sources

won't get too uncomfortable, you can ask to turn off any fans or heaters during the recording.

If you plan to videotape, think about light as well as sound. Don't sit the person in front of a window or bright light source. Shut all the blinds or curtains and turn on all lights so that the room is well lit but not too bright. You may need to bring extra lights or move lights around within the room. It's also okay to bring a little powder for shiny heads and noses. (See Chapter 7: Recording—Equipment & Preservation for more tips about light and sound.)

Keep in mind—certain locations can bring back powerful memories. If you're able to control distractions and other conditions for recording, schools or former family homes or even old workplaces can evoke special memories.

Schedule Your Interviews

Unless your interviewee is very interested in the project and in excellent health and energy, don't schedule more than two hours of interviewing in one day. If you need more than two hours, schedule multiple sessions. You can plan in advance what topics you'll cover in each section, or you can just see how the time goes.

If you have a limited amount of time—one two-hour interview only, for example—choose your questions carefully and keep your eye on the clock during the interview. If you find an interview is taking longer than you anticipated, you'll have to decide if you want to ask for a second interview or if you want to skip some of your questions to get to the topics that are most important to you. (See Chapter 4: The Art of Interviewing for more tips on managing your time during an interview.)

Invite Your Interviewees

To invite someone you know well to be interviewed, start with a phone call. To invite someone you don't know well, try to find a mutual friend or relative to introduce you. If no one can introduce you, write a letter. (See Chapter 6: Letters & Permission Forms for sample letters.)

In your first call or letter, be sure to discuss:

- Why you want to interview the person
- How much time you'll need
- Where and when you'd like to conduct the interview
- How you plan to record the interview and what will happen to the recordings
- That you'll ask everyone you interview to sign a permission or release form

If you want to use your oral history interview to create a memoir, web site, or any other published product, or if you might donate the interview to a historical society, library, school, museum, or other organization some day, you will need signed permission forms from everyone you interview. You also have an ethical responsibility to make sure that everyone you interview has realistic expectations for where their interviews might be seen or heard by others and thoroughly understands whatever permission forms they sign. (See Chapter 6: Letters & Permission Forms for more information about permission forms and samples.)