



D E N S H Ō

The Japanese American Legacy Project

The Densho Student Guide to Conducting Oral History Interviews

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Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project

Website: www.densho.org

Email: info@densho.org

Densho: the Japanese American Legacy Project developed this unit. Densho is a Japanese term meaning "to pass on to the next generation," or to leave a legacy. Our mission is to preserve the testimonies of Japanese Americans who were unjustly incarcerated during World War II. We collect and offer their stories in a manner that reflects our deep regard for who they are and what they endured.

Using digital technology, Densho provides access to personal accounts, historical documents and photographs, and teacher resources to explore principles of democracy and promote equal justice. We seek to educate young people and inspire them to act in defense of liberty and the highest values of our country. Densho presents a thorough accounting of what happened to Japanese Americans during a time of war and in doing so contributes to the current debate about civil liberties during times of national emergency. It is our conviction and hope that an informed citizenry, aware of the human costs and consequences of the violation of the rights of the few, will be better equipped to protect the civil rights of all.

Feedback and contact information

We are very interested in receiving comments, suggestions and questions about this guide and our materials. You can contact us by:

Email: info@densho.org

Mail:
1416 South Jackson Street
Seattle, Washington USA 98144-2023

Phone: 206.320.0095

Fax: 206.320.0098

Website: www.densho.org

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People as Primary Sources

Interviews all around

On a TV talk show, the host interviews a Hollywood guest who talks about her personal encounters in the past with fellow movie stars. A foreign correspondent in Iraq interviews a soldier about the events of the previous day. Students in an elementary school classroom interview one another about their favorite foods. And a community volunteer interviews a neighbor about her memories of participating in the civil rights movement in their city. Which of these interviews could be considered oral history? Is there something more you would need to know to be sure?

What is oral history?

Oral history is a method of historical research; the collecting of living people's accounts of their own past experiences that they consider to be historically significant, through systematic interviews.

While all of the examples above are of oral interviews (as opposed to an account that someone wrote down) and most of them have to do with the past, those criteria alone do not qualify them as oral history. The talk show guest is providing entertainment. The foreign correspondent conducts systematic interviews and seeks to verify the information using other sources (as do oral historians), but is not doing historical research—nor are the elementary school students.

Meanwhile, the community volunteer is not a scholar or a professional historian, but is engaged in oral history. She is one of a group of volunteers for the city's historical society who are conducting interviews and finding old articles from their city newspapers, as part of the development of an exhibition on the history of the local civil rights movement.

An oral history interview is often conducted as part of a research project. It is conducted systematically and is documented with care, so that it is valuable as a primary source for study of an aspect of history. A person working on an oral history project will do more than just an interview—that person (or team of people) will usually plan a number of related interviews, compare the accounts, and check some of the information against other kinds of sources for verification. The project will involve analysis of the interviews, research on the historical context of their topic, and storage of the interviews for potential use by others.

History Gets Personal: Reasons for Oral History

Eyewitnesses to history

Oral historians have similar motivation to journalists in seeking eyewitness accounts of major world events, although in the case of oral history, these accounts are tempered by time and memory. An articulate eyewitness can offer a vivid account that probably is not captured in an official record—when did they realize the event was happening, what did they think it was at first, what did it look/smell/feel like, and how did they find out more about the full story? An oral history account can reveal what meaning the event has years later for the narrator—a meaning that depends upon present circumstances, the personality and background of the narrator, and the relationship between the narrator and interviewer.

‘History belongs to the victors’

Not if an oral historian can help it! This expression refers to history that reflects the perspective of powerful people, and the side that won a war. Sometimes an oral history project is undertaken to balance the historical record through inclusion of people who were on the losing side of a conflict, or not part of an official record.

A collective history from everyman and everywoman

We see another use of oral history in projects developed to collect accounts from ‘ordinary’ people who are not famous. Such a project might target, for example, a cross-section of the population of a particular location. These projects also counter histories based on powerful people’s records and official sources--the equivalent of a ‘man-on-the-street interview’ in journalism.

Varied perspectives

Some oral history projects examine the perspective of a particular group of people, perhaps a group that has been marginalized in the past. Quite a few projects have been done with various ethnic communities, groups of women, members of a particular profession, labor organizers, and civil rights activists.

How could this happen? Reflecting on tragedy

Some tragic events in history are terrible on such a large scale that they are almost unfathomable. Years later, an oral history project can help air the voices of survivors and reflect on what happened. Oral history testimony can be critical in documenting a situation hidden or covered up at the time.

Think locally

Some oral history projects are community efforts, and may focus on relatively small groups or events that aren’t covered in the history books! A local historical society or community organization might take on such an effort for an exhibition or publication of a booklet. The anniversary of a school or other building might inspire a project, or conversely, a physical change in an area that involves dismantling a community landmark.

Planning a Project that Includes Oral History

For your study of a topic within living memory, you may want to conduct an oral history interview if:

- You are working on a family, school, or community history that doesn't have lots of published sources
- Your project will benefit from an individual's perspective to add a personal dimension to information from other sources
- You are working on a multimedia project that can incorporate audio or video commentary
- You are working with others to build a collection, such as oral histories from a defined group of people, or on a particular topic from many individuals

What are your goals?

Consider your purpose - how you envision your final product and what else you have to work with, to be clear about your goals for conducting oral history interviews. Your goals will affect how you prepare for an interview. For instance, if you are looking for an individual's responses to a historical event, you will need to familiarize yourself with the background on the event and sources that reported on it at the time. On the other hand, if you are collecting oral histories from a particular population, you will need to familiarize yourself with other interviews with members of that population, their common threads and variations.

How will you find the right person to interview?

Depending on your topic, you might have friends or relatives who might know good people to interview. Or you might call community organizations, search through local newspapers, or post notices in neighborhood locations. Another good option is to ask teachers and librarians at your school for recommendations of someone with personal knowledge of the topic you plan to research.

Protocol for Oral History Interviews

By following these simple standards of behavior while in contact with your narrator, you can communicate well, avoid misunderstandings, and respect their time and attention.

Making the contact

When you contact someone to request an interview, begin by introducing yourself and explaining your purpose. Generally, you will explain that the information is for educational purposes, and not for any commercial use. Let them know how you got their name, or who referred you to them. On this first contact, you will determine whether this person is an appropriate source for your project; they may not be able to accommodate you, or may recommend someone else.

Introducing yourself—In addition to your name, tell the person your school or affiliation, whether you are working independently or as part of a team, and your interest in their experiences.

Explaining your purpose—In addition to your basic interview topic, explain the larger project. How will their interview fit into the full range of research? What will be the product? It will help them think over the topic if they understand the larger scope.

Let them know what to expect—Let them know if anyone else will accompany you, how you will record or take notes, and what equipment you will bring. Confirm the time you expect to take. Two hours is generally the maximum amount of time you will want.

Do they need to prepare anything?—You can let the person know they don't need to write up notes to give you. Certainly let them know in advance if you have an interest in photos or artifacts, or communicate your interest if they offer to show you such objects. Be considerate, because you don't want the person to spend hours looking for something that won't be useful.

Permissions, privacy and rights Issues—Be sure to inform the person that you will bring a release form for their signature. It is a good idea to explain the release form and leave a copy. Explain how others will have access to what they say.

Summarize the process for the person being interviewed—Explain what happens after the interview: what you will do with the interview, how a person can correct a misunderstanding if necessary, and where the interview materials will be kept.

Ask for some basic preliminary information--The interview will be partly spontaneous, as you respond to what you hear from the narrator. However, you still need to do some careful preparation and plan your basic questions. When you schedule the interview, ask some basic questions about the person's experiences with your topic. You might determine some dates and places or incidents to be covered, so that you can fine-tune the basic research you have already done, and adjust your questions.

Preparing for an Interview

Make a decision about how to record the interview, and gather any equipment you may be using. What quality of recording do you need, for example, for online use or video production? In addition to some practice with the equipment, it's useful to practice interviewing as well.

Research

Do some preliminary research on your topic using published sources. You need to be familiar with the topic to prepare your questions, to have ideas about what further details to ask for during the interview, and to understand particular references the person makes.

Preparing interview questions

You will want to prepare a list of topics to be covered, or general questions to ask. But some of the questions you ask will be in response to something the narrator says.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions are best to introduce topics, and to get full answers instead of “yes” or “no” responses. Questions that begin with phrases such as “What was it like when . . .” or “Tell me about the time that . . .” allow the narrator freedom in constructing their own answer and emphasis.

Plan ahead for the first open-ended question you will ask, after you have covered preliminary biographical questions. You want this question to inspire a relatively long answer, and help the narrator get going. For important questions, you may need to rephrase it and ask it again, maybe even several times, to get as thorough an answer as you need.

For oral history interviews, it is important for judgments or emotional responses to come from the narrator and not from the interviewer. Although the interviewer will have some empathy, it is better not to ask questions such as “You must have been thrilled when that happened, weren't you?” The interviewer lets the narrator take the stage, refrains from putting words in their mouth, and does not show off his or her own knowledge.

Follow-up questions

Some of the questions you ask will be follow-up questions in response to what you have heard. If the narrator gives a short more factual account, the interviewer might respond by asking “What did you think when x happened. . .” or “What did it feel like when . . .” Frequently, someone will skip around while speaking rather than recount events in the order the interviewer believes is most logical. Some of the follow-up questions will be to back-track and fill in, or to confirm the order of a sequence.

At certain points, the interviewer will need to ask for clarification. Clarifying follow-up questions could be along the lines of “Now which brother was that?” or “So you didn't know what was happening until . . .?” or simply “Could you explain that in more detail?”

If the person mentions something that is no longer in use or not common knowledge, ask for a definition or description, even if you think you know. “Can you explain how that was used?” or “What did it look like?” might change your assumption or be important for someone else listening to the recording later.

A surprise comes up! Now what?

Interviewers need to be flexible in exploring topics they didn’t anticipate, without losing sight of their purpose and original questions. It’s possible that some unexpected information will require some further research afterwards, or even some follow-up questions at a later date.

Decisions on recording the interview

Recording the interview is ideal when possible, in order to focus your attention on the narrator and be able to listen to exactly what they had to say as many times as you need. You will need an exterior microphone to get good sound quality for transcribing. Use your equipment ahead of time to become familiar with it.

Photography

It’s a good idea to take a couple of still photos of the narrator, especially in their own surroundings.

Asking about historical photos and artifacts

Depending on your topic, you may want to ask the narrator (when you arrange the interview) whether they have old photos or artifacts to share with you. Photos and family objects can contain many memories! It can be very useful to have some material like this, not only for you to view and photograph, but also to support the narrator’s account. It might be easier for the person to talk while they are looking at something from the past.

Release Form

For most projects a release form will be needed. A release form helps inform the narrator how the interviews will be used. The narrator signs the form to grant his or her permission to the interviewer/organization to use the information for the purposes they have specified.

A personal information form (or life history form) is also sometimes used. It is a form with the narrator’s basic information, including their name, address, telephone number, birthdate, and birthplace. The form might include family information, such as names, birth dates, and dates of death for parents, siblings, spouses, and children. Depending on the project, it could include a list of places the person lived, schools they attended, jobs they held, or relevant organizational affiliations.

Plan for other uses of your oral history materials

The oral history interview you conduct will become a part of your own larger project, but may be useful in the future for someone else’s research on a related topic. Consider whether you will plan for preservation of your interview and the accompanying information in its original form, independent of the project you apply it to. The interview may be of lasting value, for instance, if

your class has organized to compile a collection of individuals or topics that are not well documented.

At the Interview

Allow for some time to set up for the interview. Be sure to test the equipment when you arrive, and have it set up so that you don't have to worry about it during the interview. You want to focus on your narrator, and not be distracted by fiddling with equipment.

Recording the interview

Be sure to record in a quiet place, with doors closed and a sign on the other side of the doors saying "Quiet please—Recording in Progress!" Listen for a moment to see if there is anything you need to do to minimize sounds in the background. You need to be aware of ambient sound, and keep from tapping your pencil or pushing your chair in and out.

Review with the narrator the basic information you gave them earlier about your purpose, and what access others could have to the material.

Label and number recordings as you go along. And, just in case a label or notes go missing, begin each recording with a statement of your names, the date and the place of the interview.

Begin the interview with simpler questions, to establish basic biographical information. You will want to establish some comfort with the interview process before asking more probing or difficult questions. When it is time to conclude, wrap up with some lighter talk to give the narrator a chance to make their way back to the present, or to adjust from an intense memory that they may not normally talk about.

Give affirmation to your narrator, but without speaking too much more than necessary—lots of nodding and smiling won't interfere with listening later on. You will not be happy afterwards, while listening and transcribing the interview, if you hear yourself interrupting the person or saying 'uh huh' every other minute.

The art of listening

While interviewing, it is critical to be an active listener, to support the narrator in telling their story and encourage them to say more. Be sure to keep eye contact, and not fiddle with your equipment and notebook too much. Ask for details when you need to, and remember that it's important to demonstrate your interest in what they have to say. Take cues from the narrator—do they need to think for a minute to decide how to answer? If so, be patient, and wait—it is not a problem to have a bit of silence on a recording, but it might be counterproductive to intrude on their thought process. Do they respond well to a series of questions asking for further details—or not need a lot of prompting? Are they getting tired?

After the Interview

Field notes

Make field notes right away of information that did not appear on the personal information form. Note your observations that will be useful for understanding the interview later on. Is there anything that wouldn't be clear from the recording, for example, to explain something the person was looking at during an audio recording?

Organizing the interview material

Label and file everything in a way that someone else could understand. Make copies of digital files, tapes, or original notes if the interview was not recorded. Store the originals separately and work from copies. When you listen to the recorded interviews, keep a running list of the topics covered using the time counter to create an index or log. You can use the index later to zero in on a single excerpt or quote, or perhaps to decide which portions of the interview to transcribe.

Loaned material

If the narrator has loaned you any clippings or photos, copy them immediately and return the originals.

Follow-up with the narrator

Send a thank-you note and a copy of the interview for their personal use. According to your plan, you might also send a copy of your transcription after it is prepared, for their review.

Transcribing an interview

“We stayed up alllllll night long (groan).”

OR

“We stayed up all night long!!”

When the voice and intonation of an interview are left out, to transcribe the words onto a printed page, some of the meaning goes too. In transcribing an interview, it is necessary to record carefully what was said, without correcting the person's speech or leaving out errors that they correct themselves. The point of a transcription is to be a faithful version of that primary source.

Analyzing and Interpreting Oral History: A Few Basic Points

Our human nature is to tell about our experiences as narratives, for instance, to structure our account with a beginning, middle and end. We might include details or create episodes that make it work better as a story, or even turn the people involved into heroes and villains.

When viewing or listening to a recorded interview, or when reading a transcript of an interview, keep in mind that the account is one person's interpretation of events. The reader or researcher needs to analyze the account for its point of view, just as with written sources, while also allowing for the workings or lapses of memory.

In addition, the interview is an event with its own context—the account will be affected by the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator, the frame of mind of the narrator that day, and the environment of the interview.

An analysis of a single interview will take all these factors into consideration. The interviewer, and often a reader of an interview, often will have done the research already to have a basic understanding of the historical context for the content of the interview. However, there may be details or new information in an interview that would need looking up to complete an analysis.

Critical reading of an interview

A critical analysis of a source is a part of historical method that considers the content of a source in terms of its context. Rather than taking statements in a source as truth, a critical reading is a process of inquiry into the background and point of view that shaped these statements. (A critical reading is not a matter of criticizing the narrator!)

For an oral history interview, it is especially important to think through the following points of context that would affect what the narrator chose to say.*

- Who is the narrator, and why might they have a particular point of view on their subject?
- Who is the interviewer, and what kind of relationship is there between narrator and interviewer?
- How did the narrator structure their account, and what does this say about their point of view?
- What was the purpose of the interview?
- What were the circumstances of the interview?

Identifying common themes

When working with a collection of oral histories, a comparison of accounts becomes part of the process. A researcher might compare excerpts from various accounts dealing with one place, or event or date. In addition, a reader/researcher might identify certain themes that reoccur in different accounts and make a comparison along those lines. Sometimes online archives of oral history interviews are set up to be able to search according to themes.

Building a composite story of a shared experience

Often an oral historian will compare interviews to construct a fuller account of an event or situation. These comparisons are not just for verification, but to find different emphases and points of focus to draw from.

One interview can be used for different purposes by different researchers

One reason oral historians pay attention to storage of the original materials is that others may use them for a different research project. For instance, one person going through the Densho archive of accounts of Japanese American incarceration might focus on education that children received while in the camps, while someone else might focus on relationships between men and women.

*The set of questions is adapted from Linda Shopes, “Making Sense of Oral History,” *History Matters*. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>

Interview Planning Checklist

Person to be interviewed: _____

Location: _____

Appointment Date and Time: _____

Contact Info: _____

- Appointment confirmed

Equipment and materials needed:

- microphone with extra batteries
- extension cord
- recording device/computer
- camera with extra batteries
- notebook and pencil
- prepared questions
- other: _____
- Narrator Information Form

- Release Form

Follow up:

- thank you note sent
- working copy made of original tape or written notes
- submission and confirmation, if needed, of written transcript
- storage and cataloguing of materials, as appropriate

Sharing the Info:

- copy of the interview sent to narrator for their personal use

Notes

Field Notes

Start time: _____ End time: _____

Others present:

Description of interview location:

Conditions that day, or changes to the plan:

Materials viewed:

Equipment notes:

Other notes:

Narrator Information Form

First Name: _____

Middle Name: _____

Last Name: _____

Nicknames (if any): _____

Maiden Name (if any): _____

Interview Display Name (How you would like your name to appear with your interview):

Street Address: _____

City: _____ State _____ Zip: _____

Telephone: (_____) _____

E-mail: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Place of Birth: _____

Country of Birth: _____

Name at Birth: _____

Gender: M F

Ethnicity: _____

Nationality: _____

Interview Release Form

Full name: _____

Address: _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by _____.

The purpose of the interview is for research, education, and historic preservation. Possible uses of the interview (in whole or in part) include the following: educational projects or curriculum, video documentaries, computer websites, educational publications and exhibits.

Thank you again for your participation.

Interview Date: _____

(Signature) _____

Resources

Sources:

Moyer, Judith. "Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History"

http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

"Practical Advice: Getting Started-- What is Oral History?" Oral History Society.

<http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/index.php>

Shopes, Linda. "What is Oral History?" Getting Started: Making Sense of Oral History. *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*. February 2002.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>

"Tutorial: Using and Interpreting Oral History Interviews, " Columbia River Basin Ethnic History Archive.

http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/crbeha/tutorials/int_oh.htm

Related Subject:

"Folklife And Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction To Field Techniques," American Folklife Center, Library Of Congress. First Edition Prepared By Peter Bartis, 1979; Revised 2002.

<Http://Www.Loc.Gov/Folklife/Fieldwork/>

Useful Websites:

Library of Congress Preservation "Caring for Your Collections" <http://www.doingoralhistory.org>

Indiana University, Oral History Research Center <http://www.indiana.edu/~ohrc/index.html>

Oral History Association home page at Dickinson College <http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/>