



## Oral History Guidelines

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# Oral History Guidelines

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Oral History is a respected form of recording, preserving, and interpreting historical information via the experiences and opinions of an individual. While its popularity has expanded from academia into the general realm in recent years, oral history—done correctly—requires a well-researched foundation and highly-structured process.

This guide outlines the procedures and requirements for conducting and using oral history specifically for organizations and teams doing local history projects and contributing material to Maine Memory Network (MMN).

It assumes a familiarity with interviewing techniques, ethics, and oral history procedure as defined by the Oral History Association. Anyone not familiar with oral history standards should visit the OHA website at <http://www.oralhistory.org/resources/>. The Maine Folklife Center, based at the University of Maine, is also an excellent state resource: <http://www.umaine.edu/folklife/>.

## PART ONE: GENERAL GUIDELINES

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### CONTENT REQUIREMENTS

Oral histories vary from specific topical discussions to a thorough history of someone's life. We encourage you to practice good research and information gathering techniques, and to properly back up and archive the original recordings.

Keep in mind these two key goals when thinking about the content of your project:

- The creation of a lasting primary source of an individual's knowledge and interpretation of particular events.
- The preservation of an individual's unique story and perspective.

For the purposes of inclusion on the MMN, oral histories should adhere to the following specifications:

- I. The content of oral histories for MMN should be specific to a topic. That is, the uploaded clip should focus on a topic or event or episode in history from the interviewee's point of view. While oral histories can be lengthy—capturing many stories

of a person's life or covering several topics—MMN is designed to accommodate topical searches. Segments that focus on a concise topic or answer a question are the most useful and easy to use.

2. The oral histories for MMN should be first-person stories. They can be about that person's life, memories of events, or personal accounts as they relate to big historical topics. They should not be genealogies or remembrances of the lives of other people—a person recounting events from his or her grandparent's life, for example, is not true oral history. The stories should be truthful as far as the interviewee can remember; they should not be made up.
3. The audio and/or video presented on MMN should *be one contiguous clip* in original order and not rearranged to change the interviewee's meaning or intent. Extraneous or repetitive detail may be edited out but editing should not be used to alter the story as told. Audio or video pieces with a great deal of editing, with added narration or music, or with multiple storytellers, are categorized as productions, not oral histories.
4. The clips must not contain defamatory, slanderous, or libelous material.
5. The audio/video file must be fully cataloged to provide contextual background to the clip. The Description Field of the MMN cataloging record must include:
  - Who is being interviewed
  - Who is doing the questioning
  - Where the recording was made
  - Where the interviewee is from (or similar information that sets their story in the State of Maine)

Details on anyone else heard on the recording should go in the Notes Field.

By contrast, any information related to the overall *topic* of the sound clip—such as results from your research or how the clip relates to your town or Maine history—should go in a related exhibit, or other component, on your local history website. Do not include such information in the cataloging record.

## PERMISSIONS

Since all audio and video recordings are relatively new in historic terms, they fall under copyright. It is the responsibility of the Contributing Partner (the organization that uploads collections to the MMN) to

insure that the material being uploaded is permitted under copyright law or that permission has been granted by the copyright owner. In the case of recordings, both the interviewee and the questioner may have a claim to copyright. For more information on copyright law see: <http://www.copyright.gov/>.

In addition to copyright, privacy laws may apply to recordings and extend to anyone recorded or filmed on video. As Valerie Yow writes in *Recording Oral History*, “Any recording without the speaker’s knowledge and consent is an invasion of privacy.” You can manage these issues by obtaining full use and ownership permissions at the time of the recording and by restricting the recording to just the person being interviewed. See Yow’s book or the other sources in the Additional Resources section for more information, including sample consent forms, on privacy and copyright in oral history.

## SOUND QUALITY

Just as the clarity of what you see is important in a photo, clarity of sound is important in an oral history. Even video oral histories need to capture good quality sound since what you’re ultimately interested in is the story. If you can’t understand a speaker the recording is of little value.

You can obtain good quality sound by managing the surroundings before and during a recording and by properly using good equipment. Be aware of ambient sound, i.e. other voices, traffic, phones, television, air conditioning, or other equipment. Try to minimize these noises by moving away from the source of the sound, shutting windows or unplugging electronics.

## FORMAT REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MMN

The following are format requirements for all oral histories contributed to the MMN:

- File types for audio: mp3
- File types for video: mov or mpg
- Length: Files should be short clips of no more than three minutes.
- Each audio or video oral history uploaded to MMN should be fully transcribed. That means that both the interviewee and questioner’s statements should be fully written out in the manner in which they were spoken. This includes “ums,” “uhs,” repetitions, half sentences, laughter, and the like.

## PRESERVATION

If you are creating an oral history recording, we encourage you to think about how you'll care for that recording once you've used it for your MCHP or MMN project.

**A good oral history recording is valuable historical evidence**, and ideally should be kept in an archive that can offer quality archival care. Think about donating your recording (and transcription and research) to a library, archive, or historical society. Always inform the person you interviewed about your plans for the recording and make sure this is reflected in the permission forms you use.

Caretakers of audio and video recordings should learn about and follow standard archival protocol regarding A/V materials. For information on proper archival methods for audio and video recordings, contact the Maine Folklife Center archivist, Pamela Dean, at [Pamela.Dean@umit.maine.edu](mailto:Pamela.Dean@umit.maine.edu).

## PART TWO: THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

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It's important to remember that the person you interview will be sharing his or her recollections, memories, and personal story. It is unlikely that they are an expert on a particular historical event or time period—but you are not quizzing them on their knowledge of history. You are simply capturing their unique story and it should feel like a privilege to have them share their personal history with you.

### CONTACTING THE INDIVIDUAL

1. Explain who you are, what your project is, and how you plan to use the interview in support of the project.
2. Explain how the individual's story will contribute to the topics covered on your local history website.
3. Explain that you'll be recording the interview on audio, and video, if applicable.
4. Explain what will happen to the recording—how it will be uploaded onto the Maine Memory Network.
5. Explain that you'll need a very quiet, private place to interview.
6. Get some biographical information—enough to help you create the interview questions (e.g. full name, date of birth, places lived, jobs held, hobbies, etc.)

7. A written questionnaire is preferable. Develop one asking basic biographical details and send it to the individual well in advance of the interview. Ask for a return of the completed form by a specific date.
8. If you don't have time for a written questionnaire, ask them some basic biographical information over the phone.
9. Tell the individual that you would like to visit with them for about an hour. (Longer than that is generally too tiring.)
10. Schedule the date, time, and location.
11. Thank him or her!

## DEVELOPING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The questions you ask will depend on the topic on which you are focusing the interview. Each question should be in service of this topic, rather than random inquiries about other aspects of the interviewee's life. Avoid asking simplistic, biographical questions—those should have been asked on the questionnaire prior to the interview.

It's important to ask open-ended questions that will give the interviewee a chance to describe something or tell a story. Open-ended questions require more than a one word response. Examples of open-ended questions include:

- What do you remember about...?
- Describe how you... / Describe the place that...
- Describe that to me in more detail.
- What was your role in the...
- Explain how you...
- Tell me about... / Tell me more about...
- What did you mean by...?
- Why did that happen?
- How did that affect you?
- Why do you think that way?

Be sure to ask for as much detail as possible. For example:

- What made your wedding such a beautiful event?
- Describe what the house used to look like.

- Describe the smells and sounds of the factory.

Don't shy away from asking hard questions—e.g. “What did you do when you found he had died?” These kinds of questions get to the heart of the matter and often provoke some of the richest and profound responses.

## PRIOR TO THE INTERVIEW

1. Confirm the time and date the day before the interview.
2. Dress and act appropriately. This person is generously devoting time and personal information. He or she deserves your gratitude and respect.
3. Develop a set of questions that you can use as a guide during the interview.
4. If there are other people in your interviewing group, discuss the overall plan with them before beginning. For example, don't waste time trying to figure out on-site who will be responsible for setting up the equipment.
5. Be familiar—very, very familiar!—with your equipment. Check it before you go to be sure you have everything and it all works.
6. In addition to the equipment, don't forget to bring your interview questions, paper to take notes on, and something to write with.
7. Review your list of questions and topics to cover. Be familiar enough with your list that you are not constantly looking at it during the interview.
8. Be prepared and on time!

## BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

Upon arrival, and before you start recording, make sure the set-up is comfortable for everyone. Make sure the microphone is securely situated near the interviewee. Explain the equipment to the interviewee so that he or she is comfortable with it.

1. Begin recording.
  2. Introduce yourself.
  3. State the date and location of the interview.
  4. State the reason for the interview and the person's name.
  5. Have them introduce themselves.
- Spell out the individual's name if it's unusual.
  - Include maiden name, name changes, or nicknames.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Be confident. Relax and enjoy the conversation!
- Ask questions one at a time. Take notes and listen closely to the answers so that you know how to tailor your succeeding questions.
- If you are doing the interview with another person, or as part of a group, make sure you don't ask the same question as someone else.
- Be an active listener. *Show* that you are interested—make eye contact, nod, and smile. Try not to say things like: “Uh-huh,” “Oh?” “Yeah...” “Mmm-hmm,” etc.
- Be respectful, polite, and patient. Do not interrupt. Allow enough time for the person to answer the questions. Silence is okay.
- Remember that this conversation is not about what *you* think; you may privately disagree with the person, but you *may not* openly disagree with them. Outwardly, you must be a neutral party. Do not argue with or try to correct the person and keep an open mind for the duration of the interview.
- Emotions—laughter, tears, anger—are all okay. If they are part of the story, they are important to capture.
- Silence is also okay—sometimes people are pausing to think.
- Take a break if the person gets tired, needs a drink, or is uncomfortable. (Shoot for an hour interview; never go more than two hours—it's tiring.) But...
- Do not stop recording unless the interviewee specifically requests it. You might say, “But you're the only one who can tell that story and we'll lose it if we don't record it.” If they still want to stop the recording, then shut it off. You might follow up by asking, “Why didn't you want to record that?”
- Periodically check the equipment during the interview.

## TIPS FOR QUESTIONING DURING THE INTERVIEW:

- It's okay to leave some of your prepared questions out. Your list is a guide only. Quality—not quantity—should be your focus. Let the interviewee tell the stories he or she wants to tell.
- Listen for places where you can ask follow-up questions. For example, if the interviewee makes an opinionated statement—such as, “He's a thief!” “That marriage was a mistake,”



- “She was no good”—ask for further details: “What do you mean by that?” or “What would you have done in that situation?”
- If the interviewee uses words, phrases, or acronyms that are unfamiliar to you, ask for explanations or definitions.
  - If the interviewee gets too far off topic, gently bring him or her back with cues:
  - I’d like to hear more about...
  - Talk some more about...
  - Getting back to the time you...

### AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Ask the interviewee to sign the consent or permission form and make sure you have his or her full name and contact information. Explain what you’ll be doing next with the recording. **Don’t forget to say thank you.**

## PART THREE: ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPTION GUIDELINES

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All oral history audio/video clips must be transcribed in full. While the clips you upload will be short, be sure to transcribe the interview word-for-word, from beginning to end, and save the entire original file on your hard drive and in an external format, such as on a CD/DVD.

Type all the text into one Word document in Times New Roman font, size 12. Be sure to transcribe ALL speech by anyone heard on the recording. Then follow these instructions:

1. Put the title of the audio or video clip at the top of the page of text.
2. Type the local code or any identifying code used by the owning historical society, museum, library, or other archive.
3. List the names of everyone recorded, including any interviewers or anyone interjecting information.
4. Record the date and place of the recording.
5. Transcribe all recordings as they are without correcting speech, grammar, etc.
6. Footnote any added description, definitions, or notes.
7. If you are having trouble figuring out what the speaker says, use square brackets to set off the questionable part of the transcription. For example:

- I was walking down [Brackett? Brackley?] Road...
- -OR- We were picking potatoes and [undecipherable word] so then we...

For additional resources, consult:

- Recording Oral History, Valerie Yow
- Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide, Donald A. Ritchie
- Transcribing and Editing Oral History, Willa K. Baum
- Oral History Transcribing Style Guide:  
[http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/Styleguiderev.htm](http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguiderev.htm)
- Oral History Interview Transcription Guidelines, Center for Southwest Studies:  
<http://swcenter.fortlewis.edu/Tools/sw-30.htm>

## PART FOUR: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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### ORAL HISTORY HOW-TO

- Oral History Association: <http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/>
- Conference information, evaluation guidelines, booklets for sale, listserv, information on regional organizations, oral history collections.
- Library of Congress Folklife Center: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>
- Educational and technical resources on oral history and folklife, including how-to instructions, lesson plans, oral history collections and webcasts.
- Veterans Oral History Project/Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/vets/kitmenu.html>
- Great information on how to plan and complete an interview; site also offers a number of forms that you'll need, including permission, biographical data, interview log and more. Site can also serve as a model for cataloging OH.
- Maine Folklife Center: <http://www.umaine.edu/folklife/>
- Collecting stories, folklore, music and information about Maine culture, the Folklife Center has a large collection of recordings and photographs. The MFC is located on the University of Maine campus in Orono and offers classes through the Anthropology Department.
- U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project Pre-Interview Form:  
<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/ww2latinos/>
- Family Oral History Using Digital Tools: <http://familyoralhistory.us/>

- Great new website that makes oral history accessible to anyone. Created by an oral history enthusiast who is learning as she goes and sharing her experiences on the web. She reviews equipment, posts interviews, and demystifies the process of interviewing your relatives.
- StoryCorps: <http://storycorps.net/>
- A national site for collecting audio stories. Stories are archived at the Library of Congress. Access downloadable how-to information to do oral history on your own or a kit you can rent to participate in the project. Includes a question generator and a do-it-yourself guide.
- Baum, Willa K. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1971.
- Baum, Willa K. *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1977.
- Edmund S. Muskie Archives. *Manual for the Edmund S. Muskie Oral History Project*. Lewiston, ME: Bates College, 1999.
- Ives, Edward D. *A Brief Manual for Field Work in Oral History*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press; Orono, ME: Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, [1986], 1980.
- Sommer, Barbara and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002.
- Yow, Valerie. *Recording Oral History*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2005.

## TECHNICAL INFORMATION

- Technical advice on how to work with audio content:  
<http://www.nemlac.co.uk/nemlac/page.php3?342>
- Vermont Folklife Center Guide to Audio Equipment:  
[http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res\\_audioequip.htm](http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/res_audioequip.htm)
- Excellent site for reviews on audio equipment. Staff tests and uses the equipment as well as collecting reviews.
- Video University: <http://www.videouniversity.com/>
- Site by a videographer at Maine Public Television about shooting good quality video. Site offers materials for sale but there's plenty of free information if you search.

## EDUCATION/CLASSROOM ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

- Skowhegan Middle School History Research:  
<http://www.msad54.org/sams/projects/community/index.shtml>
- Great site with student work on local history. Includes several oral histories and iMovies made by students.
- Tell Me Your Stories: <http://www.tellmeyourstories.org/>
- Oral history classroom curriculum.
- Jackson, Irene. *Hot Biscuits and Shanty Boys*. The Maine Folklife Center Curriculum Guide, 1998.
- Whitman, Glenn. *Dialogue with the Past: Engaging Students & Meeting Standards Through Oral History*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2004.

## PRESERVATION

The National Recording Preservation Board (Library of Congress) has of links to preservation sites.

- <http://www.loc.gov/rr/record/nrpb/>

## MORE INFORMATION

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Visit the [Share YOUR Local History](#) section of the Maine Memory Network website, [www.MaineMemory.net](http://www.MaineMemory.net).