Oral History in Practice: Technology, Tools, and Simple Recording Solutions





Approaches to Oral History Interviews: Listening, Asking, and Recording.

Three Ways to Conduct an Oral History Interview

Oral historians use a variety of methods to conduct interviews. The most common approaches include in-person interviews, video interviews using platforms such as Zoom, and telephone interviews. Each method offers different advantages and considerations for recording, communication, and building rapport with the narrator.

In-Person Audio or Video Interviews

Zoom Call Interviews

Phone Call Interviews



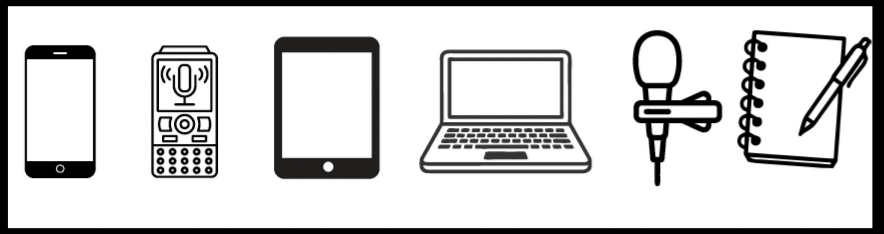


Face-to-Face Interviews

Audio



AUDIO INTERVIEWS



Audio Interviews



Follow these steps:

Step 1: Choose a quiet location. Find a comfortable space where you can sit face-to-face with the interviewee and talk without interruptions or background noise.

Step 2: Set up the recording device. Place an audio recorder or smartphone on a stable surface between you and the interviewee, close enough to capture both voices clearly.

Step 3: Test the audio. Make a short test recording and play it back to ensure both voices are audible and there is minimal background noise.

Step 4: Prepare the interviewee. Explain the purpose of the interview, answer any questions, and make sure the interviewee feels comfortable before beginning.

Step 5: Obtain permission to record. Ask for the interviewee's consent before recording. Explain how the audio will be used, stored, and shared.

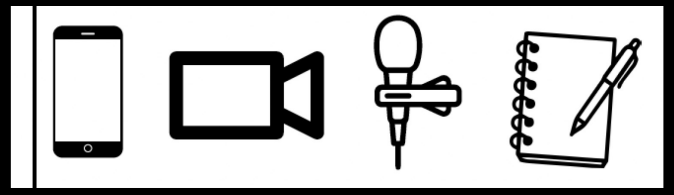
Step 6: Begin the interview. Start the recorder and introduce the interview by stating the date, location, and participants, if appropriate. Speak clearly and maintain a natural, conversational tone throughout the interview.



Video

VIDEO INTERVIEWS

In-person video interviews capture both the interviewee's voice and visual presence, including facial expressions, gestures, and body language. This approach creates a richer record of the interviewee's experiences, memories, and storytelling. Video recordings preserve the emotions and nonverbal details that accompany spoken words, helping future researchers and audiences connect more deeply with the person's story. They also document the narrator's presence, expressions, and way of communicating, preserving important details that audio recordings alone cannot capture. By combining sound and image, video interviews create a more complete record of personal histories that can be revisited, shared, and passed on to future generations.



Video Interviews



Follow these steps:

Step 1: Choose a suitable location. Find a quiet, comfortable space with good lighting and minimal background distractions.

Step 2: Set up the camera. Use a video camera or smartphone to record the interview. Position the camera at eye level and frame the interviewee comfortably within the shot.

Step 3: Check the lighting and sound. Make sure the interviewee's face is clearly visible and the audio can capture both voices. Avoid strong lighting directly behind the interviewee.

Step 4: Test the recording. Record a short test video and play it back to check the image, sound, camera angle, and lighting. Adjust as needed.

Step 5: Prepare the interviewee and obtain consent. Explain the purpose of the interview and how the video will be used, stored, and shared. Make sure the interviewee is comfortable and has given permission to be recorded.

Step 6: Begin the interview. Start recording and introduce the interview by stating the date, location, and participants, if appropriate. Maintain a natural conversation and ensure the interviewee remains comfortably positioned within the camera frame.

Good Lighting for Oral History Interviews

Type of Interview	Pro Tip
In-Person Interviews	Use natural light when possible. Position the narrator facing a window or slightly angled toward it so their face is clearly illuminated. Avoid placing a bright window directly behind them, which can make their face appear dark. Avoid harsh shadows. Use soft, even lighting to capture the narrator's facial expressions and gestures. Avoid strong overhead lights and direct sunlight. If needed, use a lamp or LED light to brighten the face. Check the lighting before recording. Look at the narrator through the camera and make sure their face is clearly visible. Adjust the light to reduce shadows and glare, especially if the narrator wears glasses.
Zoom Interviews	Position your light in front of you. Place your computer facing a window or position a desk lamp or ring light near your webcam. Lighting your face from the front helps others see your expressions clearly. Avoid sitting with a bright window behind you. Test your setup before the interview. Open Zoom and check how you appear on screen before the narrator joins. Make sure your face is well-lit, the lighting is consistent, and there are no distracting shadows or reflections.



ZOOM INTERVIEWS

ZOOM

Zoom interviews allow oral historians to connect with interviewees remotely, making it possible to document personal stories and experiences across different geographic locations. This format offers flexibility and convenience while capturing audio and, when enabled, video of the conversation. With proper preparation and recording settings, Zoom can help preserve interviews for future research, education, and community storytelling.



Zoom Interviews



Follow these steps:

Step 1: Prepare your equipment. Make sure you have a Zoom account, a computer, laptop, or tablet, and a reliable internet connection. Use a microphone or headset if available to improve audio quality.

Step 2: Schedule the interview. Arrange a date and time with the interviewee and send them the Zoom meeting link and any instructions they need to join.

Step 3: Set up your recording preferences. Before the interview, check your Zoom settings to confirm which recording options are available. Choose to save the recording to your computer or to the cloud, depending on your account and preferences.

Step 4: Prepare your recording environment. Find a quiet location with good lighting. Position your camera at eye level, check your microphone, and make sure your internet connection is stable.

Step 5: Obtain consent to record. Explain the purpose of the interview and how the recording will be used, stored, and shared. Obtain the interviewee's permission before recording.

Step 6: Test your audio and video. Join the Zoom meeting a few minutes early to check your camera, microphone, and internet connection. Make sure both you and the interviewee can see and hear each other clearly.

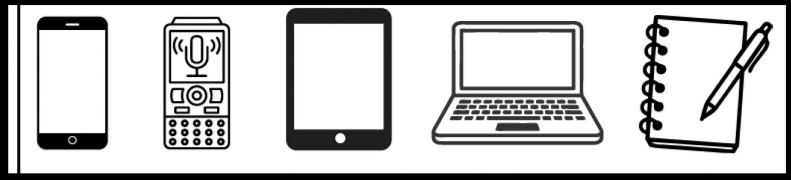
Step 7: Start the interview and recording. Once the interviewee is ready and has given permission, begin recording using Zoom's recording feature. Introduce the interview by stating the date, participants, and purpose, if appropriate.

Step 8: Save and review the recording. After the interview, confirm that the recording has saved successfully. Store the file securely and label it with the interviewee's name or assigned identifier and the interview date. If available, review Zoom's audio, video, or automated transcription.



Phone-Call

Telephone interviews allow oral historians to collect personal stories, memories, and experiences from interviewees who may be unable to meet in person or connect through video conferencing. This method offers flexibility and accessibility, particularly when working with people across long distances. Although visual cues are absent, a phone interview can still capture the speaker's voice, emotions, and reflections, preserving valuable oral histories for future research and community storytelling.



PHONE-CALL INTERVIEWS

Phone Call Interviews



Follow these steps:

Step 1: Use a cell phone or smartphone to conduct the interview. Make sure your phone is fully charged and keep a charger nearby.

Step 2: Choose a quiet location. Find a comfortable space with minimal background noise so both you and the interviewee can hear each other clearly.

Step 3: Set up your recording method. Decide how you will record the conversation. Depending on your equipment and local laws, you may use a phone's recording feature or another device, such as a laptop, tablet, or audio recorder. Do not assume that placing a call on speakerphone and recording it with another device is permitted in every situation.

Step 4: Test your setup. Before the interview, test your recording equipment and sound levels. Make sure both voices can be heard clearly and that the recording device has enough storage space.

Step 5: Obtain permission to record. Explain the purpose of the interview and how the recording will be used, stored, and shared. Obtain the interviewee's consent and follow applicable recording laws.

Step 6: Begin the interview. Call the interviewee at the agreed-upon time. Once they are comfortable and have given permission to record, start the recording and introduce the interview, including the date and participants, if appropriate.

Step 7: Save and store the recording. After the interview, check that the recording has saved successfully. Label the file with the interviewee's name or assigned identifier and the interview date, and store it securely.

Prepare Your Technology Before the Interview

Prepare Your Recording Equipment

Before conducting an oral history interview, make sure your recording equipment is ready. Fully charge your phone, audio recorder, laptop, or tablet, and ensure you have enough storage space to save the entire interview.

Test your microphone by making a short recording and playing it back to confirm that voices are clear and audible. Check the surroundings for background noise and choose a quiet location to minimize distractions.

Minimize Interruptions and Have a Backup

Before beginning the interview, enable Do Not Disturb on your devices to prevent calls, texts, and notifications from interrupting the recording. Keep headphones nearby to monitor audio quality, and have a backup power source, such as a charging cable, power bank, or extra batteries, available in case your device runs low on power.

Have a Backup Plan

Before beginning the interview, do a short practice recording with your interviewee and play it back to make sure everything is working.Confirm that the recording is actually saving and know where the file will be stored. When possible, have a second recording device available in case your primary device fails.Finally, bring a charger or portable battery so you can continue recording if your device runs low on power.

If technology fails

Technology does not always work as expected, so be prepared to adapt if something goes wrong. If your recording device stops working or the audio becomes unclear, troubleshoot the issue, switch to a backup device, or adjust the microphone's position.

If recording is no longer possible, ask the interviewee for permission to continue taking written notes. If Zoom or another video conferencing platform fails, try reconnecting, switching to another platform, or continuing the conversation by telephone if the interviewee agrees.

Remember: Technology is a tool, not a barrier. Have a backup plan and do your best to preserve the story!

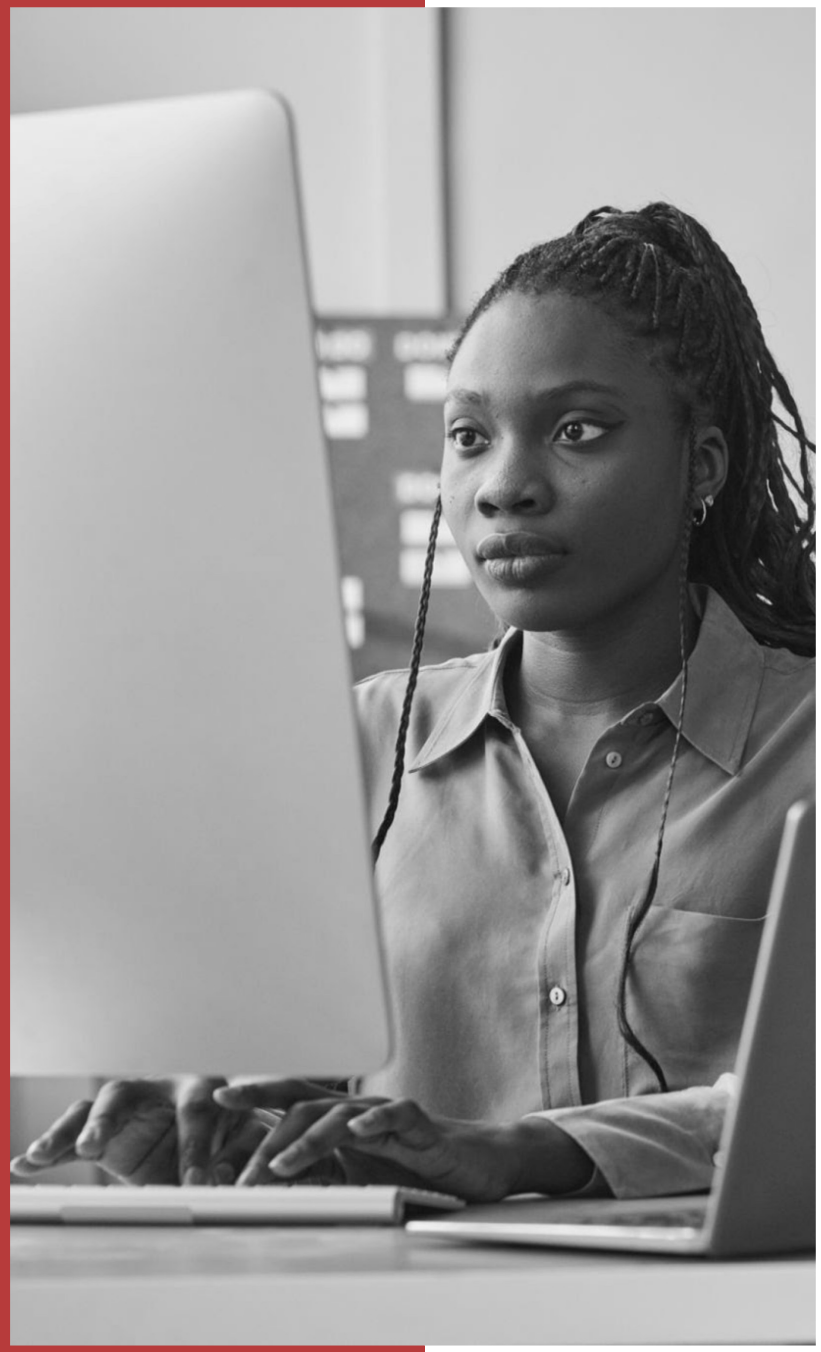


What to Do After the Oral History Interview

First, save the recording and any related personal information in a secure location, respecting the interviewee's privacy and any agreed-upon access restrictions. While the conversation is still fresh in your mind, write down key topics, names, places, and stories that stood out, along with any follow-up questions or observations.

Next, document the basic details of the interview, including the date, duration, interviewer, interviewee, and recording format. Give the recording a clear, consistent file name so it can be easily identified and retrieved later.

These simple steps help keep oral history interviews organized, secure, and accessible for future research, education, and preservation.



Do this after your Oral History Interview

01

Save the recording promptly: After the interview, save the recording to a secure location. Do not rely on the copy stored on your phone or recording device as the only version.

02

Create a backup: Make at least one additional copy and store it in a separate, secure location, such as an external hard drive or approved cloud storage. Protect the recording and any related files according to the interviewee's consent agreement and any access restrictions.

03

Use a clear, consistent file name: Label the recording so it can be easily identified and retrieved later. Include relevant details, such as the interviewee's name or assigned identifier, the interview date, and the location. For example: Maria_Lopez_OralHistory_2026-10-07.



"Stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie