



Newcastle
Libraries

ORAL HISTORY HANDBOOK

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This handbook was prepared by Newcastle Region Library with the kind assistance of Janis Wilton, Oral Historian and is intended as a guide only.

Further suggested reading is 'Oral History Handbook'
by Beth M Robertson

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY

‘A practical definition of oral history is: a recorded interview in question and answer format conducted by an interviewee who has some knowledge of the subject to be discussed with a knowledgeable interviewer speaking from first-hand experience on subjects of historical interest that is made accessible to other researchers.’

(Beth Robertson, *Oral History Handbook, Fifth Edition*, Adelaide, 2010, p. 2)

THE VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is a living history of everyone's unique life experiences. It is the recording of people's memories, experiences and opinions. Oral history helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history. An oral history project can consist of an interview with an individual or a number of interviews with different people about a particular aspect of history.

HOW TO BEGIN

A key skill in oral history interviewing is the ability to listen and hear what an interviewee is sharing, and to be able to follow up their memories by asking for more detail and depth. Before interviewing someone it is useful to have done some background research. Have an idea about the person or the time period.

THE INTERVIEW

- ◇ Choose a quiet place, free of distractions. Switch off televisions, radios etc.
- ◇ Once recording starts begin with a ⁵ general introduction. 'This is (name). Today is (date). I (your name) will be conducting this interview at (address or just a description such as 'at home').
- ◇ Most people find it easier to remember their life in chronological order, so start with their early life, family background, grandparents, parents and brothers and sisters.
- ◇ Could include topics on family life (housework/chores/mealtimes), leisure activities (street games/sport/clubs/books/weekends/holidays), schooling (teachers/favourite subject), early relationships, working life (first job) and finally later family life.
- ◇ Be flexible and ask open ended questions first.
- ◇ Tailor follow-up questions as the interview proceeds, make notes of things to revisit or come back to if needed.
- ◇ Provide feedback with silent encouragements: nod your head to indicate you are listening or smile when appropriate.
- ◇ Don't interrupt and don't ask too many questions. Your aim is to get them to talk.
- ◇ Listen carefully, maintain good eye contact and be relaxed.
- ◇ Give the person time to answer each question fully and finish his/her train of thought.
- ◇ 60 minutes to 90 minutes is a good average length for an interview. Concentration diminishes if the interview becomes lengthy.
- ◇ Make sure your interviewee signs a release form for the interview.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

- ◇ Ask open-ended questions starting with who, what, where, why, how.
- ◇ For example 'Tell me about?', 'Why?', 'Why not?', 'How did that happen?'
- ◇ Avoid leading questions that already give an answer. For example, don't say 'Wasn't Newcastle a poor, hard place to grow up in? Say 'Tell me how you felt about the place where you grew up?'
- ◇ Restate or summarise what's been said. 'You said', 'Tell me more about that'.
- ◇ Ask for clarification. 'What does that mean?' 'What is?'
- ◇ Follow up. 'What else?' 'Who else?', 'What other reasons?'
- ◇ Probe for details: 'Could you explain?' 'Could you tell me more about?' 'Could you describe?' 'How did that make you feel?' 'How did you react?' 'Why do you think you did that?' 'Why do you think that happened?'

USE OF THE EQUIPMENT

These instructions are for basic recording use; please refer to the H4n Pro Operation Manual for more in-depth instructions.

TO RECORD

- ◇ Make sure the power is off.
- ◇ Insert 2 AA batteries. Set the Stamina switch to on (which is inside the battery compartment). When Stamina mode is on it conserves power when using batteries. Stamina mode is similar to recording in Stereo. Close the battery compartment cover.
- ◇ When in use, if the 'Low Battery' warning appears, turn off the unit and replace the batteries, or switch to an AC adapter.
- ◇ Insert your SD card into the SD card slot on the right side of the recorder. 3 hours of recording roughly equates to 2GB of storage space on a memory card
- ◇ Attach the recorder to the tripod stand if required.
- ◇ Slide the 'POWER' switch on (on the left side of the recorder) to turn the POWER on and start up the recorder.
- ◇ The screen should say 'now loading'.
- ◇ To make a recording, press the RECORD button. The RECORD button will flash which means 'recording standby'. When you press the RECORD button a second time it will begin recording.
- ◇ While recording, you can PAUSE by pressing the PAUSE/PLAY button and STOP, by pressing the STOP button.

- ◇ When you press the PAUSE/PLAY button, the RECORD button will flash to show that it is on 'recording standby', by pressing the PAUSE/PLAY button again, it will continue recording from the same point that you stopped.
- ◇ The timer across the top of the screen will let you know how long you have been recording.
- ◇ The STOP button will STOP the recording, take the timer back to zero and save that recording as your first file 000.wav. The next recording will become file 001.wav, then 002.wav etc
- ◇ You can only replay what you have recorded after you have pressed the STOP button. To hear what you have recorded press the PAUSE/PLAY button and it will PLAY each of your files that you have recorded.

TO COPY YOUR RECORDING TO YOUR COMPUTER

- ◇ Turn the Zoom H4N Pro off.
- ◇ Plug the USB cable into the left side of the recorder and the other end into your computer.
- ◇ Click on storage using the toggle switch on the right side of the recorder.
- ◇ If the files do not automatically open on your file, go into your computer settings and open the USB storage device.
- ◇ Open the Stereo folder.
- ◇ Your recording or recordings will be stored in one of the folders. Open folder 1, highlight your recordings and drag or save to the destination you wish to save the recordings on your computer.
- ◇ Once the files are stored on your computer you can eject the recording device and disconnect it from your computer.

PROCESSING THE INTERVIEW

As soon as possible after the interview, you should write a summary of the interview and include:

- ◇ Names of the participants.
- ◇ Date and place of the interview.
- ◇ Brief biographical information about the interviewee.
- ◇ Brief outline of interview, indicating the order of the topics.
- ◇ Observations about the interview including the highlights of the interview.

Preserve the oral history as soon as possible after the interview by saving a copy of your recording to a computer.

It is important to save and protect a master copy of your audio recording. This is the original document. There should be no editing or changes to the master copy. It should be stored safely and backed up in another spot.

THE ETHICS OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history interviews involve working with people, their memories, their emotions, their present and their past. As an interviewer, you have a duty of care to ensure that, through the oral history process, interviewees' rights and privacy are respected and that they come to no harm.

Make sure you fully inform the participant of the purpose, nature and intended outcomes of the oral history project. Ensure participants agree to the use of material they provide and to the way it will be used.

COPYRIGHT AND ORAL HISTORY

The most common interpretation of the Australian Copyright Act 1968 is that there are two copyrights to be considered. There is copyright in the physical sound recording that usually belongs to the interviewer and there is also copyright in the recorded words that usually belong to both the interviewer and the interviewee as joint contributors to the structure and content of the interview.

It is a good idea to seek permission from the interviewee to use their interviews and some form of written agreement is the best way to do this.

In some cases it may not be possible or appropriate for a written agreement. The terms of the agreement can be discussed and recorded at the end of the interview.