

Step by Step Guide to Oral History

What this handout is about

This handout will help you figure out how to use oral histories in essays. It will give you suggestions for how to prepare for and conduct oral history interviews and help you determine, based on your context and purpose, how to integrate raw material into your essay.

Introduction

If we aren't experts on a particular time or culture, our knowledge of it is often limited to major events and sweeping trends. This doesn't necessarily help us understand the everyday experience of life in the past or in another culture. However, we do know a great deal about everyday experience in our own time and culture, and a large part of that knowledge comes not from textbooks but from talking to others. We learn about the histories of our families through conversation with those who remember them and about what various cultures value by observing their celebrations and listening to their music, among other things. So if you want to learn about another culture, country, era, etc., why not use a version of this strategy and talk to people who are or were part of it about their experiences and memories?

Oral history involves interviewing a person or group to get an inside perspective into what it was like to live in a particular time or is like to live as the member of a particular group within a society. Interviewing a group of people can create a picture of that experience, and a large project of this kind (such as UNC's Southern Oral History Project) can be a way of preserving a piece of history. When we interview one person, we gain knowledge of an individual's experiences, which may or may not be typical of his or her time and culture. We can also learn more about the experiences of groups from all sections of society, including the ones whose experience is not always thoroughly known or well documented, such as the working class, ethnic or religious minorities, or women.

When professors use oral history projects in classes, they usually ask you to interview only one or two people. The interview stage of the process requires effective question-making and interviewing skills. Usually, the project consists of taking raw material from an interview and shaping it into an essay. This step requires you to make some decisions about how you want to present the material and analytical skill to help you interpret what you learn.

Who uses oral history projects and why

Fields in which you might be assigned an oral history papers include history, anthropology, and other disciplines that study the experiences of specific social groups such as women or ethnic groups. The goals of these fields affect the ways they use this kind of project.

History: Historians use evidence to understand the experiences of people in the past. Oral history can be a valuable source of evidence for understanding the experiences of individuals or groups within a certain historical period. Oral testimony cannot replace analysis of traditional historical materials (official documents, letters, newspapers, secondary sources, etc.). It can, however, reveal the role of individuals in shaping the past and/or how larger trends impacted the individual. When an oral history essay places the experiences of an individual within the context of a historical period, it can help illuminate both the individual's experience and the historical period.

Folklore: Folklorists study culture as it is expressed in everyday life and often use oral history projects to gather materials to preserve and study. Interviewing individuals is one of the primary means of accessing folklore; for example, folklorists use oral histories to learn about a culture's musical traditions or festivals.

Anthropology: An archeologist might use oral history to learn more about the lifeways of peoples who have living descendants or to locate sites for archeological excavation. A cultural anthropologist might use oral history as a way to understand how individuals think of themselves in relation to the rest of the world. This technique can help anthropologists understand how culture shapes individuals either consciously or unconsciously, on the one hand, and the ways that individuals contribute to the production of culture, on the other hand.

Fields that study marginalized social groups (such as women, African-Americans, Latino/as): In these fields, conducting and analyzing an interview is a way of uncovering experience that might be underrepresented in mainstream culture. Dominant cultures have a tendency not to notice or acknowledge the experiences of certain subgroups, viewing them as peripheral rather than central—in other words, marginalizing them. Academic fields have emerged to explore the experiences of marginalized groups, and these fields tend to value experiential knowledge. Oral history projects can be a way of accessing such knowledge.

Preparing for the interview

* Before the interview, familiarize yourself with the history and characteristics of the culture your interviewee is from. That way, you'll have a context for what you learn.

* Some interviews may be fairly unstructured, with only general guidance from you. For instance, you may just choose some topics to discuss, allowing the interviewee to lead the way. This is appropriate when your goal is relatively broad, such as the preservation of the person's voice, memories, and perspective, as opposed to using the interview to construct a focused argument.

* Some interviews, especially those in undergraduate course assignments, are more highly structured and take the shape of a list of questions and responses. This is especially useful when you hope to use the raw material of the interview to make a particular point or are looking to address very focused issues. If you are planning a more structured interview, prepare a list of questions, including some basic ones about aspects of the person's identity (such as age, level of education, and occupation). In devising your questions, consider the interviewee's cultural context. Think about what kinds of issues would be most helpful for you to learn about. For instance, learning how the person felt about major life events might help you understand how your interviewee sees his or her life as a whole. Questions about what it was actually like to live through segregation or the Vietnam War might give you a new perspective on a historical time period. As you ask your questions, work from your list, but be ready to ask follow-up questions in case you don't understand the response or want to know more. A response to one of your questions may also trigger curiosity about some other issue, so it's good to be ready to follow whatever path seems most promising.

* Include open-ended questions, especially "how" and "why" questions, as they will probably yield the richest raw material for your essay; asking yes/no questions is okay for gathering factual information.

* Ask for examples when you think it would help you (and the readers of your essay) understand the person's perspective.

Conducting the interview

* To conduct the interviewing process in an ethical way, ask the person's permission to use his/her comments in your essay; written consent is ideal so you have a record of it. If you are recording a phone conversation, the interviewee's written consent is required by law. Ask if the interviewee would prefer that you not use his or her actual name.

* Tape record the interview if possible. If you try to work only from notes, you won't have an exact record of the person's comments and could end up distorting their meaning. Test your tape recorder, digital voice recorder, or videocamera ahead of time and bring extra batteries if necessary.

* If you're recording, try to minimize background noise. In any interview setting, try to select an environment free from distractions, so that both you and the interviewee will be able to concentrate. Choose a spot where you will both feel comfortable.

* Silence will feel awkward at first, but give your interviewee a chance to think. Don't move on too quickly just because there is a bit of a pause.

* Watch for signs of fatigue. If the person you're interviewing begins to seem tired, take a break or set up another time to finish the interview.

* Treat the person you're interviewing with respect, regardless of your own attitudes and opinions. Making assumptions about the person may damage trust and skew the essay you write.

Transcribing oral histories

Sometimes, you may be asked to transcribe your oral history interview or part of it. Transcription is the process of taking a sound file and translating it to text; it creates a written transcript of an oral conversation. One of the goals of transcribing interviews is to give readers a sense of the interview—how was it formatted, was it formal or informal, did the interviewer ask a lot of questions or did the interview subject do most of the talking with just a few prompts, what language and speaking style did the participants use?

A transcript of an oral history interview is, in the words of one style guide, "at best an imperfect representation of an oral interview. The transcriber's most important task is to render as close a replica to the actual event as possible. Accuracy, not speed, is the transcriber's goal" (Baylor Style Guide). Therefore, the transcript should reflect, as closely as possible, the words, speech patterns, and thought patterns of the interview subject. His or her word choice, grammar, and ideas should be transcribed as accurately as possible. It's not generally necessary, though, to reproduce a dialect or accent, unless you have specific

training in doing so. The same style guide says, "Oral history is not an exercise in literary composition; the transcriber should avoid value judgments about the grammar or vocabulary of an interviewee."

Transcribing can be a long and very detailed process. It will be easiest if you take detailed notes during the interview about the different questions, topics, and themes that you discuss. Write down any memorable phrases or ideas, so you have some markers for different points in the interview. You will need to listen to the entire portion of the interview to be transcribed several times. Many people find it helpful to listen all the way through a section once, then again, transcribing as much as possible, then a third (or fourth, or fifth!) time in order to fill in all the holes. At the end of this handout, you will find some websites that detail how to transcribe an oral history interview.

When you have a complete transcript, it is common practice to return it to the interviewee for editing—these changes can be noted in various ways or integrated into the document. Interviewees may need to correct things like dates, names, or places. Or they may want to provide more elaboration or clarification on a subject. Though this is standard practice for professional historians, your instructor may or may not expect you to do this.

Turning the raw material into an essay

The process you use will depend on what you want your essay to do. If, for instance, you want your essay merely to showcase an individual's thoughts on a time or subject, you will simply need to frame the comments of the interviewee and shape them into a narrative. If, on the other hand, your intention is to interpret the interviewee's comments, using them as evidence for an argument, you will need to make a strong argument while still letting the interviewee's experience and insights come through. Your essay might use the interviewee's comments to advance an alternate interpretation of a historical time or culture, confirm a commonly held characterization, or enrich an existing view.

Because oral history papers can vary a great deal according to their aims, make sure to develop a clear sense of your purpose. The assignment itself may specify quite clearly what kind of an oral history project you may do or leave many of the choices up to you. In either case, figuring out what you want your essay to accomplish will help you make definitive decisions about how to write it.

Decisions you'll need to make about your project

First, determine the overall purpose of your essay. What would you like your essay to do?

- A. Transcribe the comments of the individual.
- B. Present the experiences and/or perspective of the individual.
- C. Place the individual's experiences and/or perspective within a larger historical or social context.
- D. Use the individual's experiences and/or perspective to make an argument about a larger historical or social context.

(C and D are especially common in undergraduate assignments of this type, but every assignment is different.)

Based on your answer to the above question, choose which section of this handout you'd like to read. If you're not certain what you'd like your essay to do, read through all of the following sections to get a better sense of what your essay might include.

If you answered A., that you want your essay to transcribe the comments of the individual, consider the following questions and responses.

What should you say about the interviewee's comments?

Introduce the individual, explain the circumstances of the interview, and then literally transcribe your questions and their responses.

How should you structure your essay?

Present the questions and responses in the order you asked the questions. You may also include an introduction that briefly describes the person.

How should you present quotes and use paraphrases?

Transcribe the questions and responses so that paraphrases won't be necessary. A question and answer format is a clear way to present a transcription (see the "examples" section at the end of this handout).

Should you read and/or incorporate secondary sources?

Whether or not you need to use secondary sources is partially a matter of what the assignment calls for. Secondary sources about the cultural context might help you think of your questions, but you won't need to include them in your transcription of the responses.

Example

Here is an example of how you might handle one of your interviewee's comments within the body of the essay. Suppose that your paper is for a women's studies project in which your instructor has asked you to interview a female family member; you have chosen to interview your grandmother, Lucretia. Suppose that you asked the following question: *"How free did you feel in terms of choosing your jobs? If you felt limited, why do you think that might have been?"*

If you want your essay to transcribe the interview, you will just present the questions and answers:

[Your name]: How free did you feel in terms of choosing your jobs? If you felt limited, why do you think that might have been?

Lucretia: I have always been good at organizing things and getting along with people, so that made it easy for me to find receptionist jobs. But in those times, you didn't see women executives. That was just how things were; people simply didn't consider women for those jobs.

If you answered B., that you want your essay to present the experiences and/or perspective of the individual, consider the following questions and responses.

What should you say about the interviewee's comments?

Introduce the individual and outline the topics that the interview explored. Then use these topics to help you decide whether you want to organize the essay by the sequence of your questions or by topics that emerged as you reviewed your notes. You may frame the interviewee's comments by providing transitions and a conclusion that reiterates the central point(s) that the interview revealed.

How should you structure your essay?

Your introduction should say a few things about who the person is and name some of the recurring themes or issues to prepare the reader to notice those in the body of the essay. The body of the essay should organize the interviewee's comments, for instance chronologically or topically, and provide bridges (transitions) between sections.

How should you present quotes and use paraphrases?

Frame your quotes with phrases like "Sue Ellen explained . . ." or "Horatio's view on plum trees is that . . ."; if you use paraphrases, be careful not to change their implications or lose their intent, since your goal is to present rather than interpret. For this approach as well as the next, our handout on handling quotations might be helpful.

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/quotations.html>

Should you read and/or incorporate secondary sources?

Whether or not you need to use secondary sources is partially a matter of what the assignment calls for. Secondary sources about the cultural context might help you think of your questions, but you won't need to include them in your transcription of the responses.

Example

Here is an example of how you might handle one of your interviewee's comments within the body of the essay. Suppose that your paper is for a women's studies project in which your instructor has asked you to interview a female family member; you have chosen to interview your grandmother, Lucretia. Suppose that you asked the following question: "How free did you feel in terms of choosing your jobs? If you felt limited, why do you think that might have been?"

If your assignment asks you to present ("B") the results in essay form, you will integrate the questions and answers into your text, although sometimes you may find it easier to just paraphrase the question:

While Lucretia does feel that her occupational life offered her some opportunities, she describes feeling a sense of limitation, at least in retrospect: "I have always been good at organizing things and getting along with people, so that made it easy for me to find receptionist jobs. But in those times, you didn't see women executives. That was just how things were; people simply didn't consider women for those jobs."

If you answered C., that you want your essay to place the individual's experiences and/or perspective within a larger historical or social context, consider the following questions and responses.

What should you say about the interviewee's comments?

Analyze the responses to your questions and what they illustrate about their historical or social context. You might consider how your interviewee's identity (his or her class, gender, and ethnicity, for instance) relates to the nature of the interviewee's experience or perspective. For this kind of essay, you'll need an analytical thesis statement (see our handout on thesis statements), a plan for how to organize the subtopics that demonstrate your thesis, analysis/interpretation of the interviewee's comments, and a conclusion that draws your analysis together.

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html>

How should you structure your essay?

Your introduction should contain and explain a thesis statement that makes a claim about the nature of the historical or social context. Organizing the body paragraphs by topic may be an effective way of explaining how the individual's experiences fit into the broader historical or social context.

How should you present quotes and use paraphrases?

You'll provide framing phrases as in the previous case, but you'll also need to include your explanation of the significance of the quotes. A good rule of thumb is to include at least as much explanation of the quote as the quote is long. Paraphrases are helpful when you need just the content of the comment to make your point—that is, when the language the interviewee uses is not the primary issue. If you're writing an analytical or argumentative essay, a mixture of paraphrases and quotes will probably serve your purpose best.

Should you read and/or incorporate secondary sources?

Whether or not you need to use secondary sources is partially a matter of what the assignment calls for. But if the assignment doesn't specify, you'll probably need to read and perhaps refer explicitly to some secondary sources so that you will have the necessary evidence to create a picture of the broader historical or social context.

Example

Here is an example of how you might handle one of your interviewee's comments within the body of the essay. Suppose that your paper is for a women's studies project in which your instructor has asked you to interview a female family member; you have chosen to interview your grandmother, Lucretia. Suppose that you asked the following question: "*How free did you feel in terms of choosing your jobs? If you felt limited, why do you think that might have been?*"

If your assignment asks you to place the responses in their social context, you will need to integrate the quotes into text, paired with either the questions themselves or paraphrases, along with some analysis of how the individual's experiences fit into his or her social context. You may even include some references to secondary sources, depending on the assignment and your own sense of whether they would strengthen your analysis:

Lucretia describes feeling limited in terms of her occupational life: "I have always been good at organizing things and getting along with people, so that made it easy for me to find receptionist jobs. But in those times, you didn't see women executives. That was just how things were; people simply didn't consider women for those jobs." Her account reveals a sense of how fixed gender roles were in the workplace and seems fairly typical for the time and place, as feminist historian Tammy Ixplox's scholarship suggests (Ixplox 39).

If you answered D., that you want your essay to use the individual's experiences and/or perspective to make an argument about a larger historical or social context, consider the following questions and responses.

What should you say about the interviewee's comments?

Use the interviewee's comments as evidence for an argument you want to make about a particular historical or social context. For instance, you might want to argue that working-class women's experience in 1950s America does not necessarily fit with popularly-held notions of the fifties housewife. Or you might want to show how racism affected one African-American man's everyday life to demonstrate how insidious racism can be. For these kinds of essays, you may need some supporting research to get a better sense of the historical and social context, so you'll understand how the individual's experience relates to broader cultural trends and phenomena. In terms of what the essay will look like, you'll need a thesis that makes a claim, an organizational plan that reflects the main points you think will best support that thesis, lots of explanation of how the interviewee's comments illustrate the thesis, and a conclusion that draws your argument together.

How should you structure your essay?

You'll need an introduction with a strong, interpretive thesis statement that the body of the essay explains and demonstrates. The interviewee's comments will function as evidence for your argument, so each body paragraph should correspond to a point in your argument.

How should you present quotes and use paraphrases?

You'll provide framing phrases as in the previous case, but you'll also need to include your explanation of the significance of the quotes. A good rule of thumb is to include at least as much explanation of the quote as the quote is long. Paraphrases are helpful when you need just the content of the comment to make your point—that is, when the language the interviewee uses is not the primary issue. If you're writing an analytical or argumentative essay, a mixture of paraphrases and quotes will probably serve your purpose best.

Should you read and/or incorporate secondary sources?

Whether or not you need to use secondary sources is partially a matter of what the assignment calls for. But if the assignment doesn't specify, you'll probably need to read and incorporate some secondary sources to complement or provide a counterpoint to the interviewee's comments and to support your claims about the larger historical or social context.

Example

Here is an example of how you might handle one of your interviewee's comments within the body of the essay. Suppose that your paper is for a women's studies project in which your instructor has asked you to interview a female family member; you have chosen to interview

your grandmother, Lucretia. Suppose that you asked the following question: *"How free did you feel in terms of choosing your jobs? If you felt limited, why do you think that might have been?"*

If your assignment asks you to make an argument, for example, about how the interviewee's responses reflect gender issues and roles, you will need to integrate the quotes into your text as evidence for your argument about gender roles, perhaps with reference to secondary sources if appropriate:

Lucretia's experiences reveal gender roles in the workplace, in which men tended to fill the executive positions and women the less prestigious ones. She describes feeling limited in terms of her occupational life: *"I have always been good at organizing things and getting along with people, so that made it easy for me to find receptionist jobs. But in those times, you didn't see women executives. That was just how things were; people simply didn't consider women for those jobs."* In her experience, no one questioned these roles, which reveals how ingrained and even internalized social expectations for men and women were at the time. This phenomenon is consistent with feminist historian Tammy Ixplox's scholarship on this cultural context (Ixplox 39).

Relevant websites

Baylor Oral History Institute, "*Transcribing Style Guide*" (this website has an extensive style guide about the purpose for transcription and about how to handle various types of speech.):

http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguiderev.htm

Library of Congress, Veterans History Project, "Indexing and Transcribing Your Interviews":

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/transcribe.html>

Making Sense of Oral History (includes a section on interpreting oral history and a sample interpretation):

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

Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History (this is geared towards large oral history projects, but it makes points that are relevant to a smaller project, such as when you only interview one person):

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

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