

OHA Principles and Best Practices

Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History

Adopted October, 2018

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These documents replace the OHA's previous [Principles and Best Practices](#), which were revised and adopted in 2009.

Introduction

The History behind Our Work, 1966-2009, by Sherna Berger Gluck^[1]

This 2018 version of the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices, like each one before it for the past fifty years, is a product of its time. Since the initial 1968 Goals and Guidelines was issued, the theory and practice of oral history in the US has become more complicated and nuanced, influenced by both the expanding base of its practitioners and shifting intellectual paradigms in a host of disciplines. The trajectory of the theory and practice of oral history itself has moved apace in what Alistair Thomson has identified as four paradigmatic shifts, each of which is reflected in the various revisions of OHA's standards and guidelines.^[2]

Despite differences in focus, the early stage of the oral history movement in the Anglophone world focused on oral history as data, what Thomson referenced as "the renaissance of memory as an historical source."^[3] Reflecting this thinking, the Goals and Guidelines adopted in 1968 by the academic historians and archivists who founded the OHA displayed an empirical/positivist bent, with underlying assumptions about objectivity.^[4] While the basics remained unchanged, in 1979 an Ethical Guidelines document was adopted that basically provided a useful checklist to help those engaged in the various stages of oral history process.^[5]

With the increased visibility of a new and more diverse generation of oral history practitioners both inside and outside the academy, and the growing influence of cultural studies and feminist practices, oral history took a new turn in the 1980s. As a coeditor of one of the earliest anthologies noted: "Now a debate emerged in the profession over the purpose of oral history: was it intended to be (1) a set of primary source documents or (2) a process for constructing history from oral sources?"^[6] These kinds of debates, fueled by the work of a new generation of oral historians in both the US and Europe, flourished during the late 1970s and early 1980s, reflecting what Thomson called "post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity."

As early as 1979, then president of OHA Waddy Moore had taken note of the changing nature of oral history, suggesting that a proverbial corner had been turned and that the OHA was ready to enter what he called "the second stage of self analysis."^[7] Nevertheless, it was not until 1988-1990 that the next (third) of Thomson's paradigmatic shifts was evidenced in public OHA thinking: "the subjectivity of oral history relationships – interdisciplinary approaches."

Under the stewardship of immediate past president Donald Ritchie, four committees were formed in 1988, charged with revising the 1979 Evaluation Guidelines. In the course of their work, it became apparent that a new statement of principles was needed, and following the adoption of the 1989 Ethical Guidelines, a new committee was convened. The newly crafted Principles and Standards adopted in 1990 broke new ground. For the first time, the interactive and subjective nature of oral history was introduced; sensitivity to the “diversity of social and cultural experiences and to the implications of race, gender, class, ethnicity, age, religion, and sexual orientation” was specifically referenced; and ethical concerns were extended to include concern for the interviewee’s community

By and large, the 1990 Principles and Standards and Ethical Guidelines stood the organization in good stead until the approach of the new millennium, when the vast implications of the digital revolution could no longer be ignored. Responding to the new challenges it posed, and engaging with the fourth paradigm transformation (“the digital revolution in oral history”), a Technology Update Committee drafted new guidelines that were adopted at the 1998 OHA conference and were incorporated into what became the 2000 edition of the OHA Standards and Evaluation Guidelines.^[8]

Rather than respond to a paradigmatic shift, a committee was convened in 2008 to work on streamlining the OHA standards and guidelines, which, as Donald Ritchie noted, had become unwieldy and “more of a mini-manual than a statement of core principles.”^[9] Additionally, the various documents had not yet fully spoken to the changing constituency of the organization. The new revision, which for the first time used the terms *narrator* and *interviewee* interchangeably, was adopted at the 2009 Louisville conference.^[10]

The regular reassessment of the values/principles and practices of oral history over the past fifty years has demonstrated a responsiveness of OHA to the paradigm shifts in oral history and in the various disciplines from which we draw insights. It has also helped to keep oral history practitioners sensitive to the impact and ethical implications of social and technological changes. -For those who have spent countless hours on revising these documents over the past fifty years, it has been a labor of love and a commitment to promote the highest standards of our craft.

2018 Principles and Best Practices Overview, by Troy Reeves and Sarah Milligan

For the development of this iteration of the Oral History Association’s Principles and Best Practices, OHA President Todd Moyer (2017-2018) convened a task force of twelve members under our stewardship, with an intentional inclusion of backgrounds from historical societies, community organizations, independent scholars, and academic historians from diverse geographical regions, with representation from a variety of age, gender, and racial demographics, and experience.

We worked to blend the large committee work with a combination of video chats, email correspondence, and small group work, initially talking through reactions to the historical documents, bringing inspiration for various logistical and language approaches from related fields, and finally settling on priorities for what could be accomplished over the course of a year. We also grappled with what this document could and should be as a text living on the Web with a multitude of targeted audiences, most with their own specific need for direction. Early in the process, we decided to think of this less as a single statement of Principles and Best Practices, but rather a suite of statements and guides addressing multiple perspectives and needs.

We identified four core documents to prioritize from our initial discussions with the task force members: (1) a core values statement defining our foundational beliefs, (2) a best practices statement to outline the work of an oral historian, (3) an ethics document to define ethical work in our field, and (4) a decoding document for participants interested in understanding their rights in ethical oral history work. There are definitely more documents that should go into this suite, and as we have worked through this process and received feedback from our task force and other OHA members, we have compiled recommendations for the OHA executive council of work that needs to continue in the coming year(s).

Moreover, this version of our principles and practices, among other things, reaffirms not only respect for narrators and their communities, but also the importance of being attentive to those who are especially vulnerable; it reemphasizes the dynamic, collaborative relationship between interviewer and narrator, with a commitment to ongoing participation and engagement and sensitivity to differences in power, constraints, interests and expectations. These principles have been incorporated into four documents listed above (Core, Ethics, Best Practices, and Participant’s Rights), as well as a glossary to help define more deeply some of our terms.

Two final things to conclude: First, as noted above, there is more that could and should be done. During one phone call, we referred to this work as “scaffolding.” While we will take pride in, and responsibility for, our efforts, we understand, even relish, seeing the additions that our work will inspire and bring forth. Last, we feel the best idea in these documents comes from the Ethics piece, which asserts that the ideas in it “represent the beginning of the path toward becoming an ethical oral historian, rather than its culmination.” So, too, all the thoughts and ideas in all the other documents serve as the starting points to becoming an oral historian.

We are more than grateful to the task force members—Ryan Barland, Doug Boyd, Adrienne Cain, Sherna Berger Gluck, Erin Jessee, Calinda Lee, Rachel Mears, Martin Meeker, Tomas Summers-Sandoval, Liz Strong, Sady Sullivan, and Anne Valk—who remained engaged throughout the year of this work and who volunteered their time and expertise to ensure these documents represent who we strive to be as oral historians.

^[1] Gluck’s introduction draws on both Don Ritchie’s excellent, earlier “History of the Ethical Guidelines” (<http://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/History-of-the-Evaluation-Guidelines.pdf>) and her experiences as a 2018 OHA Principles and Best Practices Task Force member.

^[2] Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 34, no.1 (Summer/Fall 2006): 49-70. For a longer historical account of oral history, see Rebecca Sharpless, “The History of Oral History,” in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas Charlton, Lois Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006).

^[3] Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations,” 51.

^[4] In reporting on the adoption of Goals and Guidelines in 1969, the leadership of OHA noted “an opportunity and obligation on the part of all concerned to make this type of historical source as authentic and useful as possible”; *Oral History Newsletter* 3, no. 1, 1969.

^[5] The Ethical Guidelines document came out of a gathering of OHA leadership at Wingspread Conference Ground in Racine, Wisconsin. See Ritchie, “History of the Ethical Guidelines.”

^[6] David Dunaway, “Introduction: The Interdisciplinarity of Oral History,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1996), 8-9.

^[7] Waddy Moore, editorial, *Oral History Newsletter*, Spring 1978

^[8] Participants at the Buffalo meeting where the technological update was adopted recall the long, spirited—and sometimes testy—discussion that took place in two separate sessions. After the first lengthy discussion, the committee was sent back to incorporate the changes that had been suggested, and following another long discussion, the new guidelines document was adopted.

^[9] Ritchie, “History of the Ethical Guidelines.”

^[10] The question of what to call the person being interviewed had been debated from the inception of the OHA, and although no consensus emerged from the 1967 discussion, the default designation until 2009 became *interviewee*; *Oral History Newsletter* 1, no. 1, 1967. Because there was insufficient opportunity to reach consensus on the revised document, it was dubbed a beta version—that is, still in process.

OHA Core Principles

The Core Principles of the Oral History Association

1. The Oral History Association, in both its national and regional professional organizations, brings together practitioners from a variety of communities, backgrounds, and academic and professional fields, including many who might not label themselves oral historians. Nevertheless, whether motivated by scholarly research questions, political or social change goals, efforts to preserve history, pedagogical aims, or any other purpose, oral history practice shares common principles. This document lays out some of those guiding principles, keeping in mind the diverse practices of those involved in the collection, interpretation, use, and preservation of oral history.

What is Oral History?

2. Oral history refers to both the interview process and the products that result from a recorded spoken interview (whether audio, video, or other formats). In order to gather and preserve meaningful information about the past, oral historians might record interviews focused on narrators' life histories or topical interviews in which narrators are selected for their knowledge of a particular historical subject or event. Once completed, an interview, if it is placed in an [archive](#), can be used beyond its initial purpose with the permission of both the [interviewer](#) and [narrator](#).
3. The value of oral history lies largely in the way it helps to place people's experiences within a larger social and historical context. The interview becomes a record useful for documenting past events, individual or collective experiences, and understandings of the ways that history is constructed. Because it relies on memory^[1], oral history captures recollections about the past filtered through the lens of a changing personal and social context.
4. The hallmark of an oral history interview is a dynamic, collaborative relationship between the interviewer and the narrator. While interviewers pose questions based on research and careful preparation, narrators shape the interview based on what they deem to be relevant, meaningful, or appropriate to share. Despite the fluid nature of the interview process, an oral history is grounded in thoughtful planning and careful follow-through of the agreed-upon process.

Guiding Principles

5. The oral history process, from the interview stage through preservation, use, and access, must be guided by respect for narrators and the communities from which they come. This means a commitment to an [ethical process](#) and to honoring diverse cultural values, ways of knowing, and perspectives.
6. The interview process must be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, and [engagement](#) among all parties from the first encounter between interviewer and narrator to the creation of end products.
7. Oral history practitioners must be sensitive to differences in power between the interviewer and the narrator as well as divergent interests and expectations inherent in any social relationship. These dynamics shape all aspects of the oral history process, including the selection of people to interview, research questions, personal interactions during the interview, interpretations, decisions on preservation and access, and the various ways that the oral history might be used.
8. To the greatest extent possible, both the narrator and the interviewer must be protected from harm, particularly those who are members of [vulnerable communities](#). This means that certain lines of inquiry or public access to completed interviews might be precluded. Any stipulations

should be considered before the beginning of the oral history process with the understanding that they can be renegotiated as the project proceeds.

9. Whenever possible, an oral history interview and its accompanying documentation should be preserved and made accessible to other users. Oral history practitioners must be clear on the various ways the interview might be preserved, made available, and used. Likewise, narrators must grant explicit permission to make their interview public, and when possible, should be given an opportunity to establish parameters for preservation, access, and use.
10. While oral historians are bound by laws covering [copyright](#), and in some institutions might be bound by regulations governing research involving [living human subjects](#), their responsibilities also go beyond these official rules. They should conduct themselves [ethically and thoughtfully](#) and be vigilant about the possible consequences to narrators and their communities of both the interview process and the access/use of completed interviews.

[1] The intersection of oral history and memory is well documented. To explore this concept more, please see the Oral History Review: <https://academic.oup.com/ohr>

OHA Statement on Ethics

Oral historians have ethical obligations that are both specific to oral history methodology and shared with other methodologies and practices, ranging from anthropology to archival work. Ethics encompasses the principles that should govern the multiple relationships inherent in oral history. Everyone involved in oral history work, from interviewers and narrators to archivists and researchers, becomes part of a web of mutual responsibility working to ensure that the narrator's perspective, dignity, privacy, and safety are respected. This statement draws upon the decades of thoughtful work concerning the appropriate way to engage with humans as participants in research projects.

Here we offer general principles for practicing oral history in an ethical way. These points represent the beginning of the path toward becoming an ethical oral historian, rather than its culmination.

Preparation & Communication

Oral historians strive to become fully informed about oral history theory, methodology, and ethics. They work to become informed of oral history practices, including how narrators and interviewers should be treated equitably, with care and respect. One way to help ensure fair treatment is to create a beginning-to-end process that works for everyone involved. This process[1] should entail, at minimum, four points:

1. Prior to beginning the interview, the interviewer obtains the narrator's [informed consent](#), which means, most generally, documenting the knowing agreement of the narrator to participate in the process and overall project, as described in "[The Core Principles of the Oral History Association](#)."
2. The interviewer clearly communicates the goals of the project, the potential risks of participating in it, and the proviso that, once accessible[2], the oral history can be used[3] in any number of ways, by any number of potential users. While oral historians strive to protect the narrator, they are careful, at every point in the process, not to make promises that they cannot keep.
3. The interviewer provides the narrator, whenever possible, with the opportunity to review and approve the interview (recording and/or transcript) prior to using the interview, depositing it in an [archive](#), or otherwise making it accessible to the public.

4. While developing this process, oral historians should [conduct preliminary research](#) about the topics they intend to study and be comfortable with the recording technology they intend to utilize.

Collaboration: The Oral History Interview

The interview is at the heart of the oral historian's work and thus requires extra attention to ensure that the encounter meets ethical standards.

Oral historians should consider the goals of the research project and seek narrators who are able, collectively, to present a variety of points of view. When contacting potential narrators, interviewers should clearly and plainly share the project goals, explain the interview process, and describe what will happen to the interview after it is completed.

Power operates in every human engagement, and no less so in oral history interviewing. Ethical oral historians take care to give serious reflection to power differentials, implicit bias, potential areas of disagreement, and other instances in which their positions do not align with the narrator. Choice of [interview strategy](#), such as possible topics covered, the language in which the interview is conducted, or question phrasing, should be part of the consideration. Oral historians recognize the differences that might exist between themselves and the narrator; they consider how these differences might impact the way a narrator shares memories; and they strive to treat each narrator equitably and do their best to listen with empathy.

During the course of the interview itself, oral historians attempt to minimize potential harm to the narrator, communicate the narrator's right to refuse to answer questions, and honestly describe their institutional, professional, political, and other affiliations, as well as obligations and demands. They continue to safeguard the trust implied by the oral history process and to work through competing interests in fair and impartial ways.

After the interview, oral history ethics strongly recommends that the narrator be given the opportunity to review the interview (recording and/or transcript) and approve what was said for public release or other use. This step sets oral history apart^[4] from other^[5] methodologies in that it ensures the narrator's account enters the public record^[6] and that future researchers who wish to draw upon these accounts can access them in their entirety—not just excerpts that may lack important context. The interview should not be made public until the narrator, as the original recording's [copyright](#) holder, has provided [formal authorization](#) to do so.

Stewardship: Preservation and Access

Oral history is unique, in part because the collaboration between interviewer and narrator results in a historical document for posterity. In most instances, the interview and supporting material^[7] is made available to the broader public through deposit in an archive, distribution online, and/or any number of other methods for providing public access. Because of this, ethics calls for narrator review and approval. There are many valid options for managing the review process; thus, ethical oral historians plan ahead and develop a process that works in their specific context, while adhering to the principles outlined here. Options for narrator review include the right to delete, restrict, and/or redact portions of an interview; the ability to add clarifications and correct mistakes; and the choice to keep the interview closed to the public until a set date or to decline to release it to the public in the first place.

Oral historians should establish a clear procedure^[8] (including dates or a timeline) for finalizing, archiving, and releasing the interview to the public. This step communicates to the narrator that the process has been completed and that the interview is (or will be) preserved and made accessible to the public.

Oral historians should promote equitable access to the final interview (recording and/or transcript) and attempt to make these materials accessible in a timely manner. Oral historians and their archivist

partners clearly document relevant [metadata](#) so that future users will know easily who was interviewed, when and where the interview was conducted, and other key pieces of data about the interview. As the interview is prepared for preservation, decisions about description, categorization, and access should respect the personhood and desired [privacy of the narrator](#). Moreover, oral historians should educate themselves about legal concerns such as libel, invasion of privacy, and other issues that might endanger the narrator.

One goal of the agreed-upon oral history process is that it allows the narrator to make an informed decision about whether to participate in a project and to make the interview public. An ethical oral history process assures that the narrator is fully informed about the many possible uses of the oral history once it is publicly available.

Using Oral Sources[9]

The core of the oral history process concludes once the narrator has approved the interview and, in most instances, plans have been made for it to be preserved and made available to the public. Still, scholars and other users of oral sources, including oral history interviews, should educate themselves about discipline-based resources and ethical guidelines that detail issues in more depth. Oral historians who intend to use the oral sources that they create or oral sources created by others should endeavor to use the oral histories honestly and respectfully. This means users of oral sources should provide analyses, including when edited or excerpted, that remain true to the words and meanings offered by the narrator and take care to not quote words out of context or otherwise contort the original meaning. Users may arrive at conclusions that diverge from those offered by a narrator, but conclusions should be derived from evidence properly cited.

[1] We recommend that this process be fully documented in writing and that signatures of all participating parties be obtained and preserved in project records. However, we recognize that limitations of time, language, literacy, and other factors may make this recommendation unfeasible; in those cases, we recommend both the communication of the goals and risks associated with the project along with interviewee informed consent be recorded prior to the beginning of the interview.

[2] The ultimate plan for what happens with the interview once it is completed should start before a narrator is approached about participation, and well-before an interview is conducted. For full transparency and strong project planning, the process for care and access of the recorded interview should be mapped out in the early stages of the process.

[3] For example: printed publications (monographs, pamphlets, journals), text in museum & web-based exhibits, examples used in pedagogy (both K-12 & higher ed), performances (plays, ballet, opera, monologues), others

[4] What also sets it apart: The oral historian's unique responsibility and skill in co-creating, co-representing, and co-interpreting.

[5] such as interviewing methodologies that are journalistic, anthropological, folkloristic, sociological, or linguistic

[6] whether the plan is to share within a family group or with the public at large, it is important to have a plan there is a plan for long-term care of, and access to, (whatever that means for the project) the recorded interview.

[7] Transcript, images, artifacts, indexes etc...

[8] We recommend reviewing the Society of American Archivists' Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics: <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

[9] We recommend users of oral sources consult various discipline-based ethical guidelines. For example: the American Historical Association's Statement on [Standards of Professional Conduct](#); the American Anthropological Association's [Principles of Professional Responsibility](#); the American Sociological Association's [Code of Ethics](#); and the Society of Professional Journalists' [Code of Ethics](#).; The Society of American Archivists' [Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics](#); The American Folklore Society's [Statement on Ethics](#).

Best Practices

Four key elements of oral history work are preparation, interviewing, preservation, and [access](#). Oral historians should give careful consideration to each at the start of any oral history project, regardless of whether it is comprised of one or many interviews. This brief document presents the Oral History Association's guidelines for how to conduct a high-quality oral history interview;^[1] it highlights some standard practices that should help produce historically valuable and ethically conducted interviews.

Preparation

1. First-time interviewers and others involved in oral history projects should seek training,^[2] whether they are conducting individual research or developing a community or an institutional project.
2. During initial preparation, oral historians should locate an appropriate repository^[3] to house the project's finished oral histories and other documentation. Oral historians should take care to select a repository that aligns with the project's goals, has the capacity to preserve the oral histories, can enforce^[4] any [signed agreements](#), and will make them accessible to the public.
3. Oral historians should outline an oral history process appropriate for their projects and their narrators. They should consult the complete suite of [Oral History Association Principles & Best Practices](#) documents for guidance, but whenever possible, the process should include the following: obtaining and documenting the [informed consent](#) of the narrator; when possible providing the narrator an opportunity to approve the oral history prior to public release; and sharing expectations about the overall project timeline. At this stage, the oral historian also should develop [forms](#) appropriate for documenting the process and related agreements.
4. Oral historians should choose potential narrators based on the relevance of their experiences to the subject at hand, while striving to identify and incorporate as many [diverse voices](#) as possible.
5. The process of engaging with potential narrators can be relatively simple and brief or involve multiple conversations.^[5] The process typically entails two facets: first, describing the project and process and securing the informed consent of the narrator and second, holding a pre-interview discussion to assist in the interviewer's preparation. These meetings, regardless of their formality, are important in establishing rapport between interviewer and narrator and allowing for clear communication of the following elements:
 - a. The oral history's purposes in terms of topics to be covered and general research questions under study, and reasons for conducting the interview
 - b. The full oral history procedure, including when and how the interview will be recorded, a description of any review process, the plans for preservation and access, the potential uses of the oral history, and the need for informed consent and other legal forms to be signed
 - c. The narrator's expectations for the oral history—what they want to get out of the process, what topics are meaningful to them, and what questions they should be asked
 - d. When an understanding on how to proceed is reached, a formal record of that agreement should be completed prior to^[6] the beginning of recording.

Narrators, find out more about what to expect [here](#).

6. In preparing to ask informed questions, interviewers should become familiar with the person, topic, and historical context by doing research in primary and secondary sources, as well as through social engagement with individuals and communities and informal one-on-one interactions.
7. Interviewers should create, when possible, a high-quality recording of the interview(audio or video format) to capture the narrator's interview accurately with consideration of future audiences and long-term preservation.
8. Interviewers should prepare an open-ended guide^[7] or outline of the themes to be covered and general questions to be asked before conducting the interview. Interviewers should educate themselves about different interviewing strategies with the goal of encouraging the narrator provide the fullest responses to the questions as possible. (See interviewing section below for more details.)
9. Oral historians should recognize that their narrators are not just isolated individuals; they are members of communities, some of whom have historically complex relationships with researchers. When planning an oral history project, interviewers are advised to think about whether they want to engage with those communities in a formal, organized way. Oral historians may decide to develop a plan for community engagement that benefits both the project and the community. These plans for bringing communities into the oral history process might include the creation of a community advisory board, hosting events for sharing research findings, providing oral history training, and more.

Interviewing

1. The interview should be conducted, whenever possible, in a quiet location with minimal background noises and possible distractions, unless part of the oral history process includes gathering soundscapes or ambient sounds.
2. The interviewer should record a lead-in at the beginning of each session. It should consist of contextual information,^[8] such as:
 - a. names, or when appropriate, pseudonyms, of narrator and interviewer;
 - b. full date (day, month, year) of recording session;
 - c. location of the interview (being mindful to not list personal residence address, but rather generic "narrator's home"); and
 - d. proposed subject of the recording.
3. Both parties should agree in advance to the approximate length of each interview session. Given the unpredictability of the setting, however, the interviewer should be flexible and prepared for the session to be cut short, interrupted, or possibly to run long, if both parties agree.
4. Along with asking open-ended questions and actively listening to the answers, interviewers should ask follow-up questions, seeking additional clarification, elaboration, and reflection. When asking questions, the interviewer should keep the following in mind:
 - a. Interviews should be conducted in accord with any prior agreements made with narrator, and interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose a **pseudonym**. Interviewers should clearly explain these **options** and how they would be carried out to all narrators during the pre-interview.
 - b. Interviewers should work to achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of their narrators. Interviewers should provide challenging and perceptive inquiry, fully and respectfully exploring appropriate subjects, and not being satisfied with superficial

responses. At the same time, they should encourage narrators to respond to questions in their own style and language and to address issues that reflect their concerns.

c. Interviewers should be prepared to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to allow the narrator to freely define what is most relevant.

d. In recognition of not only the importance of oral history to an understanding of the past but also of the cost^[9] and effort involved, interviewers and narrators should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value to future audiences.

5. The interviewer should secure a signed legal release^[10] form, ideally when the interview is completed. It is important to follow the guidelines of the partnering repository's policy on this, if relevant.

Preservation

1. Oral historians, [sponsoring institutions](#), and archival repositories should understand that planning for appropriate care and storage of original recordings begins with project conception.
2. Whenever possible and/or practical, oral histories—either individual or many within a project—should be deposited in a repository such as a library or archive that has the capacity to ensure long-term and professionally managed preservation and access. Regardless of where the oral histories ultimately reside
 - a. the recordings of the interviews should be stored, processed, refreshed, and accessed according to established archival standards designated for the media format used;
 - b. whenever possible, all efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are cross platform and nonproprietary;
 - c. the obsolescence of all media formats should be assumed and planned for.
3. In the interim before deposit, oral historians should
 - a. transfer the original recording from whatever device was used, make an appropriate number of redundant digital copies,^[11] and store those in different physical locations, as soon as possible after any interview is completed;
 - b. document their preparation and methods, including the project's context and goals, for their own, the project's, and the repository's files;^[12]
 - c. organize and preserve related material for each interview—photographs, documents, or other records such as technical or descriptive metadata—in corresponding interview files.

Access & Use

1. In order to enhance accessibility of the audio or audio/video files, an [archive](#) should provide, when possible, written documentation such as transcripts, indexes with time tags linking to the recording, detailed descriptions of interview content, or other guides to the contents.
2. Whatever type of repository is charged with the preservation and access^[13] of oral history interviews, it should
 - a. honor the stipulations of prior agreements made with the interviewers or sponsoring institutions, to the greatest extent possible, including restrictions on access and methods of distribution;

- b. evaluate documentation, such as consent and/or release forms, and if they do not exist, make a good faith effort to obtain them;
 - c. take all steps practicable to abide by any restrictions set forth by the narrator, while also making clear that certain legal challenges—such as subpoenas or open-record requests—may make some restrictions unenforceable;
 - d. be prepared to provide timely access to material with considerations for expectations of narrators or project partners;
 - e. when possible, consult project participants on how best to describe materials for public access and use.
3. All those who use oral history interviews after they are made accessible should strive for intellectual honesty and the best application of the skills of their discipline. This includes
- a. avoiding stereotypes, misrepresentations, and manipulations of the narrator’s words;
 - b. striving to retain the integrity of the narrator’s perspective;
 - c. recognizing the subjectivity of the interview, including, when possible, verification of information presented as factual;
 - d. interpreting and contextualizing the narrative according to the professional standards of the applicable scholarly disciplines;
 - e. contextualizing oral history excerpts;
 - f. providing a citation to the location of the full oral history.

[1] Before reviewing this document, please note: Many published and online sources offer further in-depth information about how to conduct an oral history interview. For more on finding the right guide for oral history see: Linda Shopes’ list to [online web guides](#) and Barb Sommer’s [reprinted from *The Oral History Manual, 3rd Edition* with publisher’s permission] [bibliography](#)

[2] [OHA list of centers and collections](#) and [OHA list of regional and international organizations](#)

[3] Whether an institutional archive or a personal family archive. See more on the glossary term for [archive](#)

[4] For more on legal issues in oral history, see: <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/legal-issues/>

[5] Or involve multiple layers of gatekeepers or proxy’s before reaching direct contact with potential narrator.

[6] Although many oral historians prefer to request signatures for any legal release forms assigning rights to the interview after it is completed in order to better address any sensitive issues that may have come up during the course of the interview.

[7] Linda Shopes’ list to [online web guides](#) and Barb Sommer’s [bibliography](#)

[8] This is with an understanding that in some cases, such as interviews with vulnerable communities, particularly those with surveillance concerns, there will be a need to gather only the very basic contextual information.

[9] In this sense, the “cost” of a project is more than just financial, for example, good relationship building with the community will involve the “cost” of the emotional labor involved for the interviewer, project manager, and/or team members, in creating understanding and trust.

[10] For more on legal issues in oral history, see: http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/legal-issues

[11] <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/glossary/archiveglossary/redundancy/>

[12] <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/glossary/archiveglossary/metadata/>

[13] <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/glossary/archiveglossary/access/>

For Participants in Oral History Interviews

Oral history interviews are conducted by people from a diversity of fields and professions. They may be academic researchers, community organizers, artists, documentarians, and more. How they approach their work and communicate with you may be very different. However, there are several key ethical responsibilities which oral historians of any background share. We have summarized these here to help you, the participant, make an informed decision about whether to contribute to an oral history project.

Before the Interview

The following information should be made available to you in a language that you can read or speak fluently, or with the assistance of a trusted translator:

1. The project background

The oral historian should talk with you about the motivations for initiating the project and conducting your oral history interview, as well as what they hope you might be able to contribute to the project. The oral historian may ask you to make a formal declaration, which could either be recorded or in writing, of your agreement to participate in the project and your knowledge of the process. Make sure you understand and are comfortable with what the oral history project seeks to achieve.

2. Contact information

You should receive contact information for your interviewer; someone responsible for the [archive](#), website, or other repository where your oral history materials will be housed and/or made available for [public access](#); and (if applicable) a project director and/or ethics committee contact.

3. The process for participation

The oral historian will explain to you the full oral history process, from how it begins to when it should be considered finished. This explanation should include:

- a. how long the interview will take;
- b. how it will be recorded;
- c. whether you will have the opportunity to review the recording, transcript, or other related materials before they are shared in any format;
- d. any other details that may be relevant to the experience of being interviewed
- e. what your rights are;
- f. any other details that may be relevant to the experience of being interviewed.

4. The benefits of participation

Each oral history project is different, and the value of certain benefits may be different for you than for another contributor. As a participant, feel free to discuss and negotiate possibilities with your oral historian. Potential benefits may include the following:

- a. The project may align with your personal interests or goals.
- b. You may be given copies of the interview and related materials to use or share.
- c. Your community may be given special access to the records produced.

- d. The oral history project may provide some other service to your community, such as workshops or events.
- e. There can be personal or intangible benefits, such as the possibility of contributing to the historic record.

5. The potential risks of participation

In addition to the potential benefits, you may have concerns related to your participation. You should feel free to discuss your concerns in detail with your interviewer so that you can come to an informed decision before the interview begins. You are within your rights to ask questions, including what steps have been made to minimize the risk of physical, psychological, social, or economic harm to you. Standard oral history practice calls for making the interviews accessible to researchers and the general public, but you are free to request [confidentiality](#) or even to withdraw from the project at any point prior to its completion, or the time at which the material is made available (See “Altering or Withdrawing Your Oral History Interview” below). Understanding the following key subjects will be helpful to you in such conversations: [privacy](#), [private information](#), [pseudonym](#), [identifiable information](#), [confidential](#), [anonymous](#).

During the Oral History Interview

6. The interview

The actual process of being interviewed can feel like a conversation, but there are important differences. Most interviewers will limit their own speaking so as to focus the interview on your experiences and memories. Keep in mind that at all times you are free to not answer questions, to take a break from recording, or to end the interview. You are not required to discuss any topics that make you uncomfortable or cause you distress. The interviewer should not pressure you to change your mind, although they may ask you why you would prefer to not to speak about a particular subject in order to understand why you are choosing to avoid it. If the questions you are asked are not clear or seem irrelevant, you may ask for clarification. You should feel free to think about how you want to respond and take the time necessary to answer the question fully.

7. The recording process

The interview is recorded, sometimes with a simple audio recorder or perhaps with professional video recording equipment. Your interviewer will place the equipment to get the best possible recording. Work with them to make certain you are comfortable throughout the process. While you might be distracted by the recording equipment when the interview begins, most participants are able to easily focus on answering questions and sharing stories as the interview proceeds.

After the Oral History Interview

8. The intended use of the interview

The oral history interview may result in certain materials such as an audio or video recording, a written transcript of the recording, detailed notes on the information you provided, pictures of you, or other related records. These materials may be given to an [archive](#) or other [repository](#) to be housed long term and/or made available for public [access](#). They may also be used in publications, websites, events, exhibits, and other public resources. The interviewer should explain to you the intended use of these materials, how they will be cared for, and how they may be accessed by others. Understand that these intentions are not a guarantee. The oral history interview and related materials may never be used at all. Additionally,

over the long term, there may be changes to how such materials can be made accessible to the public, preserved, or cared for as technologies and institutions change. In such cases, those responsible for the long-term care of your oral history materials should respect your initial intent for their use as much as possible. If the oral historian is aware in advance that such changes could take place, they should let you know.

9. Altering or Withdrawing Your Oral History Interview

When the interview finishes, you are welcome to raise questions or concerns about the interview or the oral history project. Know that you can restrict an interview from the public, make changes before it is shared, or withdraw your interview even after you have recorded your oral history interview and/or, in many cases, signed a formal agreement. Depending on the plan for long-term storage and access, this may be handled in a variety of ways. The oral historian should be able to share any information related to withdrawing your interview.

Once an oral history is shared with the public, or entered into an archive, it may not be possible to fully remove it. Once an oral history is available to the public, a third party may quote, use, and reference it in another way that the oral historian has no control over. The oral historian should, when possible, specify a date by which it would become difficult or impossible for you to withdraw your oral history.

Be aware that even if an oral history is closed to the public for a period of time, certain legal challenges—such as subpoenas or open-record requests—may make some restrictions unenforceable.

10. Formal agreement agreement^[1]

At the conclusion of your interview, the interviewer should request a written or verbal declaration to formalize the agreed upon terms of use for the recorded interview. This process is often referred to as legal release. In recognition of the fact that you, the narrator, own the words you speak in the interview, the [formal agreement](#) is your opportunity to provide permission for others to have access to and use your interview. On this legal release, you may provide a blanket permission for the public to access and use your oral history, or you may decide to place certain restrictions on its use. Speak with your oral historian about the options^[2]. After consenting, you should receive a copy of the legal release terms. If you or your interviewer prefer not to use a written agreement, this should be discussed in advance.

11. Copyright

When you sign a legal release, you might also be asked to assign your [copyright](#) of the interview to the oral historian or to an archive, as part of, or in addition to, the release document. You may also be given the option of assigning your interview to the public domain or of signing a [Creative Commons license](#). All of these options are in place so that others may quote from your interview in books, on radio, in films, or other media. Libraries and archives often wish to hold copyright so that they can protect the materials now and long into the future. Ask your interviewer to explain the document you are signing and, if you wish, other options that exist for planning public access to, and use of, your interview. Note that any time you sign a document, you should request a copy of that document to refer to later if needed. Understanding the [terminology](#) is important; always feel free to ask questions when in doubt.

^[1] We recommend that this process be fully documented in writing and that signatures of all participating parties be obtained and preserved in project records. However, we recognize that limitations of time, language, literacy, and other factors may make this recommendation unfeasible; in those cases, we recommend both the communication of the goals and risks associated with the project along with interviewee informed consent be recorded prior to the beginning of the interview.

^[2] While legal release is the often referred to term, there are other terms that might be used. Glossary: [informed consent](#), [formal agreement](#), [permission to use](#), [copyright](#), [deed of gift](#), [non-exclusive license](#), [creative commons](#), [public domain](#).

Principles and Best Practices Glossary

Participating in an oral history interview, whether as the interviewer or narrator, involves technical knowledge that crosses several disciplines. Understanding the terminology used by oral historians and related professional fields will be helpful.

- **access (see also privacy):** Access to a recorded interview can refer to many different formats, including physical or virtual access regulated by requests to an archive or individual responsible for the collection care, or unfettered access to full recorded and transcribed/indexed interview online. It can also refer to the use of recorded interviews in part or full in publication or broadcast.
- **anonymous:** While a narrator may choose to have their name disassociated from any interview, or choose to utilize a pseudonym, there can be no guarantees towards absolute anonymity in the oral history process. Information provided to an oral historian is only anonymous if there is no way for anyone, at any time, to determine the narrator's identity from it; that is, there is no *identifiable information* (see term below). This is a very high standard of information security that oral historians are only rarely able to offer.
- **archives (see also repository):** The term *archive* can refer to permanently valuable records (such as photographs, recordings, and letters, to name but a few), an organization that maintains historical records and documents, or the physical space where the records are maintained. Since oral history does ideally require long-term maintenance and properly managed preservation of all types of records, it is most common to work with a well-established archival repository with a clear track record for managing the media format and the complexities of the sensitive nature of oral history work. See more on this definition at the Society for American Archivists: <https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives>; for more on personal archiving—of family recordings, for example—see <http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/>.
- **closed records (also part of collection restriction):** Archives and other repositories of oral history interviews and related records, often tasked with making records accessible, may also be able to withhold records from being used or viewed for a period of time. In this case, the oral history interview will still be listed as part of the repository's collection (often, for instance, via a finding aid), but it will be marked as closed and the repository will not willingly grant access to it until the closed period has expired. Note that they would still be obligated to provide records in response to a subpoena.
- **community:** Group of individuals who share a collective geographic space, experience, or level of ownership of the content being shared.
- **confidential:** Confidential information is not necessarily anonymous, but it is protected to the best of the oral historian's ability. This means that the information provided during the interview will not be willingly disclosed to others by the oral historian, or any archival repository partner, for an agreed-upon period of time. This may require specific data security procedures to ensure that the information cannot be accessed, except by the oral historian or other authorized parties. Narrators should feel empowered to ask about security measures that may be employed during and after the oral history project. Note that oral historians and archives do not have any special legal privileges or protections to withhold information about criminal activity. In the event of a subpoena they would be obligated to turn over any records or information in their possession.

- **copyright:** Anyone who creates an original work or unique intellectual property has exclusive rights to use, distribute, and profit from that work. Laws regarding copyright will vary depending on an individual's country or municipality. In most cases, a narrators' oral history interviews are considered to be their intellectual property, for which they are either the legal owner or co-owner of copyright. Others who wish to use, distribute, or profit from the oral history interview will first need to obtain the narrator's explicit permission, license, or copyright. For more information about copyright, visit the [US Copyright Office](#).
- **Creative Commons license:** These irrevocable licenses are used to define how the narrator, as the copyright holder, would like the general public, rather than a specific party, to be able to make use of their oral history materials. Further information on specific types of Creative Commons licenses is available at creativecommons.org. See more on the case for Creative Commons in oral history work here: <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/a-creative-commons-solution/>
- **deed of gift:** A deed of gift agreement defines how the narrator would like materials or rights related to an oral history to be managed as a donated collection—that is, transferred to an assigned party, such as the project director or a partnering/sponsoring organization or archive. What makes a deed of gift unique is that the narrator acknowledges granting these rights or materials without reciprocal compensation.
- **diverse voices:** Diversity should extend to voices both in the types of people interviewed (age, ethnicity, sexuality, people of color, and so on) and in the variety of possible perspectives within a project.
- **formal agreement (release form):** Participating in an oral history interview may involve signing specific types of agreements or assigning intellectual property rights. Examples include Creative Commons licenses, deeds of gift, nonexclusive licenses, permission-to-use agreements, and transfer of copyright.
- **identifiable information:** Information that could be used to identify the narrator. The term usually refers to specific details such as name or date of birth. Narrators need to bear in mind that oral history interviews often gather comprehensive narratives about the narrator's experiences and life story that could be recognized by others.
- **index (see also time log):** To help make an oral history more accessible, one should create a log (or index) of its contents. Akin to a book's table of contents, which links a chapter to a page number, this document usually links a summary of a small section of the full recording to a timestamp where that summary starts. Different than a word-for-word transcript, the log can serve as an efficient and effective way to unlock the oral history's contents for current and future users.
- **informed consent:** An agreement that documents, verbally or in writing, that the narrator has been given all the information necessary to come to a decision about whether to participate in the oral history project. Informed consent does not cover or deal with copyright. The interview process must be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, engagement, and open discussion among all parties, from the first encounter between interviewer and narrator to the creation of end products. Informed consent plays a key role in ensuring transparency.

- interviewer: OHA's preferred term to describe the person conducting the interview; it should be noted that interviewing is just one part of the oral history process, meaning an interviewer could be, but may not necessarily be an oral historian.
- length: One should anticipate an interview lasting at least one hour but may choose to plan for one and a half to two hours, depending on the circumstances. The oral historian should give the narrator a time frame when scheduling the interview. In the spirit of sharing authority, each party should feel empowered to avoid keeping the other longer than scheduled.
- living human subjects: A term most commonly used in reference to researchers who are guided by an [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\) process](#). *Human subject* refers to a living individual who is asked to contribute personal information to a research project; this individual may also be considered a research participant by an investigator or researcher (that is, the interviewer or project director). Human subjects and the data (that is, the stories) collected from them can contribute to a broader study of a topic.
- metadata: Information about aspects of an oral history interview; it is essential for the curating, discovery, and management of a collection or interview. In an oral history context, [Descriptive metadata](#) refers to information about the interview or the topic discussed. [Technical metadata](#) refers to the technical information that makes up the digital data file containing the interview, such as file type, codec, file size, and resolution. [Administrative metadata](#) refers to information related to issues such as rights management. [Structural metadata](#) refers to how individual parts relate to a whole. (For more on this, see [Oral History and the Digital Age](#))
- narrator: A person being interviewed during an oral history recording. While there are many possible terms, including *interviewee* or *chronicler*, this iteration of our Core Principles and Practices uses the term *narrator* exclusively. We do this as an acknowledgment that the people we interview have agency and are not merely "living human subjects."
- nonexclusive license: A nonexclusive license can be used by a copyright holder to grant another party rights to make simultaneous use of their intellectual property without transferring their copyright to that party.
- oral historian: More than just interviewing, the oral historian must keep all aspects of the oral history process in mind, including project planning and implementation.
- permission to use: An agreement that defines specific uses a certain party can make of an oral history. It often includes circumstances and terms of that use, but does not request any transfer of copyrights.
- privacy: Anyone preserving oral history and making it accessible in any format (that is, unfettered online or in-person access) needs to be aware that data privacy standards have changed in the recent past. Narrators need a precise understanding of what access to their interview will look like, as well as consideration for any third parties discussed within the recording. Access needs to meet local, national,

and international data and privacy requirements/standards (see the [Oral History Society's page](#) on the effect on oral history of recent changes to EU data protection). Anyone conducting or storing oral history interviews should take all practicable steps to keep the interviews protected from possible illegal or unauthorized uses.

- **private information**: Sometimes it may be necessary for the narrator to share information with an oral historian that they have no intention of allowing them to record, use, or make available to others. Interviewers should always make the narrator aware of when they are recording and ask for permission to record before they begin. The narrator should let the interviewer know when they need to share something privately and ask them to stop recording. If the narrator realizes that they shared private information while they were being recorded, they will need to let the interviewer know as soon as possible.
- **pseudonym**: It may sometimes be possible to record an oral history interview with a narrator using a pseudonym. In such cases, the oral historian should use only the fictitious name when referring to the narrator during the interview or in any related materials, such as transcripts, notes, finding aids, or publications. However, this does not mean that the information provided during the interview will be anonymous or confidential (see anonymous and confidential).
- **public domain**: Material not protected by intellectual property laws, such as copyright law; such creative work is thus under public ownership and open to use by anyone without permission.
- **repository (see also archives)**: A repository can be either a physical or digital location, depending on the recording format and the project goals; in any case, the term refers to the long-term storage of permanently valuable material. Since oral history does ideally require long-term maintenance and properly managed preservation of all types of records, it is most common to work with a well-established archival repository with a clear track record for managing the media format and the complexities of the sensitive nature of oral history work. Of course, there are instances of oral history projects working exclusively in the online sphere with strong archival principles in place for collection management, as exemplified in such digital archives as <https://www.saada.org> and <https://densho.org>. A repository could also be someone personal or family archives; for more on personal archiving—of family recordings, for example—see <http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/>.
- **research**: In reference to the oral historian, interviewer, or project manager, researching a topic or person requires remaining humble and respectful. The interviewer may know a lot about the topic but still not know in the way that the individual/community to whom this history/stories/experiences belong does.
- **restrictions**: To enforce specific interviewee/donor requirements such as restriction for period of time before public access to the interview is granted, or online vs. physical access to the interview, the repository needs to have transparent collections management policies and procedures in place.^[1]
- **sponsoring institutions**: Any organization that maybe affiliated with the oral history project, either by paying for the costs associated with oral history work (labor, travel expenses, and so on), providing

archival services for completed project, or providing in-kind support such as relationship building within a community or sharing social capital.

- **terms:** Specifically in regard to terms of agreement for the use of an oral history interview, these terms might include restrictions on public access for a period of time or on access by location.
- **time log (see also index):** To help make an oral history more accessible, one should create a log (or index) of its contents. Akin to a book's table of contents, which links a chapter to a page number, this document usually links a summary of a small section of the full recording to a timestamp where that summary starts. Different than a word-for-word transcript, the log can serve as an efficient and effective way to unlock the oral history's contents for current and future users.
- **transfer of copyright:** Many agreements or contracts that narrators are asked to sign may include a transfer of their full copyrights in the oral history to another party. (see copyright)
- **vulnerable communities:** Understanding the power dynamics involved in any oral history interview is essential for ethical work in this field. This is especially important when working with vulnerable populations—including but not limited to the following: those who might be put in danger or face harm by publicly sharing their experience; legal minors, and others with limited agency and freedom, and those with impaired ability to fully consent. Examples of groups of people who may fit this description include those who have lived through traumatic experiences and those who discuss or describe activities, such as immigration, that could technically violate state or federal laws.

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- **[1]** For an overview of the most prominent case depicting the fallout from managing oral history collections with restrictions, see “Secrets from Belfast,” Chronicle of Higher Education, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/belfast>.