

CONNECTINGHISTORIES

Guide

How to Plan an Oral History Project

If you have not done an oral history project before there are a number of basic things you need to think about before you start. Some of these are very practical and relate to matters like choosing the right equipment. Others are more about the principles of oral history, the ethical issues that you need to consider and the approach that you want to take.

1. Introduction
2. Useful online information
3. Checklist:
 - Project planning
 - Issues around interviewing
 - After the interview

Introduction

There is a lot of very useful and practical information available online and that will not be repeated in detail here. This short leaflet lists some of the most useful websites and then provides a brief checklist of things you should think about before you start and as you go along.

If you are planning a project in Birmingham then Birmingham City Archives would like to hear from you. We are happy to:

- talk about project ideas
- suggest equipment and suppliers
- provide a home for master copies of your interviews
- supply a basic cataloguing database
- put you in touch with others doing oral history projects
- provide training for interviewers
- provide advice on copyright and release/consent forms

Additionally Birmingham Central Library and Archives has large sound collections which include a number of oral history archives - you might want to come in and find out what already exists that you could use, or to listen to examples of interviews and look at existing transcripts, summaries and catalogues to give you an idea of what's involved.

To find out more get in touch via the **contact us** page on the website.

Useful online information

Before you start it is a good idea to read the following information:

www.oralhistory.org.uk/advice - practical advice and guidance from the Oral History Society covering all aspects - from what oral history is and how it can be used, to equipment and what type of questions to ask in an interview. The site also gives contact details for people in different regions of the UK who are happy to provide help and advice and detailed information about copyright and ethical issues.

www.oralhistorynortheast.info - a practical step by step toolkit taking you through the various stages and issues that you need to consider. A very good summary and some very useful advice in a format that's quick and easy to read.

www.hlf.org.uk - a detailed guidance document (35 pages) on planning oral history projects from the Heritage Lottery Fund - essential reading if you are applying for a HLF grant to fund your oral history project. You can find the document on their website by going to 'Publications' and then 'Guidance Notes'.

www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/history - information about the National Sound Archive's oral history collections at the British Library. This is not practical information on doing a project but it has a useful contact list of projects, sound archives and others in the UK and elsewhere as well as interesting information about the National Sound Archive and its collections.

Checklist

This checklist provides a brief list of some of the main issues you should think about - if you need any help with answering the questions then get in touch with Izzy Mohammed or Siân Roberts on 0121 464 1607 or 0121 303 4219.

Project planning

- What equipment are you going to buy and how much will it cost you? This depends on what you are going to do with the recordings - do you need very high quality recordings or is ease of use of equipment more important to you?
- Have you got a good quality microphone? The quality of the microphone is more important than the quality of the recorder.
- What type of microphone do you want to use? Do you need one that works in stereo, that picks up several voices at once, or not? Do you need more than one?
- Have you factored in time for identifying people to interview, making contact with them and arranging the interview?
- Are you using volunteers? If so how are you going to arrange the workflow? Do you have enough equipment for them and can they use it? Have you thought about providing training on doing an interview?

Issues around interviewing

- Have you got a signed 'release/consent form' for every recording? This should cover copyright, your permission to use the recording, and what you can and cannot do with it.
- What is the purpose of the interview - do you need to ask the same questions to each person for statistical purposes or can you be more flexible and have a more informal conversation?
- Do you want to know about the person's whole life story or are you concentrating on specific subjects or time periods?
- Have you thought about practical issues (like checking your equipment or reducing surrounding noise) before starting the interview?
- Have you thought of ways of putting the person at their ease or breaking the ice? How will you get the conversation started - do you need a prompt such as an old photograph?

- Have you considered whether you are 'leading' the interviewee by wording your questions in a particular way? What affect will it have on the information you get in return? It is usually better to ask 'open' questions that invite the interviewee to talk.
- Have you offered anonymity or confidentiality to the people being interviewed?

After the interview

- How and where will people be able to access your interviews?
- Have you factored in time for transcribing the interviews? You should allow 4 hours for every 1 hour of interview for full transcriptions.
- Do you need full transcripts or will summaries be enough? This depends on what you are intending to do with the interviews in the longer term.
- Have you factored in the cost and time of making master copies and duplicate listening copies? Have you made backups of your interviews? What happens if you only have one copy and it gets damaged or erased?
- How are you going to preserve your interviews in the long term? Have you thought about depositing a copy at your local library or archive office?

Compiled by Siân Roberts, May 2007

www.connectinghistories.org.uk

