

# **Conducting an Oral History Interview**

**Doug Boyd, Ph.D.**  
**Director, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History**  
**University of Kentucky Libraries**

## Pre-Interview Preparations

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1. If the interview will be part of a larger oral history project, identify the scope of the project. Think about the organizing components of the interviews you will be conducting. Limit your focus and be able to articulate a clear description of your project.
2. What technology are you using for your project? **Audio or Video?**
3. Have you adequately experimented with your **equipment?**
4. What is your preservation plan? Do you have an **archival partner?**
5. What is your strategy for conducting **research** for this interview/project? You will need to do some level of research for each interview.
6. Consider the potential **variables** you may encounter in the upcoming interview. Oral history interviews often contain digressions, what digressions from your original topic can you anticipate?
7. Compile a set of core questions relevant to the scope of your project. Every interview is different. Consider what is different about the particular interview you are conducting? Prepare for each interview.
8. Think about the unique questions that you will use for this particular interview. Which of the core questions will you use for this interview? Create an outline for the interview. Be careful if you use a list of questions...to often this becomes a script.
9. Begin writing field notes (Including personal expectations and hopes for the project/interview—this will carry on throughout the fieldwork process).
10. Decide who will be interviewed for your project. Why have you chosen the people you have chosen?
11. Make initial contact with interviewee/narrator (phone, email, letter). Give potential interviewees/narrators a general sense of your project and their role in your project.
  - I do not recommend sending a list of questions in advance.
  - I recommend given a basic summary of the purpose of the interview and the topics you will want to cover.

12. Create a checklist. Do you have everything?
  - Recorder + Cables
  - Microphone + Cables. If using lapel microphones, do you have the clips?
  - Microphone stands
  - Headphones
  - Release forms
  - Paper/pen to take notes
  - Extra batteries
  - Appropriate media for recorder (flash memory, storage space). Do you have enough storage on the flash memory or hard drive?
8. Check the recording equipment before leaving home. Is it working today? Have you practiced recording on this machine?

### **The Interview**

1. Arrange for an optimal recording situation. Setup: locate recorder and microphone(s) in appropriate place. Use your headphones to hear how your recorder "listens" and will record this interview.
2. Briefly review the purpose of the interview. Discuss the project scope and the interviewee's role in that project
3. Explain the archival donation form (to be signed at the end).
4. At the beginning of the recording, create an audible header for the interview.
  - Example: "This is Doug Boyd conducting an interview with [Interviewee Name] on [Date] for the [Project Name] Oral History Project."
5. Begin with an open-ended question: "Tell me a little bit about yourself?"
6. Ask one question at a time, keep the questions fairly simple.
7. Phrase questions in an open-ended manner, steer clear of yes-no questions.
8. Ask follow up questions. The most important questions in your interview will be the questions you ask that encourage richer detail and elaboration pertaining to your initial question
9. Try to avoid interrupting. Make notes, and circle back.
10. Write down potential questions while the narrator is talking. Take notes, but not too many notes.

11. Be an active listener. Don't check your smart phone. This indicates that you have disengaged
12. Remember, this is an interview not a dialogue.
13. Don't forget your recorder, is it recording? Are the levels appropriate? Once you confirm that you are recording, don't obsess about the recorder.
14. Silence during the interview is important. Be patient, even if it seems somewhat awkward. The wait will be worth it.
15. Follow up on interesting digressions. Allow yourself to be led by the interviewee to some degree. Find appropriate segues back to your topic.
16. Take note of names mentioned who could be potential interviewees for your project.
17. I like to close by asking questions such as: "Is there anything I have not asked about that you think we should talk about?"
18. Get the release form signed.

### **Post-Interview Procedures**

1. Take care of the recording. Do NOT leave the recorder or the media in a hot car, or don't allow it to get wet. Do not bend the flash card.
2. With regard to processing the audio or video files you have just created, work with your archive to establish a file naming convention and a workflow for transferring the audio file to the archive and/or backing up your files.
3. If you want to listen to the interview, make a copy of your interview to listen to.
4. Fill out your interview information form (See sample).
5. Send a thank you note expressing your appreciation for their willingness to participate in the interview. Reaffirm your intentions to fulfill all promises to the interviewee (i.e. to have copies put on CD or DVD and sent back to them promptly).
6. Promptly fulfill all promises made during the interview.

take photos

## City Stories Oral History Project

Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History & Kentucky League of Cities



### PLANNING / PREPARATION

1. Project design and scope
2. Project planning and research
3. Practice with the recorder
4. Who will you interview? Why?
5. Reach out to interviewees / narrators
6. Schedule interviews
7. Prepare for interview
8. Practice with the recorder again
9. Confirm readiness: flash cards, power cables, recorder, microphones, cables, printed forms. Charge the recorder the night before an interview.
  - a. Bag should include:
    - i. 1 recorder (charged), 2 microphones (check clips), 2 microphone cables, 1 power cable, flash cards, tripod (if needed)

### INTERVIEW

10. Conduct interview
11. Sign deed of gift/release form (both interviewee and interviewer)
12. Complete the interview information form
13. Remove the flash card from recorder
14. Place flash card into envelope with deed of gift and interview information form
15. Label the envelope

### TRANSFER

16. Confirm your Google account status (sign in to Google Account)
17. Download and ~~Install Exactly~~ (software application)
18. Scan deed of gift / release form (.pdf), save .pdf file to your computer
19. Place flash card into card reader, connect card reader to computer
20. Utilize Exactly (software) to "bag" your interview (.wav) and the scanned release form (.pdf) and transfer bag to your computer
21. Open the Google Drive submission folder via the link designated to your project
22. Upload the interview "bag" / folder to your submission folder on Google Drive
23. Contact the Nunn Center regarding the upload
24. Send or deliver interview envelopes to the Nunn Center

#### Contact:

Doug Boyd, Director, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History  
University of Kentucky Libraries  
104B1 Margaret I. King Building  
Lexington, KY 40506-0039  
[doug.boyd@uky.edu](mailto:doug.boyd@uky.edu) [w] 859-257-9672 [m] 859-494-5794

