

Checklist for Preserving Family Oral History

If you plan on capturing and preserving your family's oral history, here are some tools, forms, and procedures to include:



Communication and Scheduling

- Determine who you want to interview, list the reasons why, and schedule possible dates and locations.
- Also determine the best way to contact the interview subject. Older relatives who don't know you personally won't respond well to a phone call. Consider using another relative such as a cousin who knows them better to "broker" a connection and help set up the interview.
- Schedule the date and time of the interview and the location. Make sure the location is quiet and free from distractions. If it's a long-distance interview over Skype, the broker suggestion above might be a good idea, especially if the person being interviewed is not familiar with this technology.
- Send your invite and outline the reason for the interview and the types of questions to expect.
- Make it clear to the interview subject as to how the interview will be conducted and what devices you will be using. Also elaborate on how you plan to structure the interview. For example, let your subject know that you plan to ask one question at a time and that you would like a five minute or less response to each question.
- Manage your expectations. Reassure the person being interviewed that you are not expecting perfectly thought-out phrasing. Emphasize that you are looking for a story and pattern of speech that best reflects them and their life history.
- Check to see if you will have access to a wireless Internet connection during the interview. This is important if you are using any cloud service or other platforms to upload content.

Recording Devices and Platforms

- Always review the instructions on how to use each device and platform. Also practice using the device or platform before the actual interview.
- Bring batteries and a power supply or necessary charging devices for in-person interviews!
- Have a backup plan in case a device or platform doesn't work. Remember you may have worked hard to schedule the interview and you may only have once chance at this!
- Make sure your interview subject is comfortable with the recording device or platform. If there is a possibility that the interview subject could be confused by the technology, consider buying an old-fashioned phone handset that plugs into the "high tech" device. Some of these inexpensive handsets come with noise reduction technologies that can overcome background noise.

Interview Questions and Prompts

- If using a release form, make sure you have hard copies and electronic copies available.
- Create a list of questions to use during the interview. Make sure you have a printed copy of the questions as well as an electronic version (PDF) on an iPad, tablet computer or other device.
- For older interview subjects, print each question on an index card or piece of paper with large font. Also include a relevant image which might prompt a response.
- Consider sending the questions in advance. Some people prefer knowing the questions before the interview so that they can think about (but not rehearse) their responses.
- Don't forget to bring old family photographs since these will often invoke memories.
- Create a master list of questions and then sort the questions into grouped themes. You may not be able to cover all questions in one interview, so use one theme for one interview, another for the next, etc.

Sharing Methods and Platforms

- You don't need to have a sharing method or platform selected prior to the interview; however, some interview subjects would like to know exactly what kind of "end product" you hope to produce.
- Make a list of different ways you hope to preserve and share your interview content. Spend time with each one and focus on those that are easy to use and produce the best results.

Follow Up Materials

- Send a thank you note or email or make a phone call to thank the interview subject for their time.
- If you are publishing the interview in print or some other format, consider offering the interview subject a chance to review the content first.
- Transcribe oral interviews when you have time. Consider using a program to do this or send it out to a transcribing service.
- Send a copy of the final published work to the interview subject.