

Doing Oral History

A Practical Guide
SECOND EDITION

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Using Oral History in Research and Writing

CHAPTER 4

Oral history methodology seems geared for large projects; how much of it can the individual researcher apply to interviews for a book or an article?

Individual resources may be more limited than those of a group project, but an individual researcher is no less concerned about making interviews fully usable. Since researchers are the primary users of the information they collect, they ought to set their own standards to at least equal, if not surpass, those of an oral history project or archives. Both projects and individual researchers want to collect oral documentation that is complete, accurate, and reliable, but researchers scrutinize even more intensely than do project interviewers what they hear in the interviews they conduct and apply a higher degree of professional skepticism to them. They seek verification in other sources for information gathered through interviews, and they evaluate contradictory material to draw their own conclusions.

Despite their focused efforts and self-defined goals, individuals doing their own interviewing bear definite professional responsibilities. The American Historical Association has issued the following recommendations for individual interviewers:

1. Interviews should be recorded on tape but only after the person to be interviewed has been informed of the mutual rights and responsibilities involved in oral history, such as editing, confidentiality, disposition, and dissemination of all forms of the record. Interviewers should obtain legal releases and document any agreements with interviewees.
2. The interviewer should strive to prompt informative dialogue through challenging and perceptive inquiry, should be grounded in the background and experiences of the person being interviewed, and, if possible, should review the sources relating to the interviewee before conducting the interview.

3. To the extent practicable, interviewers should extend the inquiry beyond their immediate needs to make each interview as complete as possible for the benefit of others.

4. The interviewer should guard against possible social injury to or exploitation of interviewees and should conduct interviews with respect for human dignity.

5. Interviewers should be responsible for proper citation of oral history sources in creative works, including permanent location.

6. Interviewers should arrange to deposit their interviews in an archival repository that is capable of both preserving the interviews and making them available for general research. Additionally, the interviewer should work with the repository in determining the necessary legal arrangements.

7. As teachers, historians are obligated to inform students of their responsibilities in regard to interviewing and to encourage adherence to the guidelines set forth here.¹

Why bother to record interviews? Why are notes not sufficient?

After years of scribbling notes during class lectures, many researchers feel perfectly able to take coherent notes during an interview. They consider a recorder an unnecessary expense, a bother to lug about and operate, and a possible barrier to a candid interview—whether with public figures, who may be overly cautious about having their words recorded, or with nonpublic figures who may be intimidated about talking into a microphone. Some researchers consider note taking superior to tape recording. Barbara Tuchman, for instance, complained that tape recorders simply encouraged people to “ramble effortlessly and endlessly.” She described note taking as a “crystallizing process” in which the writer automatically distinguishes the significant from the insignificant. Others have cited the risk of the recorder breaking down at crucial moments as their rationale for not recording.²

Such responses combine cogent truths and unnecessary rationalizations. Tape recorders are no longer such an expense or a novelty. They can be purchased or rented for a reasonable cost, are easy to operate, and have become so commonplace that few interviewees will be surprised or uncomfortable to see one. More important, tape recorders radically expand and improve any interview. The longer

interviews last, the more interviewers tire and miss nuances. Later, when they play back the tape, interviewers inevitably hear more than they did during the interview itself. Note takers may make honest mistakes in what they hear or find their handwriting hard to decipher. Note takers also run the risk of hearing only what they want to hear rather than what the interviewee actually says—a recurring phenomenon to which anyone interviewed by the press can readily attest.

Note taking makes some researchers feel more comfortable, because it helps focus their attention—as they listen to what is being said—on the exact points they anticipate later using. But there is no reason not to record and take notes at the same time. The notes can serve as the recording's index, which is especially useful if a full transcript cannot be made.

Recording is the researcher's best means of self-protection. Interviewees may object to how they were quoted or may not be willing to stand behind statements they made in their interviews. A recording of the interview provides the documentation to defend against such reactions. Some interviewees, especially the more prominent, may be so skittish about being misquoted that they will insist that the interview be recorded. For his biography of Henry Kissinger, Walter Isaacson interviewed former president Richard M. Nixon. Isaacson took notes, while Nixon recorded the interview. When the tape recorder broke down, Nixon commented, "I've never been very good with these things."³

What if a potential interviewee refuses to be recorded?

Interviewers operate under ground rules that interviewees set. For an oral history project, such an objection would likely cause that person to be stricken from the list of potential interviewees, as there usually remains little reason to conduct an oral history if it cannot be recorded. But the individual researcher may consider the person a critically important source, regardless of the ground rules. Notes may be inferior to a recording, but they are better than nothing. As soon as the interview session is over, the interviewer needs to write down as full an account as notes and memory permit.

An interviewee may decline to be recorded out of fear or vanity, emotions that can sometimes be overcome by some reassurances and flattery. The late historian Gordon Prange, whose ego matched the monumental books he wrote on the Second World War, refused to be tape-recorded during an interview on the grounds that Gen. Douglas MacArthur had never allowed his interviews to be recorded. The interviewer took notes for a few minutes and then injected, "What a shame that this isn't being recorded, Professor Prange, because my notes will never do justice to your cogent thoughts and beautifully crafted sentences." Accepting that as a point well taken, Prange permitted the tape recorder to run for the rest of the interview.⁴

But why make a recording if you cannot afford to transcribe it?

You can make notes from your own recordings without having to transcribe them entirely. Having the recording allows you to quote accurately, and to pick up nuances you may have missed during the interview. The recording can be quoted, cited, deposited in a library, and referred back to for proof should any queries arise about the accuracy of the material.

Transcripts are costly and time-consuming to create, but they increase the usefulness of an interviewer to everyone, including the original interviewer. Researchers planning to conduct extensive interviews for a dissertation, book, or other project should seek a logical repository, whether it be a university library, a state archives or historical society, or a community library, to which to donate the completed tapes. The repository will most likely have legal release forms that the interviewer can use. If the interviews meet the repository's standards, it may be able to have its own staff transcribe the interviews or join the interviewer in seeking a grant for transcription.

Why should independent researchers make their interviews available to anyone else?

Scholars have a professional obligation to permit access to their sources. A footnote citing "personal interview in the author's possession" leaves much open to question, especially if the interviewee has died. Readers may question how accurately the researcher quoted or paraphrased the interview. Even when a researcher quotes an interview meticulously, in all probability he or she needs to cite only a small portion of it. Future researchers may make different use of the same material.

While writing her doctoral dissertation on the Office of War Information, Holly Cowan Shulman, discovered that another historian had conducted an interview with a key official of the agency. Her graduate adviser, however, dissuaded her from asking to see a copy of the interview, on the grounds that it was someone else's work. Although she complied at the time, she came to feel that it had been wrong not to examine the interview for her research because interviews "were a piece of historical evidence just as much as letters or diaries." Seeking to raise the consciousness of the historical profession on the issue, Shulman has argued:

When we conduct interviews, we are creating evidence. When the next historian comes along interested in another aspect or interpretation of the same topic, he or she should have access to the interviews we did. This is the very nature of the rules of history. Otherwise, I could hide all of my evidence to protect myself from competition and argument. Or I could make up anything I wanted and assert its truth citing interviews

I supposedly conducted but would let no one else see. In other words, if we historians don't treat interviews seriously, we raise a series of problems which could hurt the profession as a whole.⁵

Must individual researchers get signed legal release for their interviews?

A legal release is essential if the interviewer intends to deposit the recording or transcript in a library or archive. By signing a legal release, the interviewee indicates that he or she understood what the interview would be used for and establishes its ownership. Just having recorded another person's words does not give the interviewer copyright on those words, and making quotations beyond "fair use" length might stimulate a legal challenge. The problem may not come from the interviewee but from the interviewee's heirs, who may seek compensation for the interview's publication.

Unfortunately, graduate advisers have too often assured individual researchers that they were just doing interviews, not an oral history project, and therefore did not need to get releases. This oversight unnecessarily limits the interview's future use. While depositing the interviews in an archives, the interviewer must go back to get signatures on legal releases. Sometimes interviewees have died and their next of kin must be located. It is always easier to have the legal releases signed when the interview is conducted.

Researchers at most colleges and universities must also comply with Institutional Review Boards that will want to see evidence of the interviewee's "informed consent." Standard oral history release forms should suffice, indicating that the interviewee understands and approves of the purpose and intended uses of the interviews. Some Institutional Review Boards further require release forms to stipulate that the interviewee can decline to participate, can choose to remain anonymous, and understands the potential risks involved in participation—factors more applicable to medical and behavioral science projects than to oral history. (See chapter 7 for further issues relating to Institutional Review Boards.)

With limited time and resources, why should independent researchers ask questions beyond their immediate research interests?

Researchers understandably think of interviews as filling in gaps in their work or expanding their own knowledge of the particulars and want to ask questions precisely about that area and nothing else. But this attitude is counterproductive in a number of ways. First, the interviewee's memory may not immediately be able to dredge up the specific information that the interviewer is seeking.

Interviewers need to spend some time establishing rapport, building up to the central issue, and understanding its context in the interviewee's life. Interviewers need to be sensitive to the feelings of interviewees and not to dismiss other areas of their life they may consider relevant to the interviewer's questions.

In the 1970s I interviewed the New Dealer Benjamin V. Cohen about his role in creating the Securities and Exchange Commission in the 1930s. Watergate was in the news when the interview took place, and Cohen wanted to talk about Nixon. But for my dissertation, I needed to hear about Franklin D. Roosevelt. Not willing to follow his tangents, I constantly steered the interview back to my immediate interests. Not until later did I realize that I had missed the opportunity to capture Cohen's thoughts about Watergate and to find out whether the development of the "imperial presidency" had in any way changed his opinion about the expansion of the executive branch during the 1930s.

Within a few years of completion of most oral history projects, many of the interviewees will have died. There is no guarantee that these people will have been interviewed by any other programs. A researcher's notes, recordings, and transcripts of interviews therefore become valuable sources for other researchers, who no longer have access to the deceased.

Does the independent interviewer have any advantages over the oral historian in a group project?

Anyone working on a specific book or article becomes far more steeped in the subject matter and has a much more personal stake in the process. Their interviews lead to publication and promote their professional advancement, perhaps even earn them royalties. Researchers can verge on obsession with their projects, wanting to know *everything*. They press interviewees to go into greater detail than does an interviewer for a more general project. A number of interviewers participated in the Former Members of Congress oral history project, and not surprisingly, one of the lengthiest and most detailed interviews was conducted by an interviewer who was also writing a doctoral dissertation on the senatorial interviewee. The interviewer pressed the senator on any number of issues, even persuading him to sing his campaign song.⁶

Individual researchers may express disappointment with the project-directed interviews they read in oral history archives because the project interviewers did not dig deep enough into the subject. The main themes may have been covered, but not enough of the smaller details are included. Because individual researchers generally are seeking answers to specific questions, they may undervalue the parts of an archival interview that do not directly address their needs. The curse of oral history is failure to pursue details.

Can an independent researcher's interviews be considered an oral history?

There are differences between interviews conducted for one researcher's express purposes and those conducted as oral histories for general use. Oral histories are broadly conceived and conducted, then processed, preserved, and made available to other scholars in archives. Research interviews fill the narrow needs of the individual interviewer, are rarely recorded or transcribed, and generally wind up in the interviewer's file cabinets or in boxes in basements and attics.⁷

These distinctions blur when a researcher's interviews are recorded or transcribed and deposited somewhere so that other researchers can use them. Oral historians have long objected to the use of the term "oral history" to describe every interview, regardless of whether it was recorded or simply handwritten notes were taken. "Historians have been interviewing people for hundreds of years; there's nothing new about that, and I don't think they've been doing oral history," observed Philip Brooks of the Harry S. Truman Library in 1966. "I think there's a real distinction here between a researcher who interviews people for his own purpose to derive information for *his own* book, and that of what I sometimes call a 'pure' oral historian, who is accumulating a stock of evidence for the use of other researchers, any and all researchers, as we do in an archival agency. I think this is related somewhat to the question of objectivity." More recently, oral historians have conceded that all interviewing—archival or individual—is subjective, and that the earlier distinctions posed a false dichotomy.⁸

Similarly, when the Oral History Association first issued its *Evaluation Guidelines* in 1980, they were directed almost exclusively toward group or archival projects. When the revised guidelines were promulgated in 1992, they addressed the "independent/unaffiliated researcher" as well. Fully half of the guidelines involve the transfer of the independent researcher's interviews to an archives. Some interviews may not be worthy of permanent preservation, particularly if the researcher has not followed other criteria for oral history interviewing, preparation, and processing or has not been sensitive to oral history ethical considerations. Still, in the long run, institutions—whether public libraries soliciting and collecting family history interviews for their local history sections or major research libraries working with authors and documentary film producers to collect oral history project interviews—stand to gain from a closer partnership with individual researchers.

It would be a mistake to define oral history so narrowly that it applied only to large archival collections. But to do oral history, interviewers must live up to

its standards and assume its legal, ethical, and methodological responsibilities, including that of making their interviews available to other researchers for verification and further use.

ORAL EVIDENCE

How valid is oral history as historical evidence?

Treat oral evidence as cautiously as any other form of evidence. Documents written at the time have an immediacy about them and are not influenced by subsequent events, and yet those documents can be incomplete, in error, or written to mislead. In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson invited the television critic Jack Gould to meet with him in the Oval Office. A memo from a White House aide later reported to Johnson that Gould had stopped at his office after the meeting and said, "Why doesn't the President appear on television the same way he talked to me—the President is so gracious, affable and well informed." Subsequently, scholars have frequently cited that memo when writing about Johnson and the media. Gould's son, a historian, came across the quote in the mid-1980s, and asked his father about the incident. Gould recalled that he had left the White House immediately after the interview, had not seen the aide, and had not said what was credited to him in the memo. The episode impressed his son as "a cautionary tale about relying on archival material without double-checking the sources used."⁹

A statement is not necessarily truer if written down at the time than if recalled later in testimony. Whether written or oral, evidence must be convincing and verifiable. A federal court jury on which I served was presented with a written statement that the prosecutor described as the defendant's "signed confession." The defense insisted that the prosecution had misinterpreted the statement, whose many grammatical errors obscured its meaning. In the jury room, jurors repeatedly read the statement, trying to decipher exactly what it meant, before concluding that it failed the test of convincing evidence.

Oral history can be unconvincing. Some interviewees' remarks are self-serving; they remember selectively, recall only events that cast themselves in a good light, and seem to always get the better of opponents. Interviewers may be too polite or too timid to ask probing questions about events that did not turn out well. Sometimes interviewees honestly cannot remember. They jumble names and dates and confuse people and places. Sometimes they deliberately recast their past to fit their current self and public image. Whole series of interviews can be faulted for paying attention to only one side of the issue, or for interviewing only

those people who would speak positively about the individual who was the subject of the project.¹⁰

Enough bad oral histories have been done to satisfy the worst suspicions of traditionalists, and yet enough good interviews have been conducted to validate the process. Properly done, an oral history helps to interpret and define written records and makes sense out of the most obscure decisions and events. An interview with a thoughtful participant and perceptive eyewitness can generate new ideas and avenues of inquiry that a researcher might have never thought of pursuing. Interviews can explore the use of language by subgroup—such as jazz slang, black English, shop-floor jargon, and even the acronyms of government bureaucrats—and discover word meanings that might otherwise have eluded researchers outside the subgroup. Oral evidence does not always derive from oral history. The French historian Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie published what amounted to an oral history of a fourteenth-century village in the Pyrennees, Montaillou. His sources were depositions taken during the Inquisition by Bishop Jacques Fournier, who interrogated some five hundred suspected heretics between 1318 and 1325. Scribes copied down the questions and answers and gave the accused the opportunity to correct the transcripts. The final copies were deposited in the Vatican archives, where six centuries later they enabled Ladurie to quote the words of the common folk of Montaillou, people who stood in stark contrast to the nobles who dominate the chronicles of the Middle Ages. *Montaillou* (1979) became a best-seller in France and elsewhere, possibly because of its explicit accounts of sexual relations within the village. Prurient interests aside, the first-person accounts make the book compelling reading for even nonmedievalists.¹¹

Similarly, the pension application process for militiamen in the American Revolutionary War amounted to what the historian John C. Dann has called “one of the largest oral history projects ever undertaken.” In 1832, when Congress agreed to pay a yearly pension to any militiamen who served for more than six months in the Revolution, thousands of elderly veterans applied. Since written records were scarce, the government required them to dictate their reminiscences to court reporters, giving as many names, dates, and other details as possible. Government clerks then scrutinized these testimonies to determine their accuracy. Selecting from a great mass of applications a century and a half later, Dann published the first-person eyewitness accounts of foot soldiers, runaway slaves, and women who followed their husbands into combat. Their accounts authentically describe not only combat but everyday life in the camps, wounds, diseases, and the whole social setting of the Revolutionary War.¹²

Oral history makes a critical addition to oral evidence: a trained interviewer who can guide an interviewee’s recital of events that he or she may not have thought about for years but can recall vividly when asked. Questions prompt interviewees to discuss issues they might otherwise have skipped over. Interviewers can question inconsistencies between the oral account and written documentation. A good oral history can present and preserve convincing evidence and put it in quotable, first-person prose that enlivens historical narratives. But oral history should not stand alone as a single source. Researchers need to seek out available material to substantiate both written and oral evidence. If written and oral information contradict each other, then the researcher must dig even deeper to determine which is more accurate.

While preparing to interview the former chief clerk of the Senate Labor, Education, and Public Welfare Committee, Stuart McClure, I centered much of my research on the National Defense Education Act. In 1957, when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, the first earth-orbiting satellite, McClure wrote a memo to the committee’s chairman, Lister Hill, suggesting that the public attention generated by *Sputnik* might help pass the education bill that had stalled in Congress—if they called it a “defense education act.” One account of the bill’s passage devoted a chapter to the fight between the Senate, which wanted to make the money available as grants in the form of scholarships, and the House, which insisted on making it available as loans. During the interview, when asked why the Senate lost the battle, McClure laughed and replied:

Oh, that was another clever, clever ploy. That was done on the House side. They narrowed the issue. There were millions of dollars for all kinds of other things, but Carl Elliott [the Alabama representative who chaired the House subcommittee on education] and his guys narrowed the issue to whether we should have the federal government hand out scholarships or loans. . . . The House denounced scholarships, it was a waste of money and socialism and all of that. And the minute the damn scholarship issue was done for, dead, the bill swooped through. I don’t think anybody had read any other title in it. Oh, that was clever stuff. Carl Elliott was a brilliant strategist, as good as Lister Hill in his way, in different houses.¹³

Here oral history exposed a legislative ploy that not only fooled most members of the House of Representatives but the scholar who had published a history based on official documentation. The debate over loans versus scholarships had been a subterfuge designed to allow the House, which had previously

defeated federal education bills, to save face and claim victory. McClure's story has the ring of credibility—first, because it is logical, and second, because Senate staff rarely give credit to House members, except to express sheer admiration for a brilliant legislative strategy.

Do courts accept oral history as evidence?

Without the interviewee being present for cross-examination, courts generally regard the recording or transcript of an oral history as hearsay. Nevertheless they have permitted oral histories to be subpoenaed as evidence and have accepted oral traditions in rendering verdicts. In dealing with land claims of native peoples, courts in several nations have acknowledged the inadequacy of written documents—although legal obstacles to those native claims remain formidable. When those fighting a land claim in Canadian courts argued that oral histories “did not accurately convey historical truth,” the chief justice of the Canadian supreme court ruled that “stories matter,” and that the legal convention of hearsay could be waived in regard to the oral traditions of Canada’s “first people.”¹⁴

When South Africa established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine past government tactics used to suppress resistance to apartheid, critics of the commission argued that the oral history it gathered was unreliable and grossly inaccurate. The stories that victims told were subjective, they charged, telling “their understanding of what happened to them and not necessarily what happened.” A minority report asserted that: “Exaggeration is a natural consequence of human suffering.” These critics assumed that when the alleged perpetrators took the stand, having been granted amnesty, they would refute the victims’ claims of human rights violations. Instead, the perpetrators confirmed the most outrageous of the stories and affirmed the reliability of the oral history.¹⁵

Can information from an oral history ever be cited by itself, without other supporting evidence?

It depends on the information. A personal description, the expression of an opinion, or the telling of a colorful anecdote would permit citation of the interview as the single source. But the more controversial the subject, the less an interview can stand alone. Critics would question the authority of the interviewee. Was that person in a position to know, or does the interview constitute simply secondhand speculation? When in doubt, employ the journalist’s practice of seeking at least two witnesses before asserting a statement of fact—if indeed a second witness is still alive.¹⁶

Independent researchers can also borrow from journalists the practice of having one interviewee comment on what another has said. A novice reporter, sent

to cover a dispute involving a local developer, interviewed the developer and wrote his story. “Did you talk to the architect?” asked his editor. The reporter dutifully interviewed the architect and added his comments to the story, but his editor was still not satisfied. “Take what the architect said back to the developer and get him to respond,” the editor instructed, “then take what the developer said back to the architect, and after they’ve answered each other’s charges, then you write your story.”

In cultural resource management projects that have included oral history interviews despite the misgivings of archaeologists and others on the team who are not oral historians, efforts have been made to determine the quality of evidence that the interviews gathered. The oral historian Dan Utley has described how, in one project collecting information about a defunct farming community, each interviewee was encouraged to talk at length about the annual hog killing, a universal experience within the community. “The hog killing stories were then compared and used as a rough guide to evaluate the memories, descriptive abilities, and involvement of the interviewees,” he explained. “It was not easy to sit through numerous descriptions of the slaughter process, especially after breakfast, but they did provide an important comparative dimension to the overall project.”¹⁷

Isn’t most oral history anecdotal?

People naturally recount events and personalities anecdotally, in small self-contained stories that illuminate or instruct. Anecdotes often focus on humorous situations and characteristics and in conversation are designed to stimulate a smile or a laugh. In many ways, the anecdote is a writer’s freshest material. The term derives from the Greek word *anekdota*, meaning “things unpublished,” and it is often the telling stories taken from interviews that make a book original and different from previously published sources. *Anecdotal* is not synonymous with *apocryphal*, meaning spurious or unverifiable information. Names, dates, and other facts can usually be more reliably obtained elsewhere, but each interviewee has a unique store of anecdotes.

Although scholars sometimes denigrate anecdotes as the antithesis of analysis, these accounts can actually be informative, offering their analysis in a vivid and colorful manner and enlivening a narrative, often with a touch of humor. Good writers have an eye and an ear for a lively and believable anecdote that can make their points both memorably and compactly. Critics also dismiss oral history and other forms of narrative history because anecdotal information, by its nature, is randomly gathered and not statistically significant enough to make generalizations from. Social scientists look to census data, marriage licenses, death certificates, and voting statistics rather than to interviews, unless they are using

a standard questionnaire and questioning a large, representative sample. Oral historians tailor their questions for individual interviewees, and time and financial limitations tend to restrict their pool of interviewees.

Although anecdotal information has a personal flavor, the collected stories from a group reinforce each other and show common threads in the lives of the group's members. Mixing anecdotal information with the hard data of statistical abstracts, the skilled researcher and writer can re-create a colorful as well as a convincing portrait of the past.¹⁸

Can an interviewer argue with interviewees if they seem wrong in what they are saying?

Individual researchers have more liberty than archival oral historians to inject the interviews with their own opinions and to challenge the interviewees. Remember, however, that all interviews are voluntary and last only as long as the interviewee desires. Keep in mind that too forceful an intervention by the interviewer may also distort the interviewee's responses.

Deliberate carefully when trying to decide whether interviewees' stories are accurate, misleading, or erroneous. An individual researcher usually approaches an interview with a thesis to prove and may assume that anything contradicting that thesis is wrong. Give the speaker a fair hearing, and then challenge any inconsistencies in the testimony with other sources. When pressed, the interviewee may be able to provide some additional rationale or even hard evidence to support previously unsubstantiated assertions. An impaired ability to listen can be a dangerous affliction for interviewers.¹⁹

"Research involves the shedding, not the confirmation, of our preconceptions," the historian Blair Worden has asserted. "If historians go to the archives expecting certain answers to their questions, careful study of the evidence will almost invariably change their minds." Living sources can magnify this condition by looking interviewers in the eye and telling them they are wrong and by revealing unexpected information. Interviewees may see things entirely differently from the researcher, and although interviewees might be biased or just plain wrong, so might the researcher's thesis. The best information to emerge from an oral history is often completely unexpected: a different way of looking at something, turning preconceived notions upside down. An interviewer may want to argue points with an interviewee, but it is self-defeating to seek out people to interview and then ignore what they have to say. Or as Lyndon Johnson used to say, "I ain't never learned nothin' talkin'."²⁰

Although interviewers strive to take a neutral role during the interview, neutrality may not be acceptable in its publication. When James Green published

his interview with the historian C. Vann Woodward in the *Radical History Review*, it stimulated a series of angry letters to the editor expressing outrage that Green had not rebutted Woodward's critical remarks about the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker. The opinions had been Woodward's, but Green took the blame for his silence and apologized for not challenging Woodward's assertions. "My purpose in interviewing Woodward for RHR was not, however, to expose our political differences," Green explained, "but to examine his contribution to the Left's understanding of Southern history and to the study of race, class and region in U.S. history."²¹

Is it possible to get a worthwhile interview from someone with whom you profoundly disagree?

The emphasis on interviewing "from the bottom up" has presumed that interviewers at least admire their interviewees even when they do not agree with them. But some researchers record the lives of people whose politics and ideologies they find "unsavory, dangerous, or deliberately deceptive." The sociologist Kathleen Blee, who interviewed former Ku Klux Klan members from Indiana, has no sympathy for the Klan's anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, and racist politics and violent attitudes. She found it unnecessary to appear empathetic when interviewing Klan members and made little effort to shy away from controversial topics. She anticipated "no rapport, no shared assumptions, no commonality of thought or experience" and expected her interviewees to be too wary of her to reveal their true attitudes. But her expectations proved groundless. Not only did the former Klan members seem at ease during their interviews, but they assumed that she, "a native of Indiana and a white person," had to agree, even if secretly, with their views. "Even challenging their beliefs had no effect on their willingness to talk," Blee noted, concluding that despite profound differences, rapport was disturbingly easy to achieve in an oral history interview.²²

Won't interviewees try to convince their interviewers to adopt their viewpoints?

A certain amount of intellectual seduction—interviewees trying to make interviewers agree with them—may take place. Sitting down to talk with prominent figures can be a heady experience, and it is all too easy to slip into a false sense of intimacy that can diminish scholarly distance and detachment. The makers and shakers who spend their careers assiduously trying to manipulate the media may treat historical researchers in much the same manner. They want the researcher to see events from their perspective, to validate their positions. Some

are characteristic of the person to whom they are attributed and whether they make sense in the context of the time and place of the conversation. Be suspicious of interviewees who always managed to get the last word or administer the perfect squelch. They may be recalling what they wish they had said or may be claiming credit for lines spoken to them rather than by them. The humorist Garrison Keillor once confessed in a radio monologue that his childhood reminiscence about an overripe tomato thrown with perfect aim was absolutely true—except that his sister had thrown it at him, not the other way around. The historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., noted that remembered dialogue helps to “impart immediacy to narrative” but warned that such information should only be used when the remarks are “plausibly supported by context or other evidence.” He added: “I have extended this tolerance to oral history and employed the literary convention with the same critical caution I hope illustrious predecessors have applied to written documents. It remains a convention.”²⁷

How legitimate is it to cite anonymous interviews?

Journalists and other writers often rely on anonymous sources. Like Bob Woodward’s “Deep Throat,” journalists have interviewees whose identities they promise to keep secret and would go to jail rather than divulge. Reporters know they would not get sensitive information if they interviewed only for attribution. Social scientists employ pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the interview people as representatives of types rather than as identifiable individuals. Their fieldwork techniques permit the creation of fictional identities for people and places. They believe that anonymity encourages interviewees to speak more candidly and that it protects interviewees, their families, and their jobs from retribution.

Oral historians influenced by the social sciences have felt a similarly strong need to protect interviewees’ well-being by not revealing their names. They feel that sometimes the general message carries more significance than the particular speaker. For instance, the historian Sherna Gluck regretted that the political climate in the Middle East prevented her from revealing the real names of the Palestinian women she interviewed. “They have made it clear, however, that this personal recognition is less important to them than making their story public.”²⁸

Yet anonymity clashes with some of oral history’s most fundamental objectives. Having sought to give “voice to the voiceless,” it is inconsistent to render them nameless. Oral historians conduct life review biographical interviews because they consider interviewees important as individuals and want to record their unique experiences and perceptions. Future historians using those interviews will also

expect some verification of sources. They will want to know where the information came from and what biases might have affected the testimony. Just as critics of journalistic practices have complained that unbridled anonymity allows public officials to evade responsibility for their views, oral historians believe that their interviewees should be held accountable for what they say for the record. Nothing based on anonymous sources can be proven, and the evidence remains at the level of rumor and innuendo. “When sources choose anonymity,” the oral historian William W. Moss warned, “whether out of privacy, humility, or fear, the record produced not only suffers the loss of user confidence that accompanies any anonymous testimony, but the primary assertion of oral history that the individual indeed matters is also lost.”²⁹

The issue of anonymity created the greatest single area of disagreement when the Oral History Association revised its principles, standards, and evaluation guidelines in 1991. After protracted debate, the OHA adopted guidelines that ask whether “the Interviewee understands his/her right to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to seal portions of the interview or in extremely sensitive circumstances even to choose to remain anonymous.”³⁰

By accepting anonymity under dire circumstances, oral historians indicated that it should never be a routine practice. When authors claim that their books are based on hundreds of interviews and cite none specifically, or assert that none of their interviewees chose to be identified, there is a strong suspicion that anonymity was part of the researcher’s design and that interviewees were never encouraged or given the opportunity to speak for the record. The use of blanket anonymity also raises the question of the expiration of that anonymity. Was the promise of anonymity eternal, or can the interviewees’ identities be restored to them at some safe point in the future?

One solution for writers seeking to balance their interviewees’ anonymity with scholarly verification is to deposit the recordings and transcripts in a library or archives with provisions for identifying the interviewees after a safe interval. The political scientist Richard Fenno has given his interviews with members of Congress to the National Archives. As these interviewees had left public life, they could be identified without fear of political embarrassment, thereby enhancing the future research value of the collection. A history of the U.S. space program drew heavily from interviews with past and present employees of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), asking about their personal backgrounds, the type of work they did in the space program, and their perspectives on how the agency changed over time. Given that many of the interviewees were still NASA employees, they were assured that their names would not appear next to any quotations used in the

published history—which identified each interview only by number—but that the transcripts, linking names to the numbers, would be preserved in the NASA History Office.³¹

PUBLISHING ORAL HISTORY

How much editing of interviews is acceptable for publication?

Transcripts of recordings are edited, and most published oral histories have been further edited, condensing and highlighting remarks and in some cases rearranging testimony for chronological and narrative purposes. But how much is too much? Oral historians have expressed suspicion over the popular books of Studs Terkel, who usually removes his own questions and sometimes reorders his interviewee's answers. When Charles Morrissey questioned some of the Vermonters quoted in Terkel's *American Dreams, Lost and Found* (1980), they objected to the way their remarks had appeared in print. One complained that Terkel "applied his thoughts to my words and came up with the version in his book." Another felt that his words had been rearranged "in such a way that I can't make sense of it."³²

Some of the best known "oral history" books have been produced by professional writers who lacked training in historical research and handled oral documentation rather loosely. Serious questions were raised about the authenticity of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976); many felt it was a work of historical fiction more than history. Merle Miller's *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (1974), in a similar fashion, seems to mix Truman's recollections with Miller's own creative writing. Miller did not publish his interviews until after Truman's death, and some of the statements he attributed to Truman strain credulity. Miller's rambling remarks to an Oral History Association meeting in 1975 augmented the audience's worst suspicions. "I don't consider myself an oral historian," Miller later admitted. He then added, "Oral historians don't either. I spoke at their national convention several years ago and they loathed me, detested me, because since I don't know the rules of oral history—and operate as a reporter, which I consider myself—I violate them." After Miller's death, seven hours of his recorded interviews with Truman, conducted in 1961–62, were opened for research at the Truman Library. Historians who reviewed the tapes found nothing in them to support the book's more sensational claims.³³

Editing and rearranging interviews for clarification and cutting away tangential material are appropriate so long as the original meaning is retained. The goal is to sharpen the focus without putting words in the interviewee's mouth

or altering the essence of what was said. For instance, if an interviewee spoke at length about someone's positive characteristics and fleetingly of one negative quality, it would be misleading and unfair to quote only the latter.

In reproducing large sections of oral history interviews for publication, researchers should consider including the questions as well as the answers. Some subjects may not have been discussed simply because the interviewer asked nothing about them. Other subjects came up precisely because that was what the interviewer wanted to know about. By leaving as many of their questions in the text as feasible, oral historians not only show what questions elicited the responses but demonstrate that the interviewee did not necessarily volunteer the information and may even have had to be coaxed to reveal private and potentially embarrassing information. Without the questions, the basic dialogue of an oral history is lost, creating the impression that people raised the issues when, in fact, they were responding to queries. Similarly, when several interviewees focus on a particular trait or make a similar observation, it could be simply because they are all responding to the same question.

Oral history has become fashionable among popular writers and other purveyors of popular culture who are not always careful about its presentation. Cullom Davis, who directed the oral history program at Sangamon State University in Illinois, warned of its "debasement" by those who fail to "observe the canons of our profession." He charged that publication of oral history without interpretation produces little more than a scissors-and-paste scrapbook and a disorganized mass of recollections. "As serious practitioners, whether lay or professional," Davis argued, "we must identify the hucksters and charlatans who exploit oral history's intrinsic appeal for their own shallow, ahistorical and even unethical ends."³⁴

Should oral history interviewees speak for themselves, or do they require scholarly interpretation?

The compelling nature of the spoken word, the enjoyment of reading the vernacular, the honesty and humor of so many interviewees, has kindled a strong interest in allowing oral sources to "speak for themselves." This approach, which often involves little interpretation on the part of the compiler, sometimes results in books that resemble collages. The literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick has dismissed "tape recording without an interpretive intelligence" as "a primitive technology for history" designed to relieve the author of the burden of writing. Hardwick insists that a book requires an author's "signature of responsibility."³⁵

Reviewing the biography of Robert F. Kennedy by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Henry Fairlie dismissed oral history as testimonials of dubious value. It is up to

the historian "to do the hard work of sifting," wrote Fairlie. "When we are given the personal words of various actors, that is all we are given, and we have either to take or reject their word that something happened as they say. . . . That is what we have historians for: to take their word that this was so." Historians act as judges, interpreters, and critics, compiling and analyzing sources of the past. Historians are rarely themselves eyewitnesses to the events they write about. They reconstruct events and the temper of the time from a mixture of sources, balancing the reliability of one piece of data against another, arranging them in a coherent pattern to make sense out of what happened.³⁶

The very act of editing and arranging interviews shows that the author has not simply allowed interviewees to speak for themselves. Editorial intervention begins with determining whom to interview, what questions to ask, which interviews to include in the volume, in which order, and how much of the original interviews to publish. Even if the editor refrains from adding an overt interpretation, he or she is still deciding which interviewees are most worthy of being recorded and published. Having gone that far then, the editor owes something more to readers. At the minimum, authors of oral history collections should provide some background for their interviews to place the interviewees in context, offering suggestions about why they said what they did and took certain positions and sometimes spelling out where interviewer and interviewee did not agree.

A certain romantic belief has developed that putting a microphone in front of people will miraculously provide the road to truth. In his influential review of oral history literature, Michael Frisch has argued that what historians do—interpreting evidence, weighing, testing, connecting people and events—is still critically important. "And yet, at the same time the exciting thing about oral history is that the process becomes a less exclusive one," he added. The scholar and the subject collaborate: "They come together and provide a good advantage for understanding the meaning of the experience." This is the notion that Frisch calls a "shared authority": "the grounds of authority are very different, and have different meaning, but there is a kind of sharing in the process of the interpretive authority, which is one of the exciting things about doing oral history."³⁷

If writers quote from interviews they conducted, do they need to first submit them to their interviewees for review?

Some researchers allow their interviewees to check their quotes before they use them. "I think it's only fair," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., reasoned, "that when you talk to people, you should give them the same kind of control over an interview as they have over an oral history transcript." Other researchers might chafe over

this idea, given that an interviewee might change or delete something entirely. Yet anyone who has ever been interviewed by a reporter and then misquoted in the newspaper article can appreciate how differently the teller of the tale and the listener can hear the same story. Context is essential for accuracy, and even a perfectly quoted sentence can have its meaning altered if taken out of context.³⁸

At the same time, interpreting what the interviewees said remains the historian's domain. A researcher and an interviewee may form entirely different opinions about the events being discussed. Even though interviewees were eyewitnesses, their perspectives could be distorted, and their memories incorrect. By collecting evidence from a multitude of sources, the historian may come to a different conclusion. The author's duty is to quote the interviewee correctly and not distort the remarks to fit a thesis. Otherwise, the author is entirely responsible for the finished product.

What do reviewers look for when reviewing oral history books?

Reviewers have been notoriously inconsistent in dealing with oral history. Too often a review begins with an admission that the reviewer knows little about oral history or does not trust oral sources, characteristics that never seem to disqualify them from reviewing the book. They distance themselves from the methodology and consequently add little to our understanding. At the root of their complaints, however, is a fairly common call for the author to assume a more interpretive role. Commenting on the increased appearance of books based on interviews, the novelist and frequent reviewer Diane Johnson asserted, "There does seem in this technique an almost cowardly reluctance to think."³⁹ In the same vein, Timothy Foote began a review of an oral history of the Second World War by noting: "Anything calling itself oral history probably ought to be approached with deep suspicion. Time is short. There is much to read. We're already awash in ill-chosen words. And though tape recorders are splendid gimmicks, people who present interviews as history are farther from the mark than a cook who insists that a loose collection of eggs, sugar, milk, vanilla, flour, and a few squares of bitter chocolate are in fact a chocolate cake."⁴⁰

Reviewers more experienced with oral history have reacted to the literature through the lens of their own disciplines or tailored their reactions to fit the publications in which their reviews appear. After conducting a survey of oral history reviews, the book review editor Linda Shopes observed that reviewers in the *Oral History Review* generally wanted to know more about the interviewing process and procedures than about the subject matter and particular findings of a project, although the accuracy of the information gathered was often a

major touchstone of *OHR* reviews. Reviewers commented on whatever unique insights and perspectives emerged from the interviews but took the authors to task for not testing the accuracy of oral evidence through corroborating sources. Reviews in the more theoretically oriented *International Journal of Oral History* were more likely to be interpretive, focusing on subjectivity and how oral tradition and narratives "can reveal the complex consciousness of a culture." Reviews in the British journal *Oral History* tended to raise questions of a political nature, reflecting the journal's socialist leanings.

Reviewers for general, non-oral history journals express more concern about oral history's substantive contributions to historical knowledge. These reviews emphasize the importance of first-person narrative in conveying a sense of people as historical actors and actresses. General historical reviewers tend to respond best to authors who use a variety of interviewees together with other documentary sources, and who place the data in broad analytical context. The chief conclusion that emerges from this sampling of reviewers is that the author of an oral history volume is inevitably judged as a historian and cannot escape that role by suggesting that the sources "speak for themselves."⁴¹

How should oral histories be cited as references?

How to cite interviews is a question that touches on how seriously researchers take oral sources. Of all the academic disciplines engaged in interviewing as a research tool, professional historians have devoted the least amount of methodological attention to its problems and potentials. This laxity contrasts sharply with the intense seriousness historians bring to written sources. Authors dutifully list every manuscript collection, book, and article consulted, and then limit the bibliography of oral sources to a few lines acknowledging those who "shared their knowledge" in "conversations" with the author. Footnotes identify the interviews with cryptic initials and often without dates or other information that would tell the interested reader how the interview was collected. Some interviews are not cited at all. Substantial numbers of histories drawn from oral sources give no indication of whether the recordings and transcripts are deposited somewhere, either for other researchers' use or for verification. It remains puzzling why professional historians have accepted on faith the author's reliability in note taking, transcribing, and even interpreting oral information.⁴²

Guides to historical writing specify that the standard reference should begin with the name of the interviewee. The title of the interview (if there is one) should be in quotation marks. The citation should include "interviewed by [with the name of the interviewer]" and mention whether the interview is a recording or

transcript, and whether it has been published as part of a book or journal article or in any other medium, with standard references to such publication. The citation should indicate whether the interview is in the author's possession or has been deposited in a library or archive. Keep in mind that the purpose of a footnote is to show where the information comes from and to help the reader find the original source. Page numbers for transcripts, or other publications, should be provided. For interviews found on the Internet, cite the archives where the collection is physically located as well as its electronic address.⁴³

The following are examples of citations of interviews from oral history archives, from independent research, and from published sources:

Beth Campbell Short, interviewed by Margot H. Knight, April 23–August 17, 1987, transcripts, Women in Journalism Project, Washington Press Club Foundation, Washington, D.C.
<http://npc.press.org/wpforal/bcs.htm>

Sen. Hugh D. Scott, interviewed by the author, January 27, 1986, tape and transcript deposited at the Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C.

David Montgomery, interview by Paul Buhle, *Visions of History*, ed. Henry Abelove, et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 169–83.