



## **GUIDELINES FOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS**

WHC-funded oral history projects involve humanities scholars collaborating with members of the public to collect, interpret, and preserve spoken memories for the purpose of presenting the gathered material to the public in ways that spark the joy of discovery, engage audiences and scholars in critical exploration of the human experience, and prompt participants to see their place in the human community in new and surprising ways. The WHC does not fund oral history projects that gather material for un-interpreted archival preservation or whose primary purpose is the unexamined celebration of a group's history.

At least one of the humanities scholars involved in the project should have significant experience in oral history. Interviews should be conducted by the oral historian(s) or by those trained by the oral historian(s) in the value and methodology of oral history, in the ethical and legal aspects of conducting interviews, and in specific interview techniques. An oral historian should also assist in the development of project themes and in the interpretation of completed interviews. The Oral History Association (OHA) provides principles and best practices for oral history projects that uphold principles, professional and technical standards and obligations that “include commitments to the narrators, to standards of scholarship for history and related disciplines, and to the preservation of the interviews and related materials for current and future users”

(<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>).

WHC-funded projects should have a thematic focus. For example:

- A place (e.g. a neighborhood or a community)
- An historical event (e.g. World War II or a local strike)
- A controversial issue (e.g. Native American treaty rights)
- A custom or tradition (e.g. marriage celebrations among people of various ethnic groups in the same community, or within the same ethnic group across generations)
- An institution (e.g. a religious, social, cultural, political, or other organization)
- A group of people (e.g. members of a family, ethnic group, profession, political campaign, or social movement)

WHC reviewers want to see more than just the collection of thematic memories; they look for how themes arise from the topic and will engage the interest of a broader public. A community oral history project, for example, might focus on diverse responses to a pivotal and perhaps

divisive past event. A good oral history project provokes thoughtful discussion and deeper understanding of its subject.

The Oral History Association, among its general principles, advises that the oral history interview should be treated like other historical documents. Thus, a good oral history project will provide the context and curation necessary to preserve the interview record, including using an informed consent process so that narrators can be identified by name. The interview and any transcripts should be preserved for future researchers, and interviewers should try to collect the histories on the best recording equipment available within their financial constraints.

OHA recommends caution in making promises to narrators when it comes to control over the interpretation and presentation of the interviews beyond the scope of release forms and informed consent agreements.

### **Good planning will help ensure a good oral history project.**

#### Pre-Interview

- *Research and preparation:* Once the topic and theme have been identified, project personnel should further research the subject using documentation such as written histories, newspaper reports, and other published materials and consult scholars with particular expertise in the subject. Project personnel should plan a public presentation of the project's results. These might be in interpretive exhibits, theatrical productions, lectures, panel discussions, audio or video documentaries, websites. At this time, project personnel should be identifying interviewees based on the relevance of their experiences, formulating questions and making arrangements for the public access and preservation of the oral history. While the WHC encourages project directors to make initial inquiries much earlier in the process, a final grant proposal should not be submitted to the WHC until the research and preparation stage is well under way.

- *Training:* The oral historian(s) should oversee training, advising, and consulting with any other interviewers prior to the interview and be prepared to oversee the interview process. Prior to the interviews, permissions need to be in hand for the public presentation and archival storage of the interview. OHA recommends a pre-interview to discuss the scope of the recording session's subject matter. This is an important opportunity for the interviewer to discuss the goals of the project, the rights of the narrator and the confidentiality that's guaranteed until releases are signed.

#### Interview

The interviews should strive for minimal background noise and distractions and provide in the interview identifying information that labels it as an historical document, with the names of narrator and interviewer, day and year of session, interview location, and proposed subject of the recording. Good oral histories include creative and probing questions allowing the narrator appropriate time to answer, with follow up questions where elaboration is necessary. Try to

achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of the interviewees. While superficial answers to questions will need follow up questions, narrators should be encouraged to answer in their own style and language and address issues that reflect their own concerns. Interviewers should be respectful of the narrator's rights to refuse to talk about certain subjects or to restrict access to the interview or choose anonymity. A goal should be to create a complete record of candid information of lasting value.

### Post Interview

- *Interpretation*: The oral historian(s) and other project personnel need to analyze the material gathered through the interviews and set it into a larger historical and cultural framework. How does this oral history illustrate the topic, draw on the themes, and demonstrate a worldview? As part of the record of the interview, interviewers should record time, date, methods, location etc. of the interview.
- *Public presentation*: This is an important part of any WHC oral history grant. The grant proposal should clearly describe the anticipated mode of presentation and the audience that it will reach.
- *Preservation and accessibility*: the recording of the interviews should be placed in the care of an institution able to provide appropriate preservation and public access. A letter of commitment from such an institution should be included with the grant proposal.

For further information on oral history, we suggest that applicants contact the Oral History Association <http://www.oralhistory.org/>