

# Oral History 101 for Storytellers

Jo Radner

---

*“Oral history is the front line of our battle for self-knowledge and the glue which finally connects each individual’s story with everyone else’s.”*

-- Ken Burns

**W**hat luck! Perhaps people approach you, asking you to make and tell a story about some aspect of their history. Or perhaps an event, a person, a family, an urgent cause, a particular phenomenon catches your interest, and you know that story would make an effective performance. One way or another, your storytelling project calls for oral history interviewing — an absorbing, emotionally rewarding, and uniquely demanding kind of research.

Why demanding? Because for much of the process, you are not a storyteller. You are an oral history interviewer, primarily responsible not to your own artistic goals, but to the needs — indeed, to the integrity — of other people. Performing someone else’s story can be an invasive betrayal or a magnificent gift. Storytellers who work from oral history must be mindful of ethical, legal, and interpersonal dimensions of the situation.

As an oral history interviewer, you have many roles all at once. You are, of course, a seeker of information. However, gathering facts — simple data — is not the most important goal of an interview, since most people do not spontaneously remember facts very well. Interviews are excellent ways to research other kinds of information: how people have lived, how they have related to each other, how they have been touched by large events — most significantly, how they have found meaning in their lives.

You are also a collaborator with the teller in a project with a purpose. (I prefer the term “teller” to “interviewee”.) Most people interviewed fear (secretly or openly) that they don’t know enough to help you, that their authority is insufficient. You have to counteract this normal response and bring the teller to share ownership of the research project.

In this collaborative way of working, you become, in effect, midwife to the teller’s discovery of meaning. You are, in effect, helping someone to find and tell a story. Our lives and experiences are fluid in our minds until we share our recollections with others. We give them shape and create a story because we know that someone is waiting to hear it; we arrange events, speculate about causation, change an amorphous series of happenings into a deliberate narrative that “makes sense.” Anthropologist Michael Jackson argues that we tend to tell stories strategically — for instance, to find our private world’s relation to public meaning, or to maintain a sense of control in the face of disempowering circumstances. As an oral historian, you assist this process through your attention and your silence, holding back during pauses to allow the teller to discover the story.

Finally, you are a witness: as the interviewer, you are present not just as yourself, but as the representative of all who will in the future want to know the teller’s story. You are the custodian of a gift to others. Try to place your interviews in an appropriate archive so that they will be preserved. And certainly, once you have created a story from interviews, make sure that those whose words you have incorporated are the first to hear it and judge its truth.

You also have a legal obligation. According to copyright law, the words of your interviewees are automatically protected for their lifetimes plus 70

years. Unless you have a signed release for every interview, you cannot legally use its words in any way. Don't forget this step!

## **Here are some of my favorite tips for the interviewing process:**

### **1. Before you go:**

- A. Do as much background research as you can on your topic and your teller, and let this research help you develop topics for the interview.
- B. Make an appointment, even with a family member or old friend. Set the time (and a quiet place) so that you won't be interrupted. Discuss your project in advance in some detail, to enlist collaboration and to start your teller's memory working. Make sure it's understood that you'll be bringing a recorder (if you expect to record the interview).
- C. Practice with your recording equipment until its use is second nature and test it before you leave for the interview.

### **2. The first interview:**

Don't be in a hurry to buckle down and record. Get acquainted (if you're interviewing a stranger). Exchange stories. (Before the interview, you can tell the teller about yourself, even though your own stories should not be part of the interview proper.) Get comfortable. Talk about your project; make sure that it's understood that you are planning to tell some of the teller's stories, and explain that at the end of the interview you'll be asking for a signed release to permit this.

### **3. Beginning the interview:**

Put a verbal "label" on the recording, in case other labels disappear: Today is Tuesday, May 8, 2018, and this is Jo Radner talking with Barbara Rogers in her home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

I like to open an interview either with an unchallenging factual question (perhaps about names of family members, or an outline of events) or with

a “grand tour” question — simple and broad, to signal to the teller that you are interested in expansive answers. For a life history interview, for example,

- D. Can you tell me about your family?
- E. What was your childhood like?

For an interview focused on a particular topic, often a question about beginnings will create a “story” frame of mind and invite drama:

- F. What was it like to start a foster home?
- G. How did you happen to choose public advocacy as your career?

#### 4. General interviewing principles and strategies:

- H. Cluster questions logically, beginning with simple, uncontroversial matters. Save more complex or sensitive questions for the end, when you have developed good rapport.
- I. If you have a question list, never feel obliged to stick to it in the interview! Listen sensitively, instead, and follow up on the areas your teller is most drawn to. You may discover fascinating topics you had not anticipated — and, equally important, you will communicate your sincere interest in your teller’s knowledge. Think of every question you plan to ask as a “starter question” – a possible lead into discovery and conversation — rather than as a goal or an assignment.
- J. Ask mostly “open” rather than data-seeking questions to keep the interview flowing and to invite reflection, stories, and more meaningful answers. A good interview will be a mixture of these types, with open questions predominating.
  - a. **data-seeking:** asking for facts; yes/no answers; one “right” answer. [When did you work for the paper? Did you enjoy it?]

- b. open:** can be answered in different ways, invites depth and detail. [Can you tell me about your work for the paper?]

Probing for facts may derail an interview, undermining the teller's self-confidence and interrupting the flow of memories. Better to jot such queries down on a pad as you listen, and then come back to them at the end of the interview to fill in the gaps.

### **Here are some good ways to begin open questions:**

1. Tell me about...
2. What was it like to...
3. Can you describe...
4. In what ways...
5. How...
6. Describe a typical day in your life when you were...
7. What stands out for you when you remember...

### **Follow-up "bait" for stories:**

8. Tell me about the first time you...
9. Did that ever happen to you?
10. Can you give me an example of that?
11. What was the worst/proudest/happiest/most frightening... [fill in appropriate superlative]

Rely on silence. Allow the teller to pause and collect memories — don't feel you need to fill in the silent moments with talk. Give freedom to reminisce, to organize stories. Often silence — with an attentive, interested expression — is the best follow-up "question."

Don't interrupt, even if you are burning to ask something. Your interruption may block important information, and is likely to send the message that the teller is not giving you the kind of answers you want. Tellers often respond to interruptions by shortening their answers and withdrawing somewhat from engagement in the interview. Jot the question on your notepad and come back to it later.

An interview is not a dialogue. Avoid telling your own stories during the interview (“that reminds me of...,” “I knew someone who...”). Instead, if you feel you have had experiences that help you relate to what the teller is telling you, let this understanding guide you in selecting follow-up questions. And share your stories after the taped interview ends.

Do at least one follow-up interview. As you transcribe and review your first interview, you will find more questions, and meanwhile, your teller's memory, stimulated by the first meeting, will still be churning out new stories. Follow-up interviews are rich experiences.

Write a real thank-you note!

### **Recommended books:**

Beck, Jane C., ed. *Vermont Recollections: Sifting Memories through the Interview Process*. Northeast Folklore 20 (1995).

Various interviewers present accounts of their research with storytellers, singers, workers, family members. Good range of styles and experiences.

Gluck, Sherna Berger, and Daphne Patai, eds. *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York & London: Routledge, 1991.

Essays exploring the nuances of doing women's oral history, listening to hear women's perspectives accurately, responding to cues that can lead to more meaningful interviews.

MacKay, Nancy, Mary Kay Quinlan, and Barbara W. Sommer. *Community Oral History Toolkit*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013.

Five volumes, each focused on a different stage of conducting a community oral history project: (1) Introduction; (2) Planning; (3) Managing; (4) Interviewing; and (5) After the Interview. Good attention to ethical considerations and best practices as defined by the Oral History Association.

McKirdy, Carol. *Practicing Oral History with Immigrant Narrators*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015.

Sensitive and practical guide to the special considerations necessary for working with immigrant communities.

Polking, Kirk. *Writing Family Histories and Memoirs*. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, 1995.

A marvelous stimulus to all kinds of memoir and personal writing, covering topics from initial motivations and research to the writing and publishing process. Includes excellent examples and inspiring questions, as well as practical how-to information on research, organization, keeping the project going, and writing style.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History. Vol. 15, Twayne's Oral History Series*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.

A complete guide for the professional oral historian as well as the beginner, including practical advice on starting a project, interviewing, research and writing, videotaping, preserving oral histories, teaching and presenting oral history. Includes sample release forms and a thorough bibliography, not only of sources about the field of oral history, but also of oral histories of various communities and eras.

Zusman, Angela. *Story Bridges: A Guide to Conducting Intergenerational Oral History Projects*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2010.

Clear, inspiring, thorough, and practical guide.

## Recommended web resources:

- **Oral History in the Digital Age**

Curated by Doug Boyd of Michigan State University, OHDA is the go-to site for best practices in collecting, curating, and disseminating oral history. Essays, resources, advice, examples, and a marvelous “Ask Doug” site to help choose equipment.

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>

- **Vermont Folklife Center**

The Center has made preservation of the spoken word the core of its endeavors, and the VFC archive now comprises over 3,800 taped interviews, which have been transcribed and electronically indexed.

<http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/>

- **Oral History Association**

The national professional organization. Web site offers resources, notices of forthcoming events and publications, guidelines, memberships, etc.

<http://www.oralhistory.org/>

- **UCLA Oral History Program**

Excellent site, with manual, life history interview outline, etc.

<http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/index.html>

- **StoryCorps**

A project to instruct and inspire people to record each others' stories in sound and to create a national oral history archive.

Includes “Great Questions” and an interesting “Question Generator.”

<http://storycorps.org/great-questions/>



- **Veterans History Project** (American Folklife Center, Library of Congress)

Information about the AFC's national project to collect oral histories from veterans, including collection kits with forms, releases, and instructions. Excellent suggestions for interview questions. Well-presented stories.

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>

- **Karen Chace's Oral History Resource List**

Karen's generous, well-researched list of electronic resources for storytellers includes a terrific page of oral history links. These include many sites helpful to teachers or to others who train young people for intergenerational projects, as well as abundant excellent examples of oral histories, many with audio.

<http://www.storybug.net/links/oralhistory.html>



**Jo Radner** (Lovell, Maine) has been studying, teaching, telling, and collecting stories most of her life, and has performed for almost 40 years, from Maine to Hawaii to Finland. Committed to strengthening communities by helping them find, shape, and present their stories, she conducts oral history projects and workshops for organizations, families, and individuals. Her second CD, *Burnt into Memory: How Brownfield Faced the Fire*, is a performance based on oral histories she gathered from people who experienced the destructive 1947 fire in western Maine. She is past president of the National Storytelling Network and the American Folklore Society.

© Jo Radner



[nestorytelling.org](http://nestorytelling.org)