

Southern Oral History Program

A Practical Guide to Oral History

Revised July 2022

Table of Contents

SOHP Mission	3
Before You Begin.....	5
Designing an Interview Guide.....	6
Oral History Interviewing.....	6
Ten Tips for Interviewers	6
Equipment & Technical Guidelines	14
Description of Interview Forms	15
SOHP Interview Consent & Release Form	16
Biographical Form	18
Sample Field Notes.....	20
Writing Abstracts for SOHP.	22
Sample Abstract	25

MISSION

"You don't have to be famous for your life to be history."

Nell Sigmon, who spent her adult life sewing gloves in North Carolina textile factories, said so in 1979. Oral histories—structured conversations with people about their lives and experiences—remind us of the extraordinary significance of ordinary lives and guide our efforts to seek out, record, preserve, and understand the history of the American south.

Oral history allows us to explore the private dimensions of public histories and events; to add new voices to the historical record; and to track the creation and re-creation of historical memory. It helps us build bridges between generations and between the university and the community; to inspire cutting edge scholarship on the south; and to interpret history for the public in creative new forms.

Since 1974, we have collected 6,000 interviews with southerners—from mill workers to civil rights leaders to a future president of the United States. Made available to the public through UNC's Southern Historical Collection, these oral histories capture the humanity that brings history to life. In addition to building and managing one of the biggest oral history collections in the nation, we maintain an active research, teaching, and community engagement program.

Our goals at the SOHP are to:

- Create an unparalleled archive of sound recordings documenting life in the 20th- and 21st-century south.
- Produce publications and documentaries that offer a fresh understanding and promote cutting-edge scholarship on the modern south.
- Attract and support exceptional students, provide them with hands-on, original research opportunities, and encourage them to combine scholarship with public service.
- Make history accessible through workshops, presentations, collaborations with public schools, with an emphasis on understanding the roots of current issues.

Before You Begin

Questions to ask yourself before you begin an oral history project:

1. What subject you want to investigate?
2. What are your goals in taking on this project? What do you want this project to do?
3. What do the people you are interviewing get from this project?
4. What are you doing to do with the interviews?
5. What kinds of materials will the project generate? (audio recordings, film, photographs, supplemental documents)?
6. Are there any ethical issues you need to address before getting started? Is this the right project for you to be doing?

With these broad questions answered, you can more easily tackle the nuts and bolts:

1. Who do you want to interview? How many interviews do you want to conduct?
2. What kind of help are you going to need with this project (collaborators)?
3. What equipment do you need?
4. What is your timeline?
5. What kind of background research do you need to conduct before getting started?
6. Do you need money to do the project? Where might you get it?

Designing An Interview Guide

Oral History Interviewing

An oral history interview involves complex social interactions; no rigid formula can guarantee success. Respect for the OH MY GOD SANCTITY? complexity of human lives, intelligence, empathy, flexibility – all these personal qualities influence the interview situation. The following suggestions are meant to facilitate this process.

PREPARATION

1. Begin by defining your project. Only then can you decide whom to interview and what to ask.
2. In order to handle the problem of interview bias, you must explore your own assumptions, values, and attitudes. An interview does not call for an impossible neutrality. It does demand self-awareness and self-discipline.
3. Before conducting your first interview, do background research with reading and manuscript research. Oral history substituted for other methods of historical research.
4. Select interviewees who are able and willing to be interviewed. They may be chosen because their lives illuminate certain historical themes or because they have special knowledge of or occupy a unique position in a historical event, movement, or institution.
5. Either over the phone, in person, or in writing (preferably followed by a letter or email of confirmation), ask permission to conduct the interview and explain its purpose. Provide a description of the project and explain what the process of an interviews entails.
6. This is a good time to make certain that the narrator understands that the materials will be deposited in an archive with their consent and what that means. As far as you know, include the possibility of how this interview may be used outside of the archive (broadcasts, podcasts, K-12 lesson plans, documentaries, etc.)
7. Mention the consent form with your interviewee prior to conducting the interview. As a good practice have the interviewee sign the consent form *after* the interview is over.
8. Draw up a list of the topics and questions to be explored. You will want to refer to these questions during the interview, but you should not feel constrained by them.
9. Choose a time and place for the interview. Pick a setting that will maximize the participant's comfort and avoid places where you will have to contend with distractions.
10. Before the interview, become extremely familiar with your equipment. Practice recording, check and double-check your settings, and be prepared to address problems, like low batteries, when the interview happens. The more comfortable and familiar you are with your equipment, the less attention you'll draw to it and the more comfortable your narrator will be.

THE INTERVIEW

1. Set aside at least two hours to set up equipment, answer any questions, and conduct the interview.

2. Try to find a quiet space for the interview, but your interviewee's comfort is of prime importance. A little background noise is small price to pay for an otherwise good interview. But when possible, avoid buzzing refrigerators and the like.
3. Before beginning, make sure your interviewee has what they need. Ask them to sign two copies of your consent forms and sign them yourself. When they're ready, turn on the recorder.
4. As you start, introduce yourself and the participant, the date, the location, of your interview. Thank the participant.
5. Interviews may be autobiographical or topical in focus, but we employ a "life history" approach: For all interviews, include basic information regarding birthplace, date of birth, and family of origin. This creates context for the interview and comfort for the interviewee. Specific dates (month, day, year of own birth or children's birth) are less important than a sense of chronology; avoid embarrassing the interviewee by asking them to recall dates.
6. Seek a balance between allowing participants to express the logic of their lives as they understand them while maintaining a sense of the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions to elicit information that pertains to your area of study.
7. Listen carefully. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the narrator time to think, to continue after a pause. Critically evaluate the flow of information so that you can ask for explanation when needed.
8. Your questions should be open-ended and should not supply a list of alternative answers. Avoid asking several questions in the guise of one.
9. Within each topic, it may be helpful to begin with a broad question, then ask successively narrow and detailed questions as the conversation proceeds.
10. When a narrator seems unwilling or unable to provide certain information, try approaching the topic from another angle, indicating contradictory information that you have obtained from other sources; alternatively, wait until later in the interview to return to the topic. When appropriate, mention that it will be possible to restrict the interview according to the narrator's wishes.
11. Ordinarily an interview session should last no more than 90 minutes. Be alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Conduct a long interview in separate sessions if needed.
12. Thank the participant and reiterate your next steps and what they should expect from you next, and when.
13. Do not leave the interview without a signed consent form!

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

1. It's a good idea to write up your field notes immediately after the session; even if you're tired, which is normal, try to jot down or record some thoughts while they're fresh. The final version of your field notes should include: the names of yourself and the interview participant; the date, time, and location of the interview, and a description of the interview itself. Describe the setting, other people present; any pertinent events that happened prior to, during, or after the interview; observations that were not captured in the audio recording; and your honest reflections on whatever dynamics occurred during the visit.
2. Send a written thank you to the interviewee.
3. Label your recordings, notes, and any other materials consistently.

4. Decide how you will store and organize your recordings, transcripts, copies of consent forms, and other information.
5. Listen to the recording. What went well? What can be improved?. Reflecting on these questions will help you learn from your mistakes and refine your interviewing skills.
6. Decide whether or not a follow-up interview will be necessary. It is often helpful to conduct follow-up sessions after you have analyzed the content of the interview and as your understanding of your research question evolves.

Ten Tips for Interviewers

1. Choose a quiet locale and properly position your microphones.
2. Ask one question at a time. State your questions as directly as possible.
3. Ask open-ended questions—questions that begin with “why, how, where, what kind of,” etc.
4. Start with non-controversial questions. One good place to begin, for instance, is with the narrator’s childhood, or where they grew up. For example: “I know you grew up on a farm in Fleetwood. Can you talk about that a little bit?”
5. Understand that periods of silence will occur. These are useful periods of reflection and recollection for your narrator.
6. Avoid interrupting the narrator.
7. If the narrator strays away from the topic in which you are interested, don’t panic. Sometimes the best parts of the interview come about this way. If you feel the digression has gone too far afield, gently steer the narrator back to the topic with your next question.
8. Be respectful of the narrator. Use body language to show you are interested in what he or she has to say.
9. After the interview, thank the narrator for sharing his or her experiences. Also send a written thank-you note.
10. Don’t use the interview to show off your knowledge, charm, or other attributes. Remember, good interviewers never shine—only their interviews do.

Remember

An interview is about building a relationship with the person you are interviewing over the course of the pre-interview process, during the interview, and after the interview. The way you build that relationship is showing interest in and thoughtfulness about their life. You are not there to gather something; you are there to try to understand someone’s life and how they recollect and understand it.

EQUIPMENT & TECHNICAL GUIDELINES

- You will be assigned a Zoom audio recorder kit. You will either receive a Zoom H5 or Zoom H4. If anything happens to the equipment in your possession, you will be responsible for replacing it.

- Make sure you spend plenty of time exploring how to use the equipment well before your first interview. Practice recording! Make sure you check your gear the night before an interview, and the morning before.
- Within each kit, there is a pair of headphones, a tripod for the recorder, a set of rechargeable batteries and accompanying charger, a 16GB SD flash memory card, a battery adapter, and windscreen for the microphone.
- With a 16GB flash card at the preferred recording settings (already set on the Zoom, so you don't have to worry about it!), you will have 8 hours and 20 minutes of recording time (WAV format at a rate of 24bit/48kHz).
- Use your smartphone to take a few strong portraits of your narrator. Allow them time to get camera-ready. Take the images outside in a natural light, or near a window with natural light. Take horizontal images for portraits. Collect a few images of the environment and landscape of your narrator. Consider taking images of your narrator's archival and personal photographs if they are sharing with you.
- If you really want to get into the world of audio equipment, you can learn more by visiting [Transom](#), which is a site for public radio producers but has great resources for recording audio interviews.

INSERT SECTION ON SETTING UP A REMOTE RECORDING IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

INTERVIEW FORMS

- **Interview Consent & Release Agreement** - This form must be signed for any interview to be used and deposited. It covers consent and permissions, and it can grant a license for use or convey rights, title, interest, and copyright. The interview subject should not sign the consent form until after the interview has taken place. Be sure to obtain the narrator's contact information on the consent form. No restrictions are required but be prepared to discuss restriction options.
- **Biographical Form** – A biographical form provides valuable information to potential researchers. Starting an interview with a biographical form is a good way to get the narrator talking about familiar subjects and become at ease. In addition, the biographical form gives narrators an opportunity to self-identify their race, ethnicity, and gender orientation. Be sure to gather correct contact information.
- **Field Notes** - Field Notes cover all aspects of the interview that a potential researcher could not glean from a transcript or the audio recording. This includes background noises and interruptions; personal interactions such as non-verbal cues and emotional behavior; personality characteristics of the narrator that affected the interview; and finally, any general observations the interviewer believes are important for future researchers to know.
- **Abstract** - The abstract is the first place a potential researcher will consult to find out the content of the interview. As such, it should be a written paragraph that covers all the major topics and subjects of the interview in chronological order of the audio recording. It should be clear and the information should be easy to access. Proper nouns and acronyms should be accurate and spelled out completely.

TRANSCRIPT—SCOTT DOUGLAS

Interviewee: Scott Douglas
Interviewer: Kimberly Hill
Interview Date: August 8, 2006
Location: Birmingham, AL
Length: 02:07:00

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Kimberly Hill: This is Tuesday, August 8, 2006. I'm Kimberly Hill from the Southern Oral History Program talking with Mr. Scott Douglas of Greater Birmingham Ministries [GBM]. How are you doing sir?

Scott Douglas: Good morning. How you doing?

KH: Great. Thank you for meeting with me.

SD: Glad to. Glad you're doing this work.

KH: Before we get started on the questions about the work that you are doing with GBM, just wanted to ask you some about your childhood and what got you interested in working on behalf of the poor.

SD: Actually, we grew up in—I lived in Nashville, Tennessee not very far from Fisk University. My family was quite poor but not desperately poor. My father was a delivery man, well a “everything man” for a hardware store. This was back in the '40s and '50s where hardware stores were called feed stores. People, even in the cities, had things like rabbits and chickens in their back yard near downtown Nashville. It was a feed store, rabbit feed, chicken feed. I used to love to go down there and run my hands through the rabbit food pellets. My

father delivered hay to urban people, coal and ice, kindling. He was the sole employee of this business man. As a matter of fact, this business man moved three times, I remember, each time to a bigger house in the suburbs off the labor of my father. My father stayed in a house that he rented from his boss. When my father died many years later the business man put my mother out of the house and sold it. I grew up very conscious of racism. I went to Pearl High School. I would see John Lewis and the Fisk students go by our high school, Pearl High School, on the way downtown for demonstrations. I only went to one. The police beat our—not beat, yeah, actually beat but she got away—our head cheerleader with a baton right in front of the police station.

KH: So there were a lot of—there were a whole group of high school students there then?

SD: Yes. This was during the marches in the city, in the '60s we were in like 10th grade. Tenth, 11th grade. That's what made me aware because in Black Nashville, as a child, we were kind of protected from racism. My neighborhood was so thoroughly African American that we never came in contact with whites on a regular basis unless we went downtown. Right across the street from Fisk University is Hubbard Hospital, Meharry Medical School. I never saw a white doctor until I went to college. You could buy all your food, get all your medical care, go to school and never have any interactions with people who weren't Black. I kind of learned an idea about justice and fairness from my family. I also learned fear. When Dr. King was starting to come to town I was in the barber one time getting my hair cut, and I never heard grown Black men in the neighborhood you respected sound so fearful. They were discussing the fact that if King kept messing around he's going to make the good white people mad. They were afraid of King upsetting the apple cart. There

was something I found later to be quite untrue, that I was learning to fear people I had never met. I would learn to fear poor whites and learning to love rich whites. It was the poor people that were out to get you, that kind of stuff.

KH: Do you mean you didn't have much experience with poor whites but you were still afraid of them anyway?

SD: Yeah, just because of the conversations that would happen. I had had some experiences with poor whites because on the edge of my neighborhood, especially when I was very young like first or second grade, there were poor whites we used to play with. By the time I got to sixth, seventh grade they had moved out. Nashville was like Birmingham. There was on the edges of Black communities there'd be a white neighborhood but they weren't interspersed within, that kind of a thing. In Murfreesboro, Tennessee where my grandfather's farm was located, there was a white farm family next door to us, next farm over. We played together but it's around eleven or twelve white kids disappeared.

KH: As in moving away?

SD: No, no. They wouldn't come play over.

KH: Right, right.

SD: I learned later it was a Southern phenomenon that as white kids approached adolescence, boys and girls and all that, people disappeared. Anyway, then I graduated from high school. My best experience about being poor in Nashville was even as early as third or fourth grade you began to notice serious economic differences.

BIOGRAPHICAL FORM

Full Name: _____

Gender: _____

Preferred Pronouns: _____

Race: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Phone Number: _____ (home/work/cell)

Preferred method of contact? (Best way to receive interview materials):

Birthdate:

Birthplace:

Spouse's/Partner's name:

Children/Next of kin:

Work/Occupational Experience:

FIELD NOTES—CATHERINE MALLEY

Interviewee: Catherine Malley
Interviewer: Jennifer Donnally
Date: September 25, 2000
Location: Catherine Maley's home, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
Length: 02:15:00

INTERVIEWEE: Catherine Maley is Professor Emerita of French and Romance Linguistics at the University of North Carolina. Born December 3, 1934 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Maley was educated in private Catholic schools and earned a degree in English from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis St. Paul. After teaching at a local high school for several years, she went on to receive her PhD from the University of Michigan in Romance languages. Upon graduating, she was appointed the first female assistant professor in the French language department in 1970. She was on the ad hoc committee of the faculty council that recommended the establishment of a Committee on the Status of Women in 1971. Then, Chancellor Taylor appointed her chair of the first Committee on the Status of Women in 1972. She was former Director of the UNC Year and Semester programs in Montpellier, France and former Associate Dean of the Graduate School. She is the author of *The Pronouns of Address in Modern Standard French* (1974); *Hablemos Temas contemporaneos para conversar o escribir* (with M.A. Salgado) (1976); *Dans le vent* (4 editions: 1980, 1985, 1990, 1999); and co-editor (with L.D.King) of the *Proceedings of the XIII Annual Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages* (1985). Currently, she is the President of the Institut Français de Washington.

INTERVIEWER: Jennifer Donnally is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently completing a dissertation concerning the rise of the pro-life movement in North Carolina and Massachusetts. Jennifer is a graduate research assistant for the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview was conducted in the living room of Catherine Maley's home, a comfortable venue. There was one brief interruption for a phone call and bathroom break. Several background noises occurred throughout, including a squirrel running into the window, police sirens in the background, air running through a vent, and the brush of a hand against a microphone. The interview lasted five and half hours, of which the interviewer only recorded two hours. On the whole, Male

was gracious and willing to talk and threw the interviewer off by jumping into important topics like the Committee on the Status of Women while the interviewer set up. Thus, some of the content of the interview was covered twice during the actual interview. It should be noted that this interview was part of a series of interviews on pioneering women faculty and administrators at the University of North Carolina.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP's Marantz recorder #16.

SOHP Abstracts Tips and Guidelines (revised 2022)

A good oral history interview deserves a short, well-written, abstract. The abstract is how people access interviews in searches, especially for interviews that do not have transcripts. The interviewer should write the abstract with the various research communities in mind (scholars, students, community members, family and community historians). A good abstract does not mislead by giving all topics equal weight. Analysis requires examination of the entire interview and judicious selection of those parts of the interview that are most substantive and meaningful.

Tips for Writing Abstracts

- Keep the abstract to 250 words or less.

Wordy: *Born and raised in the South, Adele Clark was a founding member of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia and the League of Women Voters in Virginia. Clark first became involved in the suffrage movement in 1909, when she became the secretary of the Equal Suffrage League following its formation. Because of her position in the organization, Clark went to the National American Suffrage Association convention in Washington, D.C., in 1910 as an alternate delegate. (75 words)*

Condensed: *Adele Clark, founding member of the Equal Suffrage League (1909) and its successor the Virginia League of Women Voters (1920), attended the 1910 National American Suffrage Association convention in Washington, D.C., as an alternate delegate. (35 words)*

- Get straight to the point. Answer *who, what, when, and where* in the first two sentences.

Aaron and Jenny Cavanaugh, long-time Duplin County, N.C. residents, lost their antiques business and turkey farm in the flooding that accompanied Hurricane Floyd in 1999. They spend much of this interview describing their response to the flood and their efforts to rebuild afterwards.

- Keep biographical information to a minimum. The abstract should not attempt to tell an interviewee's life history from cradle to grave.
- Give the full name of the interviewee(s) on first use, then use the last name of the interviewee throughout the rest of the abstract.
- On first use, spell out acronyms or initialisms (e.g., STFU exclusively for Southern Tenant Farmers' Union; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for SNCC, etc.).

ABSTRACT (Example)—REBECCA JULY

Interviewee: Rebecca Judy
Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson
Date: May 10, 2011
Location: Knoxville, TN
Length: 01:08:00

Rebecca Judy was born in 1940 in Putnam County, Tennessee. She worked for forty-one years as a social worker in East Tennessee, and she was instrumental in the Project Against Sexual Abuse of Appalachian Children and also worked as clinic supervisor at the Sexual Assault Center. The interview begins with a discussion of Judy's childhood and her family. She was the first female in her family to graduate from college; she attended Tennessee Tech University and graduate in 1962. She discusses moving to Sevierville, Tennessee and working in social services there, specifically advocating for girls in juvenile court. In 1965 she entered the University of Tennessee for graduate school in Social Work. She discusses how she navigated graduate school at the same time that she was starting a family. She discusses researching the *Gault* decision. She also began taking women's studies classes. She describes the barriers she faced to getting into law school and the limited options for women professionals. She describes her work at Child and Family Services in Knoxville, which included problem pregnancy referrals. She then talks about her participation in the reproductive rights movement and her role in educating the public about child abuse and rape, including the establishment of counseling sessions for women and children who had been sexually assaulted or sexually abused. She describes the messages that she received from the women's movement, her participation in consciousness-raising groups, how she defines feminism, the relationship of the civil rights and women's movements, and how she viewed women's liberation.