Southern Oral History Program

A Practical Guide to Oral History

Revised November 2023

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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 and stories 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 its wider communities; to inspire cutting edge scholarship on the South; and to interpret history for academic and public audiences in creative new forms.

Since 1974, we have collected 6,500 interviews—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, and 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 do you want to investigate? How will oral history support the exploration of this topic?

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. How will you build an accountable partnership with your project collaborators and those who share their story with you as narrators?

5. Are there any ethical issues you need to address before getting started? Is this the right project for you to be doing?

6. What are you going to do with the interviews?

7. What kinds of materials will the project generate? (audio recordings, film, photographs, supplemental documents)?

8. What will you do with the materials you create such as audio recordings, transcripts, images, etc.? Would you like to preserve them long-term, including after the project ends?

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?

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?

7. What is your plan for preserving and/or sharing your oral histories with your chosen audiences?

Designing An Interview Guide

An interview guide is a list of potential questions tailored to a specific oral history project. It scaffolds the interview process and helps you ensure that you are asking the questions that you know will support your project's goals. The same interview guide can be used across multiple interviews for the same oral history project.

To create your guide, first consider what type of interview you will be doing to support your project goals:

1. Life history or biographical interview, in which narrators share the story of their lives from childhood to the present. These interviews generally proceed chronologically, leaving space for new questions to emerge that draw out additional details about events and experiences of meaning and importance.
2. Topical interview, in which narrators reflect on a particular time, place, event, or issue based on a series of focused questions. These interviews proceed chronologically as is helpful, but are more focused on exploring in depth a specific topic or moment in time.
3. Most interviews are a combination of the two!

Once you've decided which kind of interview you will be preparing for, you can draft a list of questions.

Life History Interviews

For life history interviews, the questions can be broken into chronological categories like: Childhood/growing up, Education, and Work. Based on what you know or have researched about your narrator/s, you can add additional categories, such as:

- religion/spirituality
- ritual
- domestic life
- friendship
- holidays/celebrations
- family life
- children
- dating and partnership
- sickness/illness

Remember to create open-ended questions, so that the narrator will feel invited to respond at length, rather than with a simple "yes" or "no." Some examples of open ended questions include:

- Who raised you? What was your growing up experience like?
- What was your first job? How did your career or job skills change over the years?
- What was school like for you?
- How has the world changed since you were young? How has your profession or community changed?

- Who had the greatest influence on you as a child or as an adult and why was that person important to you?

Topical Interviews

For topical-leaning interviews, think about your project goals that you developed with your collaborators and what questions will help you to answer the big questions that drive your project. For a project about the relationship between independent media and US social movements, you might ask about specific podcasts, videos, magazines, radio shows, and/or news sites that emerged or became popular at particular historical moments.

Research the major national or global events that happened during a narrator's lifetime and add any relevant questions related to your narrator's life experiences and your project focus:

- How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your relationships with your friends and family? How did it influence your work life?
- What were you doing when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center fell on 9/11 and how did it impact you and people close to you?
- What do you remember about your life during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq? How did it affect you and those around you?

Tips for creating questions

Many questions fall into one of three broad categories: descriptive, interpretative, and reflective.

Descriptive

Ask the narrator to describe and give context:

- What did you see?
- Where was X?
- Who was there?
- What were people wearing?
- How did it smell?
- What was it like?

Interpretative

Ask the narrator to explain something:

- Why was that important to you?
- How did you feel about that?
- How do you explain why that happened?
- Why were those events related?
- How did something begin or end?
- What got you involved?

Reflective

Ask the narrator to think back and assess:

- How has that impacted your life/neighborhood/family?
- What was the best part?
- What did you learn?
- What do you want people to know?
- How have you changed?

Additional resources

- The Southern Historical Collection (SHC) at UNC-Chapel Hill Libraries has created a set of sample oral history questions available as a printable card deck.
- For more about deciding on where and how to preserve and/or share your oral histories, check out this blog post via the SHC.

Oral History Interviewing

An oral history interview involves complex social interactions; no rigid formula can guarantee success. Respect for the 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 positionality (e.g. related to race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and citizenship), along with the assumptions, values, and attitudes you bring to the table. 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. Genealogical research using a platform like Ancestry.com can also be helpful for some interviews, so you have a sense of a narrator's family history. Oral history is a process that compliments other methods of historical research.
4. Select narrators who are interested in being 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. Let your narrator know why they are being asked to participate in or collaborate with the project. Also ask them how this project might support them in their work or goals, whether personal or organizational.
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 interview 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.). Share the name of the archive you have opted to partner with to preserve your oral histories, or, if you have chosen to not archive your project materials with a traditional archive, share your plan for preserving and/or sharing materials generated from the interview.
7. Mention the consent form to your narrator prior to conducting the interview. Make it clear the narrator will receive a copy of the audio recording and transcript from their interview, and that, upon reviewing these materials, they have the option to redact certain portions of their interview, as desired. As a good practice, have the narrator sign the consent form *after* the interview is over. Make sure they know about the goals of the larger project and how their interview will be used to support those goals.

8. A non-recorded pre-interview, which can be conducted over the phone or in person, is a short conversation or meeting to get to know the person you will be interviewing and for them to meet you. It is also a chance to talk informally about the narrator's life experiences to help you generate the best questions to ask them. You can also use that time to answer any questions they may have about the interview process.
9. Draw up an interview guide, or 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. It helps to print your guide out in advance, so you don't have to look at a phone or computer while you're conducting an interview.
10. 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 or background noise. Aim for a quiet indoor spot to conduct the interview, a place where you won't be likely to be interrupted, if possible.
11. 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 your equipment, answer any questions, and conduct the interview.
2. Try to find a quiet space for the interview, but your narrator's comfort is of prime importance. A little background noise is a small price to pay for an otherwise good interview. But, when possible, avoid buzzing refrigerators and the like.
3. Before beginning, make sure your narrator has what they need (water, comfortable chair, etc.). When they are ready, turn on the recorder.
4. As you start the recording, introduce yourself and the participant, the date, and the location of your interview. Thank the participant.
5. Interviews may be autobiographical or topical in focus, but we at the SOHP generally lean toward 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 narrator. Specific dates (month, day, year of own birth or children's birth) are less important than a sense of chronology; avoid embarrassing the narrator by asking them to recall dates.
6. Seek a balance between allowing participants to express the logic of their lives as they understand it while maintaining a sense of the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions to elicit information that pertains to your area of focus.
7. Listen carefully. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the narrator time to think and to continue after a pause. Critically evaluate the flow of information so that you can ask for an 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. Remember that you as an interviewer are there primarily to listen rather than to share your own ideas and opinions.
9. Within each topic or time period (e.g. childhood), 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 redact the interview according to the narrator's wishes. Do your best to recognize when to move on from a type of question that you sense a narrator does not want to answer.
11. Oral history interviews can evoke emotion, for both you and the narrator. While it is important for interviewers to help give narrators a sense of openness and trust in the interview process, it is also important that we as interviewers feel as safe as possible during an interview. Remember that if you as the interviewer ever start feeling unsafe, you can stop the interview at any time.
12. 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.
13. Thank the participant and reiterate your next steps and what they should expect from you next, and when.
14. Ask them to sign two copies of your consent forms (one for you and one for them) and sign them yourself. 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 narrator.
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, and have a plan for longer-term preservation and access.
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.

7. Follow through on what you promised to the narrator and make sure that you give them copies of their interview transcript and audio recording for review, along with anything else you agreed to as part of your collaboration.

Ten Tips for Interviewers

1. Choose a quiet locale and properly position your microphone.

2. Ask one question at a time. State your questions as directly as possible, and give your narrator ample time to think and to respond.

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 like eye contact to show you are interested in what they have to say.

9. After the interview, thank the narrator for sharing their 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 H4 or a Tascam. 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.

- Before an interview, make sure all your equipment is charged and remember to pack extra chargers and/or batteries.

- Consider using a backup recording device like a recording app on a smartphone or laptop computer to ensure that you have a full recording at the end of an interview if something goes wrong with your primary recording equipment.

- 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 open to 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 and has great resources for recording audio interviews.

Options for Remote Recording

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with lessons from disability activists and technological developments, have prompted a sea change in how we meet with one another, whether in-person or virtually. While this is by no means true for everyone, with the class and age-based digital divide that keeps pace with breakthroughs in new technology, many people are now comfortable setting up a conversation via Zoom, if needed.

While Zoom is a great option if you are unable to meet in-person with your narrator due to physical distance, illness, or global events like the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020-21, we still encourage in-person interviews whenever possible. In-person interviewing supports relationship-building and generally ensures a high-quality recording. But, when needed, Zoom recordings can be a strong replacement.

Take these steps to set up your Zoom interview:

1. In advance of the interview, make sure you know where your audio recording will be saved when you hit the "record" button on Zoom. Find the folder on your computer for the Zoom application that holds all of your Zoom recordings:

    - Windows: C:\Users\[Username]\Documents\Zoom.
    - Mac: /Users/[Username]/Documents/Zoom.
    - Linux: home/[Username]/Documents/Zoom.

2. Decide whether you will do a video, an audio-only recording, or both. You can limit your interview to just an audio recording in the Zoom "settings" panel. If you do nothing, Zoom will automatically create both a video and an audio-only recording.

3. Make sure you are logged into Zoom as the host of the session, or you will not be able to record to your local computer or Zoom Cloud account.

4. Don't forget to hit the "record" button! When you've completed the interview, stop the recording and look for the finalized recording/s in the Zoom folder on your computer (or in your Zoom Cloud, depending on your recording settings). Don't forget to rename the file (e.g. Lewis, John_interviewerfirstname-lastname_date_filetype).

Note

To record an oral history interview using Zoom, you will need access to a paid Zoom account; otherwise, your interview will be limited to the 40-minute paywall, something that will not support a focused, comfortable interview for you and the narrator.

Additional resources

- For more information about Zoom recording, check out the Zoom Support recording webpage.
- Zencastr is a popular podcast recording platform for high-quality audio recording that you may want to check out.

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 narrator 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 the transcript or 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.

Additional resources

Check out the sample interview transcript and interview forms on the following pages.

TRANSCRIPT—SCOTT DOUGLAS

Narrator:	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

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

NARRATOR: 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, Maley 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 Cavenaugh, 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 a narrator's life history.

- Give the full name of the narrator(s) on first use, then use the last name of the narrator throughout the rest of the abstract.

- On first use, spell out acronyms or initialisms (e.g. Southern Tenant Farmers' Union for STFU; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for SNCC, etc.).

ABSTRACT (Example)—REBECCA JULY

Narrator:	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.