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What is Oral History? Oral history is a significant method of historical research that involves collecting and preserving the personal experiences, memories, and stories of individuals or groups. This approach emphasizes the importance of personal testimonies and first-hand accounts in understanding the past. Oral history interviews typically involve documenting conversations between historians and individuals who have lived through significant events, experiences, or periods, allowing for a unique and intimate understanding of the past. In this article, we will delve into the world of oral history, exploring its significance, principles, and applications. Key Principles of Oral History Before diving into the world of oral history, it is essential to understand the core principles that underpin this research method. These principles include: Empathy and Understanding: Oral historians must strive to create a safe and non-judgmental space where interviewees feel comfortable sharing their stories. Empathy and understanding are crucial in building trust and encouraging participants to open up about their experiences. Accuracy and Authenticity: Oral historians must ensure that the collected data is accurate and authentic, while also being mindful of the potential biases and limitations of the interview process. Respect and Sensitive Interviewing: Interviewers must approach sensitive topics with sensitivity and respect, being aware of the potential emotional weight and impact on the interviewee. Types of Oral History Projects Oral history projects can take many forms, depending on the research question, scope, and focus. Some common types of oral history projects include: Community-based projects: Focusing on the experiences and stories of community members, these projects often involve collecting interviews from individuals who have lived in a specific area or have been affected by local events. Biographical research: Centered around the life story of a particular individual, these projects often involve extensive interviews and research on a persons life, experiences, and accomplishments. Thematic research: Exploring a specific theme or topic, such as historical events, social movements, or cultural phenomena, these projects involve collecting and analyzing oral testimonies related to the topic. Benefits of Oral History Oral history offers numerous benefits, including: Accessibility: Oral history allows for the collection of information from individuals who may not have left written records or were not previously documented. Personalization: Oral history provides a unique, personal perspective on historical events and experiences. Empathy and Understanding: Oral histories offer a way to connect with the past, fostering empathy and understanding between generations. Challenges of Oral History While oral history has many benefits, it is not without its challenges. Some common obstacles include: Selectivity: Individuals may not remember or recount their experiences accurately, leading to potential inaccuracies. Bias: Interviewers may unintentionally introduce biases, and participants may bring their own biases to the table. Time and Resource Constraints: Conducting oral history research can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Applications of Oral History Oral history has wide-ranging applications across various fields, including: Academia and Research: Oral history provides primary source materials, offering insights into historical events, social phenomena, and cultural movements. Museum Exhibitions and Public Programming: Oral history interviews can be used to create engaging exhibitions, educational programs, and cultural events. Preservation and Archiving: Oral history collections are essential for preserving the experiences and stories of individuals and communities. Conclusion Oral history is a vital tool for understanding the past, offering a unique perspective on historical events and experiences. By understanding the principles, challenges, and benefits of oral history, researchers and scholars can harness its potential to create meaningful connections between the past, present, and future. As the importance of oral history continues to grow, it is essential to recognize its significance in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, fostering empathy, and promoting cross-generational understanding. References: Table: Timeline of Oral History Year Event Description1930s American Folklore Society Founded, with a focus on oral tradition and storytelling1940s WWII Oral histories collected for historical documentation and preservation1960s Civil Rights Movement Oral history projects emerge, documenting the experiences of activists and participants1980s Digital Technology Omnidirectional video recorders and digital audio files become available, revolutionizing oral history collection and archiving2000s Online Platforms and Social Media Oral histories online, using blogs, podcasts, and social media platforms for dissemination and public engagement Footnotes: [1] World Oral Conference, 2022. The Power of Oral History: Preserving the Past and Shaping the Future. [2] National Oral History Association (NOHA). (2019). About NOHA. Retrieved from [3] Sheftman, A., & Schafer, D. W. (Eds.). (2018). Oral History in the Digital Age. London: Routledge. Your friends have asked us these questions - Check out the answers! Oral history is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information primary source material from personal recollections through planned recorded interviews. Below are suggestions for anyone looking to start recording oral histories based on best practices used in the Smithsonian Oral History Program at the Smithsonian Institution Archives.Click here for a printout of our How to Do Oral History Guide.What is Oral History?The Six Rs of Oral History InterviewingPreparing for Oral History InterviewsHow to Ask Questions in Oral History InterviewsSuggestions for Recording Oral History InterviewsSuggested Topics/Questions for Oral History InterviewsAfter the Oral History InterviewReadings and Online ResourcesWhat is Oral History?Oral history is a technique for generating and preserving original, historically interesting information primary source material from personal recollections through planned recorded interviews. This method of interviewing is used to preserve the voices, memories and perspectives of people in history. Its a tool we can all use to engage with and learn from family members, friends, and the people we share space with in an interview that captures their unique history and perspective in their own words. Oral history stems from the tradition of passing information of importance to the family or tribe from one generation to the next. In the United States, the Oral History Association connects oral historians and provides a broad range of information on oral history.Technique: The methodology of oral history can be adapted to many different types of projects from family history to academic research projects in many different disciplines. The interviews should usually be conducted in a one-on-one situation, although group interviews can also be effective.Sharing: In collaboration with a well-prepared and empathetic interviewer, the narrator may be able to share information that they do not realize they recall and to make associations and draw conclusions about their experience that they would not be able to produce without the interviewer.Preserving: Recording preserves the interview, in sound or video and later in transcript for use by others removed in time and/or distance from the interviewee. Oral history also preserves the ENTIRE interview, in its original form, rather than the interviewers interpretation of what was said.Original historically important information: The well-prepared interviewer will know what information is already in documents and will use the oral history interview to seek new information, clarification, or new interpretation of a historical event.Personal recollections: The interviewer should ask the narrator for first-person information. These are memories that the narrator can provide on a reliable basis, e.g., events in which they participated or witnessed or decisions in which they took part. Oral history interviews can convey personality, explain motivation, and reveal inner thoughts and perceptions.Martha Ross: The Six R's of Oral History InterviewingThe oral history interviewer should strive to create a situation in which the interviewee is able to reflect widely, to recall fully, and to associate freely on the subject of the interview, and to maintain an atmosphere in which they are willing to articulate fully those recollections.The following six considerations are basic to good oral history practice.1. RESEARCH: Thorough preparation enables the interviewer to know what questions to ask and is essential to establishing rapport with the interviewee. Research pays off during the interview, when the interviewers knowledge of names, dates, and places may jog the interviewees memory.2. RAPPORT: Good rapport is established with the interviewee by approaching them properly, informing them of the purpose of the project, and advising them of their role and their rights. A pre-interview call or visit to get acquainted and discuss procedures is recommended.3. RESTRAINT: The experienced interviewer maintains rapport by following good interview techniques: being efficient but unobtrusive with equipment, starting at the beginning and proceeding chronologically, asking open-ended questions, listening closely without interrupting, following up on details or unexpected avenues of information, challenging questionable information in a non-threatening way, and generally maintaining an atmosphere in which the interviewee feels able to respond fully and truthfully.4. RETREAT: Close each interview session by asking a deflationary question, such as an assessment of the experiences just discussed. All sessions should be planned and scheduled so that they conclude before the interviewee becomes fatigued.5. REVIEW: Interviewers should listen to their interviews soon afterwards to analyze their interviewing techniques and to pick up details to follow up on in subsequent sessions.6. RESPECT: Respect underlies every aspect of oral history respect for the interviewee as an individual, their experience, for the way they remember that experience, and for the way they are able and willing to articulate those recollections. Maintaining respect toward the individual interviewee and toward the practice of oral history interviewing is essential to success as an interviewer.NOTE: Martha Ross is the mother of oral history in the mid-Atlantic region and taught at the University of Maryland in the 1970s and 1980s.Preparing for Oral History Interviews1. Select an interviewee.2. Ask the interviewee if they are interested.3. If interviewee is interested, set up a time and place for the interview. Also request any background information the interviewee might want to provide. Check about the best place somewhere quiet where you wont be disturbed. Request at least two hours for the interview session.4. Write a follow-up email confirming plans for the interview that discusses the goals, legal rights, and how the interviews will be handled. Provide a very general list of topic areas and ask them to think about topics they would like to cover.5. Conduct basic biographical research on your interviewee. Conduct internet searches. Read publications and profiles. Ask others about topics you should cover, stories they should tell.6. Develop a chronology of the important events in their life. Develop lists of personal names and terms important in their life, such as geographic names where they traveled, names of important family or community members. Compile a folder of photographs of the interviewee and their world. These will prove invaluable in the interview when the interviewee gets confused or forgets names.7. Rework the question outline, making it relevant to this interviewee, deleting topics that dont pertain to them, and adding areas, such as organizations they were involved in, etc.8. With the equipment, PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE until you can use it in your sleep. Practice interviewing family members and friends. Then delete all the files youve created, so the recorder is at full capacity. Make sure all the settings match the instruction sheet. Make sure that you have all the necessary pieces of equipment, such as the recorder power cord and an extension cord.9. The day before the interview, confirm time and place.10. Bring with you: equipment, extension cord, cell phone (in case of equipment problems), question outline, chronology, terms, photos, etc., legal forms, extra paper for notes and a pen. Also bring throat lozenges or hard candy, in case throats get dry. If possible, bring a camera and take photograph of the interviewee at the interview.11. When you arrive, assess room for sound. Turn off equipment, close doors, and rearrange furniture into a comfortable arrangement facing each other close enough to hand photos but not too close. Set up equipment so you can monitor it constantly and discretely, without turning away from the interviewee.12. Go over the list of topic areas again and permissions again.13. Ask about any scrapbooks, news clippings, awards, etc., that they might want to bring out.How to Ask Questions in Oral History Interviews1. Find a quiet place to conduct the interview where you won't be bothered by telephones, family members, pets, traffic noise, etc. Get two glasses of water. Take a photograph. Turn off cell phones, etc.2. Explain to your interviewee what you are doing.Explain their legal rights.Explain how interview is likely to be used.Explain that they can choose what questions to answer and that the recorder can be turned off at any time.3. Ask your interviewee to sign the deed of gift and cosign it yourself if you have one.4. Use an outline of topics you wish to cover, with follow-up questions, that you have prepared in advance. Also bring photographs and a personal name and term list, and chronology.5. Start with easy questions, such as their name, where and when born, names of family members.6. Allow the interviewee to do the talking.7. Ask "open-ended" questions, such as, tell me about, describe, etc., what do you remember about?If the interviewee responds with just a yes or no, ask how, why, when, where, who.What the interviewee chooses to tell you and how they choose to tell it is just as informative/revealing as the actual answers they give.8. Avoid closed-ended questions that can end in a yes or not, or single fact.Examples, were you there? What was date of that? Did you like that?If you get a short answer, follow up with tell me more, who, what, when, where, how and why.9. Do not ask leading questions was it this or that? Or I thought that the most important thing was..These have been demonstrated to affect interviewees answer and will taint your interview.10. Ask one question at a time and try to ask simple questions.11. Try to ask follow-up questions tell me more, who, what, where.12. To stimulate their memory, use statement questions such as, In 1956, you traveled to Tibet to conduct research. How did that trip come about?13. Focus on recording their personal experiences, rather than stories about others or that they have heard. If youre getting general stories, say tell me about your role, describe how you felt that day or dealt with that crisis, etc.14. Don't worry about silences. Let the interviewee think and take time before they answer. Look at your outline and check off topics if the interviewee needs time to think.15. Note what types of questions your interviewee responds best to and try to adapt your style to what works best with them.16. Let the interviewee suggest topics to you that you might not have thought of.17. Allow the interviewee to drift off to topics not on your outline. These can be the best part of your interview.18. After an hour or less, ask interviewee if they would like to take a break. Write down the last words as you turn the recorder off.19. Provide the interviewee with feedback by nodding, smiling, listening attentively. Try to avoid too many verbal responses that will record over the interviewee, such as Really! or Uh-huh, uh-huh.20. Dont be afraid to politely question information that might be incorrect ask for a clarification, or say something to the effect, Oh, Im confused, I thought that Mrs. X was involved in that.21. Reword questions that the interviewee does not answer they may not have heard what you thought you asked. But they have the right to not answer if they dont want to.22. Do allow the interviewee to tell THE STORY. Most interviews have a favorite story. They will fit it in somehow, so let it happen! Allow some repetition since additional details may emerge with a second version, but dont allow your interviewee to keep telling the same story over and over.23. Bring visuals, if possible, to stimulate memory or ask to bring out photo albums of trips or family events, etc. Invite the interviewee to bring visuals to the interview.24. Let the interviewee do the talking. Try to avoid telling your own stories, Yes! When I was there. or offering your own opinions. If asked for an opinion, explain that the interview is designed to record their point of view, not yours.25. An interview usually does not last much longer than 1 1/2 to 2 hours. After that both interviewer and interviewee get tired and lose their concentration.26. End interview gracefully, asking them to assess their lives and the topics you have discussed.27. Ask your interviewee to spell any names or places you did not understand.28. Clean up. Make sure you have all pieces of equipment.29. As you depart, keep options open to return for an additional interview.Suggestions for Recording Oral History Interviews1. There are many recorder options that will record an uncompressed preservation quality audio file. If you do not have access to a recorder, most smartphones have recording software that will record an MP3 audio file.2. If possible, record an uncompressed WAV audio file at 24 bit.3. Use external microphones if possible.4. Check room for extraneous noise such as motors, fans, pets, traffic, etc.5. Test the recorder to check the volume of the interviewer and interviewee and to see if it is picking up any static or surrounding noise.6. Begin with an introduction that identifies who is being interviewed, who is conducting the interview, where, when, and the purpose of the interview.7. Ask if you have permission to record the interview.8. Avoid speaking while your interviewee is sharing. Instead, try to use physical cues that youre listening like nodding and taking notes instead of affirming mhmms.9. Upload the files from the recorder to your computer, external hard drive and/or the cloud to ensure you dont lose the file.10. Name the file in a way you can identify it later. Ex: LastnameFirstname_Date_Interview#_File#11. Make copies of your digital file. Save a copy to an external hard drive and/or the cloud.Suggested Topics/Questions for Oral History Interviews1. What is your full name?2. Do I have permission to record this interview?3. Where and when were you born?4. Who else was in your family?What were your parents names?Are there any traditional first names in your family?What type of work did they do?5. Did other family members live nearby?Tell me about them.How did they meet?What did they do for a living?When did you get to see them?6. What did your community look like outside of your family?How did you meet them?What types of activities would you do together?Tell me about your neighborhood.7. Where did your ancestors come from?When did they come to the United States?Where did they first settle?Did your family name change when your family immigrated to the United States?Are any of their traditions still carried on today?What language did your parents and grandparents speak?8. What games did you play when you were young?What toys did you have?Who did you play with? Where did you play?Did you have any hobbies?Have your hobbies and interests changed over time?Did you collect anything? Baseball cards, dolls, etc.9. Tell me about your grammar and high school education?Describe your grammar school/high school.What subjects did you study?Tell me about your interests in your school days.Did you have any influential teachers?Any leadership roles in organizations/classes?What were your hobbies and interests as a child?Did you read much, if so, what topics?Did you belong to any influential clubs or organizations?Did you have any goals/dreams for when you grew up?How did gender roles affect you during K-12 education?10. What holidays did your family celebrate?How did you celebrate them?What was your favorite part of the holidays?11. Tell me about the house you grew up in.How was it furnished?Did you have your own room?Where did you spend most of your time?Did you move to another home while you were growing up?Tell me about the new home.How did your community change?12. What were mealtimes like in your family?What foods did you eat?Who cooked the food?Who cleaned up after meals?13. Did you have any pets? Describe them.Who took care of them?14. What type of clothes did you wear?Where did you get them/who made them?When did you get new clothes?15. How did your family get around?Did you have a car? Did you use public transportation?If you had a car, when did you get it? Who drove it?Did you go on vacations in it?When did you learn to drive? Describe your first car.What kind of public transportation was available?16. What sort of entertainment did you like?What did you listen to growing up?Did you watch TV growing up? What did you watch? What large moments do you remember watching on TV?17. Who was your family doctor? Describe them.Do you remember any epidemics or diseases?Did your family have any home remedies? If so, describe.18. What was your first job?Describe a typical work day.How much money did you earn?How long did you have that job?What lessons did you learn?Additional jobs and details trace career path, changesTell me about any influential mentors.What were the most memorable aspects of that position?19. Did you attend college?Tell me about your college years.What school? How did you decide to go there?What was your major?Any influential mentors?Did you do a semester abroad?Describe your major interests?What were successes/accomplishments and challenges/frustrations?Tell me about any gender challenges you encountered in college.20. How have historic events, such as 9/11, hurricanes, the Great Depression, world wars, natural disasters, strikes, and now Covid-19 etc., affected you?Did these events impact your community? After the Oral History Interview1. Download interview files onto your computer, following the instructions provided.2. On your computer, rename each file by right clicking on file and selecting rename. Rename it in this format: LastnameFirstname_Date_Interview#_File#, for example, JonesSandra_04-30-2020_1.3. Click on file to be sure it plays properly.4. Do not erase files from your computer until you have made duplicates.5. Erase files from recorder, so the recorder will be empty for next interview.6. Write a one paragraph summary of what the interview is about, providing technical details. Also list a dozen or so name and subject terms for indexing. This will be used to identify the interview for future use.7. Prepare a longer list of all names, terms, etc. to use for transcription.8. Prepare an introduction for the transcript that provides an overview of the interview for the reader and helps them understand what they are about to read. The introduction should include an opening paragraph that states why the individual was selected, i.e., the special significance or accomplishments of the individual; information as to the place and particular conditions of the interviews, e.g., the interviewees home or office; research the interviewer did to prepare for the interview, i.e., books read or scrapbooks reviewed, and any prior relationship of special affinity between the interviewer and interviewee, e.g., friends for 25 years, grandchild or child. The interviewer should also prepare a biography of one or two paragraphs about themselves, including background and experiences of the interviewer related to the conduct of this particular interview.9. Photocopy or scan the signed legal form, your question outline, chronology, etc.10. Write a follow-up note to the interviewee, thanking them for their time and reminiscences.Readings and Online ResourcesAbrams, Lynn. Oral History Theory, second edition. New York: Routledge, 2016.Boyd, Douglas A. Oral history and digital humanities: voice, access, and engagement. Springer, 2014.Frisch, Michael. A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.Gluck, Sherna Berger, and Daphne Patai, eds. Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history. Routledge, 2016.Murphy, Kevin P., Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz. "What Makes Queer Oral History Different." The Oral History Review 43, no. 1 (2016): 1-24.Neuenschwander, John A. A guide to oral history and the law. Oxford University Press, USA, 2014.Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson, The Oral History Reader, third edition. New York: Routledge, 2016.Ritchie, Donald A. Doing oral history. Oxford University Press, 2014.Thompson, Paul. The voice of the past: Oral history. Oxford university press, 2017.Oral History in the Digital Age Oral History Association website, covering every aspect of oral history, from family and community oral history to academic oral history projects.Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide Contains guidelines Smithsonian folklorists have developed over the years for collecting folklife and oral history from family and community members, with a general guide to conducting an interview, as well as a sample list of questions that may be adapted to your own needs and circumstances, an information on preservation and use.Oral History Association: History Discussion List: H-Oralhist oralhist/ is the oral history discussion list.Library of Congress, Oral History Lesson Plans Folklife Center, Oral History Guide at LeicesterOral history can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people, it can also involve interviewing younger generations.Oral history is particularly useful for capturing stories from minority groups or small communities who will not often be represented in more formal histories. It is also useful when there is a lack of other sorts of evidence, whether written or visual.For community historians it is a valuable tool for investigating what people did, what they thought they were doing at the time, and what they now think they did. As well as recording peoples opinions and the meanings they attach to past events, it is also useful for recording community stories, songs, folklore etc.Please note that throughout this resource we shall use the word recording rather than interviewing but will use interviewer rather than recorder. Experience has shown that people like the idea of having their memories recorded more than they do being interviewed, when there are too many thoughts of other sorts of interviews (job, radio, social services, TV, police etc.)Have a look at The Making of Oral History website for further information on the development of oral history in the UK. There is an African proverb which goes something like this: When an old person dies a library burns to the ground. This proverb perhaps best reflects why the use of oral history has become so important to researchers around the world. Historical researchers over the past several decades have come to realize that everyone (lets say this again, EVERYONE!) has a story to tell and memories to preservememories, like library collections and archival holdings, that help us study and understand the past and will disappear, like materials in a burning library, when an individual dies if they are not saved. The preservation of these memories and peoples life stories is called oral history.This chapter discusses what oral history is, why we conduct oral history interviews, how oral history methods have evolved, what encompasses the oral history process, how one goes about interviewing people for historical information, and how to evaluate oral interviews and integrate them into your research. There will also be some exercises at the end of the chapter to make you a better oral historian and some useful oral history links and bibliographies for further exploration of the topic.But first things firstWhat Is Oral History? Oral history can be defined in three different ways. First, the term oral history can refer to a body of information that each person has locked in his or her memory. Ones memory essentially represents some of a persons life experiences (no one remembers everything) that he/she has lived through and can recall. This is the type of information that the African proverb is referring to and will disappear upon someones death.The second definition sees oral history as a body of literature based on first-person accounts created using an interview process. These oral accounts may be published in either popular and/or scholarly books and articles; be integrated into museum exhibits, TV scripts and programs, or other forms of media; or that exist as archival material in archives, libraries, and other cultural institutions.The third definition, and the one this chapter will focus on, defines oral history as a method of collecting historical information from individuals who have firsthand knowledge of the subject one is researching. As a method, oral history uses the interview and the familiar Q&A format as a way to preserve historical content.Oral historians like to say that the oral history method must include four different ingredients to be considered oral history. These are:Interviewee. The individual being interviewed for historical purposes is called the interviewee (The person can also be referred to as the subject, narrator, or memoirist.). The interviewee is carefully selected because he/she is an eye-witness to, or a participant in, whatever subject the interviewer is studying.Interviewer. The person conducting the interview is called the interviewer. This is the person (probably you as a researcher) asking questions and guiding the interview. This is exciting work, but make sure you are prepared for each interview. Follow the interview guidelines later in the chapter to give yourself the best chance for success.Recording Device. To capture the audio of an interview, the interviewer records it using a digital recorder or even a phone with recording capabilities. Recording the interview gives the oral historian options for how best to preserve and later use the interview. For example, the interview can be transcribed, or donated to a library for preservation, or the audio can be indexed for immediate use with the option of transcribing the interview in total at a later date.Q&A Interview. We are all familiar with the Q&A format because we are used to seeing people interviewed on TV, in social media, and in other venues. Also, many of us have participated in interviews ourselves, especially when we have applied for jobs. But just because a source is oral doesnt make it oral history. It is important to emphasize that oral history isnt the recording of speeches and songs, or the recording of a monologue, or the secret recording of conversations between unsuspecting people. Rather, to be considered oral history, both people are knowingly participating in the Q&A process and speaking for the historical record.Why Do We Do Oral History? There are a number of compelling reasons to do oral history interviews to aid in your research, but they all boil down to two basic ones. First, oral interviews can be used to fill in the gaps in the documentary research you are conducting. Lets face it, books, articles, records, and documents dont always answer every question a researcher may have. So if you are conducting research on a contemporary topic (lets say an event, person, subject, etc., that happened in the last 50-75 years) and there are still people alive who were participants or eye-witnesses, then you may want to conduct interviews aimed at helping answer questions that written records are silent about or they dont give you the complete story. One of the strengths of oral history is that it is one of only a few sources where the researcher has a hand in creating it. This means you as a researcher can ask whatever questions you want to help fill the information gaps. In short, used this way, oral history can be targeted to supplement written records.The father of modern oral history in the U.S., Dr. Allan Nevins, a historian at Columbia University in the mid-twentieth century, used oral history in just this way. He essentially debriefed interviewees that he had selected so that their testimonies could fill in the gaps in written records. He also used early tape-recorders to capture their voices, had their interviews transcribed, and he placed the transcripts and later the audio recordings in an archives where they could be used by other researchers. As a result of his efforts, the first institutional oral history project in the U.S. was created at Columbia University in New York City in 1948. The project is still going strong today.Another reason to use oral historyand maybe even a more exciting oneis to use oral history interviews when there are no written records. Archives, libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions are filled with records and sources that document the elites of the world, such as politicians, successful businessmen, celebrities, leaders, etc. But the majority of people are either undocumented or under-documented, and oral history can be an effective way to capture their stories so they can be added to the historical narrative.This is the reason why one of the earliest oral history/interview projects in the U.S. in the 20th century focused on interviewing former Southern slaves during 1936-1938. This project was part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelts New Deal designed to put people back to work during the Great Depression. Government-sponsored interviewers fanned out across some of the Southern states to interview former slaves before all of them had passed away (keep in mind this was some seventy years after the end of the Civil War). Called the Slave Narrative Project, more than 2,300 interviews were conducted and transcribed, making it the largest single body of primary sources about slavery where the slaves spoke for themselves about their experiences in bondage. All of the interviews have been preserved by the Library of Congress and are available to researchers in a digital archive.Another good example of oral history being used to collect the experiences, memories, and observations of mostly undocumented people is the USC Shoah Foundations interviews with Holocaust survivors. Famous Hollywood director Steven Speilberg started the project in the 1990s and, over a five year period, volunteers and others collected video oral histories from more than 50,000 individuals from around the world. In addition to documenting the experiences of Jewish survivors, the foundation also interviewed homosexual survivors, Jehovahs Witness survivors, liberators and liberation witnesses, political prisoners, rescuers and aid providers, Roma and Sinti (Gypsy) survivors, survivors of Eugenics policies, and war crimes trials participants. USC has provided a way for individuals to gain free access to a small set of the interviews (more than 3,000) in the archives. The Shoah Project and the Slave Narrative Project represent oral history at its best.The Oral History Process Before we cover interview techniques and guidelines in the next section, lets discuss the oral history process, or the steps to go through when you decide to conduct interviews. The steps are:Select your research topic. This is a critical first step and the key to deciding if oral history can be a part of the research process. Keep in mind that oral history aims to interview eye-witnesses to, or participants in, whatever subject you are studying. So if your subject is more than 50-75 years old then there is little chance of using oral history because there will probably not be any potential interviewees still alive. If, however, your topic is recent and there are possible interviewees available, then go to the next step.Conduct preliminary research about your topic. Begin to learn more about your topic. Take a look at what has been written by conducting a literature review. Start compiling names and contact information for potential interviewees and record how these individuals relate to your research subject.Contact potential interviewees. Prioritize the interviewee list you have compiled, contacting the most important individual or individuals on the list to request an interview. Be sure to explain what oral history is, why you want to interview them, what you plan to do with the information they will give you, and any other pertinent information about your research project. Schedule an interview for a time and place convenient for you and the interviewee. A quiet place is besta location free from any distractions. [On a side note, consider yourself lucky because beginning in 2018, the federal government exempted oral historians and journalists from going through university Institutional Research Boards (IRBs) approval process for conducting human subject research. In the past, anyone wanting to use individuals in their research had to go through a fairly long, complicated vetting process seeking approval from a local IRB before they could begin. This vetting process was designed to protect human subjects, especially during medical and other scientific research. Historical research using human subjects is fundamentally different from medical testing, so the federal government has now exempted oral history from IRB vetting.]Conduct research on the interviewee and compile an interview outline. The key to a good oral history interview is background research. Before any interview, it is important to conduct as much research as possible so that you know something about the interviewees life and how he/she relates to your subject. Once you have completed the research, then create an interview outline, placing the most important subjects that you want to ask about first and so on. Some students may prefer to write a list of questions, but, in any case, think about the order of the questions/subjects and how you would like the interview to unfold. It may not unfold the way you think it will, but it is important to think about the interview as a whole before you talk to the interviewee.Practice with the recorder. Before meeting with the interviewee, make sure you know how to operate the recorder. In fact, by the time of the interview, the recorders operation should be second nature to you. Getting into an interview and fumbling around trying to figure out how to start, pause, stop, reverse, set recording levels, etc., is a no-no!Record an introduction before each interview. Each recorded interview should be preceded by an introduction giving some basic information about the interview and the participants. Something along this line will work: This is (your name) interviewing (interviewees name) for a research project focusing on (the subject of your research). Todays date is (give date here) and I am at (location of the interview). I am here to talk with (name of the interviewee/Mr. or Ms. So-in-so) about his/her involvement with (your subject). Hello Mr./Ms, (last name). Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. Begin your first question.Conduct the interview. See the next section Interviewing Basics.Get an interview agreement signed. Before any interview, prepare an interview agreement form for your interviewee to sign, The reason for an agreement form is that the interview is protected by U.S. copyright law as soon as it has been completed and is fixed in a tangible form. This fixed form can be a digital audio file (recording), or a transcript, or both. This means the interviewee owns his/her words and should formally transfer the copyright of these words to you so that you can quote directly from the interview should you choose. This is especially important if you are planning to publish any of your research at a later date. Publishing in this context can be anything from quoting in social media to producing a scholarly product like a book, article, or exhibit text (the Oral History Association has a brief explanation of copyright law). SAADA has a sample interview release form to use.Send a thank you. After the interview, be sure to send a thank you to the interviewee for participating in your research project. Maintaining contact with the interviewee may also help you in the future should you run into problems interpreting or using the information in the interview. You might need help in clarifying a concept, or figuring out a name, or spelling a word you are unfamiliar with.Transcribe the interview (optional). You may want to transcribe the interview to make it easier to use. If you do, then make sure you adhere to a set of common guidelines for the transcribing process. Baylor Universitys Center for Oral History has placed its guidelines online. They are some of the most comprehensive available and have evolved over the past fifty years. They are also easy to follow. If you are conducting oral history interviews for the Texas Disability History Collection housed in Special Collections of the UT Arlington Libraries, then use the guidelines that Dr. Sarah Rose Director of UT Arlingtons Disabilities Studies Minor, has compiled (see Dr. Rose for these guidelines).Evaluate and use the interview. See the section below titled Evaluating Oral History Content. Interviewing Basics Before you sit down to conduct an interview, decide what kind of interview you are planning to do. Basically, there are two types of oral history interviews. The first is a biographical interview. These interviews focus on an interviewees entire life, and usually take a great deal of time to do properly. In biographical interviews, the interviewer covers all of the major parts of an interviewees life, including his/her childhood, education, growing up, career, family life, etc. Not surprisingly, such interviews often take several sessions to complete.The second type of interview is the topical interview. This interview focuses on how the interviewees life intersects with your research topic. Most students who are using oral history for a research paper will be conducting topical interviews. While you do want to record some basic biographical information about each interviewee even in topical interviews, the main focus should be to ask questions that reveal how the interviewee has impacted your topic or witnessed something about your subject. In this way, you are creating another primary source to analyze and use when writing your research paper.Regardless of the type of interview you plan to conduct, students should understand that interviews are a two-way process. Some call this a transactional process, where the interviewee is giving information (by answering questions), but so is the interviewer. Not surprisingly, the interviewers gender, race, language, clothing, age, appearance, and other factors telegraph certain pieces of information to the interviewee, and this information can shape what the interviewee remembers or is willing to discuss. For example, some interviewees may be willing to tell a female interviewer something that they would never tell a male interviewer, and, of course, vice versa. While there is not much one can do about this, just be aware of the signals you may be sending to the interviewee and try to make your questions professional, neutral, and free from bias of any kind. Also, keep your language appropriate to the educational level of your interviewee and as free of jargon as possible.Oral historians have often wished that interviewing techniques could be distilled down to a few basic guidelines that would guarantee usable interviews, but, alas, no such magic guidelines exist. Interviews can vary wildly in terms of quality, even when interviewing the same interviewee over multiple sessions! After all, people are peoplewe have good days and bad days, and this can be reflected in what and how we remember.What follows, however, are some interview guidelines that, if followed, will give you, as the interviewer, the best chance for success.Research, research, research. As mentioned above, good background research is one of the keys to a good interview. Follow the paper and digital trail about your interviewee and the topic you will be asking about. Know where the gaps exist in the written records and try to fill these gaps at the very least. If there are no written recordsor precious fewthen follow the journalistic method by asking when, who, what, where, and how questions about your topic. NeverNEVERgo into an interview cold having done no research!Establish a relaxed atmosphere. As stated above, pick a location for the interview that is quiet, free from distractions, and convenient. If possible, there should only be the two of you (interviewee and interviewer) participating in the interview.Build and maintain rapport. Trust is an important part of the interview process. The interviewee will reveal more information if he/she trusts you as an interviewer. If the interviewee wants to avoid certain topics, then abide by their wishes. If they tell you something is off the record, then make sure it is kept off the record. Always keep in mind that the interview is the interviewees showit is their memories and their point of viewyou are trying to preserve.Ask easy questions first. Give interviewees a chance to relax and get comfortable with the process, so ask easy questions first. These first questions should be biographical questions that are easy to answer, like when and where the interviewee was born. Where he/she went to school? The names of his/her parents? Etc. Save more difficult questions for later in the interview.Follow your outline, BUT be flexible. Follow the interview outline (or the written questions) that you prepared, but always be flexible and adaptable. Interviewees may not answer questions the way you think they will. Be willing to follow them if they veer off topic, at least early on, to see if their wanderings lead to useful information. If they do, then continue to follow and ask follow-up questions about the new topic. If they dont after a few times, then try to guide the interview back to the topics on your outline.Ask open-ended questions and only one at a time. An open-ended question is one that cant be answered with a yes or a no. Sometimes they may not even be questions. For example, you might get more information by saying Tell me about your time as a captain of the Texas Rangers as opposed to asking Were you a captain in the Texas Ranger? If you happen to ask a close-ended question, dont worry too much because you can follow it up with other questions if you have to. Also, ask only one question at a time and keep the language simple. This will allow the interviewee to easily understand the point of the question.Ask questions that your interviewee can answer. One of the reasons background research is so important is that it will hopefully reveal your interviewees relationship/connection to the event and/or topic you are researching. Knowing this information, you can tailor your questions to specifically probe the interviewees memory about your topic and his/her involvement with it.Listen actively. Active listening is hard work, but you have to do it when conducting an oral history interview. Keep in mind that as the interviewer, you are responsible for guiding the interview and asking the questions. This requires you to listen closely to what is being said, and, just as importantly, to determine what is not being said. Careful listening allows you to ask follow-up questions to clarify comments or pursue other lines of questioning. If during an interview your attention begins to wander from the interviewees answers, then it is time to end the interview and continue it at a later date.Dont argue. As the interviewer, you can challenge information from the interviewee, but dont argue with him or her. Instead, challenge deftly in a non-confrontational way. For example, if an interviewees answer to a question goes against what your research shows or what other interviewees have said, then try asking for an explanation. You might say something like this, Other sources have said this incident occurred this way, rather than the way you remembered, can you help me understand why your view is different?Watch for fatigue. Interviewing requires a lot of work and mental energy and can be tiring after a while. Watch for fatigue in the interviewee (especially if they are elderly) and yourself (as mentioned above, when your attention begins to wander). Keep most oral history interviews to between an hour and an hour-and-a-half, shorter if either one of you is tiring.Dont worry about silence. Try not to worry about periods of silence during the interview. Give the interviewee time to think about his/her answers before interrupting his/her thought process. Oftentimes you might be asking an interviewee to recall events/people from 50 or more years ago, so cut them some slack and give them time to remember.The Nature of Oral History Sources As you are learning in this course, historians analyze the quality and veracity of sources all the time (see earlier chapters for a review of this process)and it is no different with oral sources. They too have to be evaluated for their dependability and accuracy. But, oral history sources also have a number of characteristics that make them different from many of the more traditional written sources that we are used to using in our research, like books, archival documents, newspapers, photographs, etc.Some of the characteristics of oral sources are as follows:Oral sources are personal and subjective. Oral sources are good at revealing the feelings and impressions about events, actions, and people from the interviewees perspective. Since the interviewee is talking about the details of his/her life and the interpretation of the details, these interviews have a deeply personal meaning to the interviewee. Some historians argue that written records are good about telling what happened in the past, while oral testimony is best at telling how people felt about what happened.Oral sources are collaborative. Oral history interviews are collaborative in the sense that two peoplean interviewee and interviewerare working together to produce a single primary source. This is one of only a few sources where a researcher can shape the source based on the questions he/she is asking and based on the knowledge about what other sources on the subject already exist.Oral sources are retrospective. Michael Frisch, Professor Emeritus at the University of Buffalo, argues that oral interviews are usually a dialogue between the past (the history being remembered and recalled) and the present (the act of remembering and interpreting the past based on ones life experiences up to the time of the interview). Frisch goes on to say that oral history can produce what he calls more history, that is sources much like some written personal sources (e.g. memoirs, personal journals, autobiographies), but it can also be anti-historical, by allowing interviewees to interpret their own history free from the analysis and conclusions of historians.Oral sources are oral. DUH! This is obvious, but the point is that the audio interview reveals more details and information than a transcribed version of the interview. Indeed, listening to a person talk conveys more meaning through voice inflections, sarcasm, sadness and happiness in tone, changes in volume and timbre, etc. The irony of oral history is that most researchers, when given the option of listening to an interview or reading the transcript, will opt for the transcript because of time constraints. Pity because they may be missing some important oral clues!Oral sources depend on memory. In the mid-twentieth century, as historians experimented with oral history as a method of collecting historical information, some scholars criticized its reliability as a source because it was based on memory, and, as we all know, memory can be malleable, elastic, and can change over time. In short, memory can be fallible. Since those years, however, memory studies have shown that most memories are shaped just a few minutes after an action or event has taken place, which calls into questions all types of sources, not just retrospective oral sources. This is why historians insist that all sources (ALL!) must be analyzed and evaluated during the research processand this includes oral sources too. Just because someone says he/she was there doesnt make it true, and just because someone was there doesnt mean his/her understanding of what happened is accurate. This is why it is best while conducting historical research to cast a wide net and look at as many different types of sources as possible.Evaluating Oral History InterviewsNow that you are more familiar with the oral history process and may even be considering conducting interviews, or at least using some interviews that have already been archived, you might be asking yourself how do I use these interviews in my research? Dont fret because evaluating oral history interviews is not much different than evaluating other types of historical sources. When assessing oral accounts, ask the following questions:What is the reliability of the interviewee? When looking at the interview as a whole, has the interviewee been consistent and reliable throughout the session/s or has his/her story been inconsistent and changing? Did the interviewee take the interview seriously, being careful to answer questions fully and with attention to details?Can the recollections be verified? As with other sources, can the interviewees account be verified and corroborated through the use of other sources, including other oral sources?What is the interviewees relationship to the subject? We usually give more credence to an account if the interviewee is a direct participant in the event or was an eye-witness, as opposed to hearing about the event from someone else.Does the interviewee have a personal stake in a particular point of view? If the interviewee is predisposed to have a bias or his/her professional or personal reputation depends on a particular interpretation of an event, then check the veracity of the account carefully. Do the same if someone has an axe to grind about another individual.What was the physical condition of the interviewee at the time of the interview? Can you tell if the interviewee was in good health during the interview? Were his/her memories sharp, clear, and easily remembered, or were they belabored, halting, and difficult to recall?Helpful Oral History Links Below are some links to a few professional organizations for people interested in oral history and also some websites about oral history in general.Canadian Oral History AssociationOral History, History Matters WebsiteOral History, WikipediaOral History Association (U.S.)Oral History Society (Great Britain)Texas Oral History AssociationUNC Writing Center, Oral HistoryOral History Bibliographies What follows are a few links to bibliographies that include some of the more important published sources about oral history. There is now a huge body of literature about oral history, but these bibliographies are selective and include only the most impactful books.An Oral History Bibliography, A Research Guide by the Columbia University Center for Oral History, 2009.Selected Bibliography of Books on Oral History, UC Santa Cruz University Library, nd.ConclusionPaul Thompson, a British oral historian and author of one of the seminal books on the subject titled The Voice of the Past: Oral History, first published in 1978 and in its fourth edition, talks about the power of oral history and its potential transformative impact, when he writes:Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change; it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of historyit can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place. (1st edition, p. 2)We couldnt have said it any better! Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies.InDoing Oral History, Donald Ritchie explains, Oral History collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives. These interviews may be used for research or excerpted in a publication, radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other form of public presentation. Recordings, transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials can also be posted on the Internet. Oral history does not include random taping, such as President Richard Nixons surreptitious recording of his White House conversations, nor does it refer to recorded speeches, wiretapping, personal diaries on tape, or other sound recordings that lack the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.The Oral History Association offers several resources for you to learn about all facets of oral history. OHA also offers a series ofpublicationson community oral history, family oral history, oral historyand the law, and other subjects. Oral history is all about making contact with people, so join us at our annual meeting and pleasejointhe Oral History Association.

What are the sources of oral history. Types of oral tradition in history. History of oral history. What are the types of oral tradition. What are the three types of oral history.