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# Oral History Workshop

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Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library

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# What is a oral history ...exactly?

Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st- century digital technologies.

...a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.

Even more simply..having an intentional conversation with another person.

# Examples of interviews



Adrian Pearson and Donna Rae Pearson

StoryCorps





## Why should I interview someone?

- Obtain information directly from the source.
- Keep the record straight.
- Document local history.
- It is a useful skill.

# Pre-Interview

Question yourself first!



Why am I interviewing this person?

What do I hope to learn?

What events or topics do I want to document?

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# Pre-Interview

## Preparing the Narrator

- The purpose of the interview.
- How you will use the interview.
- Approximate length of interview and where you will meet .
- Where the interview and accompanying materials will be stored and who will have access to these records.



# Pre-Interview

Questions!

Two main types of questions

1. Biographical Data

1. Particular events or circumstances

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# Pre-Interview

Questions! pt.2

## Developing Questions

Be curious

Write down the list of possible questions or topics.

Consider broad or universal topics.

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# Pre-Interview

## Questions! pt.3

### Example Questions & Format

1. What is your full name?
2. Today's date?
3. Do I have permission to record this interview?
4. Where and when were you born?
5. 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?

6. Did other family members live nearby?

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**Minimize the distractions.**

Interviewing Techniques



# Start with basic questions.

Interviewing Techniques



**Then open ended questions.**

Interviewing Techniques



**Use memory triggers.**

Interviewing Techniques



**Be a good listener.**

Interviewing Techniques



Silence is golden.

Interviewing Techniques



# Practice.

Interviewing Techniques





# Equipment Options

## pt. 1

If you have a smartphone:

Digital Recording Apps - I use Otter. Provides transcription of interview.

StoryCorp App: has questions built in. Shared with Library of Congress.

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# Oral History Backpack Equipment pt.2

Available for checkout in the  
Topeka Room located upstairs.

Contents:

Zoom Hn1 Audio Recorder

Canon Vixia Video Camera

Tripod

Tripod Smartphone adaptor

Lavalier microphone

SD card

SD card reader

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The background of the slide features a light gray silhouette of two people sitting in wooden chairs, facing each other in conversation. The text is centered over this background.

## Everyday Conversations can turn into Oral History Interviews

Remember to:

Ask for permission to record.

Be curious as a 3 year old.

Take a couple of pictures of the scene and of the narrator.

Get their contact information.

Offer them a copy.



# Preserve and Protect the interview!

Backup three ways, three locations.  
Make a transcription copy

# Let's Practice