

# **COLLECTING ORAL HISTORIES :**

**A Practical Guide from Playing Pasts**



If you have any questions, please send an email to [contact@playingpasts.co.uk](mailto:contact@playingpasts.co.uk), and one of the team will get back to you.



## COLLECTING ORAL HISTORIES

**The people around us have amazing stories to tell. Oral history is one way of capturing some of these stories, so that we can preserve, share, and learn from them.**

In simple terms, oral histories are recordings of people telling their stories. Usually, this is just one person (the 'narrator') with the person making the recording (the 'interviewer').

But there's more to oral history than pressing record and having a chat. People's stories are personal, and valuable. They need to be treated with respect.

This is a brief, simple introduction to doing oral history in the community. It is not a substitute for formal training. But, it should help you to feel more confident in how to record oral histories responsibly – and encourage you to enjoy it!

### WHY DO WE DO ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is a way of understanding human lives in the past. Recording and reflecting on one person's lived experience is a different kind of history to documents and official records.

None of our memories are perfect. So, if you want to find out exact dates, times and places, there might be other ways to do this. Or, you might want to check what you are told.

# HOW DO WE DO ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history involves recording someone's story. To do this requires setting up a meeting, asking questions, and listening to the answers.

## RECORDING

Ideally, you will be using a digital recorder. Tapes can easily be damaged, and, increasingly, people do not have the equipment to play them on. Avoid them if at all possible!

Make sure you know how your recording equipment works. Practice recording. Listen back to check the quality. Experiment with it. Try it at different angles and distances from the person you are recording. Ideally find someone else to practice with – a friend, or someone else working on your project.

## MEETING

Choose somewhere quiet. Listening is much harder with lots of background noise. Discuss possible options with the person you will interview – the narrator – and try to give them as much choice as you can. It is important that you are both comfortable.

Whether you know the narrator already or not, spend some time talking in general before you turn on the recording. Remind them of what the interview is for, and of how the process works.

At the start of every recording, ask the narrator to state their name and their date of birth. If they do not wish to give the exact date, just the year is great. Check the recording is working.



## QUESTIONS

Ask 'open questions' – questions that don't have one simple answer. Allow your narrator to tell you what is interesting about their story.

Start with fairly general questions.

If there are particular things you want to ask about, write them down before the interview and keep the list to hand. It's fine to ask about these directly, but try to balance what you want to hear with what your narrator wants to talk about. It is their story.

If they say something that you find interesting, or surprising, ask them to say more about it. But remember, this is not an interrogation. Your job is to try to understand the story you are being told, and the person telling it to you, not to 'catch them out'.

## LISTENING

It's important that your narrator feels that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they are saying. Give them time to think, and to answer. If there is a pause, it can be very tempting to jump in and say something. Try to resist the urge as long as possible!

Don't forget, your body language and facial expressions can help and encourage the narrator even if you are not 'saying' anything.

An oral history interview is not a Q&A session. It should be conversational – don't just stick to a script of questions, you can respond to what they say – but it is not a general chat.

Before the interview, you will have worked out the basic topics you want to talk about, and told the narrator what these are. If you find that you're talking about something completely unrelated, then remind them of this and bring the interview back on track.

# NARRATORS

**Once you know what you want to find out about – for example, the history of a local area – think about who might be able to tell you about it.**

Maybe you already know someone with a great story to tell. You could ask your friends or colleagues if they know anyone who might be able to help you. Alternatively you might choose to advertise, perhaps through leaflets, posters, or online, for instance through Facebook groups.

Whether you know your narrator already or not, it is important that you are careful about when and where you meet, and how you communicate with them. If you have no existing connection, it is prudent to take additional precautions, such as only meeting in public places.

**Oral histories with vulnerable individuals – for example, under-18s, the very elderly, or those with learning difficulties or physical disabilities – should not be undertaken without specialist training.**

Narrators will not remember everything. They might get some details wrong. They might exaggerate some things, or leave others out. An oral history is not a neutral 'eye-witness' account. The narrator is looking back on what they did, or what happened around them, in the past.

The most important thing is that the narrator understands why you are talking to them, what will happen, and their rights. All of these apply all of the time: before, during, and after the interview.

## WHY

**What are you interested in finding out? Why do you want to record that person's story?**

You need to prepare a general sheet of information about your project. You should share this with any narrators before you interview them. Have a chat with them about it when you meet. They will be interested in why you want to speak to them.

## WHAT

**How will an interview work? When and where will it happen? What happens next?**

Include information about the interview process on your information sheet. Make it clear to narrators that you want to make – and keep – a recording of the interview, and that other people will be able to listen to it.

Some people might feel nervous about being interviewed, or wonder why you are interested in what might just have been their daily life. Try to set their mind at ease.

## RIGHTS

**What if they change their mind? What can you do with the recording?**

Make it clear to narrators that they can stop being involved at any time.

Narrators should sign a consent form, and both you and they should keep a copy. This form should also tell them that they can change their mind.



# WRAP UP

## WHAT YOU NEED

- Someone to interview (a 'narrator')
- Information about the interview, and a consent form, to give to the narrator
- A way of recording the interview (e.g. a digital voice recorder)
- A place to do the interview
- Somewhere to keep the recording afterwards

## INFORMED CONSENT

- It is your job to make sure your narrator understands the project, and their rights, and that they agree to get involved on this basis.
- This is called informed consent, and is your most important responsibility.
- For most adults, this is a straightforward process. It is important but does not need to be scary!
- For all under-18s and vulnerable adults, you need to approach informed consent with greater care and attention. You should not do this without specialist training.

## SUMMARY

- Be responsible: make sure your narrator understands what you are doing, and gives informed consent.
- Listen! Try not to interrupt – give your narrator the chance to tell their story.
- Choose a quiet, comfortable place for the interview.
- Understand your equipment.
- Thank your narrator after the interview and make sure they know how to get hold of you, or someone who knows about the project.