

HOW TO RECORD AN ORAL HISTORY

Do you have tales from your past that you would like to pass on to your children or grandchildren? Would you like to capture the memories of an interesting local personality for posterity? Well, why not make a simple oral history recording.....

What is oral history?

Oral histories are a translation of the past through a series of personal stories. Often these include stories passed through generations or eyewitness account of historical events. They can be about any topic (holidays, wartime memories, local folklore). In fact, you are probably already telling oral histories when you get together with friends and family and share stories of the past and present.

What is an oral history recording?

These stories are important. They capture information about the past as well as information about the person telling the story. By making an audio recording of these stories, you are creating a resource that others can use to learn about the past. People create oral history recordings for their personal use, but they are also created by historians and museums as they seek to discover and share more about the past. For example, you might well hear snippets of oral history recordings when you take an audio guide at a museum.

Why make an oral history recording?

- Tell your stories
- Help other generations and cultures to learn about the past
- Create an archive of your memories and experiences
- Bring your past to life for your family and friends

Getting started

Creating an oral history recording is something you can do on your own, in pairs or with a group of friends. Research and think about the topics or events you are going to talk about for the recording. This will help you to ask more detailed questions of others and/or stimulate your own memories. You might chose to interview a friend, have a group discussion or record by yourself; whatever you chose to do, think about the

following discussion prompts to help you get the most out of your recording:

- Use visual prompts (objects or photographs) or questions to prompt memories and guide conversations
- If you are recording as a group, relax and encourage everyone to participate
- Ask questions in a way that prompts a detailed response, not a yes or no answer
- Think about the five Ws: Who, What, When, Where, Why. Consider these questions in relation to the subject you're discussing
- Think about how your story relates to wider events and the history of the period
- Be attentive and listen carefully to others.

Equipment

Recording and sharing your oral histories is quite simple. You will need access to a computer with audio recording software. You should be able to use the computer at the library, if you don't have one at home. You will also need a digital audio recording device. You can get hold of these at most department stores, electrical shops or online at shops such as www.amazon.co.uk. Prices range from about £30 to £80.

Here a few affordable and easy to use recording devices. These will create digital audio files that are easily transferred onto a computer using a USB cable (which typically comes with the device):

- Sony ICD P520
- Olympus VN 3100 PC
- Olympus VN 5500 PC





Some tips for recording

Recording devices will work differently, so make sure you read the instructions and test your equipment before your oral history recording session:

- Test for echoes. If you are in a large room with high ceilings and a hard floor, there will be some echo. Try and use a smaller room with soft furniture.
- Noises that are often unnoticeable when speaking with someone in person can be distracting when caught on a recording. Therefore, beware of fidgeting with papers, street noise, the sound of a room heater or television heard in an adjacent room

Sharing your oral history

The suggested line of recording devices will record oral histories as digital audio files. Follow the instructions included with your recording device to transfer the files to a computer. There are different types of audio files. Most recording devices create MP3 or WAV audio files. These can be burned to a CD to share with friends and family, using a program such as iTunes. iTunes is available for both Apple Macintosh and PC Computers, and is free software. You can download iTunes from this website: www.apple.com/itunes/download/

Advanced steps

If you are making a large compilation of stories, you may want to consider transcribing the recordings and then editing the content. Reviewing a written version of the discussions will help you to select which statements from your recording you want to keep and to decide the order in which you want to present the statements. If you mark up the transcription with your cuts, you will find the process of editing the audio files on the computer much easier.

Free software to assist you with the transcription process is available to download from the internet. When you attach your audio recording device to the computer, the audio files will automatically be loaded into this transcription software. The transcription software is used at the same time as word processing software such as Microsoft Word. It allows you to type the audio while starting, stopping and replaying it easily.

Helpful links:

- Free transcription software, Express Scribe, that can be used on a Mac or PC to transcribe your audio recordings: www.nch.com.au/scribe/
- Free audio editing software, Audacity, can be used on a Mac or PC to edit your audio recordings: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/download/>
- Quick reference guide for editing software Audacity, which includes a related link to the complete manual. <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/onlinehelp/1.2/reference.html>

Further support and guidance

Meet others with your interest in recording stories by getting involved with your local Oral History Society www.oralhistory.org.uk/. You can also find out more about oral history at your local library.

Other helpful websites include:

- Practical advice from Oral History Society - www.oralhistory.org.uk/advice/index.php
- Oral History Resources and Organisations in Britain - www.ohs.org.uk/resources.php
- Oral History Handbooks and Bibliographies - www.ohs.org.uk/publications.php
- Relevant and Affordable Publications for Sale - www.age-exchange.org.uk/our_work/publications/index.html (A great publication available here is: How To Help Reminiscing Go Well)
- Information on Community Archives in the UK - www.communityarchives.org.uk/

