

## Family Oral History: A How-To Guide

### Overview

#### **A. The Importance of Oral History**

Interviewing a family member can increase your appreciation of the past and give the person you interview – your narrator – an opportunity to reflect on important life events.

#### **B. First Steps**

Prepare for your interview by doing research into your narrator's life. Have an informal pre-interview meeting with your narrator to make sure she understands goals of your project, and to hear about her life story.

#### **C. Audio or Video?**

Decide whether you want to conduct an audio interview (sound only) or video interview (sound and image).

#### **D. Preparation**

Develop a list of interview questions using the 5Ws (who, what, when, where and why) and open-ended questions, but don't look at it like a script for the interview – be prepared to ask lots of follow-up questions during the interview based on your narrator's particular experiences.

#### **E. The Interview**

Follow our tips that should ensure both you and your narrator are pleased with the interview process.

#### **F. After the Interview**

Take time to reflect, give thanks, and file the interview properly for future use.

#### **G. Uses of Oral History**

Get your narrator's permission before using your oral history interview, whether you are presenting it as a gift, using it to honour the narrator, or adding a personal touch to research projects or family albums.

#### **H. Further Reading**

For more information about conducting oral history interviews, check out our list of recommended books and articles.

*Thank you to Mark du Toit for the use of his artwork. You can see more of his work at [www.marktoon.co.uk](http://www.marktoon.co.uk).*

## A. The Importance of Oral History

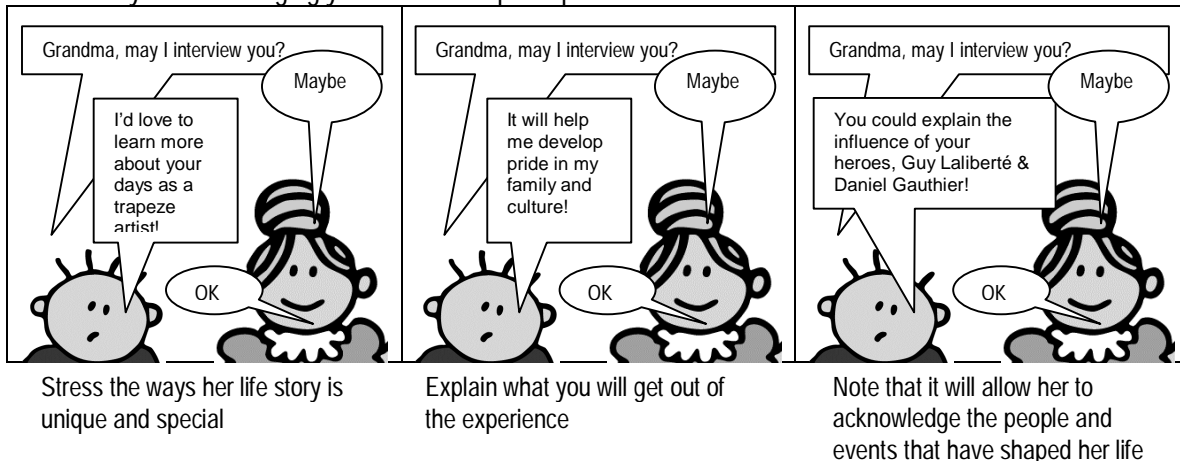
Have you ever wondered what it was like when your parents or grandparents were growing up? Conducting an oral history interview is a fun and interesting way to learn about the experiences of older generations.

Oral history is spoken word information about events experienced firsthand. Oral history usually takes the form of recorded interviews. This guide will help you conduct your own **oral history interviews** with members of your family and respected elders.

## B. First Steps

**Setting up the interview:** When you (the “interviewer”) approach the person you want to interview (the “narrator”), tell her *why* you want to interview her, and why you think her story is valuable.

Gentle ways of encouraging your narrator to participate:



**Pre-interview:** A pre-interview is an informal meeting between you and your narrator. At the pre-interview, you will:

- **Explain your intentions for the interview.** Is the interview for a school project? A family reunion? How will it be used in the future?
- **Answer any questions or concerns your narrator might have.** You might want to give her an outline of the topics that you will cover in the interview.
- **Get to know her life story a little better.** Take notes as you talk to help you prepare for the interview.



**Additional research:** Try asking her friends or relatives for relevant stories. Visit your local library or go online to research the time period when she grew up.

**Ethical considerations:** Oral history interviews are based on a relationship of trust between the interviewer and narrator. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Before you set up an interview, you should make sure that the narrator understands the process and is willing to participate.
- The narrator should be aware of your short-term and long-term intentions for the interview.
- If your intended uses go beyond just your family and friends, you may need a legal consent form. Contact the MHSO at [mhso.mail@utoronto.ca](mailto:mhso.mail@utoronto.ca) for more information.

### C. Audio or Video?

Oral history interviews can be either audio or video. You may have a specific purpose for the interview that makes one format better than the other. If not, consider the following to help you decide which format to use:

	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
 <p><b>AUDIO</b></p>	<p>Equipment is cost effective and easy to use</p> <p>Easy to maintain eye contact with narrator</p>	<p>Does not capture visual record of the narrator</p>
 <p><b>VIDEO</b></p>	<p>Shows narrator's facial expressions and body language</p> <p>Easy to integrate photos and mementos into the interview in a meaningful way</p>	<p>Narrator may be uncomfortable on camera, or distracted by concerns about appearance</p> <p>Equipment requires a higher degree of familiarity and technical know-how</p>

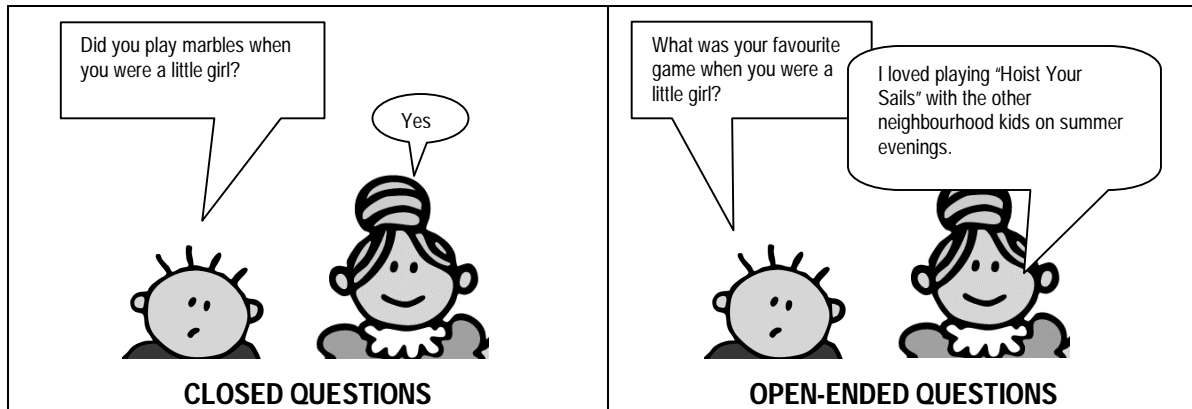
**Tips:**

- Familiarize yourself with your recording equipment before your interview.
- Check the batteries before your interview and always bring spares
- Arrange for easy access to the narrator's relevant photos and mementos
- For audio interviews – Keep the recorder out of the narrator's line of sight to minimize distractions
- For video interviews – Tell the narrator in advance that you will be filming the interview and use a camera operator that the narrator trusts
- For video interviews – Light the narrator's face with daylight or a strong lamp. Avoid windows because the camera will cast the narrator in shadow
- For video interviews – Find a neutral backdrop and position the camera at eye level or below the narrator, slightly off to one side

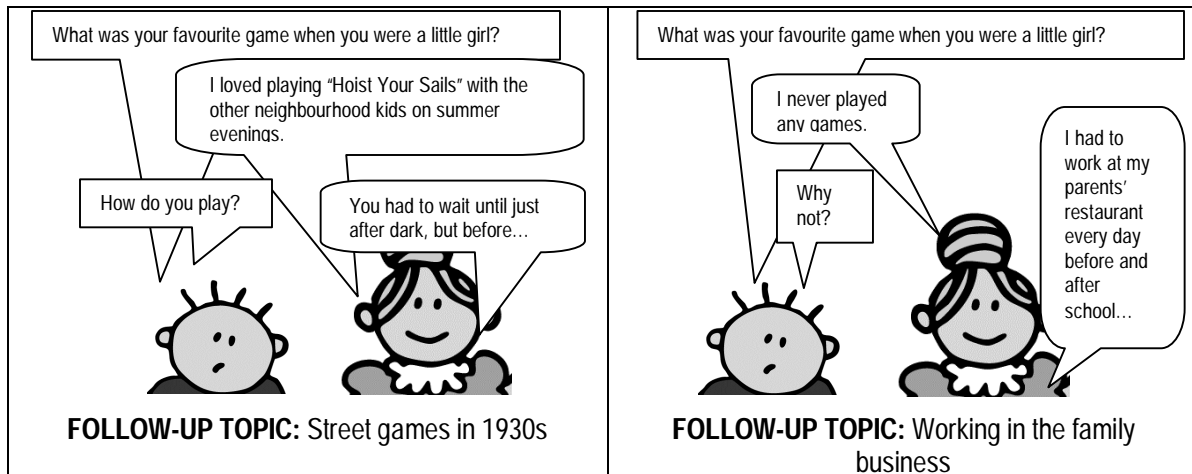
## D. Preparation

**Creating a list of questions:** What do you want to know about the narrator's life? Develop a list of questions to serve as a guide, not a script. When developing your list of questions, be sure to:

- Consider why you are doing this interview, and what you plan to do with it
- Review your research notes and pre-interview notes for stories or topics that you want to explore more thoroughly
- Begin questions with the 5 Ws (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and How
- Avoid closed questions that can be answered with only "yes" or "no". Ask open-ended questions that can yield a variety of responses.



- Be prepared to ask follow-up questions during the interview. Your list of questions is only a starting point. Depending on the narrator's answers, you might want to ask for more details or clarification that could take your interview in interesting and unexpected directions.



**Arrange a time and location:** Choose an appropriate location and time for the interview. Often the narrator will be most comfortable in her home. Avoid public places like restaurants or busy outdoor areas, as ambient noise and distractions can interfere with the interview. Ask the narrator to inform other people in her household when the interview is taking place to avoid interruptions.

**Checklist:** Prepare a checklist of all of the items you will need to bring to the interview. This might include items like:

- Pens and paper for taking notes during the interview
- Extra batteries or memory cards for recording devices
- Your prepared list of questions
- Recording equipment
- Consent forms, if needed

## **E. The Interview**

**Set the right tone:** Bring a token of appreciation -- a small gift -- to show the narrator that you appreciate their participation.

**Take breaks:** Assure the narrator that she can take a break or stop the interview at any time. For audio interviews, you may develop a hand signal to pause the interview without disrupting the flow of the recording.

**Be flexible:** Part of being a good interviewer is listening carefully to your narrator's responses and adjusting your line of questioning as you go, even if that means addressing your chosen themes in an unplanned order, or discussing a theme you hadn't considered previously.

**Start with the basics:** When you switch on the recorder, state your name, the narrator's name, the date, and the location to allow for easy identification in the future. Start with easy questions to establish the context of the narrator's life: when and where the narrator's parents and grandparents were born, when and where she was born, when her family immigrated to Canada, etc. Then move on to your questions about her life. Don't forget to use the 5Ws, open-ended questions and follow-up questions!

**Keep the attention on the narrator:** Avoid distracting verbal tics, such as "uh huh" and "okay" and instead nod or smile to show the narrator that you are listening without distracting your future audience. Though the interview should be conversational, talk about yourself as little as possible.

**Don't be afraid of silence:** Silence is not necessarily a bad thing in an interview – it can give the narrator time to consider your question and develop an answer. Resist the urge to jump in and interrupt this process.

**Don't quibble about the facts:** Narrators sometimes say things that you might disagree with or remember differently. You may want to ask some clarifying follow-up questions, but avoid confrontation and accept the narrator's differing viewpoint.

**Be sensitive and respectful:** Show the narrator that what they are saying is valuable by maintaining eye contact and positive body language, asking well-informed questions, and being adaptable. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions, but be sensitive if a topic stirs up strong emotions. Be prepared to pause or stop the recording if the narrator is uncomfortable.

**Wrap it up:** Be mindful of the narrator's energy level. Try not to let a single session run past two hours, especially with an elderly narrator. Thank the narrator on the recording at the end of the interview.

## **F. After the Interview**

**Reflect:** Take some time to think about the interview and jot down anything that struck you. What did you get out of the experience? What did you learn? What was particularly remarkable about the narrator's life story?

**Give thanks:** Send the narrator a thank you card, and follow up with them about your intentions for the interview. You should also supply them with a copy of the interview in a format that is easy to play.

**Name the file:** You might have an idea of what "WN5005" means right now, but it could easily get lost among other digital files on your computer. Rename it right away, and backup the file in case anything happens to the original.

**Transcribe or index:** Do you want a written record of the interview? If so, you will have to decide whether to transcribe the interview in full (type out verbatim what was said), or whether to create an index or short summary. Transcription can be costly and time consuming, so consider creating an index of the interview by identifying key topics with time stamps. Indexing helps you and your future audience find specific moments in the interview.

## **G. Uses of Oral History**

You are helping to preserve a person's memories, and you are opening up new avenues for the sharing of valuable stories with others. **With the narrator's permission**, consider using the interview in the following venues/projects:

- Send copies as gifts to friends and relatives
- Play clips on special occasions to honour the narrator, such as retirement parties, anniversaries, birthdays
- Incorporate quotes or clips in scrapbooks or online albums
- Use quotes in community history projects
- Incorporate the stories in memoirs, biographies, or family history books

For more information about getting involved in community oral history projects, please contact the Multicultural History Society of Ontario: [mhso.mail@utoronto.ca](mailto:mhso.mail@utoronto.ca)

**H. Further Reading:**

Anderson, Kathryn and Dana C. Jack. "Learning to Listen: Interview techniques and analyses," *The Oral History Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp 157-171.

Perks, Robert and Alistair Thomson. *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Rosenbluth, Vera. *Keeping Family Stories Alive: A Creative Guide to Taping Your Family Life and Love*. Vancouver: Hartley and Marks, 1990.