

OHA Principles and Best Practices

Principles and Best Practices for Oral History

OHA CORE PRINCIPLES

Adopted October 2018. These documents replace the OHA's previous Principles and Best Practices, which were revised and adopted in 2009.

A web version of this report is available on the Oral History Association website:
<https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>

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OHA Core Principles

The Core Principles of the Oral History Association

1. The Oral History Association, in both its national and regional professional organizations, brings together practitioners from a variety of communities, backgrounds, and academic and professional fields, including many who might not label themselves oral historians. Nevertheless, whether motivated by scholarly research questions, political or social change goals, efforts to preserve history, pedagogical aims, or any other purpose, oral history practice shares common principles. This document lays out some of those guiding principles, keeping in mind the diverse practices of those involved in the collection, interpretation, use, and preservation of oral history.

What Is Oral History?

2. Oral history refers to both the interview process and the products that result from a recorded spoken interview (whether audio, video, or other formats). In order to gather and preserve meaningful information about the past, oral historians might record interviews focused on narrators' life histories or topical interviews in which narrators are selected for their knowledge of a particular historical subject or event. Once completed, an interview, if it is placed in an archive, can be used beyond its initial purpose with the permission of both the interviewer and narrator.
3. The value of oral history lies largely in the way it helps to place people's experiences within a larger social and historical context. The interview becomes a record useful for documenting past events, individual or collective experiences, and understandings of the ways that history is constructed. Because it relies on memory, oral history captures recollections about the past filtered through the lens of a changing personal and social context.¹
4. The hallmark of an oral history interview is a dynamic, collaborative relationship between the interviewer and the narrator. While interviewers pose questions based on research and careful preparation, narrators shape the interview based on what they deem to be relevant, meaningful, or appropriate to share. Despite the fluid nature of the interview process, an oral history is grounded in thoughtful planning and careful follow-through of the agreed-upon process.

¹ The intersection of oral history and memory is well documented. To explore this concept more, please see the *Oral History Review* (<https://academic.oup.com/ohr>).

Guiding Principles

5. The oral history process, from the interview stage through preservation, use, and access, must be guided by respect for narrators and the communities from which they come. This means a commitment to an ethical process and to honoring diverse cultural values, ways of knowing, and perspectives.
6. The interview process must be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, and engagement among all parties from the first encounter between interviewer and narrator to the creation of end products.
7. Oral history practitioners must be sensitive to differences in power between the interviewer and the narrator as well as divergent interests and expectations inherent in any social relationship. These dynamics shape all aspects of the oral history process, including the selection of people to interview, research questions, personal interactions during the interview, interpretations, decisions on preservation and access, and the various ways that the oral history might be used.
8. To the greatest extent possible, both the narrator and the interviewer must be protected from harm, particularly those who are vulnerable communities. This means that certain lines of inquiry or public access to completed interviews might be precluded. Any stipulations should be considered before the beginning of the oral history process with the understanding that they can be renegotiated as the project proceeds.
9. Whenever possible, an oral history interview and its accompanying documentation should be preserved and made accessible to other users. Oral history practitioners must be clear on the various ways the interview might be preserved, made available, and used. Likewise, narrators must grant explicit permission to make their interview public, and when possible, should be given an opportunity to establish parameters for preservation, access, and use.
10. While oral historians are bound by laws covering copyright, and in some institutions might be bound by regulations governing research involving living human subjects, their responsibilities also go beyond these official rules. They should conduct themselves ethically and thoughtfully and be vigilant about the possible consequences to narrators and their communities of both the interview process and the access/use of completed interviews.

Presented by the OHA Publications Committee

Elissa Stroman, chair

Jeni Crockett-Holme

Benjamin Houston

Jason Kauffman

Brad King

Sarah Milligan, OHA Council Liaison



Baylor University
One Bear Place #97176
Waco, TX 76798-7175
(615) 624-2688
oha@oralhistory.org