![OHA Oral History Association logo]

OHA Principles and Best Practices

Principles and Best Practices for Oral History

ARCHIVING ORAL HISTORY

Archiving Oral History

Adopted October 2019

Introduction: Notes on Using this Document and Developing an Archival Plan

This document is intended to be viewed in context as an addendum to the Oral History Association's *Principles and Best Practices*. It is important to note that this document is not just meant for professionally trained archivists or practitioners working with a traditional repository. Oral history is both created and cared for by a broad and diverse set of practitioners, including community organizers, independent researchers, affiliated faculty, storytellers, policymakers, journalists, writers, librarians, and families. While professionally-trained archivists who work with oral history are encouraged to engage with these guiding concepts and best practices, this document was created with all practitioners in mind. As a primer, we recommend reading the Society of American Archivists Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, as this document serves to "guide archivists, as well as to inform those who work with archivists, in shaping expectations for professional engagement."

While considering an archival plan for oral history interviews, it will be helpful to consider the multifaceted nature of oral history. Oral history interviews are: primary sources that are meant to be accessible, discoverable, and understood; evidence for historical and anthropological understandings, as well as other disciplines; cultural objects; and archival objects requiring long-term preservation. Therefore, the archiving of oral history interviews has its own set of principles and best practices that need to be acknowledged and addressed in a centralized resource. This document applies well-established best practices from professional organizations and institutions to oral history interviews and collections.

This guide cannot be a one-size-fits-all resource. Practitioners may need to pick and choose from these best practices based on the needs and resources of their organization or community. Every oral history project should have a plan for archiving its oral histories that aligns with the project's goals and works within the capacity of the project's partners. Practitioners who are not affiliated with a formal archive should consider that capacity may be extended or re-envisioned through resource-sharing with repositories that can offer archival support or guidance. A plan for archiving interviews should take a form that is uniquely customized for the project, weighing the needs, concerns, and strengths of the individuals involved in the project, as well as the narrators.

Some archiving plans may eschew traditional repositories, particularly when working with vulnerable communities, or when inclusion in a repository carries the potential for legal or personal danger.[1] When considering whether to donate to or work with a repository, it is critical to identify the priorities of the project. Some important questions to ask include: Who will have access to the materials and how will access be provided? How does a project align with the overall mission of potential partner organizations? How will privacy and confidentiality be handled? Plans may also require prioritization of immediate needs and uses of the oral histories over the future life of the materials — for example, in instances where projects emerge from political or environmental crises.

Considering all of the above, clear documentation of the archival plan is immensely important. This documentation will provide the means for understanding the context of the project in the future, including how and why the oral histories were conducted, how the project evolved over time, and how the archival plan was created. It will help future archivists and users understand the singularities of a project or collection, and it will serve to protect narrators and communities from any future misuse due to a lack of documentation.

Below you will find an overview of the topics that have been identified as crucial components to developing an archival plan. To read more about each topic, visit the corresponding sections of OHA's Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices online.

Archives Principles and Best Practices

Appraisal and Accessioning

The arrival of interviews at a repository is one of the most critical junctures in an interview's life cycle. There are two steps in this process: appraisal (the process of determining which interviews should be accepted by a repository) and accessioning (the actions that archivists take to acquire legal and physical custody of the interviews). A clear appraisal and accessioning process allows repositories to handle the intake of oral histories and makes it easier for potential donors or partners to understand how the repository approaches the intake. Responsible accessioning is foundational to good archival practice. It protects materials and collects the necessary information to

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[1] Examples include interviews conducted with undocumented immigrants who would be at risk of deportation or survivors of domestic violence or stalking who risk being located and harmed by former abusers. For an in-depth exploration of the limits of repositories to protect narrators, see a statement, discussion, and resources on Boston College's Belfast Project: Oral History Association, "Oral History Association Response to Developments in Boston College Case," May 5, 2014; Society of American Archivists, "SAA Oral History Section Live Web Chat: Lessons Learned from Boston College and the Belfast Case," July 17, 2013; Society of American Archivists, "The Belfast Case: Information for SAA Members," March 2013.

subsequently create metadata for discovery and provide access consistent with the intentions of the narrator. (See Manual, Appraisal and Accessioning)

Metadata and Description

Metadata and description include specific fields of collected information which help place oral history interviews in context and enable discovery and access in a variety of ways. Devoting attention to description and metadata at all stages of the process is an essential part of any oral history project. It is important to collect the following types of information or metadata categories: administrative, descriptive, technical, preservation, and rights and access. All stages in the lifecycle of the interview should be considered as opportunities to engage in descriptive practices: pre-interview, interview, processing, preservation, and dissemination. Practitioners should also keep in mind that metadata may need to be monitored over time and changes or updates to metadata may be required after the interview lifecycle.[2] (See Manual, Metadata and Description)

Preservation

It is important for oral historians and archivists to understand the responsibility for ensuring the long-term preservation of an oral history interview. Oral history as a field of practice prioritizes preserving the original recording of the interview as well as related documentation. Therefore, the inherent use of audiovisual materials in oral history practice, whether analog or digital,[3] requires an appropriate and robust preservation plan. The obsolescence of media formats should be considered and planned for.[4] Preservation of other documentation could also include fieldnotes or context statements, photographs or moving images, and any publications or documents created using the recording as the primary resource.

Every effort should be made to ensure oral history materials are adequately stored, processed, maintained, and made accessible according to archival standards and best practices.[5] Continued maintenance of the interviews and related materials ensures continued access to, and viability of, the materials for long-term preservation. Oral

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[2] The Oral History Association Metadata Task Force has produced detailed guidelines for those working with oral history metadata and description and has worked to develop specific tools for metadata and description decision-making, which are based on earlier best practices work (see ODHA, https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/category/metadata/).

[3] A more detailed discussion of digital preservation concepts, including visualizations of systems, can be found in Douglas A. Boyd, "The Digital Mortgage: Digital Preservation of Oral History," in Oral History in the Digital Age, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012, https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/the-digital-mortgage/.

[4] A resource on media stability and format longevity/obsolescence can be found at https://obsoletemedia.org/media-preservation/.

[5] A primer on digital preservation can be found at https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/gettingstarted/playlists/digital-preservation/.

history practitioners and archival institutions should carefully review their infrastructure and resources to determine whether they are able to effectively undertake or intake an oral history project/collection. Individuals and organizations should determine if it's necessary to deposit materials into more experienced or better-supported repositories. (See Manual, Preservation)

Access

One objective of most oral history projects is to create an opportunity for the public to interact with the interviews. There are several key components when considering how oral history interviews will be accessed and used:

1. *Permissions and ethical use:* Who can (and should) do what with an interview.

2. *Transcription:* Transcripts and video captions aid the discoverability and accessibility of interviews by allowing users to fully text-search an interview.

3. *Public access and discoverability:* Cataloging and providing access to oral histories should follow the standards of the collecting institution and/or be based on the capacity of the participants involved.

 (See Manual, Access)

Collaboration

In any collaborative partnership dealing with archiving oral history projects/collections, stakeholders should discuss and come to agreements on the following:

1. *Scope:* Ascertain that the subject matter of the interviews addresses the needs and interests of each stakeholder.

2. *Format:* Ensure that the recording(s) will be made in a format and standard suitable for accession, preservation, and any specific uses identified by stakeholders.

3. *Rights and permissions:* Ensure that a proper legal release is obtained and adheres to each stakeholder's needs and requests.

4. *Long-term preservation plan:* Ensure that any partnering repository has the capacity to accept the interview materials and is capable of long-term preservation of the objects.

5. *Metadata requirements:* Ensure that required metadata is defined at the outset of the project and is collected throughout the life cycle of the interview.

6. *Access:* Determine who can access the interview, how it is made accessible, and create policies dictating future duplication and dissemination of the interview material.

7. *Restrictions on use:* Determine any restrictions, and establish how they are handled by project stakeholders.

8. *Additional considerations:* Discuss any unique or specific wishes relevant to the needs of the narrator, community, repository, or other collaborating partner.

Partners may consider creating a Memorandum of Agreement/Understanding (often referred to as an MOA or an MOU) to document the agreed-upon plan to handle the above important issues. (See Manual, **Collaboration**)

Ownership and Rights Management

Oral historians, archivists, and narrators alike must understand the complexity of ownership and rights management of oral history interviews. It is important to define ownership before a project starts and document any changes throughout the lifecycle of an oral history. This includes preserving narrator rights through an ongoing relationship with an archive. It is also important to consider the temporal aspects of administration and how practices change over time. Aspects that could impact ownership include changes in administrative best practice, in legislation, in societal understanding of ownership, and in technology. (See Manual, **Ownership and Rights Management**)

About the Document

The establishment of the Oral History Association (OHA) Archives Principles and Best Practices Task Force grew out of a direct recommendation from the OHA Principles and Best Practices Task Force after revision work was completed in 2018. The objective of the task force was to create a document addressing issues of best practices regarding the archiving of oral history, not only for archival management of oral history material, but also in terms of working with oral historians, narrators, and the public for access and care of oral history material. In January 2019 the OHA Council asked the OHA Archives Interest Group to form a small task force to take on this duty, with a suggested completion date to coincide with the 2019 OHA Annual Meeting in October. The task force reached out to the Society of American Archivists Oral History Section for support and recruitment of additional task force members. In late-January 2019 the task force convened twelve members with an intentional inclusion of backgrounds from large and small institutions, academic institutions, non-archivists working with archival collections, non-traditional archives, and independent practitioners.

The co-chairs identified six sections for this document: Appraisal and Accessioning; Metadata and Description; Preservation; Access; Collaboration; and Ownership and Rights Management. Ideas for a number of these sections came directly from discussions and feedback given by OHA members during the review of OHA's general Principles and Best Practices document in 2018.