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Oral History Handbook : A Practical Guide for Students at USF St. Petersburg

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Oral History Handbook

A Practical Guide for Students at USF St. Petersburg



*Image: Moving into Jordan Park, St. Petersburg, circa 1940
Special Collections and University Archives
Nelson Poynter Memorial Library
University of South Florida St. Petersburg*

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About this Handbook

The Poynter Library developed the original version of this handbook in 1993 after Mary Grigsby, library director at the time, launched the **Oral History of Modern America** initiative. Since that time, the Poynter Library has collected oral histories that capture the voices of local residents, regional issues, Florida themes, and the history of USF St. Petersburg. Library staff members have revised this handbook on occasion, though the general outline remains similar to that used in the mid-1990s. The handbook divides the oral history process into three “Acts”: Preparing for the Interview, Conducting the Interview, and Safeguarding the Interview. Helpful hints offer an overview of best practices.

About Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA)

SCUA operates as a distinct unit within the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library at USF St. Petersburg, a public institution chartered by the State of Florida and a separately accredited member of the USF System. The Poynter Library serves the teaching, research, and educational mission of USF St. Petersburg by accommodating the scholarly needs of graduate and undergraduate students and the teaching faculty at USFSP. The library’s secondary mission is to provide access to academic resources for staff, postgraduate students and alumni of the USF System, as well as to outside researchers, lifelong learners, and the general public.

Collections fall under a number of distinct areas of provenance. Rare and unique items, as well as most monographs in *Floridiana*, reside in SCUA’s **General Collection**. Manuscript, archival, and book collections may also appear in collections based in the fields of **Humanities, Journalism and Media Studies, Local and Regional History, Marine Science and Ichthyology, Maritime Base History, Oral History of Modern America**, and the **USF St. Petersburg Archives**. Since the spring of 2011, the library has also preserved documents of historical significance through the **USFSP Digital Archive**.

SCUA is open to members of the University community and outside researchers. Individual appointments are required to access the collections. Regular hours of operation vary weekly, due to reference duties and other staff assignments. To arrange an appointment, please contact us at 727.873.4094.

Act I: Preparing for the Interview

Step 1: Setting Your Goals

1. **Decide on a broad research topic and evaluate potential interview subjects.** Oral histories generally assume one of three forms:
 - a. **Biographical** interviews record information about the subject's life.
 - b. **Topical** interviews combine the recollections from a variety of participants that focus on a single topic (i.e., how the Second World War changed life in Ocala).
 - c. Finally, oral histories may focus on a **single event** (for example, the 1968 statewide teacher's strike at a particular school).
2. **Examine primary and secondary sources and chronicles to gain an awareness of the chief events and participants involved.** Once a theme is selected, you may examine either primary or secondary sources. *Primary* sources are materials that originated from the period under consideration, such as archival materials, diaries, photographs, letters, and scrapbooks. *Secondary* sources are synthetic narratives that describe an event in the past, such as scholarly articles, biographies, and other products of research. When examining source material, take note of names that appear (or appear frequently) in the documents. You may also look at chronologies that allow you to place names and events in historical context. From these lists, you will be able to decide which individuals should be interviewed and which events should be discussed. From this broader topic, you can craft particular questions those you interview.

Step 2: Arranging the Interview

1. **Make the call.** During your preliminary contact, tell the potential interviewee about your research interests. Select interviewees based upon their knowledge of the topic. If your subjects have little knowledge of relevant events or refuse to consent to an interview, you should ask them if they know of others who may have an interest in participating in this project.
2. **Explain your intentions.** During your conversation, many questions will inevitably arise. (Who will have access to the recordings? Where will they be located? Can anyone listen to them?) Inform potential candidates of the themes you wish to discuss during the interview session. Assure them that the interview will be informal, not regimented. Your interview should resemble a friendly exchange of ideas and memories rather than the tense, adversarial interchange that often occurs between a lawyer and a witness in the courtroom. Avoid making commitments that you may not be able to fulfill, and be sure to document any promises or special arrangements/ agreements before the interview session begins so there is no misunderstanding at a later time.
3. **Set the appointment.** Reserve a quiet location where interruptions will remain at a minimum. If the appointment is more than a week away, you may want to make a call or write a brief letter or email to tell your subject that you look forward to the interview.

Mention the date, time, location, and topics you plan to discuss to allow the interviewee to prepare.

4. **Encourage the interviewee to examine personal materials relevant to the topic.** They may have scrapbooks, journals, photographic albums, newspaper clippings, or other materials that will help them recall events. And, of course, the interviewees should feel free to consult personal materials during the actual interview session.

Step 3: Before You Leave Home

1. **Do your homework.** Formulate an outline or a variety of questions based upon your research of the time period or topic. Avoid tightly written scripts that make the interview session appear rigid and leave little room for deviation. Select questions that fill gaps in the historical record. For example, instead of asking your subject a question that could be readily found in other sources or that are difficult to answer (i.e., “Do you know the exact number of troops at Camp Blanding in October 1942?”), create a list of questions that make the interview personal (i.e., “How did your experiences as a young soldier at Camp Blanding change your life?”). Use the interview as a way to obtain “inside information” unavailable from other sources, or for clarification when different sources offer conflicting accounts.
2. **Make sure you have everything you will need before departing.** At a minimum, you should have the following:
 - a. A **cassette recorder** or **digital recorder** in good working condition with its electrical cord and/or fresh batteries. Test the equipment before leaving the house. Check for sound quality. If possible, use an external microphone with good sound fidelity. Select a machine with good recording capability; with audiocassettes, you can always replay the tapes on a different machine. Examine the machine for dust or other particles that may damage the recording heads or compromise the sound quality.
 - b. A supply of **new, unused, high-quality audiocassettes (for tape recorders)**. Avoid using miniature tapes or microcassettes; changes in technology may render them obsolete (remember 8-track tapes?). Refrain from purchasing low-quality cassettes with inferior materials, or longer, extended play tapes (like C-120s). Whenever possible use the thickest tapes available, like C-60s, which have 30 minutes recording time on each side. Longer playing cassettes have thinner tapes that may cause the sound to echo or “bleed through.”
 - c. A **blank release form** that, when completed, will transfer legal title and literary rights to the oral history program or grant project, if applicable.
 - d. Any **research notes, questions, or other materials** that are necessary.

Act II: Conducting the Interview

Step 1: Before Pressing the “RECORD” Button

1. **Test the equipment one last time.** Does the cassette recorder work? Is the tape in the machine?
2. **Place the interviewee at ease.** Take the interviewee to a quiet place away from unnecessary interruptions. Meet with the interviewee on a one-to-one basis. Third parties, whether spouses, friends, or relatives, may distract the interviewee. If your subject feels nervous or uncomfortable, you may want to hide the tape recorder or start the recorder and talk about mundane matters: the weather, a recent sports event, or some other item that will “break the ice”. You should quickly establish a strong rapport until the interviewee no longer notices the recorder’s presence.

Step 2: The Main Event

1. **Identify yourself.** When starting a tape recorder (as opposed to digital), allow for 5 or 10 seconds of silence (especially if the tape has a long leader), then identify the context of the interview. For example: “This is tape number one of my interview with Mr. John Smith, an Ocala native and veteran of World War II. My name is Tom Jones, and I am conducting this interview on February 5, 2011, at Mr. Smith’s home. Welcome, and thank you for allowing me to interview you.” Biographical questions (i.e., “When were you born? Did you attend school locally?”) usually follow such introductions.
2. **Foster an intellectual exchange through strong questions.** Ask only one question at a time and keep it brief in length. Do not overwhelm or confuse the interviewee by posing a series of involved, lengthy questions. Establish a strong rapport with the speaker before asking questions of a delicate or controversial nature. Formulate questions in a way that will encourage honest, detailed responses. Avoid interjecting subjective commentary that might influence the answer. To ask: “I thought the mayor was a generous and kind person; what did you think of him?” would place the interviewee in an awkward position if they held an opposite opinion.
3. **Include open-ended questions.** Your questions should include general, short-answer questions (e.g., “When did you enlist in the military?”) as well as broader, open-ended questions (e.g., “How did wartime rationing affect your family?”). Although you will have some general and topical questions, you want most of the questions in this session to address the unique vantage point that your interviewee can offer.
4. **Feel free to deviate from the script.** Add zest to your interview and rekindle otherwise forgotten memories. Show interest and listen carefully. You must play a delicate balancing act: Allow the interviewee to pause and reflect, yet try to keep the interview on track. Never blurt out your next question in a moment of silence, but be sure to steer the conversation away from long-winded responses that venture far from the

- subject at hand. Interrupt occasionally with new questions or guiding comments that evolve during the course of the interview, but never interrupt the flow of a good story. If the interview gets off track, you might say: "This is very interesting, Mr. Smith. However, before we move on, could you tell me about your first assignment in the platoon? . . .".
5. **Respect the opinions of your interviewee.** Your subject may express views that contradict your beliefs. However, avoid imposing currently accepted standards or criticism on historical actors. By challenging the interviewees' value system or attempting to convert them to your beliefs, you may merely alienate the participants and discourage them from sharing their honest reflections. If discrepancies appear between interviewee's account and other sources, you may have to do additional research or detective work after the interview has ended. Remember that the subject's statement may be an inaccurate representation or the larger picture, but a truthful recollection of what was witnessed from his or her limited perspective.
 6. **Keep the interview "in the Sunshine".** During oral history interviews, subjects may occasionally ask you to put the interview under seal or restriction until a later date. While you always respect confidentiality and "off the record" information, you should remind the interviewee of the value of their narrative and try to keep the recorder turned on as much as possible. Oral history is of little value if present and future scholars cannot gain access to the materials. If the interviewee seeks to close or limit access to the material—or you believe some contents of the interview could place the interviewee in a compromising position—place the terms of the restriction in the release form. Make the period of restriction as short as possible and use specific language. Avoid vague and unenforceable restrictions, such as "Open only to qualified researchers with a legitimate interest."
 7. **Do not steal the show.** You should allow the interviewee an opportunity to tell a complete story, rather than force him or her to compete for attention in a balanced dialogue. Remember to keep the subject as the focus of the interview; do not use the interview as a place to flaunt your expert knowledge. Avoid wasting this rare opportunity to preserve someone's memories by becoming a compulsive talker or an overbearing director. Allow the interviewee to do most of the talking.
 8. **Take copious notes and watch the tape counter.** While the recorder may preserve the verbal interchange, do not rely on it to capture the essence of the interview. During the oral history session, the course of the interview may generate other ideas, potential subjects, or new questions. Listing names, places, dates, or themes of special interest during an interview serves two essential purposes: It gives you an opportunity to make note of important thoughts during long pauses in the conversation, and provides an index to the flow and contents of the oral history session. This index may later be used by library, archival, or museum staff to assign subject headings to the interview. Whenever possible, use a tape recorder with a timer or counter, so you can keep track of memorable quotes. Remember that no two tape counters operate at precisely the same speed.

9. **Keep an eye on the tape or time remaining in the device's memory.** Do not lose the best part of the interview by forgetting to monitor the tape or odometer. You may have to ask your subject to pause briefly while you turn over or replace the cassette. Avoid asking deep, thought-provoking questions just before the end of the tape. After replacing the tape, remember to leave some blank tape at the beginning.

Step 3: Concluding the Interview

1. **Any last thoughts?** Before you stop the tape, give the interviewee an opportunity to share any thoughts or have closure on any issues discussed during the interview. Also, thank your subject for agreeing to participate before you end the recording.
2. **Collect related items, if possible.** The interviewee may have illustrative materials that might assist future researchers, such as clippings or photographs. If possible, obtain copies of any materials that would allow others to place this interview within proper historical context. You may even want to take a photograph of the interviewee, if he or she grants permission to do so.

Act III: Safeguarding the Interview

Secure and Preserve the Interview

1. **Secure your interview.** Place a label on both the cassette and its container that indicates the following information: names of interviewer and interviewee(s), the date, the tape number (if you used more than one tape), and the approximate length of the interview. Listen to a few minutes of the tape to verify sound quality. Remove plastic tabs on the top of the cassette to ensure that you never record over the interview. Make a copy of digital recordings.
2. **Store the recording.** Never keep audiocassettes (or other media items) in areas where they may encounter excessive fluctuations in temperature or humidity, direct exposure to the sunshine, or electromagnetic radiation. Place tapes in cool, dry areas away from natural pollution (dirt and dust) and electronic interference (such as microwaves, portable phones, vacuum cleaners, etc.).

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