

## Module 3

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# Preparing for the Oral History



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## Supporting Questions

**How** do you choose a narrator for an oral history?

**Where** should you record your oral history?

**How** do you prepare for an oral history?

## 1. Can collecting community histories confront the silencing of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders?

Community historians understand that an oral history takes careful planning in advance, diligent focus during the interview, and considerate care afterwards. Community historians always try to collaborate with the narrator whose stories they are documenting.

So you have decided that you want to document the history of someone in your community. Where do you begin? How do you choose the person you would like to interview? Think about the people you know. Do you have elder relatives, family friends, or people you know in your community whose perspectives on the past don't often show up in your textbooks? Is there a particular event that you have read about that you would like to hear about first-hand? Do you know someone who lived through that event who would talk to you? Are any of these people storytellers? Do they like to talk about the past? If so, you might have found someone who would be willing to sit for an oral history interview with you.

Once you have identified someone to interview, you should conduct a pre-interview meeting. A **pre-interview** is a meeting where you explain the project and the interview process to the narrator. At the meeting, you should discuss the scope of the interview and tell the narrator why you think conducting an oral history with them is important.

Make sure your narrator understands that the interview recordings and transcripts will be shared with the public. You should then agree on the number of interviews and the amount of time each interview will last. You should tell your interviewer that you will be asking them to sign a document called a “release form,” which will give you written permission to use the interview. You should then give them a copy of the release form to review in advance.

You and your narrator should agree on whether the interview will be recorded using only audio or both audio and video. You and your narrator must agree on all of this in advance before you begin the oral history interview.

## 2. Where Should You Record Your Oral History?

Choose a place for the interview where your narrator will feel comfortable talking with you. This might be your narrator’s home, a local park, or community center. Ideally, you will choose a place that is quiet enough for an interview recording. If you are recording using video, you should make sure that you are not recording in a place where there will be people walking behind your narrator in your shot. For example, recording in front of a wall is better than recording in front of a window.

## 3. What Equipment Do You Need?

You don’t need any advanced technical equipment. Usually, the best recording equipment is the one you know how to use. A phone with recording capabilities is enough. If you are recording a video, however, it is highly recommended that you use a tripod to mount your phone or camera and record the interview.

Because recording is such an important part of the process, you must familiarize yourself

with the recording equipment in advance. Your narrator's time is valuable. Your narrator does not want to waste time while you figure out how to use your equipment during the interview session. Consider running a practice interview with a friend using your equipment in advance.

## 4. How Do You Create an Interview Guide?

Once you and your narrator have agreed on the number of recordings and the length of the recording, you need to collaborate with them to produce an **interview guide**. An interview guide is a rough map of what topics you want to discuss in your oral history. This guide will contain historical topics and sample questions. Because you and your narrator are working together, you should ask your narrator what topics they would like to discuss.

It is important to think of the guide as just that: a guide. Remember, the goal of your oral history is to record a version of the narrator's life that they want to share with the public. The goal is not to ask every question or cover every topic in your interview guide. Instead, you should think of the guide as a way for both the interviewer and narrator to prepare for this recorded conversation.

## 5. What Should You Do Before the Interview?

- Conduct a pre-interview. A pre-interview is a meeting between the narrator and the interviewer in which you discuss the goals of your project and agree on specifics of the length and number of interviews.
- In your pre-interview, make sure your narrator understands that an oral history interview is recorded and that the recording and its transcripts will be shared with the public.
- Decide what type of equipment you would like to use to record the interview. Will you be recording with only audio or with both audio and video?
- Agree on a location for the interview.
- After your narrator has agreed to participate, work with them to create an interview guide.

An interview guide is a set of general topics and sample questions for the interview.

- Share the final interview guide with your narrator in advance so they can prepare.
- Ask the narrator if they have any photos they would like to discuss during the interview. If so, have them bring those photos to the interview.
- Finally, test all your recording equipment before you arrive at your interview.