

A Guide to Conducting Institutional Oral History
Projects in Classrooms

A Guide to Conducting Institutional Oral History Projects in Classrooms

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Introduction

This guide outlines how to conduct an online oral history project with an institutional focus in a classroom.

Conducting an oral history project enables students to engage in a real history research project that improves their research, writing, communication, and listening comprehension skills and abilities. The students will be able to better understand the past and recognize that examining the past events is not always straightforward, and each story provides an intimate portrait of the past that is unlikely to be revealed otherwise. This guide can be used in a public history course as a final term project to be completed over the course of the semester. However, given the ubiquity of oral history projects, a wide range of faculty teaching various relevant classes can use this guideline to add a similar project to their course design. Further, any individuals (e.g., students) interested in such projects can benefit from the guidelines outlined here in their individual efforts. Two keys to a successful oral history project are planning and preparation. The information, steps, and resources included in this guide will assist the students in their planning and preparation and will help ensure a successful learning experience.¹

1. The linked images to Audacity, Zoom, and The University of Baltimore's Oral History Projects demonstrate oral history tools and examples.



zoom

Join a Meeting

Oral History Project, 1971-1983

The University of Baltimore Oral History Project was started in 1971 by the Special Collections Department of the University of Baltimore Library. Adele Newberger, a Longshore library staff, directed the project. Its purpose was to preserve, through tape recorded interviews, information that was available only in the minds of the people who participated in events surrounding the development of the University of Baltimore. Several interviews were conducted by John Nicholson, Library Director in the Baltimore Room of the University of Baltimore Library.

Credits: Exhibit curated by Fareesh Raza in August 2020.



Adele Newberger, University of Baltimore Baltimore
Librarian, 1973



PART I

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

What is Oral History?

Oral history captures and preserves personal memories pertaining to historical events through recorded interviews.

What is the purpose of conducting oral histories?

Oral history provides valuable insight into the lives of individuals, allowing us to understand important events and the way the events were experienced.

Here's an example of an oral history interview:

Part 1



An audio element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can listen to it online here: <https://ubalt.pressbooks.pub/oralhistory/?p=253>

Part 2



An audio element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can listen to it online here: <https://ubalt.pressbooks.pub/oralhistory/?p=253>

Interview with Lee Labovitz Kramer. The interview was conducted in Baltimore, Maryland on August 22, 1979 by Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project¹

To learn more about the significance of oral history, read the following:

<https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/66420.pdf>

1. Lee Labovitz Kramer, (1979, August 22), *Interview by Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project* [Interview 136]. Baltimore Regional Studies Archives, The Maryland Historical Society and The University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives, Baltimore, MD, United State. https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/17995 Accessed April 07, 2021.

PART II

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONAL ORAL HISTORY

A higher education institution's history is largely recorded in its yearbooks, university publications and media, and student publications. Conducting oral history interviews with faculty, staff, trustees, alumni, and emeriti can also reveal more nuances about the history of the institution. By capturing the community's daily lives, oral history interviews can help the university better preserve its history and can help the administration improve the academic experience.

Here is an example of Institutional Oral History:



An audio element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can listen to it online here: <https://ubalt.pressbooks.pub/oralhistory/?p=255>

This Interview is part of a series of oral history interviews directed by the Special Collections Department of The University of Baltimore's Library. The interview was conducted on May 20, 1977. The interviewee is the president of the University of Baltimore H. Mebane Turner from 1969 to 1979.¹

1. H. Mebane Turner, (1977, May 20), *Interview by Oral History Project* [Tape: 11]. Oral History Project Collection, UR0031. University of Baltimore Institutional Archives, The University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives, Baltimore, MD, United States.
https://archivesspace.ubalt.edu/repositories/4/archival_objects/31757 Accessed April 07, 2021.

PART III

MAIN STEPS TO COMPLETE AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

I. Project Title

The primary investigator of the project must first, come up with a title that captures the purpose of the project. A suitable title facilitates communication with both interviewees and people who use the products. Using the title of the project in all communications with potential interviewees can convey and signify the purpose of the project and direct the interviews to the right direction

Example

Here is the title for The University of Baltimore institutional oral history project: *UB Stories: 100th Anniversary University Oral History Project*

2. Purpose/Themes

It is necessary to recognize the purpose and theme of the project in order to design appropriate interview questions.

Examples

- *Organizational change over time*
- *“What does this university mean to you?”*

3. Project Description

The project description explains how and when the project will be conducted. Project description offers further clarity about the project and helps in making appropriate steps to achieve its outcomes.

Example

“The University of Baltimore was founded in 1925 and has gone through many structural and academic changes over the years. As the University approaches its 100th anniversary in 2025, UB Special Collections & Archives is planning extensive oral history interviews with faculty, staff, trustees, and alumni. Through this oral history project, the University will be able to tell more about its history over the past 50 years. The project will start in the spring of 2021 and will continue until 2025. The first phase of the project will include interviews with retired faculty and staff, representative alumni for every decade of the past 50 years, and employees who are about to retire or leave the university. Next, employees who have worked at the university for more than twenty years will be interviewed. The interviewees will be selected from a broad range of people with diverse responsibilities, duties, backgrounds, and years of service. The interviews will be archived within the UB RLB Library’s Special Collections and Archives.”

4. Team/Roles

- Planning the project and providing the training for interviewers are the responsibilities of the **supervisor or project investigator**.
- Among some of the duties of the **interviewer** are preparing, conducting and recording interviews, creating audio and/or video files and transcribing the interviews.
- Managing interviews, preserving them, making them accessible, and spreading the word about the project are some of the other duties of the **archivist/PI**

5. Interview Guide

Workflow to conduct an oral history interview for UB Stories: 100th Anniversary University Oral History Project

1. *Conduct preliminary research on:*

Interviewees

- Background research on interviewees
 - education
 - employment history

History of the University

- UB history resources:
 - [Unpublished University Histories Collection](#) 1947-1985
 - [Oral History Project Collection](#) 1971-1983
 - [University of Baltimore](#) 2000
 - [University of Baltimore Alumni Magazine](#) 1960-2019
 - [University of Baltimore Wikipedia](#)

2. *Contact interviewees that have already been contacted by*

the project manager, confirm the interview, explain the logistics, and inquire about their availability.

Email Template

“Subject: UB Stories: 100th anniversary oral history project

I am [your name]. I am a student at the University of Baltimore and a member of the oral history project team at Special Collections and Archives.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an oral history interview. I am reaching out to set up a date and time for your interview, as well as give you some information you might find useful as you prepare for your interview.

Please suggest a couple of times and dates that work for you. Our interviews will be conducted online through Zoom’s video conferencing platform. All you need is a webcam, microphone, and high speed internet on your computer, tablet, or smartphone. Additionally, earbuds with built-in microphones or external headphones would be ideal. If you do not have access to this equipment, please let me know. The link to our Zoom meeting will be sent to you once we finalize the date and time of the interview. We will record both the audio and video during your interview (unless you do not want us to record the video).

In advance of the formal interview, we can do the following:

- Confirm that the internet connection is strong, and that the interview conversation will go smoothly.
- Make sure that there are no background noise sources that might disrupt the interview.
- Consider how to get the best picture possible by changing computer camera positioning, moving distracting background objects, or considering the available light sources.

I've attached a list of questions that I will use for your interview. We conduct interviews in chronological order, starting with personal background information, where you have worked, why you became interested in working at UB, etc. It may take between 60 and 90 minutes to conduct the interview.

Additionally, we'd like to have a recent photo of you to use for this project's online exhibit.

Please find attached the Informed Consent and Deed of Gift Agreement forms to sign before the interview. You may choose to sign the Deed of Gift form after the interview.

There are two options for you to digitally sign the documents for us.

- E-signature in Adobe Acrobat. If you are not familiar with this service please let me know that I can provide you with instructions.
- You can print and sign the form, then generate an image of the signed form and return it to me via email.

Your interview will be transcribed and you'll get the chance to edit the transcription before it's posted online at [Special Collections and Archives Exhibit website](#). In the meantime,

you can explore the other [oral history project that was conducted between 1971-1983 at the University of Baltimore.](#)

Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this project. Your insights will enhance our knowledge of our institution's history, and we truly appreciate you being a part of it.

We look forward to hearing your story.

Let me know if you have any questions, and we will continue our discussion via email or you can call me at ..."¹

3. *Send the Informed Consent and Deed of Gift to the interviewee to sign.*

Informed Consent Form Template

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM

1. The initial version of this template developed by (Fish and Wildlife Service, 2019) was modified for the purpose of this guideline. Retrieved from <https://training.fws.gov/history/Documents/oral-history/Sample-Communications-for-Interview-Planning-2019-03-04.pdf>

UB Stories: 100th anniversary oral history project

1. You are being asked to participate in an interview in connection with UB Stories: 100th anniversary oral history project because you are a part of a list of individuals important to and knowledgeable of the history of the University of Baltimore over the past several decades. You will be asked about your life and experience as a faculty or staff working at the University of Baltimore.
2. The interview will be digitally recorded, transcribed, published online, and made available for public and scholarly use at the University of Baltimore. Any member of the general public will have access to this interview and your words may be quoted in scholarly and popular publications.
3. The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. It will include video, audio, and transcript recorded through Zoom platform. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this interview. However, you can withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice prior to the execution and delivery of a deed of gift (see the attached form). You will also have the opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions in the deed of gift. During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding. In the event that you choose to withdraw during the interview, any recording made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview. With your permission, a photograph of you

will be used if you provide it. If you withdraw from the project, any digital files regarding your interview will be destroyed.

4. Upon completion of the interview and signing the deed of gift, the digital recording and content of the interview will belong to the University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives, and the information in the interview can be utilized by the University of Baltimore Special Collections and Archives in any manner it will determine including but not limited to future use by researchers in presentations and publications.
5. If you have any questions about the project or procedures, you can contact, Project Investigator at , phone number:, or email:

Interviewer signature

I agree to participate in this interview.

Interviewee Printed Name

Interviewee signature

Address

Phone number

Date ____/____/____²

Deed of Gift Form Template

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW DEED OF GIFT

I,
_____,
hereby give my permission to the University of Baltimore
(UB) Special Collections and Archives for scholarly and
educational to use the video recordings, and all associated
audio and text files, from the interview(s) conducted on
_____ and the photograph sent on
_____. I also grant the University
of Baltimore's Special Collections and Archives all the rights I
possess in those recordings, including all intellectual
property rights.

I understand that I am conveying all right, title, and
interest in copyright to the University. I understand that the
UB may post online the material in whole or in part for

2. The initial version of this template developed by
(Washington County Historical Society, n.d.) was
modified for the purpose of this guideline. Retrieved
from <https://wchsutah.org/documents/Oral-History-Consent-Form.pdf>

additional educational, non-commercial purposes. I understand that UB grants me a nonexclusive license to utilize my interview/s.

I agree to be identified by name in any transcript or reference to any information contained in this interview.

The foregoing gift and grant of rights is subject to the following restrictions:

This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Accepted by:

____ Date _____ Project
Investigator

____ Date _____
Interviewer Signature

____ Date _____
Interviewee Signature

Interviewee Street/PO Box Address

City _____ State _____ Zip

Code _____ Phone Number _____

4. Compile a list of topics or questions.

Questions For Interviewing Faculty, Staff

Early life, Education, and Family

- *When and where were you born and where did you grow up?*
- *What do you know about your family ancestry?*
- *Tell me about your family background.*
- *How was it like to be growing up in ...?*
- *Tell me about your childhood and adolescence days.*

- ## Early life, Education, and Family
- *When and where were you born and where did you grow up?*
 - *What do you know about your family ancestry?*
 - *Tell me about your family background.*
 - *How was it like to be growing up in ...?*
 - *Tell me about your childhood and adolescence days.*

3. The initial version of this template developed by (A Round Table of American Library Association, 2012) was modified for the purpose of this guideline. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/rt/sites/ala.org.rt/files/content/deed-of-gift-2012.pdf>

- Did you have any jobs in town when you were growing up?
- How did you end up choosing to go to ... University for your Undergraduate?
- At what point did you decide to major in ...? How did this happen?
- Why did you decide to continue your education?
- Tell me more about your time at the university where you studied. What stands out in your memory from that time?
- What did attract you to pursue your PhD (e.g., doing research, teaching, etc.)
- What would you like to mention about your time at ... University for your PhD?
- What would you like to say about your time at ... for your PhD?
- What was your first real research project? Was it your thesis?

Work experience before UB

- Tell me about your experience at your first job as a faculty and teaching at the ... University.

Working at UB

- What year did you join UB?

- *How did you learn about the job possibility at UB and what, if anything, did you know about UB before you came for the interview?*
- *What was your job at UB?*
- *Tell me a bit about how you set up those early courses.*
- *How much pressure was there to do research? How were you made aware of the pressure (requirements)?*
- *What were the requirements for pedagogy or teaching at that time at UB?*
- *How was your early impression of the campus once you arrived?*
- *What did you teach?*
- *How about your colleagues at UB?*
- *Do you have any memories or stories about specific students or colleagues?*
- *Are you a tenured faculty? Tell me about your experiences at UB when you were a tenure track faculty.*
- *You've seen a lot of changes in the way teaching gets done and in the way the institution organizes itself. What observations you might like to share about those changes as UB has moved forward?*
- *Did you have any administrator role at UB?*

- *What University committees have you served on during your time at UB?*
- *Is there anything else you'd like to say about your career as you look back on it and your time at UB?*

School atmosphere

- *What are your thoughts and observations of diversity at UB? How has the concept of diversity changed since you've worked here?*

Choose at least 10 questions from the examples above. Add any other questions to your interview if necessary. Be ready to make any follow up questions based on your conversation with the interviewee.

5. Practice interviewing.

- Make a personalized checklist

6. During the interview:

Tips

- Start the interview with a statement of who, what, when, and where you are interviewing.
 - For example, “This is (your name). It is May 25th, 2020, 3 pm. I am with professor ... via the online platform Zoom and we are beginning our oral history interview”
- Explain the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it.
 - Example, “The purpose of the UB Stories: 100th anniversary oral history project is to celebrate the University’s centennial by preserving the memory of those influenced by The University of Baltimore over the years. We will be creating a digital exhibit and making the recordings available online through the Internet Archive.”
- Actively listen and pay attention
- It is best to speak one at a time
- Allow silence during the interview. Silence gives the interviewee some time to think.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Before moving on to the next question, make sure your current question is answered completely.
- Unless you are looking for short answers, facts, ask open-ended questions that can be answered in a longer essay.

- *Begin the interview with basic questions and progress to more probing ones as the interview goes on.*
- *Let the interview end on a lighter note. Do not abruptly end a discussion that has been intense.*
- *Limit interviews to no longer than an hour and a half.⁴*

7. After the interview:

- As soon as recording files are generated, use the file name convention to generate the proper names for files
 - Last Name First Initial Date of interview (yyyy/mm/dd)

Example

4. Film Study Center at Harvard University (1999).
Retrieved from http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

SmithA20210412

- Complete the field note form

Interview Field Notes Template

Full Name of Interviewer:

Full Name of Interviewee:

*Date of Birth _____Place of
Birth_____*

Interviewee occupation:

Interviewee Ethnicity:

Interview Date:

Interview Location:

Filename of the interview:

Approximate length of interview:

Summary of the Interview:

Notes

Add any additional notes, such as an explanation of specialized terms, correct spelling of names or places, any idiomatic words/phrases that you think the researcher might

*have difficulty understanding, or important themes or contextual information.*⁵

- Edit the transcript of the interview.
- The project investigator should send a thank-you note to the narrator.

Thank You Letter Template

Dear...,

Thank you very much for your participation in the UB Stories: 100th anniversary oral history project. Interviews with you and other University staff and faculty will contribute to the University's documented history.

We are currently transcribing and editing your interview. Once this work is completed, you will have the chance to review it and make revisions before the transcript becomes available on our website.

5. The initial version of this template developed by (Andrea L'Hommedieu, 2008) was modified for the purpose of this guideline. Retrieved from <https://library.bowdoin.edu/arch/george-j-mitchell/oral-history/OralHistoryManual%20Mitchell%202011May.pdf>

*Once again, we are grateful for your contribution.*⁶

- The narrator should receive a copy of the transcript from the project investigator
- Transfer the oral history files to the archives

6. The initial version of this template developed by (Andrea L’Hommedieu, 2008) was modified for the purpose of this guideline. Retrieved from <https://library.bowdoin.edu/arch/george-j-mitchell/oral-history/OralHistoryManual%20Mitchell%202011May.pdf>

PART IV

RECORDING TECHNOLOGY

Setup process of conducting an online interview

In spite of the various online interview tools available, Zoom seems to be the most practical due to its convenient accessibility and familiarity. The steps for using Zoom to conduct online interviews are as follows:

- **Zoom Audio/Video recording settings**

1. *Schedule an interview on Zoom and send the link to the interviewee.*

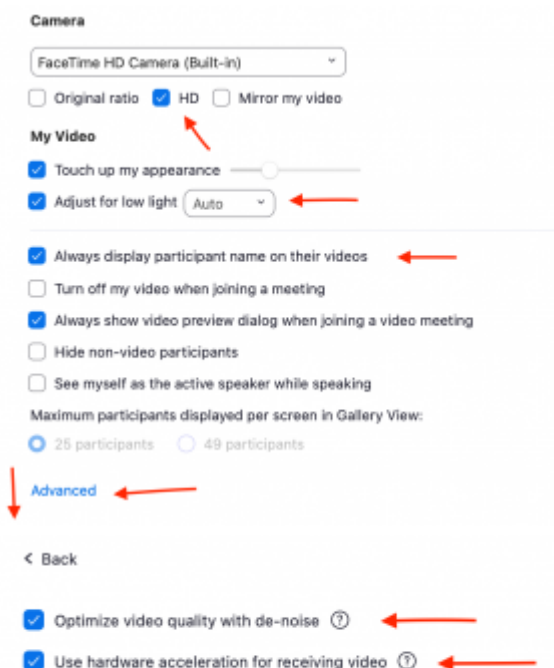
- The title of your Zoom meeting should include the following: “Title of the project – Your Name – Interviewee’s Name – Date and Time”
- Enable “join before host”
- Make sure that the video is set to automatically turn on

2. *Make sure Zoom records to the cloud in the recording settings*

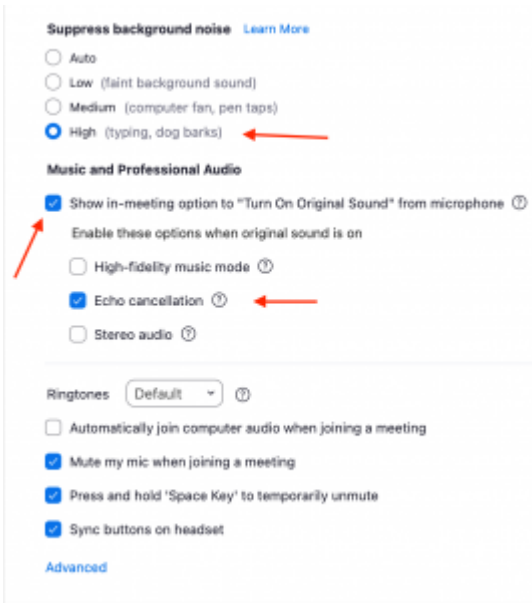
3. *You may want to consider using a better microphone such as*

a USB mic or a headset rather than the built-in microphone found in your computer. Make sure your narrator does the same.

4. The Zoom setting for video should look like this:



5. Make sure the Zoom setting for audio looks like this:



• Recording

1. Zoom has a Record option in the bottom right of your screen; you must select the second option to record to the cloud, otherwise you will not get a transcript.) Inform your narrator that you're recording.
2. Set screen to "speaker view"
3. If you need to take a break, pause your Zoom recording rather than stopping it.
4. When the interview is finished, you can just close your Zoom application and select the option to "End meeting for all." This will begin the process of creating your audio files in mp4 and m4a formats.

- After the Interview

1. The recording might not show up immediately, or may not be available in one day. You might also have to wait until the next day to download the transcription. Go to the Zoom portal website and sign in to your Zoom account to download the recording.
2. Download all three files (MP4, M4A, VTT) when they are ready. Name each recording file immediately using the convention and save them to a suitable location.¹²

- Backup Audio Recording

1. Install and open [Audacity](#)
2. Click the red record button
3. Start the backup recording before starting the Zoom recording
4. Stop recording after you stopped recording in Zoom. Then go to the file in the Audacity app and select export as WAV. Name the recording file immediately using the file name convention and save them to a

1. Columbia Center for Oral History Research (2020, August). Retrieved from <https://www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NYC-Covid-19-Oral-History-Narrative-and-Memory-Project-Case-Study.pdf>
2. University of California Berkeley (2020, July). Retrieved March 20, 2021, from <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/files/RemoteInterviewingForZoom%2C%2007-13-20.pdf>

suitable location.



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