

WHAT IS Oral History?

From **Methods and Mediums:
Oral History Methodologies** with
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It's **conversation**,
but it's also **not actually**
just a recorded conversation.

Oral history is a method of historical and social scientific inquiry and analysis that includes life histories, storytelling, narratives, and qualitative research.

Oral history has emerged as a movement to **democratize history**: to make history more accessible to a wider public, to include a greater diversity of people in the histories that are written and told, and to encourage more people to participate in the practice of history.

Oral history is... used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition bearers, what sometimes is also called oral tradition... to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.

– Linda Shopes, “Making Sense of Oral History”

Source: Oral History Centre, University of Winnipeg

What does Oral History look like as a Research Method?

BEFORE

Before starting the oral history interview process, you must consider the **ethics of your oral history research project** and **positionality**.

- Positionality answers the key questions, “why are you the one who should be doing these oral histories?” and “are you the person best placed to engage in that oral history?”
- In Canada, institutional research ethics boards require researchers undergo the Tri-Council Course on Research Ethics before beginning an oral history project.
- A research ethics protocol must address issues including informed consent, data storage and destruction, and the question of anonymity.
- However, university ethics processes include a narrowly-defined legal and ethical system that does not necessarily incorporate OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) principles that are key to Indigenous research.

DURING

An oral history consists of an **informed interviewer** asking questions of an **interviewee**.

- Ideally, this conversation is recorded through an audio recording. The conversation may also be video recorded, or recorded by the interviewer using detailed notes, depending on the wishes of the interviewee and the communities you're working with.
- Oral history emphasizes **shared authority** - often, the interviewer's relationship with the interviewee is collaborative and continues outside the interview space.

German oral historian Alexander von Plato uses a four-phase methodology in oral history research:

- First, you ask a general question – “**could you tell me your life story?**” or “can you please tell me your life story in as much or as little detail as you wish to share?”
- Second, you **ask questions out of clarification** – these are not focused on your own interests, but aim to clarify any parts that are unclear to you.
- Third, you **get into the questions of specific interest to you** as the oral historian, asking in a natural way depending on how the conversation has gone.
- Fourth is **the conflict phase** – in the case where the story being told is promoting a harmful narrative, the interviewer should engage the narrator in considering alternative perspectives.

AFTER

Once you've completed the interviews, it is important to archive your interviews. This process involves **legal/ethical access**, **digital access**, and **access to content**.

- Legal/ethical access requires the participants' consent form and their waiver, where they agree to deposit and/or share the interview through an archive.
- Digital access requires the audio files from the interview and its meta data.
- A complete transcript, timed index, and summary provide maximum access to content
 - A summary is a 50-word account of what the interview was, where and how and why it happened, and what the content of the interview is.
 - The index provides summaries of timed interview segments.

Looking to learn more about Oral History?

- **Oral History Centre, University of Winnipeg** - <https://oralhistorycentre.ca/about/>
- **Oral History Association** - <https://oralhistory.org/>
- **Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling** - <https://storytelling.concordia.ca/>