

The background is a solid yellow color. A green audio waveform, resembling a speech recording, runs horizontally across the middle of the page. A large, black speech bubble is positioned on the right side, overlapping the waveform. The title 'DOING ORAL HISTORY' is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters inside the speech bubble.

DOING ORAL HISTORY

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THIRD EDITION

day" questions; follow-up or clarifying questions; experience or example questions; comparison or contrasting questions; and closing questions.¹⁵

Are open-ended questions preferable to specific questions?

It works best to start with open-ended questions, such as "Please tell me about your childhood." Specific questions can follow: "What schools did you attend?" Starting with too specific a question gives the interviewer too much control of the interview. Interviewers should let interviewees explain what they think is most significant before beginning to narrow the questions. "The best oral history is a quasi-monologue on the part of the interviewee," the oral historian Sherna Gluck has observed, "which is encouraged by approving nods, appreciative smiles, and enraptured listening and stimulated by understanding comments and intelligent questions."¹⁶

Use open-ended questions to allow interviewees to volunteer their own accounts, to speculate on matters, and to have enough time to include all the material they think relevant to the subject. Use more specific questions to elicit factual information, often in response to something the interviewee has mentioned while answering an open-ended question. Political reporters and courtroom attorneys use this type of mixed questioning in an approach that has been called "funnel interviewing." Their search begins with general questions and then constantly narrows until the subject has difficulty not answering the final, more specific questions. Oral history is a much less adversarial means of interviewing, but the funnel approach remains useful when the subject is controversial.¹⁷

In framing an open-ended question, the oral historian Charles Morrissey postulates that the two-sentence format often works best. The first sentence should state the problem; the second poses the question: "The records show you were a leader in establishing the zoning laws that shaped this town. Why were zoning laws your objectives?" There are a number of possible follow-up questions: "How did these laws specifically affect your neighborhood?" "What complaints were raised about these laws?" "How effective would you judge these laws to have been?" "Looking back from today, what would you have done differently?" Questions also might relate to specific zoning incidents drawn from newspaper clippings. For such a topic, a map might serve as a good visual prompter during the interview and as appendix material for the transcript.¹⁸

Keep in mind that interviewers are not restricted to just asking questions. Statements of fact, concise restatements of what the interviewee has said, brief observations and comments can also stimulate responses from the interviewee as well as inject more spontaneity into the discussion. Mixing occasional comments among the questions provides some relief and can prevent the interview from sounding too much like a cross-examination. But interviewers should always use such injections in moderation to avoid skewing the contents of the interview with their own opinions.

What you are looking for is a mix of stories and interpretations. To get stories, the oral historian Ronald Grele recommends asking, "Can you give an example when that happened to you?" To get interpretation, and place the story in a larger context, the next question might be, "Was that typical? Did that happen to others in your neighborhood?" This will encourage people to speculate and generalize. Interviewers often have favorite questions they ask everyone. "Did you have any teachers who particularly influenced you?" "How did the institution change during the years you worked there?" The biographer Robert Caro regularly asks his interviewees, "What would I *see* if I were there?" This tactic has helped him write vividly, using personal recollections to draw word pictures that enable readers to envision the scene.¹⁹

The use of open-ended questions has been cited as a means of "empowering" interviewees—that is, by encouraging interviewees to relate and to interpret their own stories, such questions shift the balance of power from the interviewer to the interviewee. Those who talk of empowerment view the interviewee as an "informant" and the interviewer as a "reporter." The interviewer may be asking the questions, but the interviewee is actively shaping the course of the interview rather than responding passively. These notions have raised the consciousness especially of those sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists who generally do not identify—or create fictional identities for—their oral sources and of interviewers who work outside their own cultures and struggle not to impose their cultural assumptions on the people they observe and interview.²⁰

Can the framing of a question distort the answer?

Pollsters say that if you can tell from what position a question is being asked, then the question is loaded. "Do you support a balanced budget amendment to end waste and fraud in the government?" is loaded. "Do you support a balanced budget amendment?" is neutral. Journalists will often ask leading and manipulative questions; the preface "wouldn't you say..." is designed to produce a response that fits a particular hypothesis. Many politicians have regretted letting a reporter put words into their mouths with such questions. Researchers working on a specific book or article similarly ask questions to fill holes in their evidence, usually having in mind the answer that they *hope* to hear. The danger of this approach is that interviewees want to please and will pick up clues—from the type of question asked to the tone of voice used—to ascertain what kind of answer they think the interviewer wants to hear. The result is the opposite of how an oral history should proceed.²¹

Start with broad, open-ended questions and allow the interviewee to talk broadly, ranging as far and wide as possible. Listen and make notes as the interviewee speaks, but do not interrupt. When it is clear that the person has exhausted the subject and stopped, go back and ask specific follow-up questions, clarify points of confusion or contradiction, and pursue details.



PRACTICING ORAL HISTORY

TRANSCRIBING ORAL HISTORY

TERESA BERGEN

ROUTLEDGE

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR STYLE

1. Dates are to be transcribed in the following format: December 7, 1941. If the date comes in the middle of a sentence, a comma should follow the year before the text ensues. The year should always be included with the date. Insert it in brackets if necessary.

Ex. I was born on March 14, 1931, in Denton, Texas.

If the narrator says, “I was born on March 14th, in ’31,” transcribe it as “I was born on March 14, 1931.” If the narrator says “the sixties,” transcribe it as “the 1960s.”

Note that there is no apostrophe (‘) with the decade: 1950s, 1960s, 1970s...

2. Times are to be transcribed in the following format: 6:00 a.m. If the time comes at the end of the sentence, no second period is necessary. If the interviewee does not say a.m. or p.m., add it to the time.

Ex. I went to the store at 7:45 a.m., but they didn’t open until 8:00 a.m.

3. Cities and states should be separated by commas, and a comma should follow the state if text ensues. If a city or place is mentioned without a state or country, add the missing information in parentheses.

Ex. I lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for three years.

Ex. We flew over Cairo [Egypt] on our way to Istanbul [Turkey].

4. Do not put stops in abbreviations. The first time an abbreviation is used, place the full name of the thing abbreviated in brackets. An exception to this is U.S., which should include stops. Also, use Washington, D.C.

Ex. Going to UNT [University of North Texas] is a wonderful thing.

5. Numerals below 10 should be spelled out. Numerals above 10 should be rendered with numerals. Use commas in numbers when necessary. Hyphenate quarter-, third-, and half-numbers. Spell out number when beginning a sentence.

Ex. Eighty-five of the 1,000 children questioned answered the survey. Their ages ranged from five-and-a-half to 10.

6. Colloquialisms such as “yeah,” “uh-huh,” etc. should be transcribed as “yes” or “no,” as necessary, unless they are part of a quoted conversation recalled by the interviewee.
7. If slang or jargon is used, put the term in quotes and insert a brief explanation in brackets.

Ex. I drank lots of beer and got “sloshed” [inebriated].

8. If one or both of the participants laughs softly, indicate that by typing: [laughs]. If there is loud or shared laughter, type: [laughter]. Note the use of brackets, not parentheses. If not within the sentence, capitalize.

Ex. [Laughs] I never will forget the look on his face [laughs] when he realized his mistake!

9. If the interviewer makes a motion or indicates something that the tape cannot indicate, note it with a brief explanation in brackets if necessary.

Ex. So she was over here [gestures], and I was there [approximately ten feet away].

Ex. Do you see that [points to living room wall]? That’s my diploma.

10. Do your utmost to transcribe what is being said. If you cannot make out a passage, type [unclear] to indicate the missing text to the editor.

Ex. She told me [unclear], but I didn’t believe her.

11. Do your utmost (using dictionaries, atlases, online sources, etc.) to spell proper names and such correctly. If you cannot find a correct spelling, place a [?] behind the word to signal the editor of a possible uncertainty. Do not use any other method to indicate a spell-check.

Ex. Quetzalcoatl [?] was an Aztec god.

12. Foreign words or phrases not incorporated into English should be italicized.

Ex. *Nouvelles et fromage en casserole* is French for “macaroni and cheese.”

13. Use two dashes [--] to render broken sentences. Do not use ellipses [...]. Do not capitalize the first word on the other side of the dashes.

Ex. I told her--well, I didn't really tell her, but she knew that.

Do not put a space between the two phrases separated by the two dashes. The word processor will automatically change your two-dash hyphen to an unacceptable form. To avoid this, type two or three words after the "corrected" hyphen and retype the two-dash hyphen again, taking sure not to hit the space bar immediately after the two-dash hyphen. This autocorrect function can also be turned off in MS Word. Click on "File," then "Options," then "Proofing." Click the "AutoCorrect Options" button, then "Auto Format as You Type." Uncheck "Hyphens with Dash" and click "OK."

14. Do not use punctuation is the two dashes [--] end the sentence.

Ex. So you tried to finish after--

15. The titles of books, newspapers, films, etc. should be italicized.

Ex. The reviewer in the *New York Times* praised J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

16. The names of ships should be italicized. If it is an American naval ship, preface the ship's name the first time with "USS" and include the ship's service number in brackets after the ship's name. If the interviewer does not identify the type of ship, indicate this in brackets.

Ex. Planes from the [aircraft carrier] USS *Enterprise* [CV-6] damaged the Japanese cruiser *Mikuma*.

17. If an airplane is mentioned, the type designation, make, and nickname of the plane should be included at that plane's first mention. Insert the appropriate information if necessary.

Ex. We were flying F-4Fs [Grumman Wildcat fighters] until 1943.

18. If a historical event is mentioned, insert the date if necessary.

Ex. The day FDR died [April 12, 1945] was a sad day.

19. We are committed to accuracy, not good taste. If the interviewee swears, blasphemes, makes insensitive comments, etc., transcribe it verbatim.

20. Spell out “OK” as **Okay**.

21. Type “Alright” as **All right**.

22. Quoted words go in double-quotation marks (“ ”); thoughts go in single quotation marks (‘ ’).

Ex. She said, “I want that doll with the blue eyes.” And I thought, ‘Of course. That’s the most expensive one in the store.’

23. Begin with identifying introductory material on the recording. Include your name, the date, interviewee’s name, place of interview, and reason for the interview.

Ex. I’m Joe Student, and today is April 25, 2013. I’m interviewing Jane Smith at her home in Denton, Texas, for the DFW Metroplex Immigration Oral History Project at the University of North Texas.

24. Use numerals and the word “percent” for percentages.

Ex. Only about 70 percent of the class passed the final.

25. For monetary amounts over one dollar (\$1.00), use the dollar sign and numeral.

Ex. I received \$500 for winning first-place in the race.

26. If an interviewee uses “cents,” for amounts over one dollar (\$1.00) use the dollar rule above; for amounts under one dollar, spell out cents.

Ex. If an interviewee says, “I made four-dollars and twenty-five cents an hour at my first job,” transcribe: “I made \$4.25 an hour at my first job.”

Ex. If an interviewee says, “I mowed lawns for twenty-five cents a day,” transcribe: “I mowed lawns for twenty-five cents a day.”

27. Use italics for emphasized words.

Ex. It was *very* heavy, but we managed to carry it anyway.

28. Use **etcetera** not et cetera or etc.

Ex. We gathered up all of our books, pencils, etcetera.

29. Comma between repeated adjectives, adverbs, and phrases.

Ex. It was very, very, hot out. So he said that we should sit in the shade and blah, blah, blah.

30. If the interviewee gives a date range, use “to,” not a hyphen between dates.

Ex. I worked at the university from 1984 to 1998.

31. For the use of names, titles, or other elements of style and grammar, refer to **Turabian/Chicago Manuel of Style**.

<https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

TRANSCRIPTION AUDIO PLAYER

We highly recommending playing your audio files through the **Express Scribe** transcription audio player software. This works great with a foot pedal. Offers at:
<https://www.nchsoftware.com/software/index.html>

However, any audio player that supports MP3/WAV files (Windows Media Player, iTunes, Audacity, etc.) may be used.

Oral History Collection

Mildred Louise Griffith Kitchens

Interviewer: James Wall

Date: November 27, 2019

Place of Interview: Denton, Texas

James Wall: We are in Denton, Texas. Today is November 27, 2019. We're at the Brookdale assisted living facility, and we are speaking with Mildred Kitchens. All right, so the first thing I always ask is can you tell me when and where you were born?

Mildred Kitchens: I was born in a little town called Diboll, D-I-B-O-L-L, Texas, in Angelina County. It was a planer mill town owned by some men O'Hare, Durham, Temple, but it was called Temple Lumber Company. Everybody worked for the company, lived in company houses, had one doctor who delivered all the babies and took care of all the sick. His name was [Dr. Crabb?].

Wall: And what year was that, that you were born?

Kitchens: I went to a kindergarten--you don't want all that.

Wall: No, no. That's totally fine. I just need to know--remind of the year--it was 1920, right, your birthday?

Kitchens: Yes, my birthday was July 17, 1920. I was born at home, one visit from the doctor and the other and a couple of midwives. Everybody used midwives in those days.

Wall: Right, and tell me--

Kitchens: We lived in the company house. I had one older sister, two years older. I remember going to kindergarten at the age five and when I was--the next year I should go to first grade, they didn't have enough desks at the school, so they put me in the second grade. [Laughter] Three of us had to go to the second grade.

Wall: Did you have one teacher who taught--

Kitchens: We had--

Wall: --every grade?

Kitchens: --one teacher in each classroom. And Diboll was a sawmill town, so everybody had about the same-size house. We had outhouses, but we were in the middle

elite group because our outhouse had three holes,
a big, a middle size, and a baby.

Wall: So what do you remember about your parents? Can
you tell me their names?

Kitchens: About what?

Wall: Your parents, could you tell me your mother's and
father's name?

Kitchens: My mother was very young. She married at 16. And
my father was--worked for the planer mill until
they put him in charge of the cleaning and
pressing shop, which moved us to a little better
house. But my father was an alcoholic and
disappeared for days at a time, so early when I
was about two, my mother went to work at the
cleanup place, and I was taking care of two black
women named Aunt [Cassie?] and Aunt [Kelley?] who
came at 6:00, did everything, cooked, washed, and
taught us. And my mother wouldn't let us call them
Cassie and Kelley. We had to call them Aunt Cassie
and Aunt Kelley, which was good. And then I
started to second grade--

Wall: Can I stop you for a second? See, this piece of

[End of interview]

October 25, 2022

First Name Last
Street Address
Any City Texas 76203

Dear Mr. Last,

Enclosed is a draft of your interview with the University of North Texas Oral History Program. Please make any deletions, additions, or corrections that you feel are necessary and return the edited transcript in the self-addressed stamped envelope we have included in this mailing.

Our concern is **not** with grammatical errors and the like; there is a difference between oral and written English, and the transcript is meant to be a reflection of your oral memoirs. Instead, we ask that you **verify the accuracy of the factual data, including dates and the spelling of proper names**. Please print clearly, using a **blue or red pen**, any corrections **directly on the paper copy**. Because this transcript will be used by future scholars and students, it is vital that the contents are as accurate as possible.

If you have copies of photographs or other relevant documents you would like to have included as an appendix in the final copy, please return them to us with your edited transcript. Such additions can greatly enhance the context of your interview.

We realize that reviewing this document will take some time, but we also ask that it be returned to us at your earliest possible convenience. Please return your edits by **December 20, 2022** in the envelope provided so that we may proceed with the final binding. *You will also receive a bound volume of the final transcript for your personnel use.* Please let us know of any future address changes.

If you have any questions, please contact our office at (940) 565-2549 or sara.wilson@unt.edu.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Sara Wilson
Office Support Associate
Oral History Program

Enclosures