

Principles and Best Practices Glossary

Participating in an oral history interview, whether as the interviewer or narrator, involves technical knowledge that crosses several disciplines. Understanding the terminology used by oral historians and related professional fields will be helpful.

- access (see also privacy): Access to a recorded interview can refer to many different formats, including physical or virtual access regulated by requests to an archive or individual responsible for the collection care, or unfettered access to full recorded and transcribed/indexed interview online. It can also refer to the use of recorded interviews in part or full in publication or broadcast.
- anonymous: While a narrator may choose to have their name disassociated from any interview, or choose to utilize a pseudonym, there can be no guarantees towards absolute anonymity in the oral history process. Information provided to an oral historian is only anonymous if there is no way for anyone, at any time, to determine the narrator's identity from it; that is, there is no *identifiable information* (see term below). This is a very high standard of information security that oral historians are only rarely able to offer.
- archives (see also repository): The term *archive* can refer to permanently valuable records (such as photographs, recordings, and letters, to name but a few), an organization that maintains historical records and documents, or the physical space where the records are maintained. Since oral history does ideally require long-term maintenance and properly managed preservation of all types of records, it is most common to work with a well-established archival repository with a clear track record for managing the media format and the complexities of the sensitive nature of oral history work. See more on this definition at the Society for American Archivists: <https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives>; for more on personal archiving—of family recordings, for example—see <https://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/>.
- closed records (also part of *collection restriction*): Archives and other repositories of oral history interviews and related records, often tasked with making records accessible, may also be able to withhold records from being used or viewed for a period of time. In this case, the oral history interview will still be listed as part of the repository's collection (often, for instance, via a finding aid), but it will be marked as closed and the repository will not willingly grant access to it until the closed period has expired. Note that they would still be obligated to provide records in response to a subpoena.
- community: Group of individuals who share a collective geographic space, experience, or level of ownership of the content being shared.
- confidential: Confidential information is not necessarily anonymous, but it is protected to the best of the oral historian's ability. This means that the information provided during the interview will not be willingly disclosed to others by the oral historian, or

any archival repository partner, for an agreed-upon period of time. This may require specific data security procedures to ensure that the information cannot be accessed, except by the oral historian or other authorized parties. Narrators should feel empowered to ask about security measures that may be employed during and after the oral history project. Note that oral historians and archives do not have any special legal privileges or protections to withhold information about criminal activity. In the event of a subpoena they would be obligated to turn over any records or information in their possession.

- confidentiality: Confidentiality is the keeping of another person's or entity's information private. Certain professionals are required by law to keep information shared by a client or patient private, without disclosing the information, even to law enforcement, except under certain specific circumstances. In oral history projects, confidentiality cannot be totally guaranteed, despite best intentions.
- copyright: The exclusive legal right to reproduce, publish, sell, or distribute the matter and form of something (such as a literary, musical, or artistic work). An agreement that documents, verbally or in writing, that the narrator has been given all the information necessary to come to a decision about whether to participate in the oral history project. Informed consent does not cover or deal with copyright. The interview process must be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, engagement, and open discussion among all parties, from the first encounter between interviewer and narrator to the creation of end products. Informed consent plays a key role in ensuring transparency. For more information about copyright, visit the [US Copyright Office](#).
- co-copyright: When two or more authors prepare a work with the intent to combine contributions into inseparable or interdependent parts, the work is considered "joint work," and its authors are considered joint copyright owners. In oral history, Co-Copyright can include narrators, interviewers, and organizations/institutions.
- Creative Commons license: These irrevocable licenses are used to define how the narrator, as the copyright holder, would like the general public, rather than a specific party, to be able to make use of their oral history materials. Further information on specific types of Creative Commons licenses is available at creativecommons.org. See more on the case for Creative Commons in oral history work here: <https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/a-creative-commons-solution/>
- deed of gift: A deed of gift agreement defines how the narrator would like materials or rights related to an oral history to be managed as a donated collection—that is, transferred to an assigned party, such as the project director or a partnering/sponsoring organization or archive. What makes a deed of gift unique is that the narrator acknowledges granting these rights or materials without reciprocal compensation.
- diverse voices: Diversity should extend to voices both in the types of people interviewed (age, ethnicity, sexuality, people of color, and so on) and in the variety of possible perspectives within a project.
- educational purposes: Educational Purposes means use for the purpose of education, teaching, distance learning, private study and/or research. When a project's stated goal

is for Educational Purposes, this does not free institutions or individuals of obligations related to copyright, informed consent, fair compensation, and more.

- formal agreement (release form): Participating in an oral history interview may involve signing specific types of agreements or assigning intellectual property rights. Examples include Creative Common licenses, deeds of gift, nonexclusive licenses, permission-to-use agreements, and transfer of copyright.
- identifiable information: Information that could be used to identify the narrator. The term usually refers to specific details such as name or date of birth. Narrators need to bear in mind that oral history interviews often gather comprehensive narratives about the narrator's experiences and life story that could be recognized by others.
- index (see also time log): To help make an oral history more accessible, one should create a log (or index) of its contents. Akin to a book's table of contents, which links a chapter to a page number, this document usually links a summary of a small section of the full recording to a timestamp where that summary starts. Different than a word-for-word transcript, the log can serve as an efficient and effective way to unlock the oral history's contents for current and future users.
- informed consent: An agreement that documents, verbally or in writing, that the narrator has been given all the information necessary to come to a decision about whether to participate in the oral history project. Informed consent does not cover or deal with copyright. The interview process must be transparent, with ongoing participation, consent, engagement, and open discussion among all parties, from the first encounter between interviewer and narrator to the creation of end products. Informed consent plays a key role in ensuring transparency.
- interviewer: OHA's preferred term to describe the person conducting the interview; it should be noted that interviewing is just one part of the oral history process, meaning an interviewer could be, but may not necessarily be an oral historian.
- IRB (Institutional Review Board): A specifically constituted review body established or designated by an institution to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects recruited to participate in social science research. According to the Oral History Association, "Recent revisions to the U.S. Department Health and Human Services 'Policy for Protection of Human Research Subjects' (known as the Common Rule) in 2019 now exclude oral history from IRB review through a strict definition of research."
- length: One should anticipate an interview lasting at least one hour but may choose to plan for one and a half to two hours, depending on the circumstances. The oral historian should give the narrator a time frame when scheduling the interview. In the spirit of sharing authority, each party should feel empowered to avoid keeping the other longer than scheduled.
- living human subjects: A term most commonly used in reference to researchers who are guided by an [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\) process](#). *Human subject* refers to a living individual who is asked to contribute personal information to a research project; this individual may also be considered a research participant by an investigator or

researcher (that is, the interviewer or project director). Human subjects and the data (that is, the stories) collected from them can contribute to a broader study of a topic.

- **metadata:** Information about aspects of an oral history interview; it is essential for the curating, discovery, and management of a collection or interview. In an oral history context, [Descriptive metadata](#) refers to information about the interview or the topic discussed. [Technical metadata](#) refers to the technical information that makes up the digital data file containing the interview, such as file type, codec, file size, and resolution. [Administrative metadata](#) refers to information related to issues such as rights management. [Structural metadata](#) refers to how individual parts relate to a whole. (For more on this, see [Oral History and the Digital Age](#))
- **narrator:** A person being interviewed during an oral history recording. While there are many possible terms, including *interviewee* or *chronicler*, this iteration of our Core Principles and Practices uses the term *narrator* exclusively. We do this as an acknowledgment that the people we interview have agency and are not merely “living human subjects.”
- **narrator-centered:** A practice or set of guidelines and principles for oral historians that centers narrator agency and power. This practice places narrator agency on equal (or greater) footing as institutions and their agents. This practice could include issues of representation, ownership, access, privacy, intent, and more.
- **nonexclusive license:** A nonexclusive license can be used by a copyright holder to grant another party rights to make simultaneous use of their intellectual property without transferring their copyright to that party.
- **oral historian:** More than just interviewing, the oral historian must keep all aspects of the oral history process in mind, including project planning and implementation.
- **permission to use:** An agreement that defines specific uses a certain party can make of an oral history. It often includes circumstances and terms of that use, but does not request any transfer of copyrights.
- **privacy:** Anyone preserving oral history and making it accessible in any format (that is, unfettered online or in-person access) needs to be aware that data privacy standards have changed in the recent past. Narrators need a precise understanding of what access to their interview will look like, as well as consideration for any third parties discussed within the recording. Access needs to meet local, national, and international data and privacy requirements/standards (see the [Oral History Society’s page](#) on the effect on oral history of recent changes to EU data protection). Anyone conducting or storing oral history interviews should take all practicable steps to keep the interviews protected from possible illegal or unauthorized uses.
- **private information:** Sometimes it may be necessary for the narrator to share information with an oral historian that they have no intention of allowing them to record, use, or make available to others. Interviewers should always make the narrator aware of when they are recording and ask for permission to record before they begin. The narrator should let the interviewer know when they need to share something privately and ask them to stop recording. If the narrator realizes that they shared

private information while they were being recorded, they will need to let the interviewer know as soon as possible.

- pseudonym: It may sometimes be possible to record an oral history interview with a narrator using a pseudonym. In such cases, the oral historian should use only the fictitious name when referring to the narrator during the interview or in any related materials, such as transcripts, notes, finding aids, or publications. However, this does not mean that the information provided during the interview will be anonymous or confidential (see anonymous and confidential).
- public domain: Material not protected by intellectual property laws, such as copyright law; such creative work is thus under public ownership and open to use by anyone without permission.
- repository (see also *archives*): A repository can be either a physical or digital location, depending on the recording format and the project goals; in any case, the term refers to the long-term storage of permanently valuable material. Since oral history does ideally require long-term maintenance and properly managed preservation of all types of records, it is most common to work with a well-established archival repository with a clear track record for managing the media format and the complexities of the sensitive nature of oral history work. Of course, there are instances of oral history projects working exclusively in the online sphere with strong archival principles in place for collection management, as exemplified in such digital archives as <https://www.saada.org> and <https://densho.org>. A repository could also be someone personal or family archives; for more on personal archiving—of family recordings, for example—see <https://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/>.
- research: In reference to the oral historian, interviewer, or project manager, researching a topic or person requires remaining humble and respectful. The interviewer may know a lot about the topic but still not know in the way that the individual/community to whom this history/stories/experiences belong does.
- restrictions: To enforce specific interviewee/donor requirements such as restriction for period of time before public access to the interview is granted, or online vs. physical access to the interview, the repository needs to have transparent collections management policies and procedures in place.^[1]
- rolling consent: Agreement to participate in a project with an understanding that participants (narrators) have the right to give or withdraw consent at each step of the project's process without consequences of any kind. Some of these steps can include editing, publication, media broadcast, and future use.
- shared accountability: Shared accountability is a model for shared leadership that stresses that all participants in an oral history project (narrators, community partners, etc.) have a “seat at the table” and are equally held accountable for decisions made before, during, and after the project has been completed. Shared accountability addresses inequities when decisions are made solely by a designated manager or leader.

- shared agreements: Shared agreements are standards and behaviors that a group creates together and agrees to stick to. Shared agreements establish ways of working and being together throughout an oral history project, conference, workshop, etc. Shared agreements are meant to hold all participants accountable to each other.
 - shared authority: Shared authority removes the hierarchy commonly practiced within cultural institutions. Moving away from a top-down approach, shared authority is geared toward collaboration that includes dialogue and participatory engagement. The practice of shared authority creates opportunities for oral and written histories contributed by individuals outside the strictly academic community in conjunction with more traditional scholarly essays, text panels or exhibit labels.
 - social justice framework: An analysis of how power, privilege, and oppression impact our experience of our social and cultural identities. This analysis contributes to and becomes a main focus and topic of exploration, for oral historians who collaborate primarily with vulnerable communities.
 - sponsoring institutions: Any organization that maybe affiliated with the oral history project, either by paying for the costs associated with oral history work (labor, travel expenses, and so on), providing archival services for completed project, or providing in-kind support such as relationship building within a community or sharing social capital.
 - terms: Specifically in regard to terms of agreement for the use of an oral history interview, these terms might include restrictions on public access for a period of time or on access by location.
 - time log (see also index): To help make an oral history more accessible, one should create a log (or index) of its contents. Akin to a book's table of contents, which links a chapter to a page number, this document usually links a summary of a small section of the full recording to a timestamp where that summary starts. Different than a word-for-word transcript, the log can serve as an efficient and effective way to unlock the oral history's contents for current and future users.
 - transfer of copyright: Many agreements or contracts that narrators are asked to sign may include a transfer of their full copyrights in the oral history to another party. (see copyright)
 - vulnerable communities: Understanding the power dynamics involved in any oral history interview is essential for ethical work in this field. This is especially important when working with vulnerable populations—including, but not limited to, the following: those who might be put in danger or face harm by publicly sharing their experience; legal minors, and others with limited agency and freedom; those with impaired ability to fully consent, and Indigenous and communities of color who experience social stratification and recent or intergenerational trauma. An additional example of groups of people who may fit this description includes those who discuss or describe activities, such as immigration, that could technically violate state or federal laws.
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- [1] For an overview of the most prominent case depicting the fallout from managing oral history collections with restrictions, see “Secrets from Belfast,” Chronicle of Higher Education, <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/belfast>.