

A guide to commissioning oral history projects

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Oral history is a record of information, captured electronically, as the result of a planned interview. Its purpose is to create a record where none exists or to supplement existing records for future research. Oral history is a method of recording spoken language, eyewitness accounts and insights into society and its changing values and attitudes. It also gives a voice to those previously denied the chance to contribute to the recording of history.

Introduction

This guide has been produced for the use of both the commissioning body and the oral historian. For convenience these are referred to respectively as the 'Principal' and the 'Consultant'.

Oral historians are often commissioned to undertake work for others including individuals, voluntary organisations, commercial organisations, government authorities and consultants such as archaeologists and heritage architects.

Depending on the nature of the work, this may involve a process of determination of the task, preparation of a brief, preparation and submission of a proposal, selection of an oral historian or historians, commissioning and then managing the commission. The national standard for oral history is set by the Oral History Handbook by Beth M Robertson (fifth edition fourth impression, 2013). The following guide attempts only to list all points connected with commissioning and conducting an oral history project. For details of technique and practice reference to the Oral History Handbook is essential.

Guidelines for writing and publishing, whether for print, audio, video or multimedia, are not addressed in this guide.

Commissioning oral history

Principals and consultants should be bound by Oral History Australia's Guidelines of Ethical Practice.

Principals should have a reasonable understanding and appreciation of oral history: what it is, its various applications, the variety of skills that might be involved and the activities that go to make up a particular commission.

Like many activities involving people, particularly those requiring emotional effort, oral history cannot be rushed. It is not easy to estimate the length of an interview or the quality of an individual response. The focus of a project may indicate the average length of an interview. In some cases approximately two hours of recording may suffice; however, the full recording for a 'memory biography' will usually be longer.

Each interview requires preparation for planning, background research and framing questions.

The brief

A written brief should be prepared for commissions. In developing the brief, there should be clear objectives, an idea of the cost and time available.

The brief should be developed to the fullest extent possible giving consideration to the following points:

Administration

Purpose of the project (including whether for public or private archives, or ultimate publication, whether in-house or for general distribution).

- Description of the project including:
 - scope
 - subject matter
 - themes or subjects to be explored.
- Size of the project e.g. anticipated number and duration of interviews.
- Desired degree of detail for individual interviews, taking into account the breadth and/or the particular focus of the project.
- Time frame for completion and:
 - procedure in the event of delay or likelihood of delay to completion,
 - responsibility of the Consultant to notify the Principal of potential delays,
 - nature of liability (if any) of the Consultant in the event of defined delays.
- Procedure in the event that the scope of the project is changed – whether enlarged, reduced or terminated.
- Equipment to be used and/or technical standards to be attained, e.g. clarity of recording; recording to be of broadcast quality.
- Quotation for the project as a whole; or for an individual interview with its associated tasks included; or rates quoted separately for individual tasks.
- Selection of prospective interviewees.
- Manner of contact with prospective interviewees.

Conducting the oral history interview

Definition of tasks, including:

- Research (may be quoted separately)
- Preparation.
- Pre-interview.
- Recording the interview.
- Interview logging.
- Transcription
- Corrections to transcription.
- Interview summary (where attention may be drawn to any possibly sensitive material).
- Preparation for publication, whether print, audio, video or multimedia.
- Entry on to a database.

Statement of the principal's standard requirements:

- Professional safeguards required such as professional indemnity insurance.
- Interview identification questions.
- Access/permission/copyright release form.
- Format of recording labels, logs and transcriptions.
- Master recordings to be copied immediately and stored.
- Custody of the recordings during the project.
- Logging and transcription to be done from copies.
- Copy of recording for interviewee if required.
- Attention to be drawn to any possibly sensitive material.

After the Interview:

- Numbers of duplicate copies of recordings and documents to be specified.
- Manner in which the recordings and document copies to be delivered.
- Letter of thanks to the interviewee.
- Reimbursement of agreed expenses, including purchase of recording materials, cost of travel and accommodation where applicable.
- How payment including directions (possible certification – for progress claims should be included if applicable.
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- Income tax arrangements.
- Acknowledgement of the Principal, the Consultant and the interviewees in final product and/or in any published work.

The proposal

The consultant should submit a detailed proposal addressing each of the points in the brief. The proposal should:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the task to be performed.
- Demonstrate the Consultant's ability to satisfy the principal's requirements.
- Propose any variations or alternatives.
- Include the Consultant's curriculum vitae, record of experience and relevant references.

If the Consultant wishes to employ an assistant with acceptable qualifications or identifies a possible large extra expense, for example, studio hire, details should be included in the proposal.

Letter of engagement or contract

After receipt and evaluation of the proposals, the principal may select a consultant. In special cases it could be necessary to negotiate refinements to the brief.

The letter of engagement or contract should refer to the brief and identify the name and contact details of the supervisor of the project. It should confirm:

- the nature of the project
- the terms and conditions under which it is to be performed

- any mutually agreed variations.

For small interviewing assignments or oral history tasks, a letter of engagement should suffice, with the agreement resting on the correspondence and the Consultant's acceptance of the offer in writing.

For large assignments involving significant amounts of time and/or money for completion, a contract might be considered more appropriate.