

HOW TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Conducting an Interview

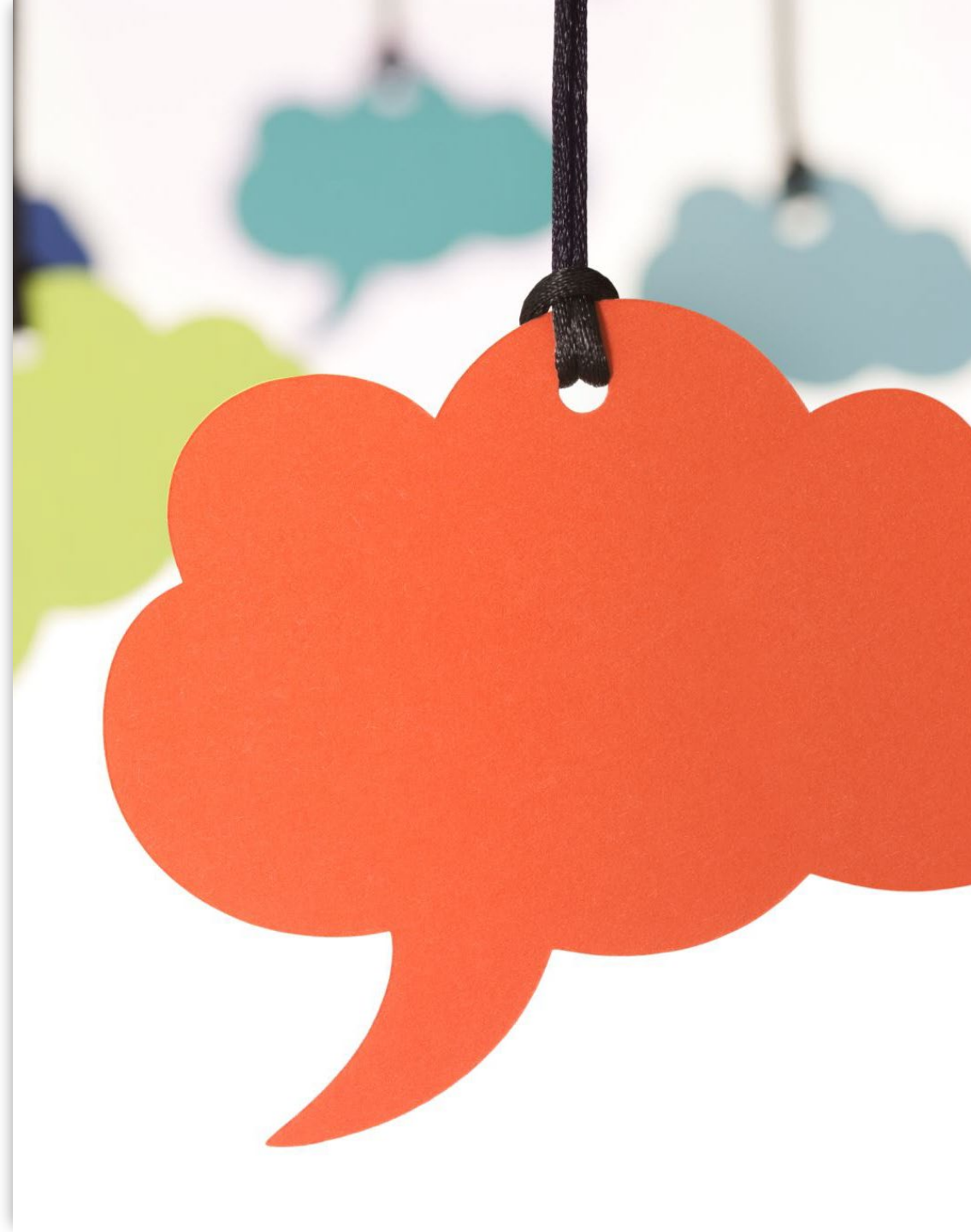
PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW

Invite the interview subject to participate. Set a date and time that's convenient for your subject.

Introduce Start the interview recording by stating your name, the date, the name of the person(s) you are interviewing, and a general idea of what you are going to be talking about.

CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

Avoid interrupting the speaker, even if it is to ask for more detail. If you think of a question while the narrator is speaking, make a note of it and ask when the narrator stops speaking. As they speak, they may answer your question on their own.



Where?

Record in a quiet place to with minimal background noise and echo. The ideal recording place would be a moderately-sized room with carpeted floor or rugs and curtains on the windows, which absorb sound. This is not always possible, but being aware of this will help you pick the best place that is available.

What format?

Choose a device which can output audio as an .mp3 or .wav file.

There are many devices and formats to choose from. You can learn more about each type at



RECORDING

If available, use a unidirectional microphone and point it at the speaker. Unidirectional microphones focus on the sound where they are pointed, while omnidirectional microphones will pick up all of the surrounding noise, which can make it difficult to hear the speaker.

If using an omnidirectional microphone, try to record 30 seconds of silence at the start of the interview. This sample of ambient noise in the environment (computer fans, air conditioning, rain outside, etc.) will make it possible to filter out these sounds and clean up the audio later.

Make sure the microphone is close to the interviewee and remains so throughout the interview, especially if using a unidirectional microphone. If only one microphone source is available, it should be pointed towards the interviewee rather than the interviewer.

JHSD has prepared a tutorial to help you use a digital recorder. Visit our website for more information and resources.

<https://jhsdelaware.org/oral-history>

RECORDING

Plug the recorder into AC power, if possible, but also make sure it has charged batteries. If the recorder is accidentally unplugged, the batteries will serve as a backup and prevent lost audio.

If you are performing the interview virtually, Zoom and Microsoft Teams both have built-in ways to easily record meetings.

The technology changes quickly. Keep up to date and learn more by using the in-depth guides on recording on the Oral History in the Digital Age website.

TRANSCRIPTION



Transcribing an oral history is a difficult, lengthy process. Spoken language does not always, or even usually, conform to the standards of written language: people do not speak in paragraphs, and often not in complete sentences, and it is not always clear where one sentence ends, and another begins.



Even if a speaker's exact words are transcribed, what comes across in a video or audio recording may not come across the same way in a transcription.



The following style guidelines are general rules to help you begin transcribing and to ensure that JHSD oral history transcriptions all follow a similar format.

TRANSCRIPTION

CRUTCH WORDS

Crutch words are words, syllables, or phrases used instead of pausing during speech to give one time to think. These can be as short as “um” or “uh,” or can be phrases like “you know?” or “see?” False starts, similarly, may be a word or even a phrase, often repeated, and can occur both at the start or in the middle of a sentence when a speaker decides to rephrase something. These may go mostly unnoticed in everyday speech, but when transcribing you will quickly see how often they occur.

Example:



NB: But the fact is we were organized, and what I wanted to say— and— and— we went out to contact the chief— the larger givers in advance of our campaign, in advance of the rally that we had at— at— uh, Adas Kodesch.

TRANSCRIPTION

Usually, unless they are intentional, crutch words and false starts should not be included in the transcript. They are tedious both to transcribe and to read and including them may even make it harder to follow the sentence. The previous example may be instead transcribed as:



NB: But the fact is we were organized, and we went out to contact the larger givers in advance of our campaign, in advance of the rally that we had at Adas Kodesch.

It may not always be clear if a phrase is or is not a crutch word or false start, and this is a decision on the part of the transcriber to balance accuracy and clarity.

TRANSCRIPTION

Incomplete Sentences, Interruptions & Parentheticals

Incomplete sentences frequently occur in oral histories, either because the speaker moved on without finishing the thought or because they are interrupted by another speaker. These unfinished sentences should be ended with an em dash: —, which can be typed by pressing Ctrl + Alt + the minus key on the numpad. Most oral history guidelines recommend that transcriptions **do not use ellipses (...)** because they can give the impression that something is missing from the transcript. Parentheticals during a sentence should also be surrounded by an em dash, rather than parentheses.

Example:

”

“

NB: While we had some major gifts—again DuPont gave us \$50,000, in addition to their \$10,000, they cut it back from eleven to ten by that time—we didn't have any great losses, like the one that we had suffered in '67, for the next year.

TRANSCRIPTION

Sounds Other Than Speaking

Sounds other than speaking should be indicated inside of parentheses. Examples of these include (laughs), (telephone rings), or, if speech cannot be understood in the recording, (unintelligible).

Adding Words

On some rare occasions, words might need to be added to give readers context that is not provided by the speakers themselves. This might be, for example, the last name of a person whose full name is never provided, or the full name of an organization if only an abbreviation is given. These additions should go inside of [brackets].

TRANSCRIPTION

Non-English Words and Phrases

When a speaker uses a Yiddish or other non-English word or phrase in a sentence that is otherwise English, italicize the word. If these come up frequently, do not italicize every time they appear, only the first time. Depending on how often these come up in a transcript and what the words are, you may also want to include, in brackets, an English translation after their first appearance. If these are especially frequent you might instead include a word list with definitions at the end of the transcript.

For an example of a word list, see page 81 of Marvin Balick's *Social History of the West Second Street Jewish Community*.

TRANSCRIPTION

Further Guidelines

Several universities have their own guidelines available online, which cover more specific questions that may come up when transcribing. This guide highly borrows from [Baylor University's oral history transcription style guide](#).

Other reliable sources can be found through the [Oral History Association's website](#).

Whichever guidelines you follow, what is most important is that you follow them consistently throughout the transcription.

Hints & tips



- Your recording space will probably not be a soundproof room or recording studio. Some environments have background noises—hums and ticks from equipment in the building. Take a moment before you begin the interview to record room tone. Just let the recorder capture what the room sounds like without anyone speaking. If needed this clip can be used to remove some annoying sounds from the final recording.
- If recording using the built-in microphone, make sure the recorder is turned so the microphones are facing the interviewee.
- Before recording an oral history, try doing a test recording and listen back to it to make sure voices are audible. To listen back to a recording, press the “Menu” button, then use the arrows to move to “Browse,” and press enter. You can select a recording here and listen back to it.
- Make sure the recorder has fresh batteries and the battery level is high. While the recorder is on, the battery level is shown in the upper right corner of the screen.



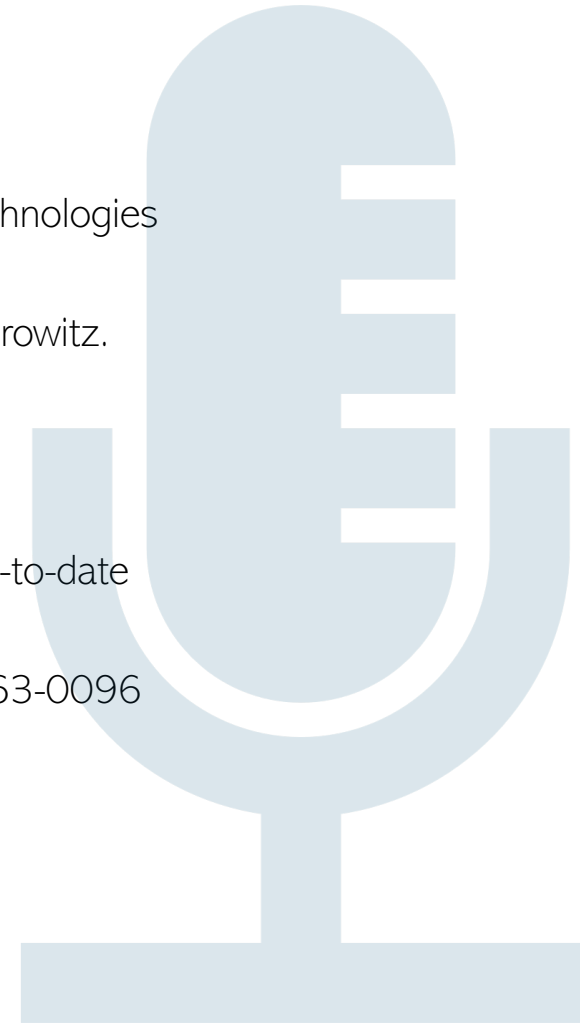
Links & Resources



- Visit Oral History in the Digital Age
A Central Resource for Oral History in the Age of Digital Tools and Technologies
<https://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>
- “A Jewish Oral History,” article by Beth Miller interviewing Dr. Roger Horowitz.
University of Delaware Research Online Magazine, vol. 8, no. 2.
<https://research.udel.edu/2020/12/01/jewish-oral-history/>

Contact the JHSD Archivist, Gail Pietrzyk, for more information and up-to-date resources to help with your oral history project.

gailpietrzyk@jhsdelaware.org or (302) 655-6232 or text to (610) 563-0096





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