



Oral History Collection Management

*Annotated Checklist for Archives and Libraries**

**This checklist does not consider the act of recording oral histories as a collector or interviewer; it documents basic principles for managing oral history collections within a collecting repository.*

Mission Statement

_____ **Mission statement allows for collecting, preservation, and access**

The organization must have a mission that ensures historical materials can be collected, that they will be preserved, and, unless legal or privacy questions arise, that they will be made available for research.

Appraisal & Collection Policies

_____ **Collection policy allows for collecting oral histories**

Collection policies provide an organization the opportunity to establish what types of historical materials will be collected, including content types that are in scope as well as those that are out of scope. It is important that oral histories fall within the collecting scope of the organization.

_____ **Collection policy supports the subject matter of the oral histories you intend to collect**

Collection policies provide an organization the opportunity to establish what types of historical materials will be collected, including subject areas that are in scope as well as those that are out of scope. It is important that the content of the oral histories are appropriately within the designated subject areas of the organization.

_____ **Documented strategy for acquiring oral histories**

Does the organization rely on donations of oral histories from interviewers and collectors? Does the organization purchase collections of oral histories? Does the organization have its own program to generate oral histories in-house or with contractors? A clear strategy for how the organization will acquire oral histories will provide a foundation for building predictable and efficient workflows for acquisition, accession, processing, description, preservation, and access. Each different strategy employed by the organization may result in differing workflows and may require different forms of legal documentation.

_____ **Clear appraisal policy to guide acceptance or rejection of certain oral history collections**

Appraisal is the act of selecting (out of all possible options) what will and what will not be included in acquisitions of an organization. An appraisal policy might include an assessment of uniqueness, quality, relevance to collecting scope, possible usage, cost of acquisition, risk of acquisition, or impact on the historical record, among other considerations.

Capacity & Sustainability

_____ **Analysis of per interview cost to your organization**

Each interview collected will cost the organization an ongoing sum of money, over and above the initial cost of acquisition or creation. An understanding of this cost will help the organization determine the quantity of interviews that it can responsibly steward. Costs include: processing, description, physical storage (if physical), housing materials (if physical), digital storage (hardware, software, storage media), electricity, HVAC, security, access (hardware, software, storage media), staff time.

____ **Succession plan documented**

What will happen to the oral histories if the organization ceases to exist? Continuing assessment of an organization's financial viability is a basic practice that will ensure the long-term preservation of the oral histories being collected by the organization. Although most collecting organizations outlive generations of employees, some small organizations have shorter life spans and it can be beneficial in these cases to develop partnerships with organizations that will serve as a backup repository in the case of sudden funding loss or closure. Additionally, many organizations disseminate copies of archival collections to partner organizations as a means of backup and redundancy.

____ **Accessible and updated disaster plan (two copies, one off-site)**

The organization should have a current and accessible disaster plan for the recovery of physical and digital materials in the case of an unexpected emergency. This is standard basic practice for any collecting organization.

Program Planning

____ **Informed accessioning methodology**

Depending upon the nature of the oral history program, it will be difficult to listen to the entirety of every interview before making an acquisition decision. For instance, Doug Boyd at the University of Kentucky has proposed a method of informed-accessioning (Interviewer Generated Metadata) to help archivists and librarians make appraisal decisions about possible new collection of oral histories. The method requires interviewers and/or donors to answer six questions about every interview detailing the existence of personal information; confidential or sensitive information; criminal allegations; potentially slanderous or libelous language; institutional, trade, or corporate secrets; and/or culturally insensitive language.

____ **Documented budget for acquiring and preserving oral histories (updated yearly)**

Informed by the per-interview cost assessment, the organization should maintain a regular budget line for oral history acquisition, preservation, and access.

____ **Privacy policies**

Because of the personal nature of oral histories, the organization that collects oral histories must make a special commitment to protect the interests of the narrators and those discussed in the narratives. A privacy policy — articulating confidentiality guidelines, ethical concerns, thresholds of risk, and methods of access — will guide staff members tasked with acquiring, describing, and providing access to collected oral histories.

Legal Documentation

____ **Approved forms for donation, gift, purchase of oral history collections**

The organization must have donation (deed of gift) and purchase forms that can be used to document the terms of acquisition for any oral history collection or interview obtained from an external party. It is best if the language of these forms is vetted by a lawyer or legal specialist.

____ **Approved release/permission forms for interviewers**

The organization must require that for each interview the interviewer clearly establishes expectations with regard to the rights connected to the given interview, including editing, mutual seal privileges, literary rights, prior use, fiduciary relationships, royalties, rights to determine the disposition of all forms of the record, and the extent of dissemination and use. It is best if the language of these forms is vetted by a lawyer or legal specialist.

____ **Approved release/permission forms for interviewees**

The organization must require that for each interview the interviewee has been informed about and has established expectations with regard to the rights connected to the given

interview, including editing, mutual seal privileges, literary rights, prior use, fiduciary relationships, royalties, rights to determine the disposition of all forms of the record, and the extent of dissemination and use. It is best if the language of these forms is vetted by a lawyer or legal specialist.

Collection Planning

___ Clear policy documenting what types of interview materials will be accepted

The organization's collection and appraisal policies establish that oral histories will be collected and that certain subjects will be covered. It is important now to determine what types of media will be acquired and managed by the organization. Will the organization support audio recordings only? Digital and/or analog? Will the organization support video documentation? Digital and/or analog? Will the organization collect ancillary materials? Photographs of the interviewers and interviewees? Related archival material (or scans of said material)?

___ Clear policy documenting what types of interview documentation will be required

Because oral histories are intentionally created documents, often accompanying documentation is generated by interviewers and oral historians during the process. The organization can determine what types of interview documentation will be required (or preferred) for the acquisition of an oral history interview or collection. Options include the Interviewer Generated Metadata form discussed above in the Informed Accessioning Methodology section, as well as interview logs, notes, transcripts, summaries, and/or indexes.

___ Clear policy documenting what constitutes a complete oral history interview

The organization, from the above options of interview materials and documentation, can determine what elements are required in order to acquire a given oral history interview. These designations provide the framework for collections management and institutional planning for description, storage, preservation, and access.

Description Planning

___ Policy for collection-level identification and description

Often an aggregation of oral history interviews form an oral history collection. If the organization generates collection-level documentation, there should be a policy articulating that all oral history collections are described at least at the collection level and that collection-level identifiers are provided to maintain the relationships between interviews within a given collection.

___ Policy for interview-level identification and description

Additionally, each interview must be described by the organization in order to develop indexes and provide for individual interview identification and management within the repository. There should be a policy articulating that all oral history interviews are described to some minimal level.

___ Policy for file/object-level identification and description / inventory

Oral histories themselves are documents of intellectual events. When the interview is described and identified, often it is the event that is being discussed. As a collections manager (archivist, librarian), each physical or digital object that constitutes the documentation of the given intellectual event (the interview in time and space) must be identified and described in order to provide inventories, to ensure responsible stewardship, and to assist with locating the content for use. The organization should have a policy that each collected object associated with an interview is described and identified to some minimal level.

___ Policy for segment-level identification and description

Oral histories are real-time documents. Often, individual segments within an oral history interview of particular interest to the organization and to potential users of the oral history. The organization should determine whether it will describe and identify segments within individual interviews.

____ **Procedures to carry out all descriptive policies**

The organization should clearly articulate procedures to carry out each of the description and identification policies above, including collection-level, interview-level, segment-level, and physical/digital object-level. This should include targeted descriptive standards, roles and responsibilities, and timing of when description and identification take place.

____ **Workflows to carry out all descriptive procedures**

The organization should clearly define workflows to carry out each of the description and identification procedures above, including collection-level, interview-level, segment-level, and physical/digital object-level. This should articulate how the procedures will actually get accomplished. Where does collection-level description take place? Who enters data? Who selects the collection ID, and how and when? What tools are used to generate segment-level description? How are segment-level IDs generated? Among many other considerations.

____ **System(s) to create, update, and access all descriptive information**

For every type of descriptive and identifying information generated about oral histories, the organization must determine a clear plan for how such information will be created, updated, and accessed (and by whom?). This plan should include the selection of data management systems and plans for managing these systems over time, e.g., Excel, Access, ArchivesSpace, Archivist's Toolkit, CollectiveAccess, Omeka, OHMS, or any number of options for creating and storing information about objects and events.

Interview Material Management

____ **Procedures to carry out physical material management**

If the organization accepts physical materials as part of oral history acquisitions (see Collection Planning above), then the organization will need procedures that guide the management of these collected materials. This should include, at the least, documentation of where and how physical objects are marked with identifiers, how they are housed, where they are stored, how they are located (and by whom), if physical assets will be permitted for access while viable and while equipment is available, and whether and how they will be digitized (for preservation and/or access). At least two copies should always be created for each unique physical object, and it is safest if they are kept in separate locations.

____ **Procedures to carry out digital material management**

If the organization accepts digital materials as part of oral history acquisitions (see Collection Planning above), then the organization will need procedures that guide the management of these collected materials. This should include, at the least, documentation of how digital objects are identified (e.g., filenames, embedded metadata), how they are processed, where they are stored, how they are located (and by whom), and whether and how they will be migrated or transcoded (for preservation and/or access). At least two copies should always be created for each unique digital object, and it is safest if they are kept in separate locations.

Digital Preservation

Because oral histories are inherently experienced through real-time media, and because all physical audiovisual media require migration to the digital file-based domain (except, arguably, film), digital preservation is especially important for an oral history collecting organization.

____ **Documented file management procedures**

Not all digital files are created equal, and every time a file is moved a new copy is generated. The organization must have clear procedures for how files will be acquired, stored, duplicated, deleted, and accessed, including definition of what is an original file, what is a master, what is a derivative, and what is trash.

_____ **File naming**

What are your organization's file naming conventions? When are files renamed (and according to what logic) and when are files not renamed? How does the organization manage special characters in filenames?

_____ **Storage plans**

Where are original files stored? Masters? Access copies? How are backups created? How many copies are kept of each type of file? How much growth is expected yearly and how is this being anticipated? At least two copies should always be created for each unique digital object, and it is safest if they are kept in separate locations.

_____ **Fixity**

An essential element of file management includes the ability to verify that a file has not changed from one copy to the next or over some span of time on a given storage media. Checksums are employed as a mechanism that can be used to evaluate whether or not a given file has changed.

_____ **Inventory management**

The organization must maintain an up-to-date inventory of all digital content that has been collected as part of an oral history collection. A simple inventory is mandatory for evaluating whether or not any files have been lost over time or in the process of moving files from one location to another. In the digital preservation lexicon this is often referred to as a manifest.

_____ **Documented hardware/software strategy (updated yearly)**

Digital collections management necessarily requires hardware (computers, hard drives, servers, tape drives) and software (operating systems, databases, file assessment tools, user interfaces) as well as storage media (disk drives or data tape). The organization should establish the scale at which it can afford to operate and should prepare a yearly budget that includes outlays for improving hardware, software, or storage media when needed. These needs will be different for each organization.

_____ **Obsolescence monitoring and updated collection profiles**

Over time, the selected storage media above will become obsolete. The organization must commit to evaluating the viability of its digital storage plan regularly in order to prepare for future migrations to new storage environments when necessary. Additionally, file formats will face obsolescence over time. The organization will do best to understand what digital formats are included in its collections and to be aware of whether those formats are becoming difficult to access currently, in which case a decision should be made to migrate the content to a stabler format.

Access Planning

_____ **Policies and procedures for onsite access to content**

Based on privacy policies documented in the Program Planning section above, the organization should determine criteria for allowing content to be accessed onsite (on location), by whom, how, for how long, and how requests for copies will be handled.

_____ **Policies and procedures for offsite access to content**

Based on privacy policies documented in the Program Planning section above, the organization should determine criteria for allowing content to be accessed off site (remotely, but not on the open internet), by whom, how, for how long, and how requests for copies will be handled.

_____ Policies and procedures for online access to content

Based on privacy policies documented in the Program Planning section above, the organization should determine criteria for allowing content to be accessed online (on the open Internet), by whom, how, for how long, and how requests for copies will be handled.

_____ Clear plan for using descriptive levels (above) to provide search, browse, and display

Based on determinations made in the Description Planning section above, the organization should determine how the varying levels of descriptive information will be used to provide access (search, browse, display) based on the policies for on site, off site, and online access to oral histories.

_____ Determine systems for access

The organization will need to select systems that will support decisions made above about access to oral histories. There is no magic bullet here. Each organization will select systems that are appropriate for the organization's technical environment.

_____ Database applications

Databases often serve as the home for descriptive information (at various levels - collection, interview, segment, object). Often an organization employs multiple databases to serve internal or external access and management needs.

_____ Streaming services

Because oral histories are real-time recordings, they are often encountered as audio or video recordings. Audio and video are larger files than images and text files. Because of this, access to these types of files over the Internet (or any digital network) can be handled in one of three ways: direct download (file is available for download to a user's local computer); progressive download (file is sent to a user's local computer in progressive chunks and the computer uses buffering to play the file in a media player); streaming (the file is actively delivered as a stream of bits to the user's computer at a lower bitrate than the available bandwidth and the computer plays the file directly in a media player). The organization should evaluate the options and expenses for providing access to audio and video media in order to select the solution that will be most appropriate for its needs.

_____ Search indexing

How exactly will users be able to search for interviews within your collections? The organization will need to determine what option makes the most sense in the organization's environment.

_____ Web interfaces

How will users access the search interface and the interviews as they are discovered? The organization will need to determine the best approach depending on the organization's existing web presence(s).

_____ Documented risk management policies and procedures

Providing access to oral histories is inherently risky — for the organization, for the interviewers, for the interviewees, for those discussed in the interview. The organization must establish the level of risk that it is willing to incur. Many organizations prepare a standard take-down policy that stipulates under what circumstances an organization will remove an oral history from public access (for legal or ethical reasons), or limit access to the interview using certain mechanisms. This policy is often published for all to see and provides information on how to contact the organization.



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