



# Oral History MANUAL

2022



**BUNCOMBE COUNTY**  
PUBLIC LIBRARIES

**BUNCOMBE COUNTY**  
SPECIAL  
COLLECTIONS

# Introduction

**"YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO BE  
FAMOUS FOR  
YOUR LIFE TO  
BE HISTORY."**

**-NELL SIGMON**

The words at left serve as the unofficial motto of the Southern Oral History Program, a project that has inspired and guided the development of Buncombe County Public Libraries' oral history collecting initiatives.

History doesn't live solely in public records, letters, maps, or photographs. Many people aren't well-represented in documented history, especially those that have been historically excluded from power or property.

Oral histories gives people the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words and allow their voices to endure through time.

Oral histories fill in the gaps of the historical record, and deepen our comprehension of the past and present by showing us how lives are experienced on an individual level.

We hope this project helps bond generations, build understanding, and strengthen community.

Thank you for joining us!

# Backpack Inventory

This backpack contains everything you need (and more!) to conduct successful oral history interviews.



## Case 1:

Handheld voice recorder (with 2 AAA batteries and 32GB microSD card)



## Case 2:

Recorder tripod, microSD card adapter, USB cable, AC adapter for USB cable



## Case 3:

Headphones and windscreen



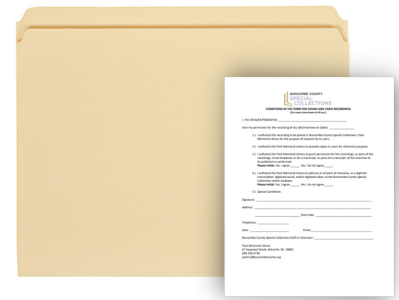
## Folder 1:

This manual!



## Folder 2:

Quick start guide, operation manual, and troubleshooting tips for voice recorder



## Folder 3:

Release forms, life history forms, donation checklist (if donating audio)

## Front & side pockets:

Question cards, notebook, pencils, thank you cards, and spray cleaner.

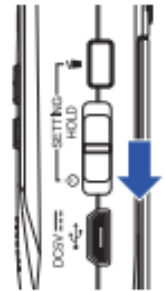
# Instructions

## ZOOM H1N HANDY RECORDER

See Folder #2 for a quick start guide and full operation manual to the Zoom H1n Handy Recorder. Here are the basics:

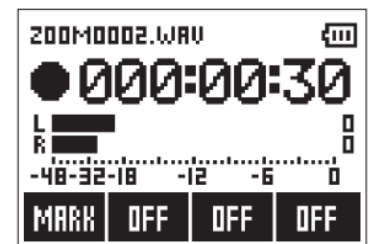
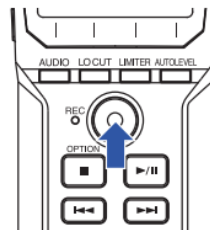
**Turn recorder on/off:** Slide  toward .

This turns on the device and opens the recording screen. The same action turns the device off when you're done. Hold the button in place until "Goodbye See You!" appears.





**Start/stop recording:** Press .

**Pause and resume:** Press .



**Listen to recording:**

Press  and  to select the file for playback. Then: Press .

### What settings should I use?

These devices have been formatted to the English language, the current date/time, input volume dial around 5, and these audio settings:

Bit rate: **48/24**

Format: **WAV**

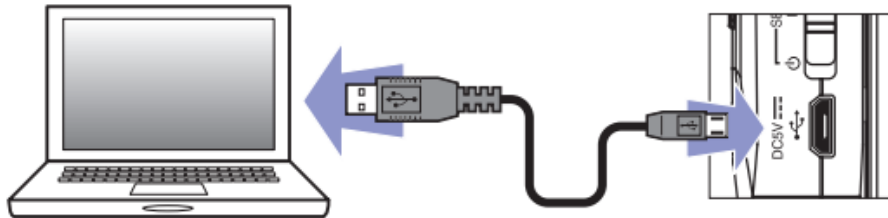
Auto level: **OFF**

LoCut: **OFF**

We recommend staying at these settings. The input volume dial can be easily adjusted so that the decibel level stays around 12 dB. Refer to the included operation manual if you need to make any other changes.

# Instructions

## CONNECTING TO A COMPUTER



**Remember to safeguard your recordings as soon as you can! Back them up by storing the files, preferably in two locations.**

The USB cord can directly connect the recorder and your computer for downloading audio files.

When the Recording Screen is open, use the USB cable to connect the device with the computer. Copy files and paste them in a folder of choice on your computer. Safely disconnect the device (for instance, by right-clicking and selecting 'eject' or 'safely remove hardware' then remove the cable.

Watch this video for a step-by-step guide: [youtu.be/86i5kcLDsuQ](https://youtu.be/86i5kcLDsuQ)

### Important notes

When you format a memory card in any device, everything is erased and gone forever! Stop and think if you see the word **FORMAT** on your storage system.

Mac users: A lightning to USB camera adapter will be necessary to connect an iPad or other iOS device without the proper USB ports.

# Instructions

## **WINDSCREEN**

Even if you do not audibly hear any wind noises, air conditioner hissing, or other sounds, your recorder may pick them up. Using a windscreen can help prevent sound distortions.

## **TRIPOD**

Screw this into the back of the recorder and set it on a table to conduct an interview hands-free. The legs and angle can be adjusted to pick up the best sound.

## **USB CORD**

Use the USB cord to connect to a computer and transfer files from the memory card in the recorder.

## **AC ADAPTER**

The USB cord can also be inserted in the AC adapter and plugged into a wall outlet to save battery life.

## **HEADPHONES**

Plug headphones into LINE OUT (left side) to monitor your recording (to test the quality of the audio being recorded) or listen later.

## **MICROSD CARD & CARD ADAPTER**

An alternate way of moving files from the device to your computer. We recommend using the USB cord instead, but if this is not possible, you can remove the microSD card, place it into the larger card adapter, and insert this into your computer's SD slot.

# Instructions

## QUESTION CARDS

Use these as inspiration for questions to ask during the interview.

## FIELD BOOK

Use this to record the **names** of yourself and your interviewee; the **date, time, and location** of the interview; and a **description** of the interview itself.

Describe the setting, other people present; any pertinent events that happened prior to, during, or after the interview; observations that were not captured in the audio.

Be sure to remove pages before returning the backpack.

## MECHANICAL PENCILS

For your note-taking convenience.

## THANK YOU CARDS

Send a written thank you to the person you interviewed afterwards.

## CLEANING SPRAY

Spray this on your headphones after use to keep things hygienic.

# Getting Started

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- What topics do I want to investigate?
- What are my goals for the interview?
- Who can provide me with information on this subject?
- What future do I envision for the information I collect?
- What kinds of materials will come from this (for example, audio recording, transcript, photographs)? What will I do with them (for example, deposit them in an archive)?

### Donating oral histories

Donating your oral history recordings makes it possible for the information you've collected to be available to the public for generations to come, helping us all better understand our shared history.

*Donating your oral history recording is **not** required.* Donations must meet certain conditions and criteria.

See page 18 for more information.



# Getting Started

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- Define the topic you want to investigate, and do background research to learn what you can about the topic.
- Identify an interviewee/narrator who is willing and able to provide the information you need.
- Ask permission to conduct the interview and explain its purpose. If you plan to donate materials to an archive, share release forms and make certain that the interviewee understands that their recording will be available to the public.
- Conduct any specialized research related to the individual. This might include sharing a brief list of questions in advance (the 'life history form' included in this backpack).
- Draw up a list of topics or specific questions to be explored. Don't ask a question that you know the answer to or can find out beforehand. Time is precious!
- Prepare your questions on note cards, a notebook, or a readable device. You may use the list of question ideas on the next sheet, or the question cards provided in this backpack. During the interview, refer to the questions, but do not feel constrained by them. An oral history interview is simply a conversation!

**There is no one way to do oral history interviews.  
Every interview is different.  
Be yourself!**

# Question Ideas

Your questions will be different based on who you are interviewing and what you want to learn from your interview.

You may select from the question cards included in your backpack:

What is your full name? Where were you born?

What brought you to the place you live now? Where else have you lived?

What organizations have you been part of? What did they do?

What historic events (marches, protests, performances, etc.) have you experienced?

Tell me about your parents. Where are they from? What did/do they do for a living?

What schools did you go to? Who was your favorite teacher? Which classes did you like?

What was your first job? How did your career or job skills change over the years?

Do you have siblings, children, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews? Tell me about them. What family traditions do you have?

What has provided you with the most satisfaction in life? What are you most proud of?

Have you been married or in a long-term relationship? Tell me about how you met your partner.

How has the world changed since you were young? How has your profession or community changed?

What are your memories of events such as segregation, the Civil Rights movement, or wars?

What were you like growing up? What were your interests? Who were your friends?

What would you say are the greatest challenges you've faced in your life?

Who had the greatest influence on you as a child or as an adult?

Who is the earliest ancestor you know about? Where and when did they live?

What stories have been passed down in your family?

Did any of your family serve in the military? Who and what conflicts?

Have you experienced or observed prejudice or racism in your life?

Do you have hobbies or play sports?

How do/did you or your family celebrate holidays? Any favorite memories?

What music do you like? How does music impact your life? Do you have a favorite song?

Describe the neighborhood or community you grew up in. What were the 'gathering places' in your community?

Tell me about the building(s) your family lived in. Did you move to another home while you were growing up?

What kinds of values did your family or community teach you? Are there ways your views have changed over time?



# Question Ideas

Or you may choose to add questions that are more specific to the topic you want to know about or the person you are interviewing. Consider these examples from other projects:

How do you define yourself?

Who are your ancestors, however you define them?

What makes you feel empowered?

What has changed your views about the world, radicalized you, or altered your perception of how you live your life?

What do you think you may be carrying from your family and ancestors? Advice, lived experience, trauma, joy?

(from "Self-Preservation Kit: Questions to Guide Self-Reflection," *Everyone is an Archivist*, project by Honey Simone / DIFFERENT WRLD and Lydia See / Engaging Collections)

Do you, your family, or friends have any specific cultural connections to food? If so, can you share a story about one of those connections?

Are there any parts of your identity that are shaped by a connection you have to food?

Have any parts of the food culture in your community changed during your life? If so, how and why?

(from "Collecting Food Culture Oral Histories," Smithsonian Science for Global Goals)

How old were you when you immigrated to the United States?

How did you travel? By boat, plane, or train? How long did the trip take?

What feelings did you have about coming to the United States?

What was one of the biggest differences between the U.S. and your previous home?

(from "Suggested Topics and Questions for Oral Histories: Immigration," Genealogy.com)

# Tips for Interviewers

## 10 QUICK TIPS

1. Choose a quiet locale and properly position your microphones.
2. Ask one question at a time. State your questions as directly as possible.
3. Ask open-ended questions—questions that begin with “why, how, where, what kind of,” etc.
4. Start with non-controversial questions. One good place to begin, for instance, is with the interviewee’s childhood, or where they grew up and have them describe it.
5. Understand that periods of silence will occur. These are useful periods of reflection and recollection for your interviewee.
6. Avoid interrupting. Use non-verbal means of offering support or give silent feedback (such as nodding).
7. If the person you are interviewing strays away from the topic in which you are interested, don’t panic. Sometimes the best parts of the interview come about this way. If you feel the digression has gone too far afield, gently steer them back to the topic with your next question.
8. Be respectful of the interviewee. Use body language to show you are interested in what they have to say. Remember, they are giving you the gift of their memories and experiences.
9. After the interview, thank the interviewee for sharing their experiences. Also send a written thank-you note (included in your backpack).
10. Don’t use the interview to show off your knowledge, charm, or other attributes. Remember, “good interviewers never shine—only their interviews do.”

# The Interview

## CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

- Set aside at least two hours for the interview to have time to set up equipment, answer any questions, and conduct the interview.
- Set up your recording equipment in an extremely quiet location. Take time to find the quietest space. If there are background noises (fans, air conditioning, etc.), or other problems with the recording, address the issues now. Absolutely NO televisions or radios in the background. Turn them off!
- Start the recording: Introduce yourself and your interviewee. State the date and the location of your interview, and anything of special note. Have the interviewee state their own name.
- Interviews may be autobiographical or topical. In either case, begin at a point in time previous to the central events you want to explore. For all interviews, include basic information regarding birthplace, year of birth, and family of origin; it will help establish a context for the interview and a level of comfort with the person you are interviewing.
- You should seek a balance in which you allow narrators to express the logic of their lives as they understand it, while at the same time maintaining a sense of the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions to elicit information that pertains to your area of interest.
- Listen carefully. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the interviewee time to think, to continue after a pause. Critically evaluate the flow of information, so that you can ask for elaboration if statements are unclear.
- Take notes that will remind you to ask follow-up questions at an opportune moment, rather than interrupting the narrator's train of thought.

# The Interview

## CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW (CONTINUED)

- Avoid leading or prejudicial questions. Your questions should be open-ended and should not supply a list of alternative answers. They should be direct and to the point.
- Avoid asking several questions in the guise of one.
- Frame questions in a language and context that the person you are interviewing will understand.
- It may be helpful to arrange the sequence of topics so as to postpone until last questions that may be challenging to the interviewee. Within each topic, it may be helpful to begin with a broad question, then ask more detailed questions as the conversation proceeds.
- When someone seems unwilling or unable to provide certain information, try approaching the topic from another angle, or wait until later in the interview to return to the topic. When appropriate, mention that it will be possible to restrict the interview according to their wishes.
- Ordinarily an interview session should last no more than 90 minutes. Be alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Conduct a long interview in separate sessions.
- Have the person you interview fill out and sign a release form, and give them a copy to keep. Be sure to fill out a copy yourself, too.

*If you plan to donate your recording for historical purposes, do not leave the interview without a signed release form!*

# Next Steps

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- Immediately after the session, write up your field notes:
  - the names of yourself and your narrator,
  - the date, time, and location of the interview,
  - and a description of the interview itself.
  - Describe the setting, other people present; any pertinent events that happened prior to, during, or after the interview; observations that were not captured in the audio recording; and your honest reflections on whatever dynamics occurred during the interview/visit.
- Send a written thank you to the interviewee, using the thank you cards included in your backpack or your own.
- Label your recordings, notes, and any other materials neatly and consistently. This will help you organize and manage them later.
- Decide how you will store and organize your recordings, transcripts, copies of release forms, and other information.
  - If you are planning to deposit your oral history in a library or archives, consult them about format, labeling, and organization of materials.
- Listen to the recording and evaluate both your own behavior and the content of the interview. This is the only way that you will be able to learn from your mistakes and refine your interviewing skills!
- Decide whether or not a follow-up interview will be necessary. It is often helpful to conduct follow-up sessions after you have analyzed the content of the interview and as your understanding of the topic evolves.

# Sensitive Materials

## **SENSITIVE MATERIALS + ORAL HISTORY GUIDELINES**

In conducting oral history interviews, we want to learn individuals' personal remembrances of the past and their lived experiences. We want interviewees to be open and honest, which can sometimes include information that is sensitive in some way or that the narrator does not want publicly available.

"Sensitive" may mean many things to many people. An interview may be sensitive if it includes references or language that might cause embarrassment or personal or professional harm to either the person being interviewed or to those mentioned in an interview.

This could include (but is not limited to) topics of

- sexuality,
- illness (physical or mental),
- legal status,
- unsavory characterizations of individuals or groups,
- defamation,
- accusations of criminal activity or unethical behavior,
- mandatory reporting scenarios,
- privacy concerns.

First and foremost, if a narrator indicates that any content is sensitive, we respect and honor their judgment regarding what they consider sensitive or private. You can do this by turning off the recorder, deleting sections of audio, or placing limits on public access if donating recordings. Be mindful of narrators saying things like "off the record" or "don't repeat this."

# Sensitive Materials

## **DEFAMATION**

Defamation is a statement (spoken or written) that injures a third party's reputation, such as accusations of criminal activity or unethical behavior. Considering the extent of potentially defamatory language, the interviewer or project director may discuss restriction options with the narrator and restrict accordingly. There is a difference between opinion/speculation and supported facts. Be mindful of mandatory reporting scenarios.

## **MANDATORY REPORTING**

By North Carolina law, "Everyone has a duty to report to law enforcement (UNC Dept. of Public Safety) reasonable suspicions that a child has disappeared or is in danger, § 14-318.5(c), or has been abused or neglected, § 7B-301. Failure to report is a class 1 misdemeanor (up to 120 days of punishment). This reporting obligation applies with respect to children under 16 at the time the information is received (e.g. not an adult recalling something that happened in their childhood). An interviewer who has reasonable cause to believe that a disabled adult is in need of protective services shall notify the county department of social services pursuant to N.C. Gen. Stat. § 108A-102.

## **OTHER PRIVACY CONCERNS**

Do not include a narrator's full date of birth in the abstract, field notes, or transcript. In rare cases, an interviewee might wish to use a pseudonym. If this is the case, then watch out for slip-ups or mention of other easily identifiable personal information in the audio and (if applicable) transcript.

# Sensitive Materials

## **RESTRICTING FOR ACCESS AND USE**

Remember: *You can always offer to turn off the recorder if a narrator wants to share information that they do not intend to (ever) appear in the public record.*

First and foremost, we honor the narrator's judgment on sensitive content and their requests to restrict materials.

### **If you plan to donate your oral history:**

The person you interview can request restrictions on the audio release form. They can choose to close the interview for a certain number of years or until after their death, use a pseudonym, or redact portions of the interview.

Responsibility for identifying sensitive materials and suggesting restrictions falls primarily on you, the interviewer/donor. Make sure you communicate with the person you interview and with the stewards of the collection you are donating to.

BCSC asks that donors edit interviews as necessary before donating them (audio and transcript, if applicable).

*Buncombe County Special Collections does not accept donations of interviews that will be indefinitely or permanently closed to the public. You are welcome to use this oral history backpack to make recordings for your own personal use rather than for donation.*

# Donating Interviews

## WHY DONATE?

Donating your oral history recordings makes it possible for the information you've collected to be available to the public for generations to come, helping us all better understand our shared history.

Buncombe County Special Collections will only collect oral histories that align with our collection policies and include:

- Audio release forms filled out by all speakers, including the interviewer, with complete contact information;
- Brief biographical summary of interviewee(s);
- Summary of topics covered;
- Description of the date and place of the interview;
- All necessary redaction, anonymization, or restrictions completed and/or communicated to staff (see pages 15-17);
- Completed deed of gift form;
- Completed donation checklist to ensure all these steps have been completed.

Finalized, narrator-approved transcripts are also appreciated.

Oral history recordings and transcripts will be made available to the public through the Buncombe County Special Collections website at **[specialcollections.buncombecounty.org](https://specialcollections.buncombecounty.org)**.

*Potential donors should contact  
**[packnc@buncombecounty.org](mailto:packnc@buncombecounty.org)***

# Acknowledgments



The direct inspiration for this project is "Archivist in a Backpack," a program of the Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Backpack contents and documents, including this manual, are largely modified versions of the resources generously made available through this program, such as the UNC Chapel Hill Practical Guide to Oral History. Find more at: <https://sohp.org/resources-2/>

Additional credit is due to the following projects that have inspired BCSC's efforts:

- History Harvest Handbook, University of Nebraska at Lincoln
- Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History
- StoryCorps

Finally, this would not be possible without the enthusiasm of community members like you. Thank you so much again for joining us!

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Image credits:

- Cover: K890-8, Wanda Henry-Coleman and men at conference table in the YMI Building, circa 1988. Photo by Diane Hendrix.
- Page 7: H464-8, Family with toddler in restaurant in the NW Bank Building. Photo by Bob Lindsey for the Asheville Chamber of Commerce.
- Page 19: K525-8, Unidentified woman conducting interview. Photographer unknown.

All from Buncombe County Special Collections, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, NC.