



WISCONSIN
HUMANITIES

TIPS FOR COLLECTING AND USING ORAL HISTORY IN PUBLIC HUMANITIES PROGRAMS

These tips for using oral histories as part of public programs have been developed in consultation with Troy Reeves, who heads the Oral History Program and collection at UW-Madison University Archives.

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

The term ‘oral history’ is often used to describe a lot of different ways of collecting stories from lived experiences. An oral history is different from “storytelling,” a word that may describe “story slams” or other means of making connections to one another through sharing experiences.

An oral history is an historical record of a person’s memory of a lived experience that is saved in a formalized way that remains accessible to future historians and the public. Often, public humanities projects use oral histories to help flesh out community histories, inform documentaries, performances and exhibits, provide context for old photographs, provoke reflection, and capture the depth and variation of experience of a time, event, or place.

When thinking about a project proposal for Wisconsin Humanities, it’s important to be mindful of the difference between storytelling events that are ephemeral, and the use of oral history as a primary source for history. Wisconsin Humanities funds both kinds of projects. In the case of oral history, we support project proposals that collect and use oral histories according to professional standards for collecting this primary source information.

Some of the oral history standards we look for in oral history project proposals include:

- The use of an oral historian to guide the development of the project and thematic focus of the history collection, and interpretation of material gathered.
- Interviewers who are oral historians or are trained by an oral historian.
- Prepared questions for the narrators/interviewees.
- Interviews that are recorded in full to be preserved, catalogued, and made accessible for future use, even though only portions of these histories may be used for the proposed project.
- Legal and ethical considerations, such as release and consent by the interview subjects that include recognition that their words may be used and interpreted by others who encounter them in the record of history.



WISCONSIN HUMANITIES

STEPS IN AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:

- **Preparation:** The interviewer should start by doing research on the person being interviewed and/or the topic(s). The interview questions should be developed from this research. The interviewer should also record each oral history session using a digital audio or audio/video recording device.
- **Curation:** The interviewer should make sure the digital file is **preserved** in some way, ideally making sure multiple copies of the digital file exist. A transcription and/or metadata should be **catalogued** to help not only the interviewer to access the content but also so that other people can use the material as easily and efficiently as possible.
- **Sharing:** Oral history interviews should be made **accessible** to the public and widely known.

For further reference, The Oral History Association website offers useful information, including its [definition of oral history](#) and its [Best Practices and General Principles](#). Another resource is the [Oral History in the Digital Age](#) website, which includes short essays on myriad topics related to oral history and a section called “Ask Doug” where you can get advice about the best recorders to purchase based on your project needs.

MAKING USE OF ORAL HISTORIES FOR PUBLIC AUDIENCES

Wisconsin Humanities will not fund oral history collection that is strictly to create an archive. Instead, Wisconsin Humanities grant funds support programs that engage the public in accessible ways.

While oral histories are often collected in support of a topic, such as a specific time period, event or a locale, a good proposal should seek to expand on themes that emerge from the topic. These themes help make those past recollections resonate with an audience or allow the public to understand an issue from a different perspective.



WISCONSIN HUMANITIES

EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS THAT RECEIVED WISCONSIN HUMANITIES FUNDING

We have funded a variety of public humanities programs that use oral history collection as the way to create engaging public programs. These examples of public humanities programs strive to help people reflect on their experiences, better understand current events and issues, and gain a deeper appreciation for what makes us human. Following are some examples of WH-funded projects that incorporated oral history:

1. In *Roots, Shoots and Blooms*, Community Support Network worked with a professional oral historian to interview adults with intellectual and development disabilities living in Dane County to give voice to a marginalized group (an excerpt available here <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=960617030944748>). The stories explored their struggles and joys in early life, experiences of self-growth, and personal successes based on self-determination and choice.
2. Slinger School District's high school social studies program focuses on local history and culture. The program worked with the guidance of an oral historian, a teacher trained in teaching local culture, and web and videography professionals to engage students with their community. Some projects, for example, focused on working professions in the community. Students used the histories to understand the kinds of businesses that operate in their area, the career choices of people who chose to pursue those careers, and how these businesses came to be identified with their community. The students presented their findings to the whole community. Recently, students explored the impact of the pandemic on a sense of connection to the school community, helping students think about how their school and community connections become part of their identity and culture.
3. A University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire public history program worked with music media, local history organizations and other partners to hold a history harvest that collected the stories, photos, ephemera and musical snippets in a project titled *The Sounds of Eau Claire History Harvest*. The two-year project engaged the public in performances and conversations about Eau Claire's music scene, past and present, while contributing to an archive: <https://www.uwec.edu/kb/article/guide-to-the-sounds-of-eau-claire-oral-history-project-2017-2019/>. Some of the events, broadcasts, and collections are highlighted here: <https://soundsofeauclaire.omeka.net/>
4. The Driftless Writing Center worked with libraries and historical societies in southwestern counties that experienced catastrophic flooding in 2018. Their story collection proved to be a shared history of trauma, as each new flood in recent years has reinforced the memories of past floods. The collection was intended to capture the impact of climate change on residents' lives. One product of the collection is a publication, "Stories from the Flood," that shares snippets of these experiences. <https://www.wisconsinfloodstories.org/>