Introduction to Oral History

AAUW wishes to augment its historical resources with oral histories from members to round out our knowledge with a fuller picture of various times and themes in our story. We aim to record the reflections and perspectives of AAUW’s involvement in the last half century and give a voice to the unheard.

Elements of a Good Oral History Interview

- Solid preparation.
- A professional and respectful approach.
- The best sound quality possible.
- A signed release form authorizing use.
- Best possible preservation of recordings.
- Access to recordings and transcripts.

Preparing for the Interview

Identify the purpose of your oral history project.
Think about why your oral history project is needed. What information are you seeking? What information is already available on the topic?

Identify potential narrators (person to interview).
Locate narrators whose experience fits your themes and who are willing, able and available. Narrators should have first-hand experience related to the subject. Potential narrators might be people you know through your state or branch, or those who you have heard of through word of mouth. It is also important to choose narrators who have a story that has not yet been told. As an example, if someone has written a personal memoir, they might not be the best choice for an oral history interview. You want to think about capturing the story and the voice that has not yet been heard. You should only interview one person at a time, group interviews are not advised.

Establish contact with the narrator.
Before the interview, contact the narrator by mail explaining that you would like to interview her. Explain the purpose of your project and outline the purpose of the interview, the length of time involved and the topics that will be addressed. Suggest some dates and a location for the scheduled interview. Follow through by confirming
the time, date and location of the interview. Make it clear at this point that you will be asking her to sign a legal release form prior to the interview.

**Conduct background research.**
This is an essential step in preparing for your interview. Not only will background research guide you in the development of your question list, but it will also enable you to establish a friendly rapport with the narrator. You want to have a thorough knowledge of the time period and key events that occurred during her lifetime. You can begin your research with a brief phone call to learn more about the individual’s life and review the relevant time periods to gain additional historical perspective. Newspapers are a great resource for research! The more research you do, the better! This will lead to a better interview, allow you to create an informed question list, and be better prepared to ask follow up questions and keep the story on track.

**Create a question list.**
Your question list should be well thought out, and should reflect the life experiences of the narrator. Your background research will help you here. See the list of sample questions on page 7. This list is meant only as a suggestion, but can be adapted to fit any circumstances.

**Create a release form.**
The release form is an agreement which the narrator and interviewer sign before or after the interview which gives written permission to record, duplicate or use their words in your project. When signed, it means that the narrator donates the interview to the organization, library or archives. In addition, the signed release means that all copyright ownership is also transferred to the organization and that all future use is permissible. A sample is provided on Page 9.

**Prepare an interview worksheet**
A worksheet contains the details of the interview and its scope and provides the first step in accessing the information. A sample is provided on Page 8. This is completed after the interview and always kept with the recordings.

**Organize and train interviewers.**
You will want to make sure you have enough people to conduct the interviews. Are you going to be working as a team? Do others need training? Do not schedule more interviews than you and other trained interviewers can reasonably handle.
Consider and select equipment.
Do you have equipment on hand that you can use? If you do, this might be your best option. If not, do you have the ability to purchase a recorder? Can you borrow one (a local library or historical society may loan this kind of equipment)? It is very important to practice with whatever equipment you will use and always have spare disks and batteries on hand.

Conducting the Interview

- Demonstrate respect for the narrator by showing up on time, and being polite. Arrive early enough for the interview so you can set up and test your equipment.
- If possible use your recorder with a power source rather than battery but always have extra batteries, SD cards and/or cassette tapes on hand.
- Try to keep the room free of background noise and interruptions – close doors, move furniture and objects if you need to ensure a high quality recording.
- We recommend getting the release form signed BEFORE the interview. Words are intellectual property and cannot be reproduced or reused without this permission.
- Have the narrator sit where she is comfortable, but not too close together or far away that the recording is compromised.
- Always begin the recording with an introduction to frame the interview. For example, “This is an oral history interview for the AAUW Oral History Program. The interviewer is (State your name here) and the narrator is Ms. Mary Smith. It is February 1, 2013 and we are in Washington, DC at the home of Ms. Mary Smith.”
- Always start the interview by having the narrator state her full name, date and place of birth.
- Proceed with question list. Refer to the Oral History Interview Tips handout for additional suggestions for conducting the interviews.
- Have pen and paper on hand to take notes, or write down correct spellings etc... (Laptop or iPad can also be useful as long as your typing doesn’t make noise!)

Post-Interview Follow-Up
- Always thank the narrator, in person and in writing. This shows respect for their contribution and the time involved on their part.
- Fill out the interview worksheet completely. Store the worksheet along with the recordings.
• Make copies of the recordings, preferably in different formats and designate one copy as preservation master. Remember SD cards and other forms of digital storage are not suitable for long-term storage. Copy recordings onto a combination of CDs and computer hard drive.
• Label all recordings with date and name of narrator.
• Store tapes and SD cards in clean, climate controlled environment.
• If you conduct several interviews, or have an ongoing project, create a written inventory of interviews.
• If you have time, transcribe the interview.

What you can send to AAUW?
• If available, send a copy of the transcript.
• If no transcript is available, send a short summary of the interview or the interview worksheet including the name of narrator and interviewer, date and length of interview and subjects discussed.
• Do not send tapes or recordings.

Transcription
A transcript is a print representation of the recorded sound interview. Transcripts make the information on the recording easier to locate and use in research, presentations or exhibits but are labor intensive. If you choose to do it yourself, keep in mind the time commitment, 10-12 hours of work on average for every recorded hour of sound. Narrators may review the transcript for spelling of proper names and clarification but not to change parts of the interview.

Equipment
The basic equipment you will need
• A recorder
• 2 microphones
• Blank media – cassette tapes, SD cards, CDs
• Computer/printer

Technology is constantly changing so recommending one recorder and media source is difficult but the most important factors to take into consideration is what can you afford and what you are comfortable using.
Recorder
Professional archivists recommend handheld digital recorders using SD memory cards. If you choose a digital recorder, look for recorders that create uncompressed PCM, WAV files and select a recorder with a USB output terminal so you can connect your recorder directly to your computer to transfer audio files. The advantage of a small recorder is it is unobtrusive during the interview, but do not sacrifice size for sound quality.

Some recommended models of digital recorders include:

- Marantz PMD-661 ($649)
- Sony PCM-M10/R Portable Linear PCM Recorder ($399)
- Olympus LS-10 Linear PCM Recorder ($199)
- Tascam DR-05 Portable Handheld Recorder ($95)

Cassette Recorders were commonplace in the oral history world for a long time and may still be a good choice if the recorder is a good quality and you can find the blank tapes.

Try to use equipment that can be run on a power cord. Make sure you bring an extension cord to the interview as you might not know the placement of outlets in the room. If you have to use battery power, make sure you have extra batteries on hand.

Microphones
Recorders generally come with built in microphones but it is best to use two external microphones for best sound quality. One is for the narrator and one for the interviewer. There are two basic types of microphones: standard (placed in a stand or hand held) and lavaliere (clip-on).

But the most important thing to remember is to use what you have on hand! Don’t let equipment considerations delay you from getting that interview done – your cell phone, for example, could be used if you have nothing else on hand.
Oral History Interview Tips

• Only ask one question at a time.

• Start out with ‘easy’ questions to make the narrator comfortable.

• Ask when, what, who and especially why and how questions. Try to avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no.

• Use common sense, and don’t exhaust the narrator. If she becomes distracted or tired, stop the interview. Ask for definitions and clarifications. (i.e. “Explain what you mean by” or “Let me see if I understand…”)

• Follow up with questions such as … what else or who else?

• Avoid loaded questions which reveal you may have a bias or already know the answer to, for example, “Wasn’t it true that women faced horrible discrimination at the time?”

• Turn the question around. “Some people say that….what are your thoughts about that?”

• Take notes while recording to remind you of subjects you want to bring up again.

• Show respect and interest. Be respectful and neutral, especially when you might disagree.

• Remember to listen and not talk! It’s not a conversation!

• Provide silent feedback, a nod of your head or smile. Your voice should be heard as little as possible during the interview.

• Be flexible about your question list, it’s okay to deviate a bit.

• Have a backup ‘easy’ question, in case a question causes emotional reactions or in case the narrator cannot easily recall.

• Challenge if you think something was remembered incorrectly, but don’t question the narrator’s honesty.

• If narrator drifts off topic, gently bring the narrator back to the subject.

• Finally, end with a question such as “Is there anything else you would like to add?”

• End interview with a statement of appreciation.
Sample Oral History Interview Questions

1. Begin the interview by asking the narrator to state her full name, date and place of birth.

2. How did you first learn about AAUW?

3. What inspired you to become involved with AAUW? When and at what age?

4. In addition to your work as an AAUW member, were you employed? Please describe your education and career.

5. Describe some of the programs you participated in during your AAUW membership. How did participating in those programs make you feel?

6. Did you hold any positions of leadership, either at the branch, state or national level?

7. Talk about a program or project that was particularly important to you or that you feel made an impact on the lives of women?

8. How are you similar or different from other women in your community?

9. How did your life as a woman differ from the lives of men during your time as an AAUW member?

10. Did you do anything considered controversial for women? If so, describe.

11. What is the most significant change for women that you have witnessed in your lifetime?

12. How has AAUW changed since you joined?
### ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW DOCUMENTATION WORKSHEET

#### Interview Details

- **Date of Interview:** 
- **Location:** 
- **Narrator:** 
- **Birth year & Place:** 
- **Interviewer:**

#### Interview Content & Purpose

Key themes or subjects:

Purpose of interview:

#### Recording Details

Location details / Recording Environment (others present, etc.) / Technical Notes

#### Explanatory Information & Additional Notes

(use extra sheets if necessary)

Explanation of specialized terms, proper name spellings, etc.

#### Related material in other AAUW collections

Related source material (books, articles, videos, etc.)
In consideration of the commitment to AAUW for preserving the related stories and histories of its members and supporters, I, ______________________ (name) hereby give permission for use in form and content any and all rights in and to the recordings(s) and/or transcribed interview(s) recorded on ________________ (date) and related subjects and/or video footage or still photographs taken during the interview.

I represent and warrant that I have the authority to grant the above rights and AAUW shall have the rights to use, reproduce, distribute and give access for any purpose whatsoever and may use my name and/or likeness in connection therewith.

INTERVIEWER

________________________
Signature

________________________
Date

________________________
Print Name

________________________
Address

NARRATOR

________________________
Signature

________________________
Date

________________________
Print Name

________________________
Address
Oral History Resources

Books and Articles


Internet Resources

Baylor Institute for Oral History. [http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/](http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/)

Worchester Women’s History Project: Worchester, MA
[http://www.wwhp.org/activities-exhibits/oral-history-project](http://www.wwhp.org/activities-exhibits/oral-history-project)

Veteran’s History Project. [http://www.loc.gov/vets/](http://www.loc.gov/vets/)

Sophia Smith Collection. Voices of Feminism, Oral History Project.