

# How to Record Family Stories

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## How-To Guides

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This guide provides information on how to record your African American family stories. Put another way, this guide offers resources to equip you to do informal oral histories yourself, within your family or community. Storytelling and oral tradition are deep practices in communities, whether in a more formal setting like a church or public event, or at home with elders or on the porch with neighbors. Oral traditions are often passed down through generations, an important way to hand down the past and preserve the legacy of the ancestors. The stories we tell about ourselves, our family, our community, and our history show not only what we value, but who we are as people.

The memories held by elders are quickly receding because as communities change and folks move away or pass on, their memories of history are lost. Preserving these stories, oral traditions, and memories is a crucial task because these stories give us insight into the past that no other source can. They become an important part of African American preservation work.

## What is an oral history? ?

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Recorded stories are often called oral histories. An oral history is a collaborative conversation where the narrator or storyteller is given space, with occasional prompts from the interviewer, to speak about their experiences and perspectives, and to tell their story. Oral histories are not interviews in the way you might think – they are quite different from a journalistic interview. They are not scripted or edited – the goal is not to come in with a defined list of questions and to extract from the narrator a particular story, angle, or perspective. Rather, oral histories see the narrator as the expert of their own story and instead give space and a platform to people who have been left out of the historical narrative.

Oral History is a distinct field, with a set of standards and best practices, methodology about how to do oral history, and professionals who specialize in it. That being said, many non-professionals do oral history work when they talk to their community members, families, or coworkers about their lives and history, whether recorded or not. Recording a conversation with your grandparents is an informal oral history, for example. Communities, especially BIPOC communities, have long been doing oral history work when they record, preserve, and compile their own stories, so this is not a new practice by any means.

## Types of oral history

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For the purpose of this guide, we'll differentiate between formal oral histories (those done by professionals following best practices and intended to be put in an archive) and informal oral histories (those done by community members, done more flexibly and casually, and not typically intended for an archive.) Although we're making that distinction here in order to make it clear that this guide provides resources for informal oral histories you can do yourself rather than an extensive guide to formal archival oral history practices, please know there is not always this distinction in real world applications.

Contrary to the name itself, oral histories aren't always about the past: they can be about a person's life in the past and currently (called life histories) or on a specific topic, whether a historical topic or modern one (called a focused oral history).

## **Why you might want to record stories**

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Many people decide they want to record an informal oral history when they realize a particular story might be lost. Sometimes that is from an older generation passing on, community members leaving the area, the end of an era of a community organization, or many other such changes. These are all opportunities to record stories. Many folks will start by recording stories with their family members, especially those that are elders. It can be a great opportunity for generations to connect when a young person interviews their grandparents. You can also seek to do informal oral histories with your family or community members about a specific place, time, event, or topic. These are all great entry points into recording informal oral histories. Ultimately, recording stories with your family is a way to preserve a piece of history, preserve memories, and offer your community a way to tell their own stories in their own words.

## ***Storytelling and oral history as a practice***

1. Embrace inconsistencies – the beauty of people’s stories is that they do shift, change, and respond to others over time, so that telling your story to one person on one day is never the same as telling it to another on another day. Oral history celebrates this and believes that there is power and meaning in how we tell our stories each time.
2. Oral histories and storytelling differ from typical interview styles – they are not extractive, seeking a sensational story, only about finding facts, or a Q and A. They are a carefully collaborative conversation where the narrator is the expert and takes the lead on how they want to tell their story. They offer space for preserving people’s stories in their own words, not dictated, changed, or edited by someone else.
3. Seek meaning more than facts – facts can be found anywhere; a narrator’s meaning and significance is unique to their story. Ask about the why more than the what.
4. Get curious – wonder why a narrator says something in a particular way and get curious about their life and story.
5. Practice active and intentional listening – everyone wants to feel heard, and when given the space and time to be heard, stories of everyday life take on deep meaning.
6. Oral history is always ethical, caring, and seeks to help, not harm, communities.

## ***Some basic fundamentals of oral history***

### 1. Narrator-led

- Oral histories are led by the narrator or storyteller. The narrator is the expert of their own story. The interviewer's role is to help the narrator tell the story they want to tell through prompts and supply a comfortable and safe environment.
- Don't force the narrator to talk about something if they don't want to. You can ask, but make sure the narrator knows before you start that they can always choose not to answer a question or to redirect the conversation if they wish.
- Let your questions or prompts be guided by what the narrator is telling you is important to them.

## 2. Open-ended questions

- Questions asked in an oral history should be open-ended. They should not be able to be answered in a yes or no answer, but should invite the narrator to reflect. More than that though, they should also be questions that do not cause harm or make the narrator uncomfortable. This means you need to think carefully about how your questions could be interpreted as assumptive and not actually open-ended.

Open-ended questions are harder to craft than you might think. A good practice is to write out some sample question ideas and then go back through those questions and ask yourself how each question might *not* be perceived as open-ended by people with varying backgrounds and identities.

- For eg: many people start an interview by asking “Can you tell me about your family or parents?” This assumes that your narrator has/had parents, that they grew up in a family environment, and that this is something non-traumatic for them to talk about.
- Another example is, “Where did you go to school?” which assumes that someone did actually go to school.
- Unless you know the narrator personally and know that certain questions are ok to ask (for eg: this is your parent and you know they want to talk about their parents or this is your grandparent and you know they went to high school and want to ask about it), avoid these types of questions initially. You can always offer it as an opportunity later.
- Think about how you phrase your questions. Often, you need to reframe and reword your questions. You could use some of the following formats:
  1. “Tell me about a time that you experienced...”
  2. “Can you tell me about...”
  3. “Can you describe...”
  4. “What was it like when...”
- Start the interview with the most open-ended questions. You can ask more specific questions as the interview progresses and you and your narrator get more comfortable.

## 3. Power of silence

Don't be afraid to leave silence after someone wraps up a sentence or thought. Be patient, take a beat and a breath, and hold back from saying anything for a few seconds. See if they continue on with another thought or if they look to you to ask another question.

#### 4. Informal, more personal conversation style

- Since this is an informal oral history, it may look more like a casual conversation, where interjections and exclamations are a normal part of the conversation. This can differ from formal oral histories, where interviewers do not typically talk over the narrator due to audio recording concerns. Informal oral histories give you the opportunity to have a more casual and natural conversation, without having to worry about audio quality for archives.
- Since this is an informal interview, focus more on the connection you have with your narrator and your relationship, and worry less about “doing it right.”
- See this as an opportunity to get to know someone better, build a deeper connection with a family member, or understand more about your family’s past.

5. Encourage your narrator that what they have to say is valuable, and that you’d like to hear their thoughts through a conversation – even if they say they don’t remember much and aren’t a good person to talk to. Everyone has significant memories and reflections, and this isn’t about saying “the right thing” or even providing specific details.

6. Don’t forget introductions at the beginning before you start your conversation.

- Introduce yourself, the date, and how you know the narrator
- Have the narrator introduce themselves

#### 7. Narrator rights

- Narrators have the rights to their own stories. It is their intellectual property. They are the only ones who can decide what happens with the recording.
- This means that you don’t “own” the recording afterwards, unless your narrator has specifically agreed to that.
- Narrators or storytellers can decide:
  1. If they don’t want anyone listening to the recording
  2. If they only want the recording shared within the family
  3. If they want the recording deleted entirely
  4. If they are okay with you sharing the recording with anyone interested
- You should plan on giving a copy of the recording back to the narrator. Usually this is done through a usb drive.

### ***How to plan for an informal oral history***

1.

1. Think about who you'd like to record an informal oral history with and why. Ideally for an informal oral history, this is someone you already have a relationship with. You might just think of one person to start with or you may already have a few folks in mind. Know your why – why do you want to speak with them? What do you want to learn?
2. Start with family members – look to parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews or family friends.
3. Think through whether you are going to suggest a life history interview or a focused interview. (Life histories are very open and can discuss anything about a person's life, history, or present day experience; Focused interviews can focus some on a person's life, but also are centered around a particular topic, ie: change in the downtown corridor, the closing of a community center, a specific historical event etc.)
4. Think about how you are going to record – suggestions below on recording apps.
5. Think through where you are going to record – home vs alternate space (see more below).
6. Think through what you might like to do with recorded stories.
7. Start with one person – don't try to do too many at once when you are just starting out.
8. Talk to your narrator about doing an informal oral history with them. Ask them if they would be willing and explain to them what it might look like (you might use the term informal recorded conversation or story). This might need to be an ongoing conversation you have, so that they can get comfortable with the idea.
9. Make sure to get your narrator's permission multiple times (\*also see note at end about permissions):
  - When asking to do the interview
  - Again, when you reach out to set up a date/time/location
  - Again, before you press record
10. Make sure your narrator knows that they can decide what happens to the recording. If they decide they don't want the recording to be heard by anyone else or be public, respect that and keep it safe. If they want it to be available only within the family, offer that as an option. If they would like a copy of it, make that available. If they want it deleted entirely, you will also need to respect that and can always offer another opportunity to record.
11. Think through who is going to store the recording. Will you keep a copy and your narrator keeps a copy (if so, you need their permission to keep a copy). Will you keep it in a safe file on your computer? Will you put on a usb drive or external hard drive? Will you upload to a free app like StoryCorps to go into their archive? (More on this below).

Keep in mind that audio files are large to store.

## ***Thinking of topics beforehand***

1. Craft some open-ended questions based on what you already know about your narrator and what you're interested to learn  
See section 2b above for more.
2. Topics vs questions
  - Sometimes it is helpful to think of general topics you can ask about, rather than specific questions. Sometimes overly prepared or formal questions can make an informal oral history interview too stiff and not flow as naturally. You could also do a combination of topics and a few more specific questions.
  - You can draft a list of topics just as you might make note of some questions before the interview.
3. Let the conversation guide your questions
  - Be willing to be flexible. Don't necessarily ask your questions the same way or in the same order that you drafted them if that doesn't flow with the conversation.
  - You may not need all of your questions or you may decide to ask different questions depending on the conversation.
  - Listen to what your narrator is telling you – both verbally, non-verbally, and through context – what is important to them. Ask about those things.
4. Possible topic ideas for grandparents or elders in your community
  - Family
  - Early life – Can you describe what it was like for you growing up?
  - Educational experiences or learning experiences – Did you go to school? What was going to school like for you? Can you tell me about a time that you learned something important or when you learned an important lesson?
  - Important relationships that have impacted their life – perhaps family, siblings, friends, spouses/partners, etc.
  - Points of big change or shifts in their life – perhaps marriage, children, divorce, graduations, moves, new jobs, etc.
  - Entertainment – music, movies, dances, outdoors activities, etc. – What did you do for fun?
  - A challenge that they feel they've overcome – Can you tell me about a time when you overcame a difficult challenge?
  - A time when they changed their mind or grew to come to have a different point of view on an issue
  - Passion projects – What is something you're passionate about?
  - What things are you most proud of?



5. Possible topic ideas if you're interested in your community's story

- Important community organizations – where did folks spend time, go to get food, go when they needed resources, etc.
- Buildings and businesses that used to exist who had a big role in the community
- Black Wall Streets
- Protests – civil rights movements, but also other protests like Vietnam War protests, Occupy Wall St protests, Black Lives Matter protests, etc.
- How folks got organized and advocated
- How folks cared for each other
- Key community leaders that may not be remembered
- How the community has changed over time
- Getting involved – How did you get involved with \_\_\_\_\_ (organization, community center, group, church, etc.)?

***How to record***

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1. Recording on your phone – recording on your phone through an app is the easiest and most accessible way to record an informal oral history. Here are some free resources you could use:
  - Basic recording app that comes on your phone
    1. Most smartphones come with a basic recording app. On the iPhone, that app is called Voice Memos. On android devices, that app is called Voice Recorder.
    2. iPhone – Voice Memos:
      - Open Voice Memos app.
      - Tap the red Record button to start recording. A red line at the bottom that progresses will show you its recording.
      - Tap Stop to stop recording.
      - To pause, swipe up on the screen to access the full view and tap the pause button.
      - Name the saved audio file.
      - Tap the three dots on the file to see sharing options: you can export, email, upload to cloud, or save to files.
      - For more, [see this article How to Record Audio on iPhone.](#)
  - Android – Voice Recorder:
    1. Gives you the option to record in 3 styles: Standard, Interview, or Speech to Text. Use standard or interview mode.
    2. In the settings you can set it to block calls while recording.
    3. You can choose the recording quality level in settings. Mid or medium is a good bet.
    4. To record:
      - Open Voice Recorder app.
      - Tap the Record button and/or Microphone button to start recording.
      - Tap the Stop button to stop recording. Or pause to pause the recording.
      - Name and save your audio file.
      - Save the edited file to your device, share to the cloud, send it to your computer, or share it with others.
    5. For more, [see this article How To Record Audio on Android.](#)
  - Dolby On app

This app offers a slightly higher quality phone recording experience than native phone recording apps through its “audio intelligence”, which automatically adjusts for audio quality settings like noise reduction. You can also record in multiple formats.

- Voice Record Pro app
  1. The Voice Record Pro app records audio in a more advanced way with more settings than the basic recording apps that come already on your phone.
  2. You can choose the recording quality (low, medium, high) and the format option (M4A, MP3, or WAV). You can also choose the input source if you are using external microphones.
  3. These are not necessarily things you need to worry about to do a basic informal oral history, but if you do have a little more knowledge about audio and want those options, you have more control in this app.
  4. You can add notes to each recording, which is a nice feature, as well as attach photos. You can also save audio files in specific folders in the app.
  5. Exporting is extremely easy and gives you very easy options to upload to cloud services like google drive.
- StoryCorps app
  1. StoryCorps is a slightly different tool than other recording apps. StoryCorps is an organization that seeks to help everyday people record stories with their families or communities. They have collected hundreds of thousands of recorded interviews and preserved them in the archives of the Library of Congress, which has become the largest single collection of human stories.
  2. The StoryCorps app allows you to record an interview on your phone directly through the app and then choose whether to upload your interview to their collection at the Library of Congress and StoryCorps' online archive. (\*You are not required to have your interview be archived if you don't wish.)
  3. This is an exciting way to capture your family's stories and have them be archived nationally, without all the work of having to do an extensive formal oral history project on your own.
  4. Make sure to discuss this option with your narrator. There may be situations where your narrator or you don't wish to have your interview archived this way. Discuss whether this is the right choice for you.
- StoryCorps Connect
  1. This is another platform provided by StoryCorps. StoryCorps Connect is a virtual recording platform they developed during the 2020 pandemic so that people can record interviews who are not in the same location using video conference technology.
  2. This is ideal if you don't live in the same area as your family or community members you'd like to interview.
  3. [Click here for more and to use the platform.](#)

- Recording technology

If your phone is very old with poor microphones or if you want to upgrade your recording setup slightly, there are extra microphones you can purchase to use with your phone for recording. They could be bluetooth, wired, or connect into your phone's port directly. This is by no means necessary to record!

## 2. Space/Location considerations

- Noise – the biggest consideration with choosing a location for recording is the noise level. Choose somewhere quiet, with no distractions. Other things to consider:

1. Outside is almost always louder than an indoor space.
2. Be aware of outdoor or traffic noise that filters in.
3. Be aware of sitting too close to machines like fridges, air conditioners, fans, heating, etc.
4. Sit away from windows, which reflect sound.
5. Carpeted rooms away from entryways are best.

- Sitting arrangements

1. Sit as close together as you can – sitting with two chairs at the corner of a table with the phone in the middle is best.
2. Make sure your narrator is comfortable and has what they need to sit for a while comfortably and be willing to adapt.

- Remove distractions

1. Remove pens or pencils, or anything that can make noise or be fiddled with while recording.
2. Try to get an hour set aside where neither of you has any interruptions. Silence cell phones, put on do not disturb settings, etc. If something comes up, just pause the recording and restart after it's done.

- Locations

1. Many people will record stories in the homes of their narrators, where they are most comfortable.
2. Other options could include booking a local library room or conference room. Some libraries or community centers might even have designated recording spaces you can reserve.

### 3. Actually recording itself

- Do a practice recording and test out your app before the interview.
- Place your phone on a solid surface as close to your voices as you can. Make sure it is also close enough that you can press start/stop/pause without making too much noise.
- Once you start recording, don't move or fidget with your phone.
- If you need to take a break or get interrupted, just pause and come back to it. If you need to make multiple recordings, that's ok too, but just know you'll need to keep a track of each individual recording later, which can get complicated.
- Don't forget to press record and double check it is recording!
- Don't forget to press stop at the end.
- Take a photo of your narrator or the two of you together.

***After the interview: What becomes of the informal oral history you recorded?***

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1. Answer the question: “Who is this story for?”

- The story hopefully was for your narrator and for you. Maybe it was not intended for anyone else beyond you two.
- Was there another audience you had in mind when you recorded? Was it also intended for the rest of your family to learn from? For other friends or community members to hear?

2. Don't feel pressured to do anything more with the recorded story. The beauty of an informal oral history or story is that it can just exist as an experience in itself. Maybe you don't need anything beyond the experience of deepening your relationship with a family member through a shared conversation. It can be incredibly rewarding and special to have a recording of such a conversation with a loved one.

3. What does your narrator want to happen?

- Narrators always have the exclusive right to decide how they want their story to be used after you've recorded it.
- Does your narrator actually want anything to happen with it? Or was recording their story enough? (Often, especially with family members, recording their story is the end goal itself).
- Ask yourself: are you prepared, knowledgeable, and experienced enough to do something else with the recorded story?

4. Where are you going to store the recording?

- Think through your storage options, eg: files on computers, cloud services, usb or external drives.
- Make sure there are multiple copies in multiple formats, if this is something you want to save for future generations in your family.
- If you see the recording as part of your family history, make a note in other family records that the recording exists and where, place a labeled usb drive in the family chest or box, etc.
- Don't forget to include the photo you took on the drive as well.

5. Some options for future use, if that is desired:

- More formal oral histories that could be archived – these informal oral histories could be a starting point from which you realize there is a need for a more comprehensive oral history project. Or, you may realize that your family wants their stories to be archived in an archival institution and more professionally preserved. The audio quality of recordings on your phone will not meet most archival standards, so these informal recordings you've done could be a jumping off point to come back and do more formal oral histories, possibly consulting with a professional.
- Can *possibly* be used in videos, small documentaries, for educational purposes, etc. (but see the note below.)

## 6. A note on permissions and rights

- Formal oral histories have in depth release and permission forms that narrators and interviewers sign. These forms stipulate the narrator's rights to their story and the recording as their intellectual property. It also gives the narrator options to choose if they want it to be archived, how available they want their interview to be, and what it can be used for in the future. These are crucial to the process of oral history, especially when an oral history is going to be archived.
- Because informal oral histories are usually not being archived and are often conversations between family members, many people do not use such forms in these types of interviews. However, if you are doing oral histories with community members, even informal ones, and intend to use the recordings in any way in the future for exhibits, documentaries, educational purposes, etc it is highly recommended that you use such forms in order to ensure your narrator's rights and wishes are respected. If you start to go down this path of doing a lot of community oral histories and wanting to use the recordings in some format later on, we would highly recommend you consult a professional oral historian, as that goes beyond the scope of this guide.

## ***Additional Resources***

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- To find professional oral historians, search our Experts Database.
- To find oral history projects in SC, search our Projects Map.
- [Resources on recording from StoryCorps.](#)
- [Ethical Storytelling Principles from Voice of Witness](#) (a great non-profit focused on social justice storytelling).
- [Voice of Witness's Resource Library.](#)
- Book on social justice storytelling from Voice of Witness: [Say It Forward: A Guide to Social Justice Storytelling.](#)

## **Explore Related Resources in the Toolkit**

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### **Need help researching & writing your nomination?**

[Check out the Experts Database.](#)

### **Want to explore funding opportunities?**

[Check out our Grants & Funding page.](#)

### **Want to pair your National Register Listing with a South Carolina Historical Marker?**



[Check out our How-To Guide on How To Get a State Historical Marker.](#)