

# GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORIES



▼  
FROM  
GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE  
ARCHIVES

**GUIDELINES  
FOR CONDUCTING  
ORAL HISTORIES**

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# Guidelines For Collecting Oral Histories

## What is Oral History?

History provides accounts of the past through memory, pictures, documents, artifacts, folklore and monuments. Events and stories from the past help provide perspectives that allow for thoughtful decision making today. However, memory is fallible, and if significant events or stories are not captured, we can lose parts of the past.

Oral history refers to the process of recording and preserving oral testimony of an individual's unique experiences. By joining our efforts to record oral testimonies, you are helping to preserve the voices and perspectives of people connected with A.A., for use by present and future generations.

This paper provides basic suggestions for conducting and preserving the valuable historical treasures in your region, district or area.

## Pre-Interview Preparation

The interviewer should do background reading and research on the interviewee and on A.A. in the local area, consulting the General Service Office Archives, AA Grapevine Archives, Conference and Assembly reports, and area or district newsletters for information. Preparation is vital to a successful interview.

Before the interview, contact the interviewee via regular mail or email to explain the purpose of the interview, and what will happen to the information collected from the interviewee. A "Sample Introductory Letter" is included in these guidelines. Your explanation should be brief and clear. Discuss the time commitment involved, legal rights, and the topics that will be covered. You may wish to give the interviewee a general list of topics and ask them to think about other topics they would like to cover.

Conduct basic biographical research on the interviewee from the resources noted above or provide a "Biographical Sketch" for the interviewee to fill out. These

materials, given a week or so in advance of the actual interview, will stimulate an interviewee's memories. Indicate that any other related topics which they can think of will be useful for the interview.

As the interviewer, you should be active in setting-up arrangements. This includes confirming a date, time, and location, if in-person. Find a quiet place with minimal background noise and, ideally, no disruptions.

## The Interviewer's Equipment

A recorded interview preserves the integrity of the interview, in its original form, rather than the interviewer's interpretation of what the interviewee shared. Do your best to capture a good quality recording of the interview. You will want to use a digital recorder, smartphone with an external microphone, or the recording function on virtual meeting software to record an oral history interview. There are several recorders available, and each has its benefits and drawbacks. Ideally, the device should be small so that its presence is inconspicuous. Initial recordings can be in MP3 format to save file space and for easy access. It is recommended for preservation purposes that sound files should be converted to .WAV or Broadcast WAV format to ensure quality. An external microphone can help improve audio quality and is relatively easy to setup with your recording device of choice. Bear in mind that audio formats and types of recording equipment change over time, and it is vital to seek up to date professional guidance.

To avoid disruptions during the interview become familiar with the equipment and know how to quickly change storage cards or other data storage components. Make sure that the recorder has enough storage for the interview. About 500 megabytes (mb) of space per recording hour is necessary in most cases. This can change based on the type of recorder and the types of audio files being saved.

The interview should be conducted in a quiet environment without any extraneous noise. Avoid sitting near windows, air conditioners or fans. Place the recording device near you and the interviewee. You may want to run a test prior to the actual interview to check the sound in your environment and the volume of the interviewer and interviewee. This is especially important when recording with meeting software or a smartphone. Performing a test and checking the environment and internet capabilities can help limit recording issues.

Remember to take along paper and pens; batteries; an extension cord; extra storage cards for recorders (in your preferred media); cables for your recorder and or computer; question outline and necessary research materials.

Note-taking during the interview is discouraged as it could be tedious or distracting to the interviewee. However, taking a few notes is okay if it is not too distracting. Jot down names and places or questions which come up unexpectedly.



**BE SURE TO FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE EQUIPMENT BEFORE THE INTERVIEW.**

## The People

You may feel uncomfortable conducting your first interview. To ease anxiety, it is advisable that the first person you interview is someone with whom you are comfortable.

In some cases it is also advisable to interview a group of long timers together — a sponsor and sponsee, a group of people who started a group together or got sober together, friends who have been in the same group for decades, etc. These kinds of interviews can be both fun and informative. The interaction that occurs as a matter of course serves to spark the memories of the participants. One story leads into another, one interpretation elicits cries of “but that’s not really the way it happened at all!” The end result of such an interview will differ greatly from private interviews with the same individuals.

## The Interview

### INTERVIEW CHECKLIST



- Interviewee’s Oral History Release and other legal forms**
- Recording device and accessories**
- Interview Questions Guide**
- Supporting materials (photographs, scrapbooks, biographical information, etc.)**
- Writing tools (paper, pens, pencils)**

The interview should be conducted within parameters agreed upon by both parties. The following tips should be helpful while conducting the interview:

1. Begin the recording by stating your name, the date, time, interviewee’s name, and place of interview.
2. Explain the interviewee’s legal rights and how the interview will likely be used by the archival repository or researchers.
3. Explain that they are not compelled to answer all the questions and that the recording device can be turned off at any time.
4. Exhibit self-confidence and enthusiasm, remain aware of your body language and make eye-contact with the interviewee.
5. Ask easy questions first until a rapport develops between you and the interviewee.
6. Once a comfortable environment is attained, begin to ask questions that will prompt a detailed response.
7. To aid in their recollections, use “statement questions” such as, “In 19xx you helped to organize the first Central Office in Manhattan.” Proceed with follow-up questions — tell me more about your role, who were involved, setbacks encountered, etc.

8. There will be some information that the interviewee will not wish to disclose. Don't pry. This information may be personal.
9. Ask for examples to support general statements or explanations as these might be critical to the interview.
10. The "Sample Interview Questions" in this packet, are only intended as a general guideline. You are encouraged to adapt the questions as you deem fit.
11. Although going into an interview with a prepared list of questions is vital to a successful interview, deviating from that list is okay and should be encouraged. The interviewee should feel welcomed to go off on tangents. Create an environment that encourages the interviewee to elaborate. Try ending the interview by asking if the interviewee has anything else they would like to share. It is possible that your prepared list of questions did not allow the interviewee to address a topic they wished to discuss.
12. If necessary, use props such as photographs, scrapbooks, letters or other objects that may stimulate memories.
13. Do not shut off the recording device unless requested. Turning it off and on periodically is not only distracting but it gives the illusion that the material is not worth recording.
14. Interviews should be scheduled at a convenient time and place for the interviewee. If the interviewee begins to feel fatigued you may consider ending the interview. It may be possible to continue the interview at another time.

### **Conducting Interviews of A.A. members who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing**

Accessibility issues apply to all alcoholics who have difficulties participating in activities within Alcoholics Anonymous. While there are a variety of ways to communicate with members who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing, American Sign Language (ASL) is "a primary means of communications in the Deaf community and is a unique language, with its own grammar and sentence structure, and many groups use trained professional ASL interpreters to help carry the message to members who are Deaf." ("A.A. Guidelines Sharing the A.A. Message with the Alcoholic Who Is Deaf or Hard-of-

Hearing".) In terms of conducting an "oral history," how can local archivists incorporate Deaf narratives when documenting local histories?

A first consideration when conducting an ASL interview is to refrain from using the title of "oral history." This term can be offensive in some cases as oral history implies oral learning. Replacement terms for these types of interviews include "story," and "narrative" histories.

When conducting an interview in American Sign Language there are steps that need to be taken to ensure quality and accuracy of the interview. These steps include following some general practices, having the correct equipment, and preparing relevant questions. Keep in mind these interviews require a range of equipment to capture hand-signing as well as high-quality audio to facilitate access for several different communities.

A general practice for conducting and video recording these interviews is to maintain and protect the anonymity of A.A. members being interviewed. When recording the interview, it is necessary to leave out any details that can be used to reveal the interviewee's identity. The title of the recording should also refrain from displaying identifying features of A.A. members including their names, titles, or job descriptions.

### **Pre-Interview**

As with any interview it is important to choose and review your questions before the interview. Conduct a pre-interview discussion, which can be done in person or via video conferencing. During this discussion, describe the purpose of the project, how long it will take place, note other people present in the room during the interview (for example interpreters, videographer, etc.). Conduct research and prepare a biographical sketch of the interviewee.

During the pre-interview describe any consent or video-release forms, if applicable, that will require both the interviewee's and interpreter's signature. It is important to clarify exactly how the interview will be used, disseminated, and preserved in the Archives.

### **Conducting the Interview**

One way of conducting these narratives with alcoholics who are Deaf, while continuing to protect their anonymity, is by working with a Certified Deaf Interpreter

(CDI). The CDI copies or “mirrors” the member’s story in ASL, and this arrangement ensures that the anonymity of the member is maintained, while the integrity of testimony is preserved.

The process could start with recording the Deaf member (“interviewee”) first, then transcribing the video recording. It is best practice to offer the interviewee the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview before passing it over to the CDI to “re-do” the interview, by “mirroring” the interviewee. It is important to add captions to the video and ensure that the interviewee has the opportunity to review the captioned video.

While filming the interview session might be uncomfortable for the A.A. member being interviewed, and may raise questions about privacy and confidentiality, be sure to clearly explain the purpose of the video recording and establish that this is one of the only ways to accurately document the stories of A.A. members of the Deaf community.

Unlike oral history interviews that require only audio, an ASL interview has specific needs to reach a wide audience. Secure qualified interpreters well ahead of time and consider any budgetary expenses. Early in the project establish estimated costs to work with interpreters and budget accordingly. Having someone on location familiar with both ASL interviews and video equipment will improve the quality of the interview. The final product should be a high-quality video and audio piece which showcases signing as well as spoken segments.

## The Environment

For the recordings to be accessible their composition needs to be high-quality as well. A common practice to ensure the proper capture of signing is to make sure the interviewee/CDI is positioned in a large segment of the video frame with their hands in the center for easy recording. As suggested in the Accessibility Workbook (M-48i) focusing on the interviewee and correct lighting can help improve signing quality and lip reading as well. Minimize anything that might be distracting or diverts attention from the content of the interview. Make sure that the filming location has no objects or other distractions. Reduce sound pollution from objects such as fans that can interfere with the interview or interpretation. Prior to beginning, do a mock interview session to test

the camera and audio settings. You will want to make sure that both the camera settings and the lighting are in sync and that the hand movements are not blurry or extend beyond the frame. If the interview is being conducted via video conferencing, ensure that there is a good internet connection.

## Access

Prior to the interview, you would have already established access rights and limitations of use, if consent is given. Remember to secure signed releases from both the certified interpreter and the A.A. member being interviewed.

Including stories from A.A. members who are Deaf in your area’s collection of historical narratives illustrate the values and experiences of a cultural-linguistic community. Other handy information, including working with ASL Interpreters can be gleaned from the A.A. Guidelines on “Sharing the A.A. Message with the Alcoholic Who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing.”

## Post Interview

1. Immediately following the interview, secure a signed Release Form from the interviewee. Be sure that the interviewee understands:
  - that either the recording or transcription produced thereafter may be used for the subject of research by members of A.A. or scholars and researchers, unless access restrictions are stipulated otherwise. Permission must be secured via a signed release.
  - their rights including the transference of all literary and copyrights to the Archives repository or designated body.
2. Be sure to thank the interviewee for their willingness to participate in the project. Follow up with a written “thank you” letter.
3. Label audio files (example: SmithBob\_2022\_January\_25\_Interview)
4. The Archives repository or responsible body is charged with the preservation and appropriate storage of the oral history interview. Whenever possible, efforts should be made to preserve electronic files in formats that are either nonproprietary or cross platform. Make a copy of each audio file.



## Sample Introductory Letter to Interviewee

*When reaching out to potential oral history candidates, it is useful to send an introductory letter describing your project and the reasons you are requesting an interview. This template may be adapted and used as an introductory letter.*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Warm greetings from the \_\_\_\_\_ [area or district]

In my role as [service position], I am embarking on a project to conduct oral histories with many significant figures in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. We would like to add to our archives collection through a new project of interviewing A.A.s and friends of A.A. to capture their memories of the organization.

Therefore, I would like to request an opportunity to record your memories of A.A. and your work with the Fellowship. An interview with you would greatly add to our collections and to the body of A.A. history. The interview would take place at a location of your choosing, or via teleconference at a time that is convenient for you. It would take just a few hours.

If you would be willing to sit for a recorded interview with me, please just let me know. If you would like to discuss it further, you are welcome to contact me any time. Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Very best wishes,

\_\_\_\_\_  
NAME OF INTERVIEWER

## **Oral History Biographical Sketch**

*Filling out this form before the interview may help the interviewer ask more appropriate and interesting questions. The interviewee shouldn't feel compelled to complete the entire form, but only those parts of it that are applicable and relevant.*

Subject's Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Family History***

Birth Date & Place of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Spouse's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date and Place of Marriage \_\_\_\_\_

Children's Names and Dates of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### ***Education, Career, and Activities***

Primary Education (School & Location) \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary Education (School & Location) \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Higher Education (School & Location) \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Professions (Jobs), Locations, Dates \_\_\_\_\_

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A.A. Service History \_\_\_\_\_

***If Applicable:***

Military Service (Branch, Rank, Dates) \_\_\_\_\_

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Civic and Community Activities (Organization/Activity, Offices Held)

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Other Pertinent Information \_\_\_\_\_

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Prepared By \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Interview Questions

The following are typical questions one might ask when conducting oral histories for the Fellowship. These are intended as a general guideline. You are encouraged to adapt the questions as you deem fit.

### **Before A.A.**

Please tell me a little about your life before you found A.A. When and where were you born? What kind of childhood did you have?

- As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- How did you start drinking?
- When and how did your drinking get out of control?
- When did you know you had hit bottom?

### **Recovery**

- When did you first hear of A.A. and from what source?
- How and when did you get started in A.A.? When and where did you sober up? Where did you go to your first meeting? What did you think of it?
- Can you tell me about your early sobriety, your work through the Steps, and problems you had in those first days of learning the A.A. way?
- What was A.A.'s "reputation" in the community? How was it different or similar from what you encountered through your initial introduction?
- What was your perception of A.A.'s success in the general population when you were first introduced to us? How has that perception changed over time?
- Did you have a sponsor when you first came in? What type of sponsorship did you have?
- How many groups or meetings were in existence?
- Can you recall the formats used at some of these early meetings? How were they run?
- When was A.A. started in your town or area? How often were meetings held? Who were some of the people playing important roles in the formation

of new groups? What else do you know about the growth of A.A. during that period of time?

- Which individuals were especially prominent in your sobriety?
- How were new members contacted? What kinds of Twelfth Step work were going on? Are there any Twelfth Step anecdotes that stick out in your mind that you'd care to share?
- Would you tell me about your experiences sponsoring others?

### **Unity – Group issues and community perception of A.A.**

- Today, Conference-approved literature is available to help A.A. members deal with a wide variety of challenging questions. Early on, all you had was the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and your experience. What did you think of the Big Book, and how often did you use it? How did early A.A.s treat newcomers? How did your group(s) treat constant slippers? How were people wishing to talk about multiple addictions during your meetings addressed? How about nonalcoholic drug addicts walking in off the street for their first meeting?
- We say sometimes that all that's needed to form an A.A. meeting is two drunks, a resentment and a coffeepot. Can you talk at all about the differences that led to new groups being formed in your area?
- In *A.A. Comes of Age*, Bill W. writes about numerous issues over which anger and contention arose and threatened the undoing of our Fellowship. The groups nationwide, for example, did not immediately accept the spiritual principles which we know today as the Twelve Traditions. What controversies over issues addressed in the Traditions

can you recall people wrestling with? (How were meeting spaces acquired? Was rent or other funding obtained by gambling sessions? Bingo games? How did the membership resolve these affairs?)

- Today, A.A. is well known to, and supported by, police officers, judges and corrections officials. What kind of relationship did A.A. in your area have with local authorities? How has that changed since you sobered up?
- Treatment facilities today frequently host A.A. and other Twelve Step meetings. Did treatment centers exist in your area when you sobered up? Did any of them use a Twelve Step format or incorporate A.A. meetings into their structure?
- Did you seek the cooperation of other local community or professional agencies?
- Today, radio and television public service announcements for A.A., as well as Internet websites, are becoming commonplace. When you first got sober, how did A.A.s interact with the media? Have you had any profound experiences sharing your relationship with alcohol with the public? What cautions might you have for young A.A.s today regarding media exposure?
- During the early years of your recovery, how did the community receive Alcoholics Anonymous?
- Do you think your group(s) has had an influence in your community? If so, how?

### **Service**

- How and why did you get into service work?
- What contributions did you, yourself, make to the growth of the Fellowship?
- What do you remember of early conferences, assemblies, and conventions? Can you recall opening Intergroup or Central Offices?
- Who made the initial outreach to you; in what manner and in what year?
- What were your first impressions of the active A.A. Legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service?
- What was your first impression of A.A. trusted servants, GSO staff, delegates? Describe your first encounters.

- What were your impressions of your first General Service Conference? What year?

Describe some of the major decisions and Advisory Actions that involved your direct participation, as well as your committee activities over your years of service.

- In your memory, what particular Conference agenda items developed into Advisory Actions? Were there any that failed to gain Conference approval?
- Is there anything you regret? Any mistakes you believe you made? Any plans that failed that you wish had been successful?
- What special occasions do you recall during your time of A.A. service?
- How has A.A. changed (if it has) since you first found it?
- Do you see any particular changes in the A.A. Fellowship and its service processes, since your start in service?
- Are there any strong similarities in the A.A. Fellowship and its history of service, from your own service time through today?

## Oral History Interview Information Form

*This form details the scope of the oral history and provides invaluable information for future historians. Complete this form after the interview and file it along with other files associated with the interview project.*

Narrator (Interviewee) \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Length of Interview \_\_\_\_\_ Number of audio files \_\_\_\_\_

Oral History Release Form Signed \_\_\_\_\_  
(DATE)

Unrestricted  Restricted

Nature of Restrictions, if any: \_\_\_\_\_

Transcribed  Yes  No

Reviewed by Narrator  Yes  No \_\_\_\_\_  
(DATE)

Abstract of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Oral History Release Form

*A release of some kind, establishing ownership of rights to the interview, should be obtained from every oral history interviewee, whenever possible. This sample form may be applicable in some circumstances. It is advisable to seek legal counsel whenever embarking on a large-scale recording project.*

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name of interviewee), hereby give this interview recorded on \_\_\_\_\_ (insert date) to the [include name] Archives as a donation. With this gift, I transfer to the [include name] Archives legal title and all literary rights, including copyright.

I understand the interview may be made available for research and such public programming as the [include name] Archives may determine. This includes right and license to reproduce, copy, modify, display, distribute, perform, broadcast, transmit, and create derivatives from the recording. This may include use of the interview material in print and in live or recorded programs for radio, television, or any electronic publishing medium.

I transfer all of the above rights without limitation, to support the mission of A.A. and to disseminate information about A.A., upon the condition that I, and any other A.A. member I identify, remain anonymous at the level of the public media. This gift does not preclude any use that I may wish to make of the information in the recordings.

_____ SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWEE	_____ SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWER
_____ NAME (PRINTED)	_____ NAME (PRINTED)
_____ ADDRESS	_____ ADDRESS
_____ CITY, STATE/PROVINCE, ZIP	_____ CITY, STATE/PROVINCE, ZIP
_____ DATE	_____ DATE

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Thank-You Letter to Interviewee

*This template may be adapted and used as a thank-you letter.*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for participating in an oral history interview for the \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_Project. The information you gave in your interview was very  
helpful and will form an important part of the history of A.A. in \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

(Optional) A transcript of the interview will be sent to you for your review. Please look it over and make sure that names and places are spelled correctly and that it is accurately transcribed.

If you have had some additional recollections that are significant to this project, please feel free to send them to us.

Thank you again for your time and your contribution.

Very best wishes,

\_\_\_\_\_  
NAME OF INTERVIEWER

## Reference Information and Resources

*For additional information contact the General Service Office Archives, 475 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10115, (212)870-3400, [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org), email: [archives@aa.org](mailto:archives@aa.org).*



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## Oral History Web Links

American Association for State and Local History  
<http://www.aaslh.org/>

American Folklife Center (Library of Congress)  
<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>

Oral History Association (OHA)  
<http://www.oralhistory.org/>

Smithsonian Institution Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide  
<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/InterviewingGuide.pdf>

## Oral History in the Digital Age

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/>

## Print and E-Book Resources

Hart, Cynthia, and Lisa Samson. *The Oral History Workshop: Collect and Celebrate the Life Stories of Your Family and Friends*. New York: Workman Publishing Company, Incorporated, 2018. E-Book

Ritchie, Donald A. *Doing Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Powers, Willow Roberts. *Transcription Techniques for the Spoken Word*. Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2005.

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A.A. World Service, Inc.  
475 Riverside Drive  
11th Floor/Archives  
New York, NY 10115

**[www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)**

Email: [archives@aa.org](mailto:archives@aa.org)

Phone (212) 870-3400