

Oral History Association of Australia

A Guide to Commissioning Oral History

Oral history is a record of information, usually on tape, as the result of a planned interview. Its purpose is to create a record where none exists or to supplement existing records for future research. Oral history is a method of recording spoken language, eyewitness accounts and insights into society and its changing attitudes. It also gives a voice to those previously denied the chance to contribute to the recording of history.

Introduction

This guide has been produced for the use of both the commissioning body and the oral historian. For convenience these are referred to respectively as the 'principal' and the 'consultant'.

Oral historians are often commissioned to undertake work for others including individuals voluntary organisation, commercial organisations, government authorities and consultants such as archaeologists and heritage architects.

Depending on the nature of the work, this may involve a process of determination of the task, preparation of the brief, preparation and submission of a proposal, selection of an oral historian or historians, commissioning and then managing the commission.

The national standard for oral history is set by the *Oral History Handbook* by Beth Robertson (third edition, 1994). The following guide attempts only to list all the points connected with commissioning and conducting an oral history project. For details of technique and practice reference to the *Oral History Handbook* is essential.

Commissioning Oral History

Principals and Consultants should be bound by the Oral History Association of Australia's Guidelines of Ethical Practice published in the *Oral History Handbook* by Beth M. Robertson (third edition, 1994).

Principals should have a reasonable understanding and appreciation of oral history: what it is, its various applications, the variety of skills that might be involved in a particular assignment, the time involved and the activities that go to make up a particular commission.

Like many activities involving people, particularly those requiring emotional effort, oral history cannot be rushed. It is not easy to estimate the length of an interview or the quality of an individual response. The focus of a project may indicate the average length of an interview. This may be approximately two hours of tape recording whereas a full recording for a 'memory biography' will usually be longer.

Each interview requires preparation for planning, background research and framing questions.

The Brief

A written Brief should be prepared for commissions.

In developing the Brief, there should be clear objectives, an idea of how much is to be spent and the time available. The Brief should be developed to the fullest extent possible giving consideration to the following points:

Administration

- purpose of the project (including whether for public or private archives, or ultimate publication, whether in-house or general distribution)
- description of the project including:
 - scope
 - subject matter
 - themes or subjects to be explored
- size of the project - anticipated number and duration of interviews
- desired degree of detail for individual interviews, taking into account the breadth and/or the particular focus of the project
- time frame for completion and
 - procedure in the event of delay or likelihood of delay to completion
 - responsibility of the Consultant to notify the Principal of potential delays
 - nature of liability (if any) of the Consultant in the event of defined delays
- procedure in the event that the scope of the project is changed - whether enlarged, reduced or terminated
- equipment to be used and/or technical standards to be attained, for example, clarity of recording to be broadcast quality
- quotation for the project as a whole; or for an individual interview with its associated tasks included; or rates quoted separately for individual tasks
- selection of prospective interviewees
- manner of contact with prospective interviewees.

Conducting the Oral History Interview

- definition of tasks, including:
 - research (may be quoted separately)
 - preparation
 - pre-interview
 - recording the interview
 - tape logging
 - tape transcription
 - corrections to transcription
 - interview summary (where attention may be drawn to any possibly sensitive material)
 - preparation for publication, whether print, audio, video or multimedia
 - entry onto a data base
- general directions for the Principal's standard requirements:
 - tape identification questions
 - access/permission/copyright release form
 - format for tape labels, logs and transcriptions
 - master tapes to be copied immediately and stored
 - custody of the tapes during the project
 - logging and transcription to be done from copies
 - copy of tape for interviewee if required
 - need to draw attention to any possibly sensitive material

After the Interview

- Numbers of duplicate copies of tapes and documents to be specified
- manner in which the tapes and document copies to be delivered
- letter of thanks to the interviewee
- reimbursement of agreed expenses including purchase of tapes, cost of travel and accommodation where applicable

- how payment will be effected, including directions (including possible certification) for progress claims if applicable
- income tax arrangements
- professional safeguards required such as professional indemnity insurance
- acknowledgement of the Principal, the Consultant and interviewees in final product and/or in any published work

The Proposal

The Consultant should submit a detailed proposal addressing each of the points in the Brief.

The Proposal should:

- demonstrate an understanding of the task to be performed
- demonstrate the Consultant's ability to satisfy the Principal's requirements
- propose any variations or alternatives
- include
 - the Consultant's curriculum vitae
 - record of experience
 - relevant references

If the Consultant wishes to employ an assistant with acceptable qualifications or identifies a possible large extra expense, for example, studio hire, details should be included in the Proposal.

Letter of Engagement or Contract

After receipt and evaluation of the proposals, the Principal can select a Consultant. It may be necessary to negotiate refinements to the Brief.

The letter of engagement or contract should refer to the Brief and identify the name and contact details of the supervisor of the project. It should confirm:

the nature of the project
 the terms and conditions under which it is to be performed
 any mutually agreed variations

For small interviewing assignments or oral history tasks, a letter of engagement should suffice, with the agreement resting on the correspondence and the Consultant's acceptance of the offer in writing.

For larger assignments involving significant amounts of time and/or money for completion, a contract might be considered more appropriate.

The Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA)

It should be noted that the Association has no procedure for professional accreditation. Membership is open to all.

The *Oral History Handbook* by Beth M. Robertson (third edition, 1994) addresses all issues relevant to the practice of oral history and is essential reading. Among other guidelines including those of ethical practice, a useful interview checklist may be composed from the *Handbook*. It is distributed through the Oral History Association of Australia (South Australia) Inc., PO Box 3420, Rundle Mall, Adelaide SA 5000, and is also available at selected bookshops. Stocks are held by some OHAA Branches. Regular workshops and practical seminars in oral history practice and technique are offered by all Branches in the states and territories.

The Oral History Association of Australia - Guidelines on Fees for Interviewing and Transcription (September 1997) has been published. The range of fees suggested depends on the experience and qualifications of the consultant, as well as the nature, extent and content of the project.