

Oral History: Theory and Method

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Course philosophy and objectives

This graduate course is intended as a practical introduction to oral history. I take a catholic view of oral history. For me, it comprehends all forms of gathering oral data for historical scholarship—targeted interviews as well as cradle-to-grave life narratives. The history of science, medicine, and technology poses some special problems for the oral historian, but the basic techniques and theory of oral history are applicable to other branches of history, as well as to related fields, such as sociology or anthropology.

The overarching goal of the course is to provide you with some sense of professionalism as an oral-historian. We will read a little of the history of the field, some theory and techniques, and some models of how to use interviews in historical writing. The emphasis, though, will be on practice. Your main product in this course will be a thoroughly researched and professionally conducted and transcribed oral-history interview (of which more below).

The course is divided into three sections. In the first section, you will become familiar with the origins of oral history and learn how to begin an oral history project. You will select an interview subject and begin to research his or her life.

In the second section, you will continue research and then conduct the interview. We will read several examples of what I consider the successful use of interviews in historical writing. With luck, one or more of these will resonate with you and your project and give you a model of how to conduct and interpret your own interviews.

In the last section, you will be transcribing, analyzing, and writing up your interview. The reading will lighten up, in order to give you more time to write. Class time will be devoted to discussion of the problems and revelations of your projects.

Your final project will be a polished transcript plus a (5-10 p.) written introduction to it. That introduction should contain a clear and well-supported statement of your approach to the interview and the various problems of method we will be discussing (rendering of speech mannerisms, preparation, relationship between interviewer and subject, etc.). You should also include a character sketch and description of the interview process. Where did the interview take place? Was the subject open and candid, reserved, aggressive, obsequious? Was she relaxed? Did he laugh? Was she sardonic or earnest? As we will see, these qualities can greatly influence how we interpret interviews. Finally, your introduction should provide a guide to the transcript—divide it into sections or themes, if applicable, and point the reader to places of special interest or deep problems.

The paper will count for 60% of your grade. The remainder will be participation.

Reading List

Required Books

- Perks, R. and A. Thomson (1998). *The Oral History Reader*. London; New York, Routledge.
- Portelli, A. (1990). *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press.
- Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times : An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2000.
- Rabinow, Paul. *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Rental

Michael Moore, Director, *Bowling for Columbine*. (Rent from your local video store, or from Netflix. *Note: You are responsible for obtaining a copy of this. It would be a good idea to reserve a copy in advance.*

Handouts

- Louis Starr, "Oral history," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* 20: 440-463 (1977)
- Allan Nevins, "Oral history: How and why it was born," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 40: 600-601 (March 1966).
- Excerpt from *Tom Rivers*, edited by Saul Benison (1967).
- Paul D. Escott, "The art and science of reading WPA slave narratives," and John Blassingame, "Using the testimony of ex-slaves: approaches and problems," both in *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds. Oxford: 1985.

Online

"Slave narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938"
(<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>). You are responsible for the following interviews: Robert Barr; Rufus Dirt; Mama Duck; Cindy Kinsey.

Optional

- Ritchie, D. A. (1995). *Doing Oral History*. New York, Toronto, Twayne Publishers.
A useful handbook to oral history technique; complements the more theoretical Perks and Thomson.
- Judson, Horace Freeland. *The Eighth Day of Creation: Makers of the Revolution in Biology*. Expanded ed. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 1996.
I will hand out an excerpt from this, but you may wish to own a copy.

Syllabus

I. Beginnings and Methods		
<i>During this section, you should be identifying and contacting your subject and beginning research</i>		
1/27	1. Introduction	
2/3	2. Origins	Louis Starr, "Oral history"; Allan Nevins, "Oral history: How and why it was born"; Excerpt from <i>Tom Rivers</i> (hand-out) WPA Slave Narratives (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html). Escott, "The art and science of reading slave narratives," and Blassingame, "Using the testimony of ex-slaves"
2/10	3. On Method I.	Perks and Thomson, secs. 1 & 2 <i>Have interview subject identified. Contact him or her and arrange a time for an interview. Obtain C-V or other materials as necessary.</i>
2/17	4. On Method II.	Portelli, <i>The Death of Luigi Trastulli, Part I. & Part 2, sec. 2. Reserve Bowling for Columbine from your video store.</i>
2/24	5. Interviewing	Watch Michael Moore's <i>Bowling for Columbine</i> . (Available for rental at fine video outlets.) <i>Prepare set of ten to fifteen questions for your interview. Prepare to present and justify them in class discussion.</i>
3/2	6. IRBs, Human Subjects, and Other Legal Matters	Guest lecture/discussion Joan C. Pettit, Esq., Human Subject Regulatory Affairs Specialist, Office of Human Subject Research; Michael McCloskey, Dept. of Cog. Sci. and head of Homewood IRB
3/9	7. Media & Technology	Perks and Thomson, sec. V
II. Models		
<i>During this section, you should be preparing for, conducting, and transcribing your interview(s)</i>		
3/16	No class (Spring Break)	Identify the book you will read for Session 10; begin reading Terkel
3/23	8. Models I. "Traditional" oral history	Terkel, <i>Hard Times</i>
3/30	9. Models II. Anthropological and journalistic approaches	Rabinow, <i>Making PCR</i> ; Judson, <i>Eighth Day of Creation</i> , pp. 125-169.
4/6	10. Models III.	Read a book in your field that uses interviews, either successfully or not. Lead the class through a (prepared!) discussion of your book, focusing on interview selection, technique, and implementation.
III. Interpretation		
<i>During this section, you should be writing your paper</i>		
4/13	11. Interpretation	Perks & Thomson, sec. IV
4/20	12. Presentations & Discussion	
4/27	13. Presentations & Discussion	