



# Oral Histories

CHURCH HISTORY GUIDES

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# Introduction



In November 1831, the Lord commanded the Church Historian to make “a history of all the important things which he shall observe and know concerning my church;”<sup>1</sup> this history would “be for the good of the church, and for the rising generations.”<sup>2</sup> Many Church leaders since then have taught that remembering our unique history can increase our gratitude for God’s kindness, strengthen our resolve to live the gospel, provide patterns for overcoming adversity, and help us understand our true identity as children of God.<sup>3</sup>

Doing oral histories is one way we do this. An oral history is a first-person narration in which someone discusses their faith, testimony, and personal experiences. Oral histories contain information about Church units and historical events that may not otherwise have been recorded. Oral histories also allow narrators to recount memories that may otherwise become lost, and to give their perspective on a topic or event.

The principles and procedures found in this guide are designed to help you gain experience and become an expert oral historian.

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## Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 69:3
2. Doctrine and Covenants 69:8
3. See Henry B. Eyring, “O Remember, Remember,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2007, 66–69; Marlin K. Jensen, “Remember and Perish Not,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2007, 36–38; Julie B. Beck, “‘Daughters in my Kingdom’: The History and Work of Relief Society,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Oct. 2010, 112–15.

# Personal Preparation

You may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to do an oral history with someone whose background is unfamiliar to you. That is normal, and they may feel the same way about meeting with you. Do your best to build a relationship of trust as you and the narrator prepare for the oral history. Be open and sincere in your interactions with them. Seek to understand their background and experiences. Ponder the following concepts.

## Listen [2.1]

Oral historians must be skilled listeners. If you do not have experience doing oral histories—and being an active listener—consider practicing by doing an oral history with a colleague or family member before doing an oral history with someone you don't know. Church manuals such as [\*Teaching in the Savior's Way\*](#) and [\*Preach My Gospel\*](#) are excellent resources for learning to listen and do oral histories more effectively. They teach the following:

If you seem too busy, too judgmental, or too focused on covering your prepared material, [narrators] may not feel comfortable sharing their questions or concerns with you. Be willing to set aside what you have planned, as prompted by the Spirit, and listen to [their] concerns. Let them know through your words and actions that you are eager to hear them.<sup>1</sup>

People also communicate by the way they sit, their facial expressions, what they do with their hands, their tone of voice, and the movements of their eyes. Observe these unspoken messages; they can help you understand the feelings

of [a narrator]. Also be aware of your own body language. Send a message of interest and enthusiasm by listening sincerely. . . .

As you listen carefully, the Spirit will help you know what to say. Listening takes effort and concentration.<sup>2</sup>

Remember that listening begins as soon as you contact a potential narrator.

While practicing good listening, it is important that you remain objective throughout the entire process of planning, holding, and submitting the oral history. It is not an oral historian's place to disagree with or judge the narrator; rather, demonstrate active listening with your body language and ask thoughtful follow-up questions, as appropriate. Do not offer counsel or advice.







## Learn [2.2]

Before doing an oral history, take time to learn about the narrator and the events you hope to cover. Conversing with the narrator at least once *before* the day of the oral history is an effective way to obtain background information, build a relationship of trust, and educate the narrator about the process of doing an oral history. It also provides an opportunity to discuss the oral history outline and how it will be used. A narrator's responses in a [pre-oral history questionnaire](#) can assist you in preparing a list of topics that you agree are important to discuss during the oral history.<sup>3</sup> As you prepare, identify areas where you should seek further guidance or information. Make sure you can pronounce the narrator's name correctly, as well as other key words or phrases you may need to use in their preferred language. Become aware of cultural differences between you and the narrator; it is OK to be vulnerable and ask for information and clarification.

## Understand Your Role [2.3]

Before doing an oral history, take time to understand the responsibilities of an oral historian and what characterizes a good oral history. Minimize the amount of time you speak during the oral history recording. Avoid monopolizing the oral history by sharing your own stories. Guide the conversation by following the oral history outline, but be flexible. Be patient and let the narrator share as much as possible. Allow time for the narrator to think about their responses to avoid interrupting them. It is OK to have periods of silence while the narrator is pondering their response.

Be aware of the Church History Department's policies regarding sensitive information and how the narrator's oral history can be used if they have questions.

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### Notes

1. *Teaching in the Savior's Way* [2016], 16.
2. *Preach my Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* [2018], 185.
3. If you are unable to meet before the oral history, find a way to invite the narrator to fill out the pre-oral history questionnaire and return it to you so you can prepare accordingly.

# Planning an Oral History

## Select a Narrator [3.1]

A narrator is the subject of the oral history, the person who shares their experiences.<sup>1</sup> Seek narrators whose stories can add information and insights to the history of the Church.

Search the prospective narrator's name in the [Church History Catalog](#) to determine whether they have already participated in an oral history. (If you need assistance searching in the catalog, please contact your Church History Department representative.) If you find an oral history of the prospective narrator in the catalog, do they need to participate in another oral history? Would doing an oral history with someone else allow another valuable perspective to be shared?

Be proactively inclusive. Select narrators regardless of their age, ability level, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, education, socioeconomic status, nationality, political affiliation, or tribe or clan.<sup>2</sup> Some narrators may be Church leaders with broad perspectives; such narrators are often identified in your area Church history plan. Church members who have diverse backgrounds can provide unique perspectives and insights. Always be prayerful and open to the Spirit when selecting oral history narrators—and throughout the entire oral history process.

## Define the Purpose [3.2]

A focused approach with clear objectives is more likely to produce a better oral history. Try to think of oral history projects that align with the area Church history plan, or the Church History Department staff will assign you a project. If you need an assignment or more direction, please contact your Church History Department representative.

Begin by defining the oral history's purpose. Ask yourself what you hope to accomplish and how the narrator's experiences are relevant to the history of the Church. What unique perspective does the narrator have? What events or topics can you document by doing an oral history with the narrator?

When possible, learn about the narrator before inviting them to participate in an oral history. Gain an understanding of the events that shaped their life. You can sometimes find the narrator's callings in the Church Directory of Leaders ([CDOL](#)), which can become topics to discuss in the oral history. Searching for the narrator on the Internet can also result in valuable information.

## Invite the Narrator [3.3]

When inviting a prospective narrator to participate in an oral history, explain the purpose of the oral history, when and where you would like to meet, and how long the oral history may last. You should also tell them that they will be asked to sign the Church History Interview Agreement and provide them with the Church's Global Privacy Notice available at [privacynotice.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/privacynotice).

This is a good time to have a brief pre-oral history conversation with the narrator. You can discuss potential topics to cover during the oral history. It is especially important to bring up topics that might include personal trials, struggles and disappointments. These can be important elements to include in an oral history, and you should not discourage or overlook them; however, many narrators have tender feelings related to these topics. Be considerate and ask a narrator if there is anything they do not want to discuss during the oral history and explain that sensitive information



will not be shared with the public. Building a relationship of trust *before* the oral history and creating a safe, comfortable environment will encourage the narrators to share their experiences freely. Invite the narrator to bring photographs, journals, and other items that help them remember the experiences you will cover in the oral history.

### **Schedule the Oral History** [3.4]

It is best to do an oral history soon after an event because the narrator will usually remember it more clearly. Remember to be sensitive to the narrator's schedule. Most narrators will prefer to do their oral history at the time of day they feel most alert.

In general, an oral history should last around one hour. Oral histories are tiring in many ways, so be considerate and end the session after one hour. If you have reached one hour and there is more to discuss, consider scheduling another oral history session. The original Church History Interview Agreement will cover multiple oral history sessions.

### **Draft the Outline** [3.5]

Before the oral history, create an outline—that is, a list of topics that will keep the oral history organized and focused. Oral historians often begin creating an outline during the pre-oral history conversation with the narrator.

Begin the oral history outline with general, familiar topics about the narrator's life: early years, education, marriage, children, career, and so on. Discussing such topics can put the narrator at ease, provide context, and create a friendly atmosphere for the rest of the oral history. Construct the rest of the outline with additional topics, remembering the purpose of the oral history and the unique perspective of the narrator about Church History. Compose open-ended follow-up questions and prompts or statements that will encourage the narrator to speak freely and reflect upon their experiences.

Be flexible during the oral history; following an outline too strictly may disrupt the narrator's natural flow of ideas, causing important details to be missed. Every oral history will be different.

Sample [oral history outlines](#) are available on the Church History Specialist website. The sample oral history outlines represent different roles in the Church and are meant to be customized for each narrator. Contact your Church History Department representative if you need help.

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#### **Notes**

1. "[Narrator](#)," Oral History Association ([oralhistory.org](http://oralhistory.org))
2. See Jeffrey R. Holland, "[Songs Sung and Unsung](#)," *Liahona*, May 2017, 49–51.



# Recording an Oral History

## Location [4.1]

Select a location that will be safe, comfortable for the narrator, and free of excessive noise and interruptions. Most oral histories are recorded in a Church meetinghouse, at the narrator's home, or online. Wherever you meet, minimize noise and distractions.

## Equipment [4.2]

Select audio, video, and photography equipment that meets Church History Department [standards](#). Your Church History Department representative can assist with the selection and use of equipment. (See preferred and acceptable digital audio and video file formats in the following table.)

Recording type	Preferred file format	Acceptable file format
Audio	.wav	.mp3 (192 kbps)
Video	.mov	.mp4 (MPEG-4 AVC/H.264)

The audio or video recorder's placement is important. Place the audio recorder on a small tripod, soft cloth, or piece of foam between you and the narrator. Position a video recorder so all participants are visible, and do not zoom in or out during the recording. When possible, keep the light behind the camera and focused on the narrator's face.

Do not alter digital files—including oral histories—in any way. If necessary, changes will be made at the Church History Library.

## Oral History Assistant [4.3]

It can be helpful to have an assistant when recording an oral history. A second person can monitor the recording and take notes that may be helpful when processing the interview. Having an assistant also allows you to focus on the narrator instead of technical issues.





## Church History Interview Agreement [4.4]

Before beginning the oral history, review the [Church History Interview Agreement](#) with the narrator once more and ask them to sign it. Explain that this agreement outlines how the Church will administer the recording and provide access. The oral history agreement gives the Church legal rights to preserve and use the recording; without a signed agreement, the oral history is of limited value to the Church History Department. Take special care to include the narrator's year of birth on the Church History Interview Agreement; this information will help you process the oral history and help the Church History Department preserve and use the recording. Sign the agreement as the "Church representative," scan, and submit it, with the oral history file(s), to your Church History Department representative. Mail the original Church History Interview Agreement to your Church History Department representative.

The Church History Interview Agreement is available in a limited number of languages. If the narrator cannot read the version provided it will not be binding. Contact your Church History Department representative with questions or concerns about the agreement. You can find the Church History Interview Agreement (in all available languages) on the [Church History Specialists website](#).

## Pre-Oral History Instructions [4.5]

Set the narrator at ease by reminding them what will happen during the oral history. Explain that you will take notes throughout the oral history and occasionally look at the recording device to make sure it is working properly. Describe what you will do if the oral history is interrupted and inform the narrator that the oral history can be paused anytime they need to take a break.

Do everything you can to prevent differences in race, nationality, language, gender, and other factors from creating barriers between you and the narrator. To create a comfortable atmosphere, the narrator might invite a friend or family member to sit in the oral history. When appropriate, the oral historian might do the same. You may need to find a partner with the appropriate language skills or cultural understanding to help with the oral history. Rely on the Spirit, the narrator's preference, and your judgment to know the best way to record an oral history (see "Language" on page 8).

Before you start the recorder, begin the oral history with a prayer.

## Opening Statement [4.6]

Begin the oral history with an opening statement that introduces the participants in the oral history and includes the date and location,\* and a brief statement on the oral history's purpose. For example:

My name is \_\_\_\_\_.  
Today is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a Church history specialist in the \_\_\_\_\_ Area. I am doing an oral history with \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_. We will be discussing \_\_\_\_\_.

\*If you are using a video communication app, state the location of each participant.

**For example:** “My name is Tuli Nafo, and I am the Samoa Church history specialist. Today is May 27, 2016. I am doing an oral history with Iosefa Tangi in his home in Apia, Samoa. Iosefa is the Church welfare manager in Samoa, and today we will be discussing his experiences with the 2009 tsunami in Samoa.”

## Asking Questions [4.7]

Use open-ended questions that will prompt the narrator to give detailed, lengthy responses. Avoid questions that can be leading or can be answered with short phrases like *yes* or *no*. Ask follow-up questions for clarification and to see if a topic can be explored in greater detail; the narrator's responses may invite additional questions that take the oral history in unexpected but valuable directions.

Sometimes narrators may say something that is inaccurate or contradictory. Never correct or challenge the narrator; rather, ask for clarification.

## Note Taking [4.8]

Throughout the oral history, write notes and follow-up questions on the oral history outline or a separate page. Make a list of important names, locations, and topics in your notes. These notes will help you process the oral history later. When the oral history is over, review your notes with the narrator for accuracy and, when possible, collect birth and death years of significant people discussed.

## Language [4.9]

Do the oral history in the language most comfortable for the narrator. Having an oral history in the narrator's preferred language ensures that the narrator can express themselves clearly and without reservation. There is no preferred language for oral histories. Consider using technology that can aid communication, such as a real-time translation app.

## Follow-up Questions

Tell me more about that.

How did that make you feel?

How did you solve the problem?

Who was with you?

Where did it happen?

Why do you think it happened?

What happened next?

Please share an example.

How did you/they/it change over time?

How did you accomplish it?

How did it affect you (or others)?





You may also enlist the help of a translator or interpreter. When doing so, make sure they understand the importance of privacy and caution regarding sensitive information. Translators or interpreters should also sign the donation agreement. Generally, if you do not speak the narrator's preferred language and choose to use an interpreter, there are three options:

- Rely on the interpreter (preferred)—Before beginning the oral history, talk with the interpreter about the purpose of the oral history, your expectations, and their role. Review the oral history training materials, since the interpreter will, in many ways, act as an oral historian during the oral history. Explain that they can determine if the narrator's responses are adequate and, when necessary, ask follow-up questions.
- Consecutive interpretation—The interpreter provides a summary of the narrator's response to each question and asks follow-up questions when directed to do so by the primary oral historian.
- Simultaneous interpretation—Interpretation sentence by sentence.

Each interpretation method has a direct influence on the quality of the oral history and the amount of information that can be recorded in the allotted time.

Oral histories will not be translated into another language unless there is an institutional need, such as official Church History Department products (*Saints*) or other Church publications (the *Friend* or *Liahona*).

## Collecting Other Records [4.10]

Sometimes, the narrator has historically significant records he or she is willing to share. When they do, ask if you may scan or photograph the item for the Church.

It is generally possible to use a portable scanner or a scanning app to capture a small number of standard sized documents on location. Be sure to follow the Church History Department's [digitization standards](#). For larger collections or larger formats, records can also be digitized at another location.

When records are acquired, it is necessary to have the narrator sign a donation agreement in addition to the interview agreement. See Church History Guide: Collecting Records for more information.



# Processing an Oral History

The oral history is not complete until it has been processed and submitted to the Church History Department. Processing an oral history means providing a description of its content so that it can be properly cataloged, allowing it to be found in the future. It also involves organizing your notes and files and submitting them to the Church History Department.

The oral historian is responsible for the processing. It is best to do this soon after the oral history when memories are fresh. Taking good notes during the oral history will improve your ability to process the oral history efficiently.

## Oral History Folder [5.1]

Create a folder on a secure computer where you can store the oral history's electronic files. Name the folder with the narrator's name. Soon after the oral history is completed, copy its recording to this folder with other relevant files, including the following:

- Church History Interview Agreement
- Oral history outline
- Notes
- Photograph of narrator (.tiff preferred)
- Correspondence
- Other records related to the oral history

Transfer the recording and other files to the Church History Department as soon as possible following the oral history. If possible, maintain a copy of the oral history as a backup.

## Describing Oral Histories [5.2]

The oral history's description will make it possible to find in the Church History Library Catalog. An oral history description contains an introductory sentence or two and includes important subjects discussed.

In most cases, you can use the main topics from the oral history outline to create the description. For a topic to be considered significant, it should be discussed extensively during the oral history and include relevant information. Leave out topics that were merely mentioned or were not covered in depth. In addition, make sure to include significant topics that were not part of the original oral history outline.

You may want to highlight part of an oral history that is not adequately described in the list of



significant topics (for instance, a historically significant or faith-building story). Do this by adding an additional sentence following the topic sentence.

**Consider this hypothetical scenario:**

Oral history with Samuel J. Florez about his life and Church service in the Los Angeles, California, area.

Topics discussed include:

- Background in Southern California; attending Brigham Young University (1982–1984) and the University of California, Riverside (1984–1986), studying accounting.
- Steven J. Florez's (father) conversion to the Church at age 19; growing up in the Church; and being reactivated by his older brother.
- His decision to serve a mission; Church activity; baptizing Samantha Clayton, his girlfriend, the week before he left for the Peru Lima North Mission (1979–1981); and his experiences at the Peru Missionary Training Center.
- Marrying Samantha following his mission and serving as the California Oaks Ward bishop (1996–2000) and Murrieta California Stake president (2010–2019).
- Florez speaks in detail about the stake's efforts to aid people who were affected by the Tenaja Fire (2019).
- Florez concludes with his testimony.

Oral history done by Jeff and Alice Smith, Church History advisers for the North America West Area.

Includes a photo of Florez taken at the time of the oral history.





## Oral History Access [5.3]

Oral histories may contain information that should not be released to the public because it is sacred, private, confidential, or sensitive. When you process an oral history, identify information that may cause concern. Doing this will help the Church History Department take appropriate precautions when providing access.

- Sacred information includes information about temple rites, ceremonies, clothing, or other sacred matters that have not been officially approved for release and are only discussed by endowed Church members or in dedicated temples.

Oral histories often include a narrator's special experiences in the temple. Any details regarding temple ceremonies, rites, or clothing that are included in these stories are sacred.

- Private information includes anything that could be used to identify a living person, whether or not they are the narrator, such as information about medical care, Church attendance, birth dates, phone numbers, addresses, other contact information, mental illness, school transcripts, government identification numbers, bank account information, salary, and physical or emotional abuse.

Data privacy is a matter of trust. Individuals and institutions share personal data trusting that it will be handled and used in a manner they have agreed to, or in a manner that is in accordance with privacy related laws and the privacy policies of the organizations receiving the data. When the Church is the recipient of such personal data, the trust given that the Church will use the data in an appropriate way is even higher. The United States has passed



industry-specific laws to protect against exposure of certain private information about a person without their prior knowledge and consent. The European Union has recognized the privacy of one's personal information, including something as simple as one's name, as a fundamental right. Legislation and common law principles globally have long protected personal information from unauthorized use without consent, particularly when the information identifies living individuals or is embarrassing or harmful to individuals or their families. For more information, please see the Church's Global Privacy Notice at [privacynotice.ChurchofJesusChrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/privacynotice).

- Confidential information includes internal corporate or ecclesiastical Church information. This can be information from a closed meeting, such as a bishopric interview or disciplinary proceedings (Church membership councils), as well as ward or stake welfare information, internal security measures, financial (budget, tithing, income in for-profit ventures, and so on) or statistical information, unreleased plans or policies, and so on. In oral histories, narrators may share information that they are privy to because of their calling in a local unit or role in Church employment. That information is often considered confidential.

Other information that should be noted can include:

- Offensive content such as overtly vulgar, violent, or racist language
- Information that could be deemed sensitive or sacred by diverse cultures
- Information that has been ruled defamatory in a court of law
- Specific concerns as stated by the narrator

The Church History Department considers additional criteria when governing access to oral histories and all its records. These include intellectual property rights and other legal and regulatory issues.

## Transferring Digital Files [5.4]

Methods for transferring digital files to the Church History Department vary and change from time to time. Contact your department representative for current instructions. Occasionally, oral history files will need to be shipped to the Church History Department using physical media.

Always notify your Church History Department representative after shipping or transferring digital files.

## Transcripts [5.5]

The Church History Department does not create transcripts for most oral histories. Creating an oral history transcript is time-consuming; it can take 4–10 hours to transcribe one hour of an oral history. If a transcript is necessary, contact the Church History Department for transcription instructions.

## Narrator Copy [5.6]

When asked, you may give a copy of the oral history to the narrator. Explain that they can share it with their family and that we request that they do not post it online or share further. A copy of the oral history will not be sent to the narrator from the Church History Department.



# Notes

[illegible]



