

RECORDING YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORIES

Over the past 20+ years, Densho has recorded over 900 oral histories. During that time we have learned, through experience and research, some key factors that lead to success.

START BY DEFINING THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

For **Densho video oral history** interviews:

- Video testimony for future generations
- Centered around an important historical event
- Part of a large public collection with diverse perspectives
- Third-party usage
- Historical document

For **family oral history** interviews:

- Materials for a family history report (written)
- Centered around a family's history
- Interview with elders may be rare
- Audience is primarily the family

This shows the ways that oral histories can have different purposes. Once you have decided the reason for your interview move on to the following phases: **pre-interview**, **interview**, and **post-interview**. The explanations below will help with family oral history interviews.

For more information about oral history best practices, the Oral History Association is a great resource. <https://www.oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/>

PRE-INTERVIEW PHASE

1. Ask a family member to be interviewed; there are times you may need to encourage participation.
2. Explain the purpose and the use of the interview to the narrator (person being interviewed).
3. Prepare the questions - customize for the narrator, Densho prefers a chronological approach.
 - a. <https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>
 - b. <https://artoffamilyhistory.com/researching/genealogy-interview-yourself/>
 - c. <https://www.thoughtco.com/fifty-questions-for-family-history-interviews-1420705>
 - d. <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/familyHistory.html>
4. Decide if you should share the questions with the narrator before the interview.
5. Identify memory prompts - photographs, letters, newspaper clippings.
6. Consider doing group interviews.
7. Test out the equipment you and the narrator will be using (if remote, you may need someone to help the narrator with technology).
 - a. Can be as simple as using your phone, e.g. Voice app.
 - b. There is the possibility of using online tools, e.g. Zoom.



INTERVIEW PHASE

1. Consider the interview environment. It should be quiet with few distractions.
2. Techniques and tips:
 - a. Verbal statements at the beginning are useful:
 - i. Date and location(s)
 - ii. People involved, including passive listeners
 - iii. Short description of the interview, e.g., "this is the second family oral history interview with Grandma Mary for the Ikeda Family history project."
 - b. Be a curious, attentive listener:
 - i. Let the narrator know you hear and feel what they are saying with non-verbal cues
 - ii. Be patient, don't interrupt, pauses may be helpful
 - iii. Resist the temptation to show how much you know
 - c. Don't be afraid to direct the conversation or ask for clarification:
 - i. It is OK if the narrator tells a story out of sequence
 - ii. If you are confused, summarize and probe
 - iii. If you need to get back on track, summarize and redirect
 - d. Interviewing people who aren't very talkative:
 - i. A solo interview may encourage more sharing than expected
 - ii. Use of photographs and other artifacts are helpful
 - iii. Be patient and be OK with silence

POST-INTERVIEW PHASE

1. Be sure to do a follow-up with the narrator and thank them.
2. It is a good idea to transcribe the interview.
 - a. Do it yourself
 - b. Automated transcription services (free - \$10 per hour)
 - c. Human generated transcripts (\$40 - \$70 per hour)
 - d. <https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-transcription-services>
3. Review and edit the transcript.
4. Have the narrator review and add notes to the transcript, e.g., corrections, additional info.
5. Add your additional notes to the transcript, e.g., different dates or locations from other sources.
6. Share with family members and request they add more notes (or ask if they would be willing to be interviewed to share more details).
7. Make back-up copies of all files!