

A detailed black and white illustration of a hand holding a vintage telephone receiver. The hand is shown from the side, with fingers wrapped around the earpiece. The receiver has a textured, ribbed surface. A coiled telephone cord is visible at the top of the frame.

The Office of
Historic Alexandria's

ORAL HISTORY TOOLKIT



OFFICE OF
HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

2026

“Medicinal’ histories seek to reestablish the connections between peoples and their histories, to reveal the mechanisms of power, the steps by which their current condition of oppression was achieved through a series of decisions made by real people to dispossess them; but also to reveal the multiplicity, creativity and persistence of resistance among the oppressed.”

— from Medicine Stories by Aurora Levins Morales

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Welcome



The Office of Historic Alexandria (OHA) preserves and shares Alexandria's past to enrich the present and inspire the future. Alexandria's stories are told through its museums, historic sites, and landscapes as well as tours, exhibitions, and a variety of public programs. The Alexandria Oral History Center is a program within OHA to document and preserve the memories and stories of Alexandria. The Center provides residents with oral history trainings and resources to conduct oral history interviews and community history projects. Additionally, the Center maintains a public archive to preserve oral histories for future generations. The Center also deepens the public's engagement and understanding of Alexandria's past and present by producing public programs and resources with the oral history archive.

This oral history toolkit was created in 2026 by Francesco De Salvatore to support community historians. We want to also acknowledge the various existing oral history projects who are committed to caring for narrators and the communities they serve, and who continue to teach us how to do this work more ethically, such as the After Violence Project, Voice of Witness, Voices of Maryland (Maryland State Archives), the Billie Holiday Center for Liberation Arts (Johns Hopkins University), The Maryland Lynching Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Oral History Initiative, Baltimore Traces (University of Maryland Baltimore County), Chesapeake Heartland, Digital Maryland, and the DC Oral History Collaborative.

What is oral history?

When I say 'archives of survival' I mean archives that fight for the survival of marginalized and oppressed communities in the most expansive sense: not only the survival of our memories, cultures, and histories, but also our survival against domination, including the carceral state, white supremacy, patriarchy, racial capitalism, and environmental catastrophe. By survival I don't just mean the ability to keep breathing. I mean truly living, thriving, and creating with purpose, meaning and joy.

- Gabe Solis , After Violence Project

Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.

Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies.

- The Oral History Association

Oral history is a community-driven process that centers the narrator's perspectives, experiences, agency, and authority from the project design and recorded conversation to preservation and uses of the interview. An oral history is always **co-created** between oral historians and narrators.

The oral history process is grounded in **transformative justice** and **popular education**, acknowledging that those who have been harmed by state and extralegal forms of violence carry knowledge that can deeply shape our understanding of the past and present. The process acknowledges the healing potential of storytelling and witnessing, and uses **trauma-informed practices and other healing practices** to support narrators in sharing their memories and stories.

The oral history process also understands that **oppression is reinforced individually as well as on larger scales**. It acknowledges privilege, power and oppression so that practitioners can act from an informed perspective, and apply that to their choices in behavior and interactions, and to create practices and policies that ensure that the process is community-driven and co-created.

What is oral history?

The oral history process can look many different ways! You're encouraged to create a practice that makes sense to you, your narrators, and your overall project. Below are some standard suggestions/qualities. But always remember that **variations and customizations are essential to a community-driven process!** Embrace flexibility and creativity, while incorporating some standard practices!

The Basics of Oral History

- A spoken, or signed interview (40 minutes to multiple recordings).
- Usually about a narrator's whole life.
- Includes a narrator's personal history/experiences.
- Typically recorded with an audio or video device.
- Includes a narrator, and an interviewer.
- Preserved in an archive.
- Includes three steps: I. Pre-Interview; II. Interview; III. Post-Interview.
- Interviewer uses open-ended questions.

Other Essentials

- Includes interview paperwork (see pg. 26):
 - Interview Data Form; Log Notes Form; Legal Release Form; Narrator Data Form
- Archival metadata.
- Project Scope of Work.
- Transcript of the oral history (see pg. 26).
- List of interview questions.
- External research (primary and secondary sources).
- Narrator compensation for completing the interview.
- A Narrator Care Plan.
- Narrator Review Process.

What is oral history?

Who Does What?

The oral history process usually includes: **an oral historian, narrator, and an archivist**. Sometimes these roles overlap and/or switch throughout the process. Ultimately, **co-creation and collaboration is central to the oral history process, so these roles are interconnected**.

Oral Historian

- Conducts outreach.
- Co-creates a Scope of Work.
- Co-creates interview questions.
- Conducts the interview.
- Operates the recording equipment.
- Completes interview paperwork and generates metadata.
- Ensures release form is signed.
- Completes transcript and transcript review process w/ narrator.

Narrator

- Co-creates a Scope of Work
- Consents to the interview/process.
- Shares personal memories/stories.
- Signs the release form.
- Completes transcript review process.

Archivist

- Creates archival protocol for oral histories.
- Receives finished oral history recording, interview paperwork, and release forms.
- Creates physical and digital records.
- Finalizes metadata for oral history.
- Creates/facilitates public access to oral history.

What is oral history?

Spend some time reflecting on who you want to be as an oral historian. What are the qualities you aspire for? What specific actions/practices will reflect each of those qualities?

Qualities/Traits	Actions
<i>ex. Make narrators feel cared for.</i>	<i>Ask what would make them feel most comfortable during the interview.</i>

Outreach

Whether you are planning to interview one narrator or several, it is essential to have a project plan. **Start with the personal. What communities are you a part of? What existing relationships do you have with individuals, community spaces, or institutions? Who are specific individuals in your life that would feel comfortable speaking with you about their memories?**

This doesn't mean that you should only work on personal topics. **However, the oral history process is most successful when there are existing relationships built upon trust, care, and rolling consent.** If those relationships do not exist between you and the narrators, please work to cultivate those kinds of relationships. This aspect of the process can take anywhere from a month to several years. **Don't rush it!**

In the process of building those relationships, **you should also consider your own identity and power as an oral historian**, and how that can cause narrators to feel mistrust, disinterest, or fear about participating in an oral history recording. Doing this kind of reflection work can lead to a more successful oral history process.

Other tips for conducting outreach

- Make a list of individuals /institutions that relate to your project topic.
- Reach out to these contacts to discuss your project.
 - You may learn that a related oral history project has either already been completed, or that one is already underway.
 - Ask to be connected to other related individuals and/or institutions to assist with your project.
- Attend related public events and social gatherings.
 - Table at public gathering spaces, such as farmers market, resource fairs, etc.
 - Attend community events (block parties, local meetings, etc).
- Conduct primary and secondary research.
 - This can better contextualize your project and inform how/who to conduct outreach with.

Outreach

Spend time thinking about which community groups/organizations/events you can reach out to. **Consider what you can do to specifically conduct outreach, and what strengths/challenges may be present when conducting outreach to these specific groups/organizations?**

Community Group/ Organization	How will you perform outreach?	What strengths do you have to conduct this outreach well?	What challenges do you expect while conducting this outreach?
ex. My local church	• Host an informational meeting • Create flyers	I am already a member and have existing relationships with members.	Many members attend church virtually, so I will need to reach them another way.

Project Planning

As you shift from outreach into project planning, it is now time to create a living document with more details about your oral history project. **A Scope of Work (SOW) should always be completed before starting any project.** By doing so, you can be as transparent with narrators and the community you are working with, and most importantly, it can be an opportunity to involve narrators/stakeholders in designing the project from the start. See the supplemental folder for an example of a SOW (page 26).

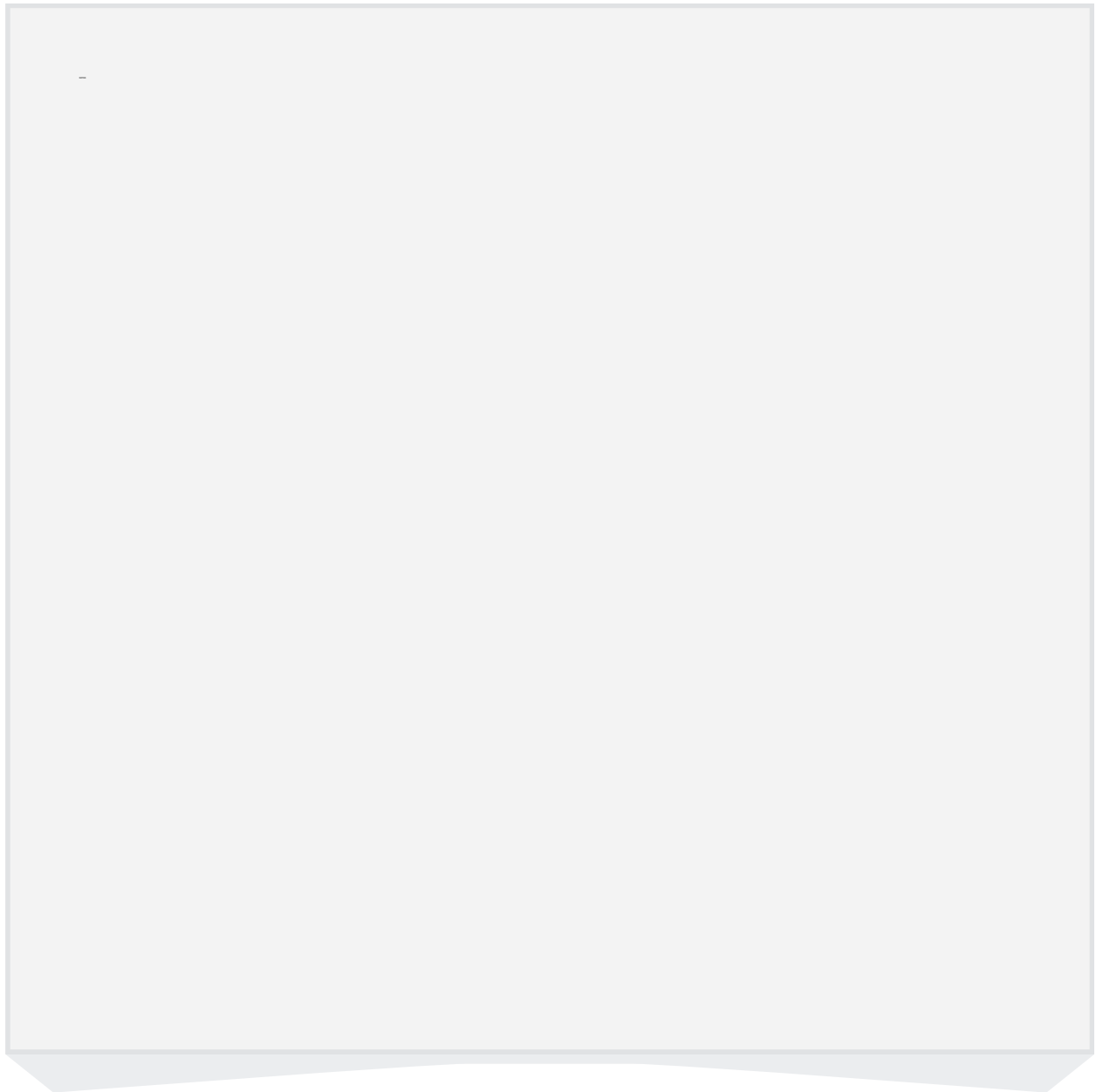
Consider creating an advisory group of stakeholders (ideally 3-5 individuals related to the project topic), who will assist you in designing and completing the project. The completion of a SOW typically takes several meetings, as you work with the advisory group to create a plan that best meets the needs of the narrators/community.

An SOW typically should include these sections:

- Project description
- Overarching project goals
- List of potential narrators
- Research questions
- Responsibilities of each project member
- Project Deliverables
- Project Timeline
- Project Budget
- Information about the archival repository for the oral history collection.
- Recording/collection/preservation formats and standards
- Administrative items
- Activation plan for the oral histories (i.e. exhibit, public event, sign, etc).

Project Planning

Let's begin to envision your project! Take some time to describe your project. Here are some questions to consider: **why is this project important/needed?; who will you interview?; how will you present these oral histories to the public?**

A large, light gray rectangular area with a subtle drop shadow, intended for project planning notes. It occupies the central portion of the page below the introductory text.

Overview of the Oral History Process

Once you have completed a SOW, it is now time to begin the oral history process. Below is an overview of this process.

Pre-Interview

Meeting(s) with narrator(s)

Conduct external research

Create a collaborative list of interview questions

Create a Narrator Care Plan

Interview

Open-Ended and Follow-Up Questions

4 Types of Questions

Trauma-Informed Interviewing Practices

Operate Recording Device

Post-Interview

Release Forms

Create Transcriptions and Archival Metadata

Complete Narrator Review Process

Archival Preservation and Activations

The Pre-Interview

Oral history is a collaborative process built upon relationships. Never rush into a recording! The priority is to build a relationship with the narrator that is based upon mutual respect, trust, and care. **Time, consent, collaboration, and transparency are key ingredients here. Meet with the narrator either in-person and/or virtually. This can be one meeting or several.**

Checklist for Pre-Interview Meetings

- Explain your project and the oral history process.
- Create a Narrator Care Plan:
 - Brainstorm a list of questions/topics that the narrator wants to/doesn't want to share in the recording.
 - Brainstorm what/who should be present to help the narrator feel comfortable during the interview.
 - Decide on a recording space and a date/time.
 - Decide on the use of pseudonyms for confidentiality.
 - Discuss transportation coordination.
 - Consider other trauma-informed approaches during the recording (see page 21).
- Share examples of oral histories.
- Review the release form.
- Explain the archival process.
- Conduct preliminary research
 - Questions to consider:
 - What are the historical events that occurred during the narrator's lifetime?
 - What specific historical events occurred during the memories that the narrator will share in the oral history?
 - How did these historical events shape the narrator's personal memories?
- The narrator approves a final list of questions before the interview.

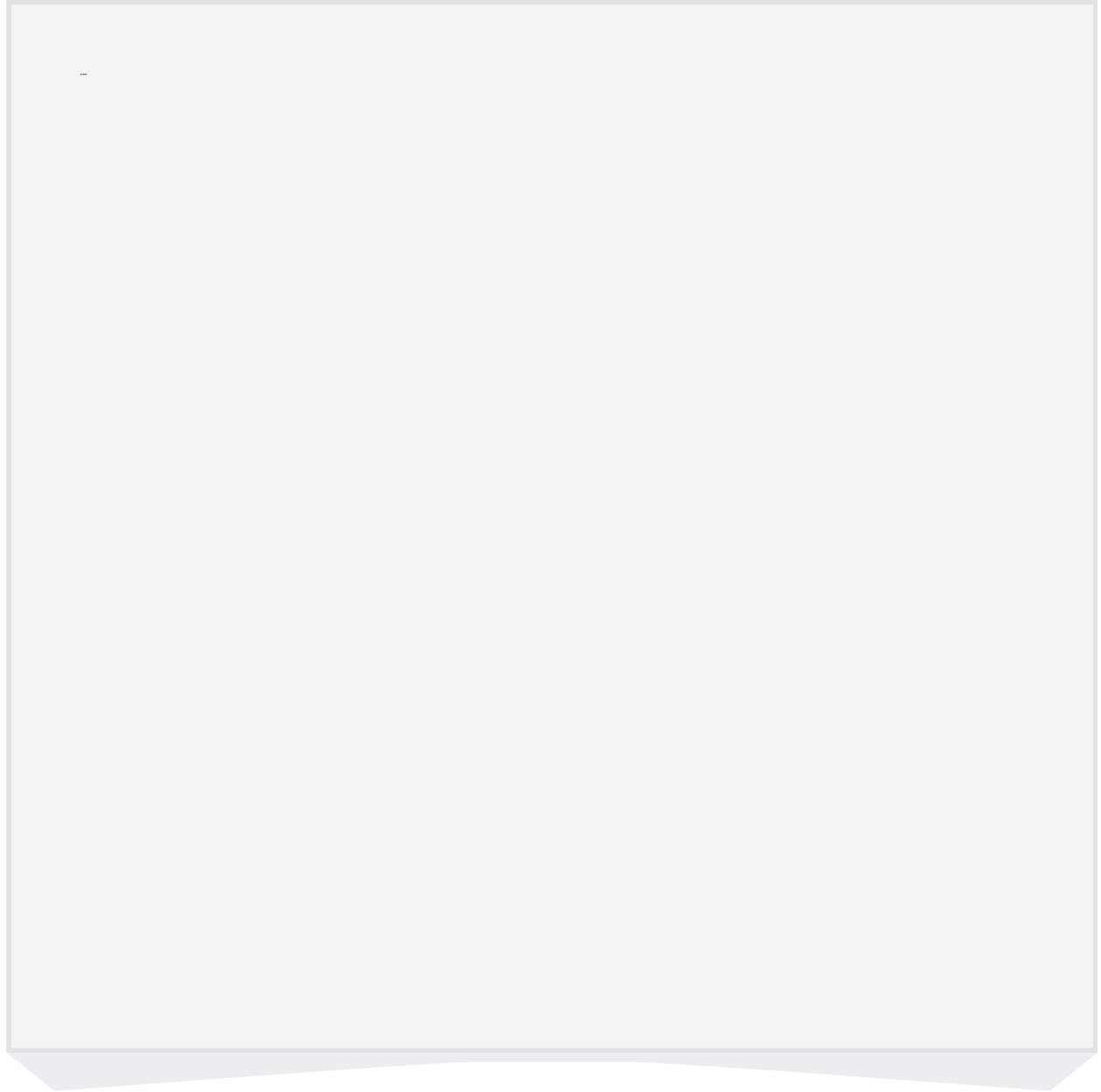
The Pre-Interview

Let's practice creating a Narrator Care Plan! Pretend you are a narrator and answer these questions to complete your own Care Plan on the next page (p. 16).

- Describe what you would like to share during your interview?
- Summarize the challenging memories that you plan to share?
- What can the interviewer do to best support you?
- What questions/topics are off-limits for the interview?
- Would you prefer that someone else be present during the recording? And/or would you prefer anything else be present?
- Where would you feel most comfortable completing the recording? And do you need any accessibility features?
- Would you prefer to use pseudonyms for yourself and/or anyone else that you speak about in the recording?
- Do you need assistance with transportation to the recording?
- How do you want your oral history to be used?
- What experience do you want from this oral history recording?
- Is there anything else the interviewer should know about?

The Pre-Interview

Provide your answers below to the questions on page 15.



The Interview

The interview is where you will support the narrator in recording their memories and thoughts. In order to do so, it is important to use **open-ended questions**, and to use **reflection, vivid, plot, and contextual questions**. It is especially important to consider **trauma-informed approaches to interviewing**.

The most successful oral history recordings are organic and conversational. Just because you have crafted a list of questions does not mean that the interview must follow this list. Expect the unexpected and support the narrator wherever they may go in the recording.

General Interviewing Tips

- Narrator(s) and Interviewer(s) begin interviews with:
 - Full Names; Date; Interview Location; Project/Program Name
- Ease into the interview.
- Welcome the silence.
- Avoid interrupting the narrator.
- Observe body language.
- Active listening.
- Don't be afraid to deviate.
- Be a human first and an interviewer second.
- Don't ask two questions at once.
- Be curious.
- Clarify and recount your understanding of their stories.
- Encourage the narrator to vividly tell their memories.
- Ask for examples.

The Interview

Every successful oral history interview includes: **open-ended and follow-up questions**. These questions can be crafted through 4 types of questions: **vivid, contextual, plot, and reflection questions**.

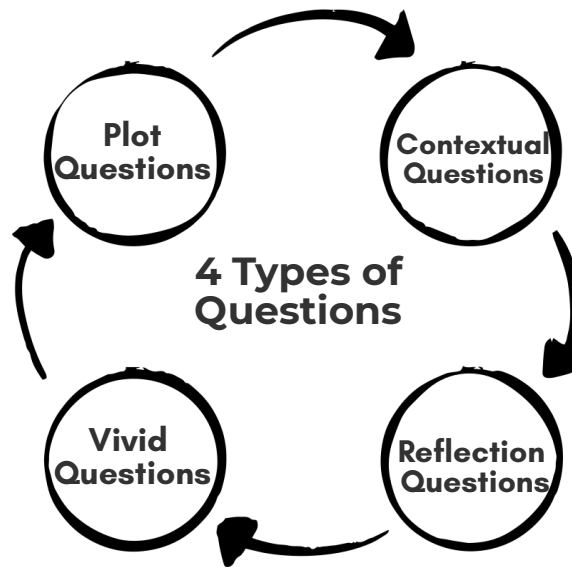
An excellent **open-ended question** is when a narrator is provided the space to share what is most important and true to them. For example, open-ended questions usually begin with: “Tell me about...” or “What was it like when...” **In an interview you want to avoid “leading questions,” which usually point your narrator in a certain direction.** For example, leading questions can be answered with “yes” or “no,” and/or can sometimes include descriptions/answers that your narrator has not given yet.

Be prepared to ask **follow-up questions** or diverge from your list of questions if you’re curious about something. If you’d like to hear more, try “And then what happened?” or “How did that make you feel?” or “What were you thinking in that moment?”

Suggested Question Stems

- *Can you describe...*
- *Tell me more about...*
- *What was that like for you?*
- *How did you feel about...?*
- *Tell me about a time when...*
- *Why did that matter to you?*
- *What were or are the consequences of...?*
- *How has... changed over time?*
- *How have your feelings towards... changed over time?*
- *What do you want others to know about... ?*
- *“I’m wondering if we can slow down here and focus on...?”*
- *“I’m wondering if we can go a little deeper here. What exactly do you mean by...?”*
- *“Can you give me an example of that?/Do any particular stories come to mind? I want to get a more detailed sense of...”*

The Interview



Reflection Questions

Oral histories not only reveal what happened, but also what could have happened. An oral history interview provides a narrator the opportunity to reinterpret and recast actions and experiences. Oral history interviews can provide narrators the opportunity to hope, imagine, consider, emote, and even regret.

Contextual Questions

Keep in mind that future listeners may not be familiar with the specific people and places mentioned. Set up context where needed with questions like “Who was Uncle Steve?” and “Why was he such an influence on you?”

Vivid Questions

Narrators are encouraged to over-describe a story/memory through the five senses. What did things look like? What color were they? Were there any smells that come to mind? If related, do you remember the feeling of certain textures, or how did things taste?

Plot Questions

What is the beginning, middle, and end of the story? Please be sure to use plot questions to help the narrator organize their memory, or story.

The Interview



Now it's your turn to create a list of 10 general questions!

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

The Interview

Reflecting on the past can bring up painful memories and may trigger feelings of distress or re-traumatization. **Intergenerational or historical trauma from systemic violence** may surface during an interview. This form of trauma refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological wounds of systemic violence, which are experienced across the lifespan and passed down from one generation to the next within individuals, families, and communities. **Trauma-informed care in practice aims to emphasize the healing components of sharing our trauma narratives while proactively minimizing harm as often as possible.** Oral historians do not provide mental health treatment, but instead, use trauma-informed practices in order to better support narrators. **See the supplemental folder on page 26 for more suggestions and exercises.**

Key Practices

Informed Consent and Transparency

Provide the narrator with transparency and choices throughout the process. The narrator should consent to every step of the process.

Create A Narrator Care Plan

Use the template on page 15 to create a plan. You should also familiarize yourself with various de-escalation strategies, and if needed do research and be aware of language, questions, or subjects that might trigger distress or re-traumatization.

Provide Support Resources

Create a resource list for the narrator. This can include a list of local therapists, and de-escalation and mindfulness exercises.

Trust and Reliability

Remember to always move at the speed of trust. Prioritize clear, regular, and timely communication. Emphasize co-creation with the narrator.

Compassionate Listening

Validate the narrator's experiences and emotions through appropriate eye contact and body language, ensuring they feel heard and respected throughout the process.

The Interview

Consider these other tips for trauma-informed interviewing:

4 types of memory recall:

Episodic

The who, what, and where of a memory. Commonly, narrators will not recount memories in a “neat” sequence. Do not force them to follow a certain sequence/structure.

Procedural

The memories of the everyday and the routines. Narrators sometimes gravitate more towards these memories. Follow and support if/when they bring up these kinds of memories.

Emotional/Sensory

These are the emotions and senses that narrators connect with a memory in their life. Provide them the space to explore these memories.

Semantic

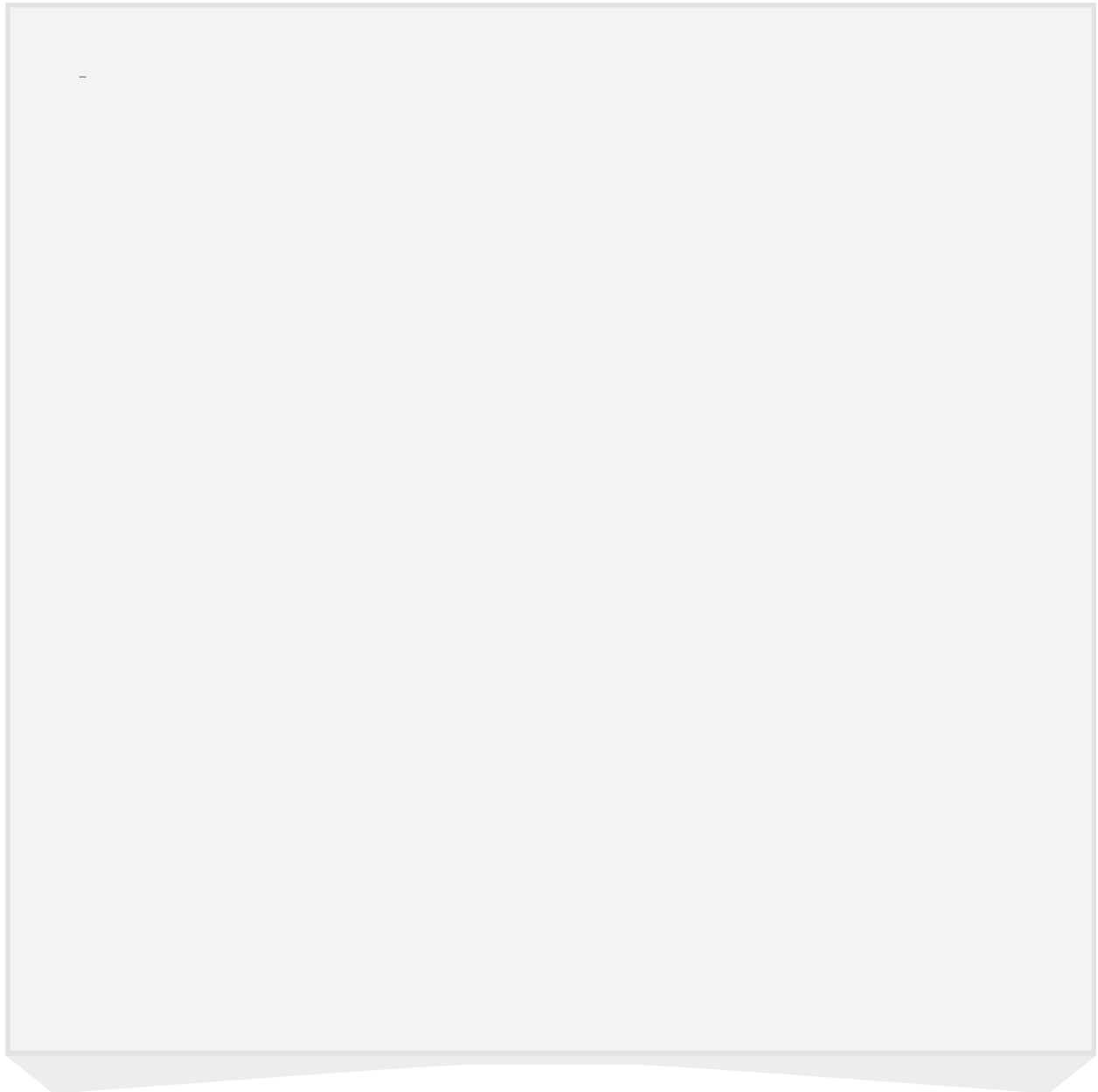
The memory of facts. This includes: dates, names, and places. Sometimes these are imprecise, especially when recounting a traumatic memory. In these situations, do not push the narrator for accuracy.

Suggested phrases to support your narrator:

- *“I’m here with you.”*
- *“Thank you for sharing that.”*
- *“We can take a break if you would like.”*
- *“Would you like to pause for a moment?”*
- *“You can decide how much you want to share.”*
- *“I appreciate you trusting me with that.”*
- *“Take your time.”*
- *“There’s no rush.”*
- *“We can go at whatever pace you want.”*
- *“You don’t have to go into detail unless you want to.”*

The Interview

Reflect on these three questions as you consider your project: **what are possible traumas/triggers that I may need to be aware of for my interviews?; what are the ways that I can create harm during an interview?; what are actions/practices that can provide better care for narrators?**



The Post-Interview

The post-interview process is when an oral history is preserved and activated. Follow the checklist below:

- Narrator Signs Release Form
- Complete Interview Paperwork
- Capture A Photo of The Narrator
- Complete A Transcript
- Complete the Transcript Review Process w/ Narrators
- Archive The Oral History
- Activate Oral Histories

Key Components of a Release Form:

- Narrator's Contact Information.
- Copyright assignment (non-exclusive agreement is suggested).
- Statement of narrator's rights.
- Statement of the interviewer's and/or project's rights.
- Restrictions about the use of the oral history.
- Signature and date.
- **See Page 26 for an example of a release form.**

Tips for Transcripts:

- Don't change what/how narrators said/speak.
- Consider the narrator, target audience, and community.
- Always have the narrator review the transcript.
- Consider the security issues with AI transcript services.
- **See Page 26 for a template of an oral history transcript.**

Narrator Review Process:

- Narrator reviews/approves the transcript.
- Narrator provides correct spelling for names and places.
- Narrator provides further information in the "Note" section.
- Narrator suggests omissions.
- Narrator suggests metadata.
- **See Page 26 for instructions.**

The Post-Interview

Once the Narrator Review Process is completed, it is now time to preserve the oral history in an archive. **An archive is a collection of historical documents, records, and other primary source material that provides information about a place, institution, or group of people.** The intent of an archive is to hold a collection over a long period of time and they can be found in various places, such as universities, non-for-profits, and libraries.

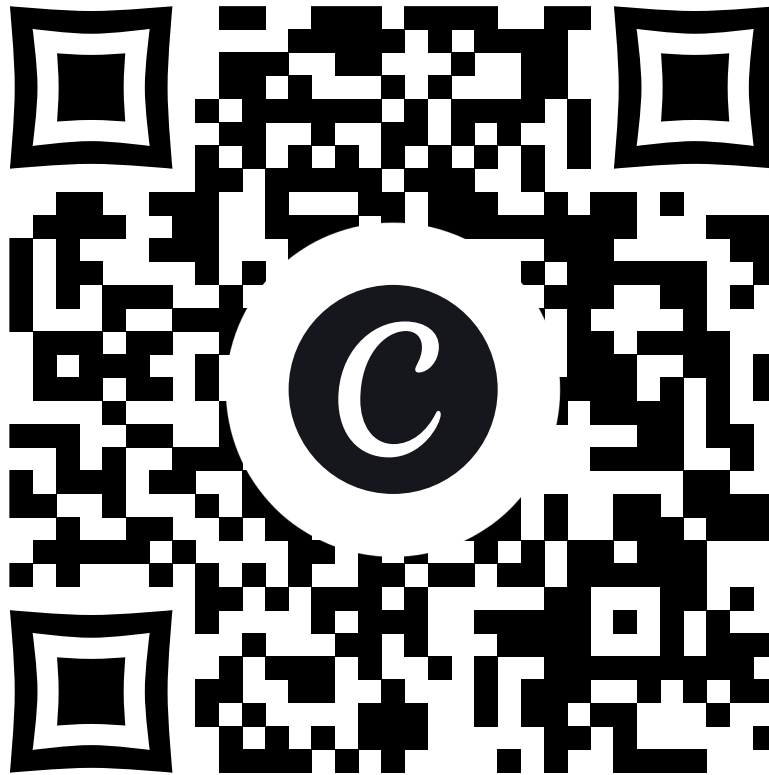
Preservation Tips

- **Best recording formats:**
 - Audio: .WAV format; Video: .MP4 (1080p or higher)
- **Maintain both a physical and digital record:**
 - **Physical Records:**
 - Interview Paperwork; Acid-Free Folders and Boxes; Climate Control.
 - **Digital Records:**
 - Interview Paperwork; Digital Recording File.
 - Have two back-ups, or more (at least one on a physical hard drive).
- **Suggestions for Interview Metadata (see pg. 26):**
 - Name of Narrator(s); Name of Interviewer(s); Date and Location of Interview; Transcriptionist Name; Names of people mentioned in the interview; Names of places mentioned in interview; Thematic/topical keywords; Summary of interview (3-5 sentences); Note Section; Log Notes
- **Security issues to consider:**
 - Using AI services and protecting narrator's privacy.
 - The risk of subpoenas.
 - The potential for identity fraud.
 - Hacking and security breaches.

Recommended Resources

Access the folder below for further resources, such as examples of interview paperwork, suggestions for recording equipment, examples of archival protocol, and more:

<https://tinyurl.com/alxoralhistorytoolkit>



“There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.”

— Arundhati Roy



OFFICE OF
HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA

220 North Washington Street
Alexandria, VA, 22314

703.946.2687

oralhistorycenter@alexandriava.gov