

Guide to Using Your Own Oral History Material in Community Dialogues

Although Listen to Everyone has provided audio clips to use with dialogue programs, we would love to see other organizations use our model to share their own oral history material. If you are interested in creating a dialogue program yourself, but do not have access to an archive of oral histories, check out the [Cooperstown Graduate Program's archive of oral histories](#).

1. Pick your themes

It's best to have a group of audio clips that deal with the same basic topic. This gives the conversation structure.

- Think of topics that are important in your community or that you think your community would find engaging.
- Themes should relate to topics that are relevant to issues today.
- Keep the strengths of your collection in mind. You'll have better material for some themes than others.
- Remember to think about topics broadly. For example, a discussion on work could range from kids' chores to equal pay to immigration to the challenges of owning a business.

2. Choose clips

- Search through your collection to find audio clips that will add an interesting perspective to your theme. It's easier if you can search your collection by keyword, but you can also sift through the transcripts and/or audio. If the person who delivered the original interviews is available, they may have a sense of which interviews deal with the subjects you're looking for.
- Keep them short--the complete story should be told in one to four minutes, with two minutes as an ideal.
- Try to find a range of clips. Some may contain more difficult material that is emotionally charged, sad, or deals with complex issues. You should try to balance these clips with more light-hearted material.
- Look for a variety of clips that cover the full range of the theme. Think about gender, race, class, etc.
- Think about where a clip might fit in the arc of dialogue (see 'Finding clips for each phase of dialogue' below).
- Pick somewhere between six and ten clips, depending on the length of the clips and whether you prefer for the program to have more listening or discussion. It may be helpful to find more than ten clips and then have a group discussion about which clips would work best.



Elements of a Good Audio Clip

Content

- Evocative imagery, something you can picture in your mind as you listen.
- Interesting, compelling narrative that draws you into the story.
- Relatable, something everyone can connect to their own experiences/past knowledge.
- You can tell the narrator really cares about what they're saying.
- Should provoke thoughts and questions, and provide good fodder for discussion.
- Include a mixture of personal story and larger relevance (connects to a big picture idea).

Audio Quality/Comprehensibility

- Can you clearly understand what the person is saying?
- Are there background noises that will be too distracting?
- Does the clip make sense without the rest of the interview (for example, if the narrator is responding to an interviewer's question, do you have to include the question for the response to make sense)?

3. Make your clips

- We used GarageBand to cut our clips out of the full interview, but any audio editing software should work.
- Make light edits for comprehensibility and sound quality. For example, you can cut out coughs, "ums" and false starts if they make the clip unnecessarily long or hard to understand. You may also want to cut and paste a little to help the narrative--for example, if the interviewee says "my mother was born in Italy" at the beginning of the interview but the rest of the mother's story comes three minutes later, you can cut and join the two segments together. Just make sure you do this responsibly, and that your editing doesn't change the interviewee's meaning or intent.
- Export your audio clips as mp3 files.
- Write a transcript for each clip, so facilitators can quickly scan the clip's content during the program and participants can read along. Write a brief bio (3-4 sentences) to provide context for listeners.

4. Order your clips

Finding clips for each phase of dialogue

Our dialogues follow the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#)'s "arc of dialogue," developed by consultant Tammy Bormann in 2009. Our programs also draw inspiration from [Humanities New York's](#) "Community Conversations" model. Our program model alternates between listening to clips from oral histories and group discussion of the clips, participants' experiences, and social issues. For more information on the arc of dialogue, visit our [Getting Started](#) page.



- *Phase One (Community Building)*: All participants introduce themselves to one another and answer an easy, non-threatening question. No clips are played during this phase.
 - *Phase Two (Sharing the Diversity of our Experiences)*: Participants listen to several oral history clips and share their own experiences with the group. Clips should connect to larger issues, but should not directly raise difficult topics. Including a clip with some humor works well during this phase.
 - *Phase Three (Exploring Perspectives Beyond Our Own Experiences)*: Participants listen to additional oral history clips and think about others' perspectives and the dialogue's theme more broadly. Clips should directly bring up these larger issues and you should include clips that directly touch on difficult topics.
 - *Phase Four (Synthesizing the Learning Experience)*: The dialogue ends with a question or questions that reinforce a sense of community. No clips are played during this phase.
- This process is best done in a group because different people will respond differently to the clips and pick up on varying aspects of them.
 - In general, Phases One and Four should not be preceded by clips. Phases Two and Three should each include between two and five clips. Each phase does not need to include the same number of clips.
 - All the clips for a particular phase do not need to be played at the same time. It is best to play between one and three clips at a time.
 - Think about what clips would work well when played together, such as ones which address similar aspects of your theme.
 - Think about whether a clip would best lead to a discussion about people's personal experiences or about the dialogue's theme more broadly. If it is the former, the clip will probably fit best in Phase Two; if it is the latter, it will probably be best suited to Phase Three.
 - Think about whether a clip addresses difficult material or topics.

5. Create questions for each phase of the dialogue

- This process is best done in a group because group discussion will better stimulate your creativity.
- All questions should be open-ended, have no right or wrong answer, and not require any outside knowledge to answer.
- Within the dialogue's theme, think about what topics you want to cover or that you think would lead to a good discussion.
- Questions should follow from the content in the clip(s) immediately preceding them. Think about what topics each clip includes and then brainstorm open-ended questions on those topics.
- Depending on the length, content, and number of clips, it may be more effective to play a few clips, ask some questions, play a few more, then ask more questions or to play all the clips for a phase at the same time and then ask questions.



- For each set of questions, think of two or three more than you need. That way, if the conversation proceeds quickly or participants are not responding to a particular question, you will have additional questions ready.

Tips for each phase

- *Phase One (Community Building)*: Phase One should include only one or two questions that are easy to answer. The facilitator may ask participants to briefly share an experience or opinion, but the question should be inclusive.
- *Phase Two (Sharing the Diversity of our Experiences)*: Questions during this phase help participants think about how the group’s experiences are similar and different from one another.
- *Phase Three (Exploring Perspectives Beyond Our Own Experiences)*: Questions should help participants explore the underlying social conditions that impact how people think about, and act on, important issues.
- *Phase Four (Synthesizing the Learning Experience)*: Questions should help the group reflect on what they have learned during the program and encourage participants to decide what, if any, next steps they want to take.

6. Create your “Facilitator’s Notes”

- The facilitator’s notes should include an overview of the program. You can adapt your facilitator’s notes from *Listen to Everyone’s* How-To Guides for our community dialogue programs.
- Our model for facilitator’s notes includes the following information, though you can adapt it to your needs:
 - Welcome.
 - Agenda.
 - Ground Rules.
 - Program Outline.
 - Information about audio selections and when to play them (see below).
 - Questions for each phase of dialogue.
 - Thank you and wrap up.
- Ground rules should consist of several guidelines for the discussion, to promote respectful conversation and allow everyone a chance to speak.
- The program outline should give the facilitator some helpful context for each audio selection. Hearing a brief bio of an interviewee whose clip is being played can help participants prepare to process the information, and when necessary can explain details that may be confusing in the clip. For example, if it is unclear who a little girl mentioned in the clip is, including “in this story, Herbert is talking about swimming with his younger sister,” will help clear it up.
- Our model includes the following information about audio clips, though you can adapt it to your needs:
 - Interviewee name.
 - Interviewer name.



- o File name (so you can find the clip easily on your audio device).
- o Date of interview.
- o Biographical information (basic relevant details about the interviewee, if you have them).

7. Create a Slide Show

- Having a slide show provides a visual component to your program. It also allows participants to read important information, such as the agenda and ground rules, in addition to hearing it.
- Our model includes the following slides, though you can adapt it to your needs:
 - o Program title
 - o Organization information
 - o Program goal(s)
 - o Agenda
 - o Guidelines for discussion
 - o Introductory questions (name, where you live, Phase One question)
 - o Photos of interviewees
 - o Thank you (end of program)

Some content in this document is adapted from the [International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#) and the [Smithsonian Institution](#).

