Guide to Using Your Own Oral History Material in Adult Home Dialogues

Although Listen to Everyone has provided audio clips to use with adult home 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 some structure to the conversation, and if you have multiple themes you have plenty of material for repeat visits with the same person.

- 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--not just nostalgia for the old days (some nostalgic conversations are fine, but we're hoping to dig a little deeper and make people feel like they're part of ongoing discussions).
- 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.
- Pick somewhere between eight 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. **Create an order for your clips**

- 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.
- Think about what clips address similar aspects of your theme.
- Clips that would best lead to a discussion about people's personal experiences should be placed earlier in the program. Clips which would best lead to a discussion about the dialogue's theme more broadly should be placed later in the program.
- Think about whether a clip addresses difficult material or topics. Those should generally be put in the second half of the program.

5. **Create questions**

- 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.
- Questions should complement the audio material and draw out people's thoughts and recollections.
- Since the program audience may be experiencing issues with their memory, avoid "do you remember" questions as much as possible by taking a broader focus and not limiting questions to a particular time period.

6. **Create your "Facilitator's Notes"**

- This section gives the facilitator some helpful context for the interview clip. It can help the participant 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, though you can adapt it to your needs:
  o Interviewee name.
  o File name (so you can find the clip easily on your audio device).
  o Year of interview.
  o Biographical information (basic relevant details about the interviewee, if you have them).
  o Transcript (word for word transcript of the audio clip).

7. Create a large-print and a regular-sized version of the transcripts

Our model includes the following, though you can adapt it to your needs:
- Interviewee name.
- Biographical information (basic relevant details about the interviewee, if you have them).
- Transcript (word for word transcript of the audio clip).

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