

# **Re-Telling the Stories of Others: Oral and Life History Interviewing and Writing**

16 April 2005 (last revised 22 February 2008)

Prepared by Rodney Frey  
American Indian Studies  
University of Idaho  
Moscow, Idaho 83844-1110  
208-885-6268  
rfrey@uidaho.edu

\* \* \* \* \*

Our premise is rather straightforward. As a humanity, *we are the stories we tell.*<sup>1</sup> In the stories we share with one another, we define the primary qualities of how we came to be, our origins, and what we can become, our destiny. In the stories, we define who we are, what the world is and how we are to relate to that world. Our ways of knowing and our ways of motivating are found in our stories. Through the stories, we learn and re-affirm our basic cultural values of time and space, causation and being, and give meaning to all aspects of our lives. In the stories, *we are*.

We carry forth our stories and with them create our social institutions, our ways of behaving toward each other. Family, church, school, recreation, art, government, economy, science, technology, work are all animated, structured and given meaning through our stories. We celebrate our stories at every opportunity: in Sunday worship at church or at a football stadium, in a graduation commencement or each Friday after work at the local bar, in a class or family reunion, in a hard-earned job promotion or vacation cruise to the Caribbean. We tell our stories at each juncture in our lives: at birth, at each birthday, at marriage, at divorce, at our death. Our lives are inundated with our stories.

---

<sup>1</sup>"Story" refers to the fundamental symbols and values, and the distinguishing cultural character pervading a portion or the entirety of a society and its various institutions; what I have come to term, "cultural story." It can be inclusive of both "mythic" as well as "historic" significance. And embedded within our cultural story is the single most important influence on the behaviors we exhibit and the worlds we create, our "values."

We carry forth our stories and with them create our view of the world about us and our ways of behaving toward it. How we define a landscape, the rush of water in a river, a sunset, a thunderstorm, the howl of a coyote, the flight of an eagle, the ant that walks across the kitchen table; all are predicated on the stories we tell. Our aesthetic, our religious, our economic and our scientific images of plant, animal, earth, star, and of their origin, dynamics and destiny are framed in our stories. The lives of others are inundated with our stories.

Simply put, our humanity and our world are defined in the stories we tell each other. Without stories there can be no human being, and there is no world.

It follows then that to understand and appreciate the heritage and values enshrined in any given family or person's own life history, we must learn something about the stories they tell. Through an appreciation of the stories, we have access to what is most essential to humanity, and to the life histories of families and of individuals.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before you begin the actual interview, think about the information you hope to gather. What are the **goals of your project**? What sort of information are you seeking? Is it a *life history* of a particular individual (first-person, idiosyncratic experiences, i.e., "he/she did it", bound by a specific cultural and historical context)? Is it the *oral traditions* of another person, and his or her family, that you seek (specific stories, traditions, or historical information passed down through different people, from generation to generation, to your interviewee, remembrances not necessarily experienced by the interviewee, "he/she learned it from others")? What are the particular parameters of your research, e.g., a particular geographic area, a historical period in time, an economic way of life, an educational or health care system, or a governmental or religious structure? *Goal setting* is the single most important aspect of your project. Ask yourself where you are at now, where do you want to go and how are you going to get there? Clarify your goals and your means to get there. Fuzzy goals result in frustration and missing important information. Have a vision of what may await you, but also be willing to re-direct

your goals as you grow in your project. Make a topical outline, establishing your research parameters and goals.

Given the goals of your project, your next task will be to *select someone to interview*. Given the desire to record and preserve for future generations the oral history of your family or someone else's family, it is critical that you seek out those elders and others who have the greatest knowledge on the families history. Ask your self who might best be able to offer you the information you seek? Is your interviewee a "willing" and enthusiastic participant? Does he/she have the time to work with you? Most of all, select someone who sincerely wants to share his or her story with you. Then develop a list of potential interviewees.

Don't go into the interview "cold." Gain an awareness of the cultural context and historical background of the family and/or individuals you are going to be interviewing. Research your topics. Consult with relatives and friends of your intended interviewee, local historians, libraries, newspapers, university resources. Learn the broad characteristics of the territory. What sorts of questions need to be asked given this larger context?

Prepare *open-ended questions*. You may know the broad topics, but you do not know the specifics. You're as an "infant," learning someone else's cultural story for the first time. "You don't know it." Use open-ended, evocative questions like: "Why did you...?" "How did you feel about...?" "What was it like...?" "Could you describe how...?" "What sort of person was he/she...?" Ask the who, what, when and most importantly, the why questions. Open-ended questions let your interviewee set the direction of information sharing and let him/her "lead." Ask questions that spark the imagination and focus the interview, that attempt to reveal the cultural story of the interviewee.

Avoid closed-ended questions that elicit "yes-no" answers like: "Did you like...?" "Were you affected by your teachers ...?" "Are the traditions still...?" They have their place, such as determining the date and place of birth, years in school, etc. But it is a limited place.

For much of oral history research, a chronological ordering of events on one's life and the lives of others serves as a template for which questions to ask at what moment in the interview process. Start with the earliest remembrances and work your way through time, spotting at all those most memorable events to explore in questions more fully. Develop questions that **chronicle a life-span**, questions about birth place, parents and family, memories from infancy and adolescents, schooling, travel, employment, etc. Let your interviewee be the guide through his or her life history territory.

**Avoid generalities** like: "Tell me all about your childhood..." which elicits nothing more than a list of names and dates, and a very bored interviewee. Ask instead, "What did you like to do when you were six or seven?"

**Write down your questions.** Know the questions you seek from your interviewee. But don't be rigid about your list. Questions will always be waiting for you once you are in the actual interview process.

To get shy people to open up to the interview, take along photos or objects (heirlooms or memorabilia, tools, maps, diagrams, etc.) and ask the interviewee to tell you about them. **Props** can also "draw out memories." Remember to number each prop and mention it in the tape recording.

In order to accurately record and, in turn, communicate another's cultural story, it is recommended that you use an audio or video **tape or digital recorder**. It is preferable that your recorder has a detachable microphone in order to pick-up the best possible sound quality. Be familiar with your recording equipment. Experiment with mic placement, volume, brand of tape, digital media, etc. before you begin. Make sure the sound quality is good. Gather recording equipment: video recorder and tripod or audio cassette or digital recorder, blank tapes (unwrap tapes, advance lead of tape and always bring more blank tapes than you think you'll need) or

extra digital memory cards, fresh batteries or extension cord and 3-prong adaptor, separate microphone and foam pad, pen and note pad.

If you are considering using a *digital audio recording device*, beware of certain lower-end models that use their own proprietary memory system. That is, they may use a built-in flash memory card with a format unique to that manufacturer. This is okay, but can present a problem if you have limited built-in memory and can not readily download your audio files to a secondary source such as your computer. And with only its own proprietary memory option, transferring your audio files to others can be problematic. It is recommended that you use a digital recorder that uses a standard memory card, such as the Secure Digital Memory Card, and that can record in such industry standards as the uncompressed .wav format (which is of the highest level of broadcast quality available though also the most consumptive of memory space) and/or the compressed .mp3 format (which captures the normal range of sound yet does not consume vast amounts of limited memory on your card). Also consider using the largest size of memory card you can. A twenty minute interview segment recorded in .wav format will take up to 112,500 KB of memory, while the same twenty minute segment will take up only 18,700 KB of memory on a card. Memory cards can range in size, but try to get them in at least 512 MB of space, if not up to **one or two gigabits**. The greater the memory, the more options you have.

It is critical that you first gain *permission* from your interviewee to use the obtained information. It is ethically essential that the interviewee fully understand the nature of the research procedures that he or she will be subjected, and to what end the research will be used. If someone else's cultural story is to be recorded and shared publicly (with fellow students, for example), an Informed Consent Form should be signed by the interviewee. Review with the interviewee the nine-point description of the purposes and procedures of the interviewee that are listed in the Consent Form. If there are any special conditions or if the interviewee wishes to remain anonymous, his or her wishes must be respected and indicated on the Consent Form. See the attached Informed Consent Form for an example and template that you can use in your own situation.

In addition to oral interview information, do not forget to gather *other cultural artifacts* such as family photographs, art work, etc. Know the *context*. Copies may have to be made from them. As you collect these objects be sure to catalog them and record all information known about them.

To get started with the interview, make an *appointment* with your interviewee ahead of time (in person, phone or letter). Be sure that the location for the interview is at a site that minimizes interference by others. Be on time to your first interview session. Schedule the session around the interviewee's family needs. Clearly *introduce* yourself and your project intentions to your interviewee. Answer any questions about the project. Go over the Informed Consent Form and gain his or her signature. Clearly explain the procedures, and the focus and parameters of the interview. Interview only one person at a time. If you're talking to the interviewee and another person wants to put in his "two cents' worth," tell him you would love to interview him, but at another time soon. It's best to make this clear before you begin your interview. The best way to guarantee this is to have just you and your interviewee present in the room. Make sure there's no background noise (t.v., dishwasher, other conversations) that may interfere with the quality of the tape. Make sure everyone is comfortable, with good seating and water. And always do a brief test of your audio/video equipment to be sure the mike is picking up both voices clearly.

*Break the ice* by chatting briefly about related topics before you start the tape recording. But don't turn the tape recorder off and on more than absolutely necessary once it's going. It's a good idea to tape a brief introductory lead-in before you ask your first question. Tell who is being interviewed, by whom, when, and the general subjects to be covered.

A key to a successful interview is in using good questioning and listening skills. Be honest and sincere, "be yourself." Interviewing is the art form of dialoguing with another human being; you are in conversation with someone else. It is a give-and-take situation. If you want

honest and sincere information, you have to give it. Get acquainted. Establish your "kinship;" establish "*rapport*."

Begin by asking for a brief (2 or 3 minute) bit of *background information* about the interviewee: where and when born, parents, major places lived during life, careers or other important areas of personal experiences. Easy to answer and non-intimidating questions help relax the interviewee.

People can usually describe *concrete* things more easily than conceptual. Start with the concrete. You want answers that are descriptive as well as factual. "Can you describe your home outside and inside?" or "Would you explain to me what you did in a typical day's work?" are good examples.

*Don't talk too much about yourself.* Resist the impulse to contribute your own stories or information or to put words in the mouth of the person you're interviewing.

Don't talk to the recorder or the mike; talk to the person you're interviewing, with lots of direct eye contact (if appropriate, given the cultural considerations of your interviewee). If you act as if the mike isn't there, chances are your interviewee will soon forget about it, too.

Refer now and then to your general topical questions; *keep your goals in mind*. But don't let your specific questions and goals become your "script." Let the interviewee set the direction and the lead; he/she is the one with the information. Be an *active listener*. Ask questions based upon your interviewee's responses. Be flexible. Don't be afraid of going off on a "tangent." Don't be so anxious about asking your next question that you fail to hear what your interviewee is saying.

Sometimes the best information comes up unexpectedly. If you're into something good, follow it up with appropriate, *follow-up questions*. Follow-up questions can also elicit more

detailed information as well as to make sure your interviewee has had a chance to tell all he/she wants to tell. "What happened then?" "How did you feel about that?" "How did that turn out?" After pursuing this line of inquiry, guide the interviewee back to your original questions.

Try ***not to interrupt*** your interviewee. If your interviewee mentions something you'd like to follow up, wait for a natural pause in the conversation and then say something like: "A few minutes ago you were saying that..." Don't ask more than one question at a time.

Don't rush into every pause with a new question. Silences are natural, and they may give your interviewee a chance to think of additional materials on the subject. Silence is not wasted time. Take advantage of the "***silent probe***."

Show your interviewee that ***you're interested*** through nods and facial expressions. Express your appreciation with occasional responses like: "That's a great story!" or "That's really interesting!" The way you ask questions, your tone of voice, your body language, are all keys to the responses your questions will get.

***Don't make irrelevant or distracting comments.*** And never contradict your interviewee, whether you agree with what the person is saying or not. Instead, ask further questions that shed light on the issue being discussed. It may help you determine the various versions to a given situation or event. There can be many differing accounts of the same event, all of which are "correct." Remember the difference between interviewing and cross-examining.

If your interviewee can't or won't give you an answer to a particular question, it's better to ***move on***. You must acknowledge that there will be some information that you will not be able to gather. Gaps will exist. Some of the story may not be meant to be shared publicly. It may be too personal or even sacred for your interviewee.



Establish a **basic time frame** by asking: "What year was that?" or "About how old were you when that happened?" If your interviewee doesn't know, try to get at least a rough idea by asking a further question like: "How long afterward was that, a month? a year?"

Try to establish what your **interviewee's role** was in the events he/she is describing--a participant, an observer, etc. Or, if he/she is passing on a story rather than describing a personal experience, try to determine who he/she heard it from or the original source of the story.

If your interviewee uses **unusual words** or linguistic terms that are unfamiliar to you, have the interviewee explain them and try to spell them out.

Adjust the length of the interview to your **interviewee's comfort** and attention span. Forty-five minutes to an hour is a good length. If it's too short it will probably be superficial, and if it's too long it will get uncomfortable. You can always take a break and resume later. Older folks tire more easily; cut the interview off at the first sign of fatigue.

It is likely that numerous sessions will be needed for some interviewees. Let the interviewee know ahead of time that there can be **future sessions**.

And always remember whose story you're trying to tell. Try not biasing your information with your own perspective. You want to present the story of your interviewee from **his/her own perspective**. Attempt to see the world through his/her eyes. You have the tremendous responsibility of continuing to speak your interviewee's voice for all the others, as well as the future generations, who will read your interview.

After the interview is completed, show your sincere appreciation by **thanking** your interviewee. Then follow-up with a formal letter of appreciation. Ask your interviewee if he/she is willing to sign the Informed Consent Form (if he/she has not already done so), allowing you to share his or her story publicly.

**Label the tape or digital card** clearly with the name of your interviewee, the date and your name. Break out the tabs on the tape so it doesn't get erased by accident, or "lock" your digital media card.

**Indexing** the interview is the next essential step. Prepare a written index of the audio/video tape recording, using a stopwatch or clock, or metering device on the recorder. The purpose of the index is to summarize the contents of the interview and to indicate approximately where on the tape or in a digital file a certain subject is discussed.

Indexing by the minute is best since the meter number systems vary from machine to machine. Use a stopwatch or a clock. Divide the tape or memory card into approximately five-minute segments or by the obvious breaks in subjects. Make your index fairly detailed – especially if you do not intend to transcribe the entire taped interview. A detailed index will make even a cassette that is not transcribed useful to other researchers. Index by names, dates, place names, processes, family names, customs, events, etc., indicated by the information in the interview. Do the index as soon as possible after the interview so the subjects are still fresh in your mind.

Using the index of the tape or digital recording as your guide, next **transcribe** those selected portions of the text that you want to include in your written report. The goal in transcribing an interview is to provide an accurate, verbatim written record of the interview dialogue in a form which will best represent your interviewee's cultural story. Transcribe everything that is said by the interviewee, including colloquial pronunciations, "yeah" and "goin'," as well as indicate the pauses in the speech pattern, phrase repetitions, and voice inflections placed on specific words. Meaning is conveyed not only in the words spoken but also in the way those words are spoken.

It is strongly recommended that you show your written index and the story transcription, as a first draft of the life history, to your interviewee and ask him/her to **check it for accuracy**. After all, your interviewee is the "authority" and the "owner" of his or her stories. Keep in mind

that a review can also spark additional insights and memories by the interviewee. Be ready for another interview session. Allow your interviewee to help you construct the written text of his or her story. But let him or her know that this draft is *not* the final life history text, but only a work in progress and tentative at that. This review stage still a segment of the interview process.

When a final life history text is completed, it is most appropriate to *leave a copy* of it with your interviewee. There is no better way of saying *thank you* than by presenting your interviewee with a personal copy of his or her own story. You may also want to donate the cultural story (tape, index and transcription) to your local library or college oral history archive. But before leaving a copy of his or her family story, there is one more step in the life history research process.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gathering the stories of others is only part of your responsibility in doing life history research. You must also, with clarity, authenticity and appropriateness, re-tell those stories to any number of audiences. When someone shares his or her most cherished stories with you, you have the added and enormous responsibility of getting it right in the first place – of conveying the essence and meaning of the original stories – and then, in the act of re-telling it, rendering that story accessible to any reader who may engage the life history, at any time, under any circumstance. It is as if you are constructing a “*word bridge*,” anchored at one end in the voice of your interviewee and at the other in the ears of your audiences, and carefully engineering the structure of the bridge in such manner as to allow the free flow of travelers over its expanse. There are thus at least three distinct considerations in writing and presenting someone’s life history – getting it right, rendering it accessibility, and linking the style and format of the writing with the content of the story.

1. “*Getting it right.*” It is important to acknowledge throughout the life history research process that the stories being shared with you are the “cultural and intellectual property” of the

interviewee. The stories belong to the individual and family from which they originate; not to you, or to any other organization. It is a sacred trust that has been bestowed upon you to get, what is considered most cherished by someone else, *right*. This is why you need to have your interviewee carefully review the final drafts of your project. It is only he or she who can assure that the written story is authentically presented and accurate to the best of his or her understandings. And it is only he or she who can also assure that the stories that are to be shared publically are appropriate to share in the first place. There are some family events that should be kept within the family. Allow the judgement of your interviewee to be the best guide on what others come to learn. Remember that your ultimate goal is to re-tell the stories of the interviewee based upon two critical criteria: *authenticity* and *appropriateness* of the stories.

2. “*Rendering the Story Accessibility.*” Implicit in the very act of writing down someone’s story is the sharing of that story with someone else. It makes little sense to write down a wonderful life history only to have it kept shelved in a book case. A life history project is meant to be shared. So you must anticipate your audiences, as you must also seek to render your written stories accessible to them. Become cognizant of who might access the life history, at any time in the future – be it a great, great grand child of the interviewee, or a perfect stranger. Long after your interviewee has passed on, long after you have passed on, what you pen to paper today could be pulled off a book self some where and read by someone 200 years from now. As you construct your presentation, attempt to speak to them, re-telling the stories of another to others. While always firmly anchored in the voice of your interviewee, consider how your interview might speak with a great, great grand child or to that perfect stranger. This often necessitates you anticipating what might be unclear in the words of the interviewee and providing additional contextual history or social background on specific events or situations.

3. “*Style and Format.*” As you know there is a unequivocal relationship between *what* you are trying to say, and *how* you say it – between the content of the story and the style of its re-telling. In your “getting it right” yet rendering it “accessible,” you must deliberate carefully on the manner of how you want to write down and present the stories. Consider the style and format of your writing. You have been handed a wonderful story to tell. For example, it would be

inappropriate to re-tell an emotionally-charged, very personal event in someone's life by using rather formal, scientific jargon and idioms, and illustrating it with a series of bar graphs and statistical tables! In addition, the style and format you use to re-tell a story should also be in the "language" that renders that story accessible and understandable by other readers. For example, you would not use the formality of a college-level textbook as the style to present the stories to fourth graders. Experiment with alternative ways of presenting the same story. Consider poetic and narrative styles, as well as formal styles. Consider the inclusion of visual imagery, photographs, and art work in your presentation. Consider a format that includes actual audio and/or video clips of the voice of your interviewee. With the advent of digital technology, such as DVDs and the Internet, there is now an explosion of possible creative ways to re-tell the life history stories of others, rendering them even more authentic and yet accessible than ever before.

A final note or two. As a human being who has been entrusted with what could be someone's most cherished stories, at some point in your written text **acknowledge who you are** and your role in this interviewing and writing process. In any research and writing endeavor you can never stand outside, as if an unbiased neutral observer. How you have asked questions, how you have responded with follow-up questions during an interview, how you have organized the stories and the means used in presenting those stories, who you dialogue with your interviewee and with the future audiences, all presumes you a part of the research and writing process. You are not a silent partner, but an essential collaborator in re-telling someone's stories

Remember always that in doing a life history project, a sacred trust has been bestowed upon you, that you must be willing to carry forth with all your passion and commitment. But always remember the humanity of this process and be willing to laugh or shed a tear, and **have some fun** throughout the endeavor. As you exude passion and vitality so too will your re-telling.

**Suggested next steps.** If you are doing a life-history, consider:

Atkinson, Robert. *The Life Story Interview (Qualitative Research Methods)*. Sage Publications: 1998.

Cole, Ardra Cole and J. Gary Knowles, ed., *Lives in Context: the Art of Life History Research*. AltaMira Press: 2001.

**Informed Consent Form**  
A Family Oral History

Project Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_

---

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (interviewee), state that I am over 18 years of age, and freely and voluntarily wish to participate in the research being proposed above.

Description of purposes and explanation of procedures **(provided by the researcher in oral or written form to the interviewee)**:

1. A statement that the study involves research.
2. An explanation of the purposes of the research.
3. The expected duration of the subject's participation.
4. A description of the procedures (including methodology) to be followed.
5. A description of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts.
6. A description of any benefits to the subject, or to others which may reasonably be expected from the research.
7. A statement describing the extent, if any, to which confidentiality of data and privacy of subject(s) will be maintained.
8. An explanation of whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the research, subject's rights, and research related injury to the subject(s).
9. A statement that participation is voluntary.

I acknowledge that \_\_\_\_\_ (principal researcher) has fully explained to me the purposes and procedures, and the risks of this research; he has informed me that I may withdraw from participation at any time without prejudice; and has informed me that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I freely and voluntarily consent to my participation in the above mentioned research project.

I waive \_\_\_\_\_ or do not waive \_\_\_\_\_ the right to confidentiality (my name may or may not be used in the research).

List any special stipulations or conditions established by the interviewee in the conduct or disposition of this project on the back.

Signature of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Principal Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_