

Oral History Guide

Process for Conducting and
Submitting Oral History Interviews

VOICES
from the
GRASSROOTS



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Introduction

The Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project was designed to document, preserve, and amplify the voices of grassroots organizers in Detroit during the era of emergency management and bankruptcy. Through interviews with longtime activists and organizers, this project explores how Detroiters are organizing their communities to challenge systemic racism and build movements for racial equity and self-determination.

The oral histories within this collection contain stories of community, oppression, resistance, transformation, and hope. While the focus is on the period of state takeovers and emergency management since 1999, some stories date back to the early 1940s while others begin in the late 1990s, all showing the long history of racism and resistance in Detroit. When put together, these diverse stories and perspectives create a mosaic of Detroit's vibrant living traditions of community organizing and social movements.

This guide is designed for those interested in contributing oral history interviews to the Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project. It contains information on how to prepare, what kinds of questions to ask, how to transcribe, and how to submit oral history interviews to the collection, including required consent forms. This guide can also be used as a template for designing other oral history projects in your community. For questions, please send us an email at detroitgrassrootsvoices@gmail.com

We are grateful to the Black Bottom Archives for allowing us to use their Oral History Guide as a template in creating this guide.

Preparing for the Interview

- 1. Get familiar with the focus and objectives of the oral history project**
 - This will help you focus the questions you'll ask during the interview
- 2. Identify a narrator (interviewee) and schedule an interview**
 - Make sure to explain the purpose of the interview and the project overview
- 3. Conduct some background research on the narrator**
 - You don't need to know the person's entire life story, but it's helpful to be familiar with the subject matter and/or their personal background to tailor questions based on their unique history

4. Prepare a list of questions for the interview

- Use Sample Interview Questions as a template and tailor them to the narrator
 - Ask about significant organizations, events, actions, people, ideas, etc.
- Avoid yes/no questions—they create dead-ends
- Less is more: leave space for follow-up questions
- Arrange the questions in a way that flows and follows a clear path (think chronologically)

5. Practice interviewing skills with a friend, family member, or neighbor

- Scroll down to the “Conducting the Interview” section for helpful tips

Sample Interview Questions

Note: Tailor these questions to suit the person you are interviewing and supplement with your own questions based on your research on their organizing work.

- Name, where you live, organizations/affiliations
- Could you describe your neighborhood and the city growing up/when you got here?
- How did you first become active in protests or community organizing?
- What/who have been some of your greatest influences in your activism/organizing work?
- In your analysis, why was Detroit placed under emergency management?
- How has the city changed since emergency management was imposed? How have your communities been impacted?
- Can you talk about the formation of [insert organization]?
- What have been some of your greatest successes? Shortcomings?
- What lessons have you learned about community organizing?
- What’s your vision for the future of Detroit that guides your work?
- Who else do we need to speak with to document these histories?
- Is there anything I missed that you want to get on the record?

Conducting the Interview

1. Find a quiet space that will be free from interruptions and distractions for the next 1.5 hours. Make sure to turn off or silence background noises that may come from televisions, radios, cellphones, etc.
2. Set up your recording equipment and test it to make sure everything is working.
3. Review the release/consent form with the narrator, answer any questions, and ask them to sign the form.
4. When you're both ready to begin, start the recording with the following line:
 - “This interview is being conducted for the Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project. The interviewer is [Insert name]. The narrator is [Insert name]. The interview is taking place at [Location or via Zoom] on [Date].”
5. Helpful tips for conducting the interview:
 - Listen actively and offer non-verbal cues
 - Affirm responses, show empathy, express interest or concern
 - Be patient and allow narrator to complete their thoughts
 - Give enough time to ensure the person is finished, rather than pausing and contemplating the remainder of their response
 - Err on the side of longer pauses between questions
 - Take note of interesting topics, anecdotes, events, etc. that you want to follow-up on
 - Don't let note-taking distract you, though. Stay focused, maintain eye contact as much as possible, and jot down just enough to jog your memory
 - Pay attention to questions that have already been answered
 - Your narrator is likely to answer multiple questions from your list in one response. Don't waste time by duplicating questions, unless you are seeking clarification or more specific details
 - Make smooth transitions between questions
 - Recall information from the previous response to lead into the next question

- Be conversational and avoid rigid transitions (“My next question is...”)
 - Ask follow-up questions to get the narrator to expand on topics of interest
 - Try to pull out details relevant to the major themes of the project
 - “You mentioned...can you tell me more about that?”
 - Pay attention to what might be going unsaid as well
 - Pay attention to the narrator’s emotions
 - It’s natural for oral histories to trigger intense emotions, painful memories, and trauma. Be empathetic!
 - If they are visibly distraught, choking up, etc., be patient and ask if they would like to take a break
 - If the narrator is rambling or getting way off-track, try to bring them back to focus
 - Try non-verbal cues first
 - Ex. open your mouth like you want to start talking
 - If that doesn’t work, wait for a brief pause and interject politely by using a segue to the next question
 - Keep an eye on the clock
 - If you’re getting close to 1.5 hours, check in with the narrator to see how they’re doing with stamina and time
 - If there’s still a substantial amount to get through, propose scheduling a second session
 - If you’re near the end of the questions, ask the narrator if they’re okay with going longer
- 6. Thank the narrator at the conclusion of the interview and ask if you can follow-up if any questions arise**
- Let them know you’ll be sharing the recording and transcript with them when they are available

Release Forms

Before conducting the interview, review the terms of the release form with the narrator and ask them to sign the form. Please explain to the narrator that their interview will be archived by the Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University.

If you or the narrator have any questions, please email detroitgrassrootsvoices@gmail.com

1. [Narrator Release Form](#) (for the person being interviewed)
2. [Interviewer Release Form](#) (for the person conducting the interview)

Audio and Video Recording

Before conducting an oral history interview, decide how you are going to record it. You can either record just the audio or audio with video. The most important thing is to have a quality audio recording that can be heard loud and clear. Listeners are likely to lose interest more quickly if they have to struggle to hear the narrator's words. High quality audio can also be used in more ways than low quality audio.

Audio: If you're using a smartphone, position yourself and the narrator close to the microphone so it picks up your voices clearly. Before starting the interview, record a brief sample conversation and play it back to see if the audio is loud and clear enough. If you have the resources and plan to do multiple interviews, here are some examples of high quality microphones that plug into your smartphone.

Video: The pros of video recording include: allowing viewers to visually connect with the narrator and creating materials that can be used in documentaries or digital exhibits. The cons of video recording include: it can make narrators uncomfortable, self-conscious, or nervous and it adds another responsibility when conducting the interview.

If you choose to video record the interview, make sure the video and audio are in sync. Make sure to choose a location that is quiet and has good lighting so that the narrator can be clearly seen and heard. Set up your camera or smartphone on a tripod or stand level with the narrator's face and focus the frame from their shoulders up. This will make viewers feel like they're in conversation with the narrator when they watch the video.

Once recording is finished, check to make sure the audio and video are in sync. Then save and backup the files with the following naming style: **narrator's lastname_firstname_interview_year** (Doe_Jane_Interview_2023)

Transcription

The goal of transcribing is to translate the content and context of an oral history interview into written form for accessibility, searchability, and preservation. If you have access to transcription software and want to use it, make sure to review for accuracy and edit as needed.

1. **Make a copy of the VFG Transcription Template to use for the transcription**
2. **Find a relatively quiet place to get started - it will be easier to hear, especially if the sound quality of the interview is muffled. A pair of headphones are helpful for hearing words and sound clearly**
3. **The transcription should be as accurate to the conversation as possible. Include any false starts, verbal slips, abrupt changes in subject, grammatical errors, etc. Transcribe everything except “ums” and “uhs” etc.**

4. **Dialogue format should be as follows:**

SPEAKER 1 NAME: Hello.

SPEAKER 2 NAME: Hey.

After the first identification of speakers using their full names, identify them with two **bold** initials thereafter. For example, use **HM** to identify Helen Moore.

To identify who is speaking here are a few tips:

- Carefully listen for names or identifiers (i.e. speaker's niece, daughter, mom, etc.) to distinguish speakers.
 - Listen to the cadence (speech pattern) of each speaker to distinguish who is talking
5. **Timestamp every 2-3 minutes to identify parts of the interview easily. Always timestamp the beginning and end of the interview.**
 - Timestamp format should be hour, minute, second format:
[[00:00:00]]
 6. **Replay the interview to check for errors and accuracy in your transcription. Depending on the length, it helps to replay the interview in sections as you go along, preferably every 10 minutes.**
 7. **It helps to use parentheses and italics to describe (actions, emotions, or pauses) and establish a sense of the environment.**

ISSA: (*Slaps hand against table*) I told you I was bad at directions.

LISA: That explains why I waited an hour for you when we met up.
(*EVERYONE laughs*)

8. If tangent, background conversations, or actions occur during the interview that you are certain are a distraction or insignificant, you can simply write “a tangent is occurring” and timestamp when the interview resumes.

(*There is a brief tangent conversation while ISSA gets up and gets a tissue until [[00:12:34]]*)

9. Helpful Tips

- If you are unfamiliar with a street name or name of a place, it helps to research it for correct spelling.
- Mark any indecipherable words with (_____???)
- Questions about spelling should be indicated with (??) or (ph) for phonetic spellings
- Spell out all words except titles (Mrs., Dr., etc.)
- Use brackets for any explanatory information needed such as to define an acronym used: ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union]; also use brackets to insert actions by the narrator: [laughs] or [smacks table]; also include any information about stopping the recording or other mechanical issues: [outside noises interrupted interview]
- Include the full name of a person the first time mentioned. If narrator only uses first or last name fill in missing information [Jane] Doe; also add any geographical information needed: Detroit [Michigan]
- Use quotation marks for any quotes used by narrator
- Use ellipses to indicate an incomplete sentence and dashes within sentences to offset any changes of subject, etc.

10. After completing the transcription, write a brief 150-200 word summary of the interview for the abstract. Use the narrator’s full name the first time and then just their first name after that. Write the abstract in the present tense.

- Check out some of the transcripts on www.voicesfromthegrassroots.org for examples

11. Save the transcription as a Word doc using the following naming style:

- narrator’s lastname_firstname_transcript (Doe_Jane_Transcript)

Interview Submission

Interviews may be submitted via [this Google Form](#). A signed release form (see below) must be included with all submissions. If you have any questions, or would like to submit your interview audio via a Dropbox file, flash drive, or some other medium, please email detroitgrassrootsvoices@gmail.com

