

# USING ORAL HISTORY

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## Summary

This fact sheet provides information about how oral history can be a valuable tool for Indigenous communities seeking to include oral tradition in their community planning efforts. Oral history provides community planners with a tool to conduct background research on communities, a key step in the planning phase of community plan development. Oral history can help identify what shapes a community's cultural beliefs, social structures, and practices.

**Keywords:** community engagement, collecting data, managing / storing data, Elders / knowledge keepers, oral tradition

## What is Oral History?

Oral history is a recording process that uses interviews to preserve memories, stories, and interpretation of events.<sup>1</sup> It documents historical and daily life events, and can be a tool to investigate how individual and community experience, identity, memory, and history influence a community's cultural beliefs, structures, and practices.<sup>2</sup> Because oral history reflects memories and an interpretation of events, it helps capture individual and community perspectives, behaviours, social influences, and ideology in a way other background gathering practices aren't able to.<sup>3</sup> Collected oral history can be analysed and interpreted, used to produce a timeline of historical events, and develop theories for why and how events occurred.<sup>4</sup>

### Indigenous Oral Tradition

Like oral history, oral tradition is a recording process that preserves memories, stories and interpretation of events. But unlike oral history, oral traditions are typically not preserved in writing but are preserved through stories, song, and language. Indigenous cultural beliefs, social structures and practices are shaped by the information preserved in these forms, where many are considered the basis of Indigenous knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous knowledge is intimately tied to land, and is shaped by individual perspectives of

*...oral traditions are typically not preserved in writing but are preserved through stories, song, and language.*

events and experiences.<sup>6</sup> This knowledge is shared by oral tradition between families, communities and tribes, and over time becomes part of the collective oral tradition and an important tool in preserving Indigenous knowledge of land, resources and way of life.<sup>7</sup>

## Why Use Oral History?

Using oral history allows planning initiatives to reflect the current and historical cultural setting of the community. By collecting various perspectives and viewpoints of events, oral history can supplement the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, and diaries.<sup>8</sup> This can be a useful tool to:

- Build a comprehensive story of the past;
- Understand how communities and people have experienced history;
- Understand what has changed over time; and
- Preserve a moment in time and memories of the past.<sup>9</sup>

### Oral History Narrator

A person that is interviewed as part of an oral history project who has first-hand experience related to or has eyewitnessed an event related to the project topic.<sup>10</sup>

## Research Methods

Key research methods to use when documenting and analysing oral history:<sup>19</sup>

1. **Interviewing:** Used to collect information related to an event, this method helps capture personal experience and interpretation in the documentation of events.
2. **Recording:** Provides a way to save interview information digitally (video and audio) and can easily be accessed for reference and review.
3. **Transcription:** Used to turn the spoken word to written form and prepares the collected information for coding analysis.
4. **Preservation:** Provides a way to store and preserve research data in a safe and accessible way.

## How Can Oral History be Used?

The first step in the planning stage of comprehensive community planning requires background information be gathered to understand the current situation in the community. Oral history and oral tradition can provide a way to fill the information gaps in existing plans and studies, and help a community gather background information like:

- History/culture of the community and its role in the community;
- Programs, services, and community organizations;
- Infrastructure assets;
- Land and resource location, and surrounding areas;
- Activities on and uses of the land and available resources;
- Central leadership body and other leadership bodies; and
- Government relations (municipal, provincial, regional).<sup>10</sup>

Oral tradition could also help gather information on traditional Indigenous land use and occupancy. Land Use and Occupancy Mapping records cultural and resource geography, and links geography with oral traditions.<sup>11</sup> It collects individual experience on the land, records key land use and occupancy, and uses information gathered as background data for mapping exercises.

## Who Provides Oral History?

The scope of an oral history project will determine who provides information and varies from project to project. Factors like age, sex, and background should be considered by community planners when selecting oral history narrators because they can significantly influence the information gathered.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of who provides the information, community planners need to consider and address any ethical concerns involved with interviewing people. Because

oral history works closely with people and may deal with sensitive matters, ethical research relationship built on respect and trust must be established. When planning an oral history project community planners need to:

- Ensure informed consent;
- Commit to a long-range outlook;
- Be sensitive to relationships and reputations; and
- Deliver a correct representation of meaning expressed in the interview.<sup>13</sup>

If using oral tradition, community planners must also be sensitive to Indigenous traditions surrounding the sharing of knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is considered sacred, specialized, known by few, and shared only when in the best interest of the Indigenous culture.<sup>14</sup> Elders are the keepers of Indigenous knowledge and their permission is required prior to collecting oral traditions.<sup>15</sup> In addition, OCAP principles should be followed and respected.

### Project Process

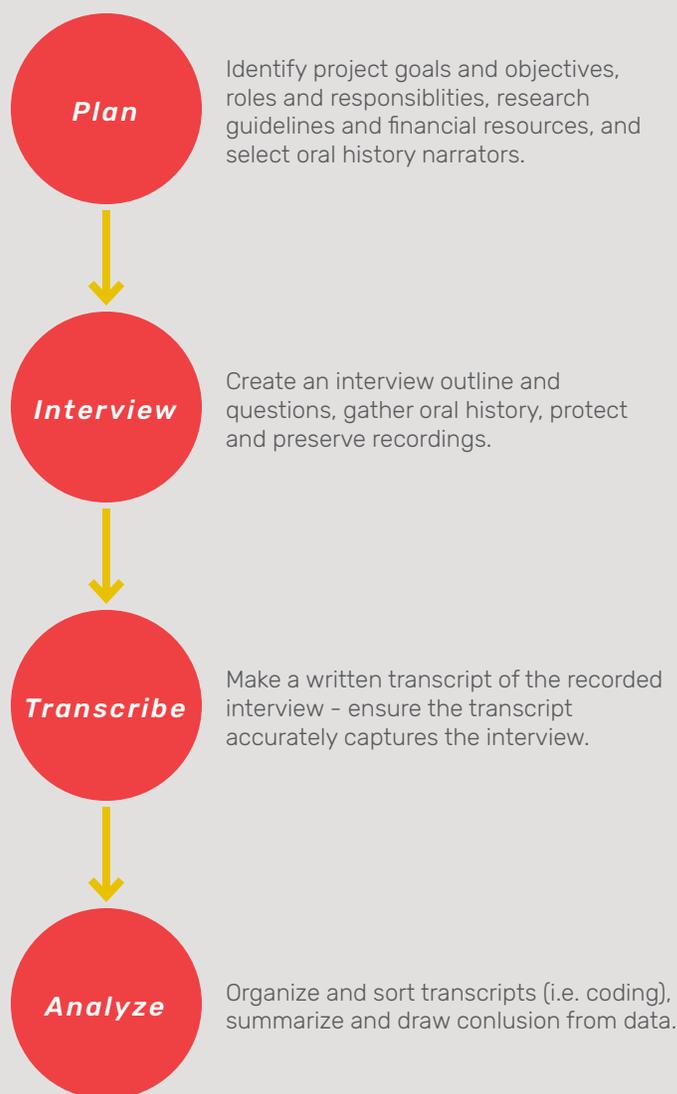


Figure 1 | Steps to complete in an oral history project

## How do you Organize an Oral History Project?

Oral history projects are most successful when carefully planned. Planning helps community planners identify the resources, time, and skills required to complete an oral history project.

Determining why the oral history project is needed is key to developing the project goals. It helps understand what the project is looking to achieve, what community planners already know, and what is unknown.<sup>16</sup> Engaging with community members can help develop goals and objectives, and determine who would make a good oral history narrator for the project. Making a list of people who might be able to provide valuable information will help narrow the search for interview candidates. Be sure to set timelines for research, interviews, transcription and analysis to keep the project on track.

For more information on how to research preserved information, see *Conducting Archival Research*.

Community planners also need to think about how they will record interviews. This includes considering who will fund, purchase, own, use, and maintain the recording equipment.<sup>17</sup> Community planners should also determine if any legal documents are needed before interviewing oral narrators, as well as what will be done with the interview recordings after the project is completed.

Table 1 list some key questions community planners should ask while organizing an oral history project.

## Final Thoughts

Oral history can be an important tool for communities in building comprehensive community plans. It can help fill the information gaps in existing plans and studies, and ensure a community's cultural beliefs, structures, and practices are reflected. Indigenous oral tradition can further help this by better representing Indigenous history and culture. By using oral history and oral traditions in background information gathering processes, Indigenous history and culture can be better integrated into the planning process.

**Table 1 | Key questions to pose when organizing an oral history project**

Adapted from (UNC School of Education. "Ten questions for planning an oral history project." Accessed January 8, 2018. <http://web.archive.org/web/20160416075952/http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/765>.)

<b>What are your goals?</b>	Thinking about project goals will help choose an appropriate project scope, set timeframes, determine oral history narrators, and use resources wisely.
<b>How will you manage the time involved?</b>	Thinking about how to plan your time will help allocate resources for research, interviewing, transcribing, and analysis.
<b>Will partnerships be required?</b>	Because oral history can be a long-term undertaking, community planners should determine if tasks like research, question-writing and interviewing may be better addressed with partnerships. Partners could include consultants, non-profits, universities, community groups, etc.
<b>How will oral history narrators be selected?</b>	Determining who will be interviewed may require consultation with community elders, local leaders, and community groups.
<b>What will happen to the recordings after they are collected?</b>	It is necessary to protect and preserve the recorded data. Determining how this will be completed while complying with OCAP principles is essential.
<b>What equipment will you use?</b>	Thinking about what information you will need to record, interview, transcribe and preserve information will help determine what resources will be required.
<b>How will the interview be transcribed?</b>	Thinking about transcription can help determine who will complete the task, determine resources, and set a timeframe.
<b>What will be the final product?</b>	Determining what the expected project deliverable will be helps set priorities and clarifies expectations.
<b>How will oral history narrators be acknowledged?</b>	Thinking about how to relay the project outcomes to interview participants helps ensure continued community participation in planning initiatives.

## Further Reading

**CCP Handbook: Comprehensive Community Planning for First Nations in BC** by Indian and Northern Development Affairs Canada

This handbook provides information on Indigenous community planning. Used in the Planning stage of CCP, oral history can be used as a tool to gather community background information.

**Chief Kerry's Moose: A guidebook to land use and occupancy mapping, research design and data collection** by Terry N. Tobias

This guidebook provides an organized and easily understandable outline for collecting and mapping oral traditions, and guides community planners in designing land use and occupancy research.

**Introduction to Oral History** by Baylor University

This introductory workshop manual provides basic information of key elements involved in oral history projects. The manual can be accessed with the following link: <https://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=931751>

## Endnotes

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- 14 Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2011, p. 9.
- 15 Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2011, p. 9.
- 16 Baylor University, 2016, p. 3.
- 17 Baylor University, 2016, p. 3.
- 18 Baylor University, 2016, p. 9.
- 19 Baylor University, 2016.