

The interviews for Media NOLA will primarily focus on hidden makers of media in New Orleans. Short clips from these interviews – approximately 1-3 minutes – will appear on the project's web pages for public access. The full versions will be digitally archived so that these stories will be available for researchers and the public in the future.

Preparing for an Interview

If you already know who you need to interview, congratulations! You've already done some of the hard work. Your goal for the interview itself is to get some compelling material that you will be able to share with others.

Choosing an Interviewee:

If you have multiple possible subjects to interview, pick someone who likes to talk. Are they telling stories all the time? This would be a good indication that they'll talk to you even with a mic in front of them. Also, make sure that they speak in a way that is understandable. This is not always possible since sometimes the person you need to interview has a heavy accent, unusual way of speaking, or a speech impediment, but if you have the option, choose someone who is happy to tell their story and who speaks clearly.

Before you set up an interview, review the information you have available about the person you'll be recording. This will help you to draft questions that can help guide your conversation during the interview. The fact that you have some knowledge of who this person is and what contributions they've made to media production in New Orleans should also help put this person more at ease both when you make the initial contact and when you conduct the interview.

Social skills are a tremendously important aspect of interviewing, so be sure that you are considerate and respectful of the person. Remember: you are asking them to give you their time.

Setting up an interview

In this section, we'll cover tips on how to request an interview, questions that interviewees ask frequently, and important things for you to communicate up front.

In person:

If you are planning to conduct the interview in person, make sure that you agree on a meeting place and time. You will want to ensure that the place you meet is quiet enough for interviewing, or that it has

What is compelling material?

This is a good question. Interviewing is much more art than science, so there is no formula to what makes good material. Often, however, it is content that shows the listener a more personal or intimate side of the speaker.

sounds that are relevant to your story (a printing press, or sewing machines, or example). If you feel you need directions to reach the place, ask and write them down.

Re-confirm your interview a day prior to the appointed time so that your interviewee is reminded that you will be showing up!!!!

Information you want to be prepared to offer the interviewee when you are making your appointment:

- How long will the interview last? (20-30 minutes, depending)
- What will it be used for? (It'll be archived and a clip from it will be featured on the Media NOLA web site.)
- Where should we do it? (This depends on what effect you want as an interviewer. If you want a quiet background so that the speaker is clear, make sure that you specify this. Most cafés make for terrible interview locations.)
- Something you should bring up as the interviewer is that you will need to get them to sign a release so that you'll be able to use the material.

In person:

“Hi, my name is Joe Klein. Is Ms. Davenport available? I'm a student at Tulane, and I'd like to speak with her for an oral history project I'm working on.”

By phone:

“Hi, my name is Sharonda Johnson. My phone number is (504) 555-1417. I'm calling from Tulane's MediaNOLA cultural history project. I'm interviewing local media makers for the project, and I wanted to see if Mr. Boutte would be willing to speak with me. My phone number again is (504) 555-1417, that's (504) 555-1417.”

By phone:

Explain that you will be conducting a phone interview. For quality purposes, the best scenario would be to have the interviewee talk to you from a landline. You can use skype or other VOIP software to record from a computer, and there are also free programs you can download to do this, such as MX skype recorder. One limitation of this program, though, is that unless you buy it, you can only record 5-minute segments at a time.

Asking for the Interview:

When you make the phone call to see if the person is willing to do an interview, make sure that you call at a reasonable time of day or evening. Don't call before 8:30am or after 8pm. Also introduce yourself right away and explain the purpose of your call.

If you get a voicemail system, be sure to leave a clear message. Also, when you do leave a message, leave your phone number early so that the listener won't have to listen to the entire thing again if they decide to call you back.

If you have to work through a receptionist, be nice to them. If you annoy the gatekeeper, chances are you won't get through the gate. Explain that you are working to document the contributions of the people behind the scenes in making New Orleans culture. Tell the receptionist that you have a deadline this week, but don't sound annoyed. You want this person to feel sympathy for you and to help you.

Preparing Questions:

Why do you want to talk to them? What have they done that makes their work of interest to the Media NOLA archive? What do you want to know about their work and life that you can ask in the interview?

Some examples of nuggets:

They initially diagnosed me with a stroke and then they took that back 3 days later and said they really couldn't explain why I had white lesions in my brain, why I was paralyzed, why I couldn't move. I couldn't move my whole body for 24 hours. I have chronic headaches daily. I have severe dizziness. I have internal bleeding, really bad internal bleeding.

There was a tremendous volume of sprays, even after the EPA requested that BP halt, but now my understanding is that moving forward, that 4 Gulf Coast States have signed off on dispersant sprays for any future oil spills, unbeknownst, really, to the general public.

We need to teach kids to eat well from the beginning. My thing is you can't teach an old dog new tricks, so get to the puppies. Teach the puppies. Robert Pierce

Write down some basic questions so that you are sure you cover your main areas of interest during the interview. You don't want to walk out the door afterward and realize you missed something important.

Often it helps to ask a few easy questions to set your interviewee at ease. Having a mic in your face can be stressful, so the things you can do to help the person relax will facilitate a better interview. To ease into the process, you could start with questions like:

“How long have you been working in this field?”

“How did you get started in this?”

“Do you march in any krewes?”

One strategy to follow when interviewing is to ask two-pronged questions. Often, if you ask a single question, the person will answer too succinctly. If you ask a two-pronged question, they will tend to expound more. For example:

Do you have a nickname? If so, what is it, and how did you get it?

Did you grow up in New Orleans? If so, what things stand out from your childhood?

How long have you been masking, and how did you get started?

Sample questions from StoryCorps:

AGAIN, make sure that you don't interrupt or talk over the person you're interviewing. Get used to nodding a lot.

What was the happiest moment of your life?

What are you most proud of?

What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?

What is your earliest memory?

How would you like to be remembered?

Sometimes, people get so wrapped up in telling their stories, that they stray away from the subject you want to talk about. Interrupting is always delicate, but if you find you're spending too much time on a tangent, tell the person that you'd like to return to the subject you're trying to cover. If you can remember what the interviewee was talking about before s/he launched into the tangent, remind her/him of that and ask her to talk about that.

You can also apologize that the project won't include the story s/he just told you, but acknowledge that it is interesting as well.

One of the keys to interviewing is recognizing when you have your “nugget.” If you prepared for this

interview, you should have an idea of what you are interested in hearing from your interviewee. This will make it easier to identify “nuggets” when you hear them. Your post-interview transcription will also help with this because you will write out the entire interview as you listen to your tape.

One strategy to help you during the interview is to make a note on your notepad of the nuggets your interviewee offered. You may find additional questions growing from these points.

Related to this, for your ease in dealing with the tape later, if the interviewee switches topics or goes off on a tangent that you find interesting, it may be helpful to ask a follow-up or clarification question about that so that you know, when you're listening to the tape again later, that you've moved from one topic to another.

A nugget will be something the interviewee says that captures our attention in some way. A hum-drum description of life won't work, but if they say something that gives us insight into their personality and/or the context that they're talking about, it's a nugget.

How to Record an Interview:

When you are recording, make sure that your mic is close to the person, but not directly in front of their mouth. 5-6 inches away from the speaker's face is a good range. iPhones don't have great mics, and unless you are using a special app, you can't control the levels on your audio. Still, if you have no other options, an iPhone will work. Just remember to keep the mic close enough to the person that you get them clearly and not all the background noise.

This is a good representation of where you should hold the mic in an interview. (Graphic courtesy of B&H Photo & Video.)

Going to the Interview:

Once you have set up your interview, make sure that you re-confirm the day before. Sometimes people forget or something comes up, and you don't want to make a trip to Algiers for nothing.

Dress comfortably but professionally on the day of the interview. No shorts. A polo t-shirt is alright, but a button-up shirt is better. For women, avoid low-cut blouses or mini-skirts. Bring a permission form, an umbrella (in case of rain chance), comfortable shoes (if walking), and drinking water (for you and the interviewee).

Before you set out for your interview, review your information on this person and questions again. If you are conducting the interview in person, bring your questions on a notepad so that you can refresh your memory during the interview if necessary.

MAKE SURE THAT YOU TEST YOUR RECORDER BEFORE YOU LEAVE!!!! Not only should you make sure that you have a memory card in your recorder, but also check that you have enough battery power to make it through a long interview. Nothing is worse than reaching your destination and realizing that you left the memory card in your computer or that your batteries are going to die in 1 minute.

You may also want to test the equipment once you arrive to make sure that it is recording. Sometimes glitches happen and nothing will record. Testing helps you make sure that you get what you need.

Conducting the Interview:

For legal purposes, it is important to make sure that you have the interviewee's permission to record the conversation. So, the first thing you do when you begin is to tell the person that you are recording and ask them if this is OK with them.

At the end of the interview, also be sure to have the interviewee sign a release form. While the recorded permission is important, the university will keep the written release on file where it can be easily accessible if necessary.

When you are ready to conduct the interview, explain to the interviewee that you won't be speaking while they talk so that you are sure you don't talk over them or interrupt. This means you can nod your head to let them know you are listening, but avoid “uh huhs” and “mm hms.” These sound terrible on tape and could force you to do the entire interview over – not something you want to ask to do since it is tremendously annoying.

Also reassure the interviewee that if they mis-speak or want to re-phrase something, they can do that. It is just tape after all, and you'll cut what you don't want to use anyway.

When you start the interview, ask the person to introduce themselves for you on tape. Ask them to include their title, if they have one, like “Jim Letten, US Attorney for the Eastern District of Louisiana.” This way, if you want to use it, you'll have them speaking instead of you speaking for them. If possible, ask the person to introduce themselves using a full sentence, such as: “My name is Brittany Spears, and I'm a performer and tabloid icon.”

You can also explain that you are going to ask a throwaway question like “What did you have for breakfast” while you check to make sure that the recording level is OK. It's important to make sure that the levels are in the mid-range and aren't getting clipped or that they are too low. Your recorder should have a monitor where you can see the sound level that your mic is capturing. You want to be in the mid-range on your screen. Also, using headphones will help you with this a great deal. If you're having trouble hearing the person through the headphones, try increasing the input level. How you do this will vary depending on the recording device you are using, but most have a button or knob that you can press or turn. Likewise, if you're overwhelmed by sound, try turning the levels down.

If the interviewee has said something that you thought was good, but you want it repeated, you can interject something like: “Really?” or “What?!” or “You're kidding!” Another strategy is to say “Tell me about....”

Once you have completed your questions, give the person a chance to share something that hasn't come up yet by asking the most important question: “Is there anything you'd like to add?” This can be phrased other ways, of course, like “Is there anything that I've missed?” or “Is there anything else you'd like to share?”

Thank yous and follow ups:

When you have completed the interview, make sure that you call or send an email afterwards to thank the person again for their time. You may also send a card.

Once the material has been posted to the site, make sure that you send the link to your interviewee so that they can see what's happened with the project and their contribution.

PRACTICE:

(courtesy of “Shout Out: A Kid’s Guide to Recording Stories” by Katie Davis and the Urban Rangers)

With 2 other people, practice asking each other questions and holding the mic so that you can get comfortable with the technique and monitoring your levels.

Here is an example of a practice interview using the nickname question¹.

Delontae: Jane, I heard your name is Vanilla Ice, why?

Jane: Brandon made it up one day.

Delontae: Sahara, do you have a nickname?

Sahara: Yes. La La.

Delontae: Why?

Sahara: I don’t know.

Delontae: What is your nickname Brandy?

Brandy: Bad Brandy

Delontae: Who gave it to you?

Brandy: My father.

Delontae: Clayton, do you have a nickname?

Clayton: Moo. Moo.

Delontae: How did you get that name?

Clayton: My brothers couldn’t say my name so they said Moo Moo, then they changed to Man Man.

Delontae: Miss Katie, I heard you’re known as Miss Second Chance and Grandma, is that true?

Katie: Yes, it’s true. I think they call me Grandma because I’m old as dirt and Second Chance because I have a soft heart.

Audio Tips:¹

Make sure that your recorder is ON and that you have a memory card in it!

Wear your headphones while you are recording. This may make your interaction with the interview more awkward at first, but it will also help you to ensure that you are getting good quality sound. In a pinch, you can probably use the headphones or ear buds that go with your ipod.

Keep your microphone slightly below and in front of the person's mouth. This will help ensure that there aren't popping or hissing noises from P and S sounds. Also, this will keep the mic out of the person's direct line of vision, which can help them to relax. A mic stuck in one's face is a big stress inducer.

Free Speech Radio News offers these tips on interviewing:

* Keep the microphone out of the person's face, so that they can't really see it. The psychological effect of having a big metal rod in their face tends to make people clam up and get nervous. If they are standing up, look the person in the eye and point the mic upward, parallel with their body, under the chin, so they can't see it. If they are sitting down, keep it off to the side and pointed at their chin.

* Make sure your source is talking across the top of the microphone, not directly into it. Otherwise, the wind from their mouth will make a popping sound when they pronounce their P's.

* The connections between your microphone and your machine are delicate and expensive to repair. Make sure your cords are not putting too much pressure on the jacks coming in or out of your machine. Don't touch the metal plugs on your cords with your fingers; the contacts will get oily and start to crackle when you record.

Post-Interview:

Transcription

In order to know what you have, you need to transcribe it. This does not mean that you have to write down verbatim everything on your tape. It does mean that you at least need to transcribe enough of what is said so that you can go back later and easily identify what parts of the tape you want.

This is the frame for your transcription. You can have your audio editor open at the top of your computer screen and reduce this word document to fit in the rest of the screen. You will transcribe the contents of the audio so that the time markings from the audio correspond to those in the transcription.

¹ Some content from this guidebook was inspired by and adapted from the Free Speech Radio News Reporters' Manual and Training Guide, available at <http://fsrn.org/content/reporters-manual-and-training-guide-free-speech-radio-news/4219>

EXERCISE:

Open a word processing document and label the top “Interview with.” Then put time markers down the left side of the page to reflect 30-second intervals, like so:

Interview With

:00
:30
1:00
1:30
2:00
2:30
3:00
3:30
4:00
4:30
5:00
5:30
6:30
7:00
7:30
8:00
8:30
9:00
9:30
10:00

Here is a short sample of an actual interview:

Interview with Harry Mayhew

:00 Harry Mayhew

ZS: What do you think?

It's beautiful. It's amazing. It's flooded. It's amazing to see all the locals wandering around in gumboots.

:30 ZS: What do you do at home?

HM: I'm a pilot.

ZS: Other comments?

We're in love with Venice already, and we've only been here half a day.

1:00

Once you have completed your transcription, you can save the file with a name that will help you remember the content. This will allow you or someone else to go back later and see what clips may be of interest from this interview. If you already know which segment or segments you'd like to use, go back to the audio and transcribe what is said VERBATIM. This will make it much easier if others edit your work because they will know EXACTLY what is on the tape.

Quality Check List:

Is the speaker clear and audible?

Is there background noise that covers up the speaker or makes it hard to concentrate on what is being said?

These are the most important questions when checking your audio quality, and it's important to remember that if you mess up the recording, with wind noise, loud background sound, or speaking over your interview, there is nothing you can do to fix it. You will have to go back and interview the person again.

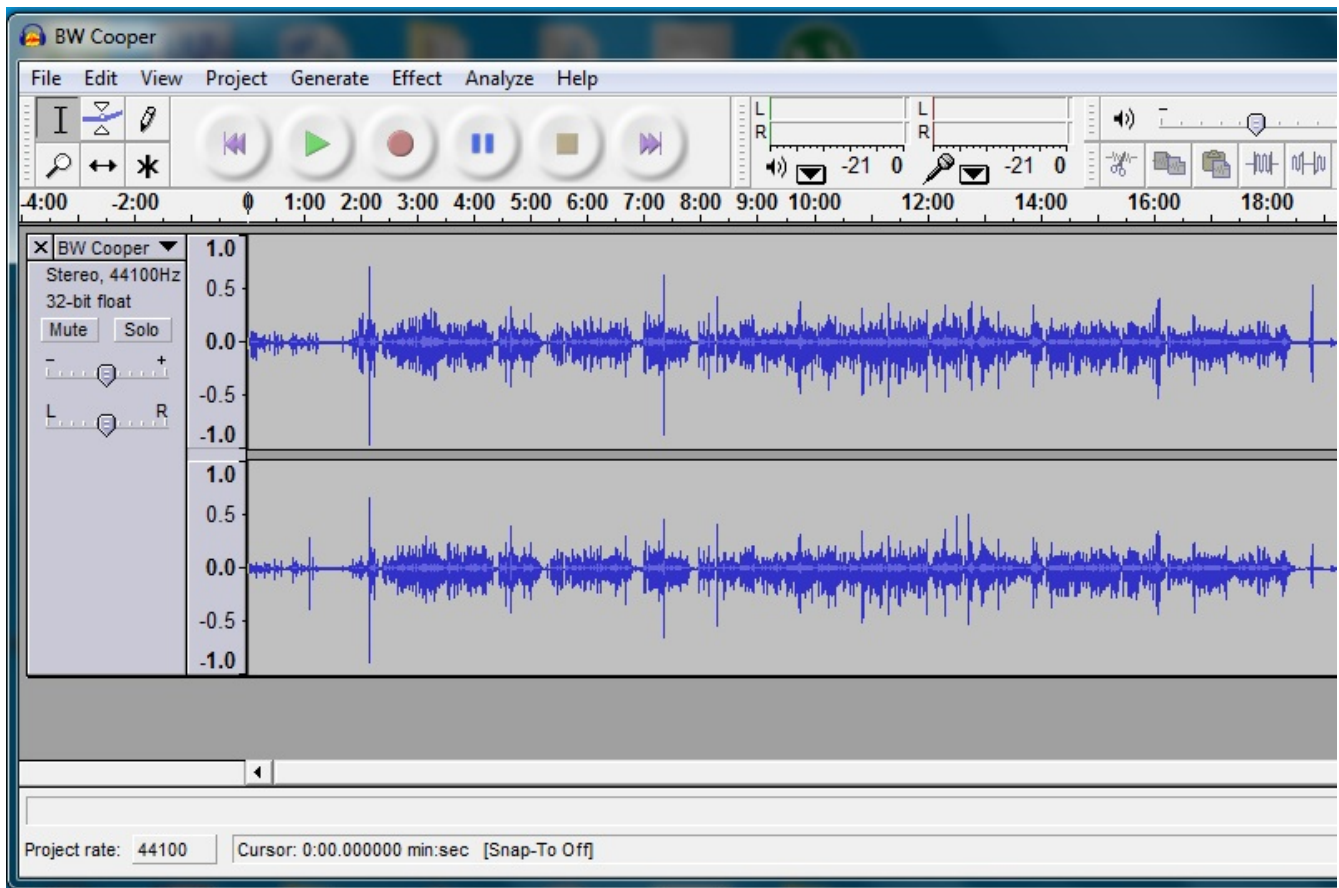
Editing your Short Clip

Audacity is an open-source audio editing program that you can download for free. It's functions work similarly to MS Word.

You can download Audacity at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

You can find a tutorials on how to use Audacity at: <http://wiki.audacityteam.org/wiki/Category:Tutorial>

You can choose a PC or Mac version. If you are going to want to export in .mp3 format, make sure that you also download a lame encoder, which you can get here: <http://lame.sourceforge.net/download.php>



An image of a stereo file open in audacity.

Now that you're ready to edit, you'll see that your transcription is your friend. You can go through the transcription and identify the segments that seem most compelling to you. Listen to them again and then choose what you want to use. You can cut different pieces out of an interview and paste them together, however, if you do this, be careful that there is a transition, whether that is a pause, narration, or a comment from the interviewee. You don't want it to sound like you just plunked clips together in some random order.

For more tips on interviewing, check out <http://transom.org/?cat=48> or storycorps.org

Checklists:

Before you call:

- Be ready to explain the project you're working on.
- Tell the person that they will have to sign a release.
- Get directions to the interview location.
- Remind the interviewee the day before your interview.

Before the interview:

- Check your equipment.
- Make sure you have a memory card.
- Check your batteries.
- Bring your ear buds or head phones.
- Dress professionally.
- Check your equipment.

After the interview:

- Send a thank you and a copy of the material you gathered.
- Transcribe your audio.
- Select the clip or clips you want to use.
- Submit the consent form to the appropriate office.
- Upload the material to the Media NOLA wiki.