

Equipment Recommendations and Resources for Recording Oral History

Conducting oral history interviews not only requires a good understanding of proper interview techniques, it also requires the proper equipment for recording good audio. Conducting oral history interviews in the 21st century necessitates an understanding of fundamental practices for deploying quality digital audio recording equipment. This includes familiarity with recording device features, adjustment settings, applicable file formats and sampling rates. For a more comprehensive explanation of digital audio recording technology, practitioners are encouraged to search the abundant resources available on the Internet or at local libraries. Some useful links are also provided on page two of this document.

The [Michigan State University G. Robert Vincent Voice Library](#) observes the [The Library of Congress](#) standards for recording digital audio as broadcast PCM-WAV files, at higher sample rates up to 96kHz/24bit. There are numerous portable digital recorders available today that can perform at this level. Where a smaller budget is the norm, it's quite easy to find inexpensive equipment that can record WAV files at the LOC minimum recommended CD-quality sampling rate of 44kHz/16-bit. Regardless of sampling rate, original recorded files should be treated as archived masters that are safely stored and backed-up whenever possible. Recording original master files using compressed formats such as MP3 is not recommended as the first choice. These file formats are normally used to create derivative copies from master uncompressed WAV files when, for example, streaming Internet access of the audio file is provided. Full access of this nature can only occur when all participants have signed copyright release forms at the time of the interview, which allow the audio files to be published without any restrictions.

Other important equipment considerations include microphone selection, memory type for file storage, and the power source. Most digital recorders have built in microphones that should pick up the sound well – provided the interviews are conducted in a quiet space with little or no ambient noise. In this configuration, the recording device should always be placed as close as possible to the primary subject. A better approach is to use two microphones, with one placed close to each participant, if the recorder can accommodate them. Lavalier microphones are ideal for this. Memory type is typically removable USB flash or SD memory cards, with a few exceptions. The important point is to insure you have enough storage capacity when conducting longer interviews. A pair of 16G SD cards should provide plenty of capacity, and also provides a back-up card if one should fail. It's always wise to build in as much redundancy with your set-up as you can afford. It's also recommended to operate the recorder using local AC power whenever possible. When battery operation becomes necessary, using multiple sets of rechargeable batteries may help offset battery costs. Finally, always test the complete system while practicing mock interviews until you are comfortable and confident operating the system.

Some suggested sources for portable (tape-less) digital audio recording equipment...

[B&H Photo](#) is often a good on-line source for competitive priced equipment:
<https://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/buy/Portable-Digital-Recorders/cj/14934/N/3992462091>
If budget allows, this complete bundled product from Tascam is an excellent choice:
https://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/product/849160-REG/Tascam_DR_40_One_on_One_Interviewer_Package.html

Other established companies like [Crutchfield](#) and [Full Compass](#) also offer a large selection at fair prices:
<http://www.fullcompass.com/category/Portable-Recorders.html>

Note: The [Vincent Voice Library](#) has used the \$600.00 [Marantz PMD-661](#) for many years. The similar less expensive model [Marantz PMD-561](#) should perform equally well.

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Microphones – Selection is based on desired pick-up pattern and recording device connection type...

Two cardioid handhelds with stands for \$60.00, XLR connection (or search/select clip-on lavalier mics):

<http://www.fullcompass.com/prod/174791-Peavey-PVI100-XLR>

<http://www.fullcompass.com/prod/191305-Pyle-Pro-PMKS8>

Single boundary microphone for wider pick-up with groups for \$32.50, 1/8" mini-plug (battery powered)

<http://www.fullcompass.com/product/370698.html>

Equipment for use with a laptop or computer, total investment about \$140.00:

Select microphones above and use any laptop/PC as the recorder when connected to this USB interface:

<http://www.fullcompass.com/product/392761.html>; free Audacity software: <http://www.audacityteam.org/>

Additional technical resources:

<http://blog.audio-technica.com/what-is-proximity-effect/>

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/digital-audio-recording/>

<http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/guidelines/digitize-audioperf.html>

<http://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/guidelines/digitize-embedding.html>

<http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/formats/content/sound.shtml>

http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/documents/PA_Audio.pdf

Additional resources for conducting oral history interviews:

[Principles and Best Practices | Oral History Association](#)

[Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History](#)

[Tips for Interviewers, Regional Oral History Office](#)

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/interviewingguide.pdf>

http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/oral_history_techniques.pdf

<http://www.mnhs.org/collections/oralhistory/ohguidelines.pdf>

<http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/43912.pdf>

Oral History Projects:

https://wosl.lib.msu.edu/	http://www.lib.msu.edu/branches/vvl/autotown/
http://oralhistory.nypl.org/	http://nymag.com/oneblock/
http://fordham.bepress.com/baahp/	http://aodl.org/oralnarratives/