

## Recording techniques – tips and traps

NB These notes were originally written in 2002. The information about equipment has been replaced in 2018 with a link to the sources of information on the Oral History Website, but the general principles still apply.

### Choosing the equipment

#### Types of recording equipment

Equipment and recording formats change over time, so you should search on the internet for the latest advice. A good starting-point (in 2018, at least) is to look at the Oral History Website at [www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk). The page for technical advice can currently be found at <http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/getting-started/3/>

#### Types of microphone

If you want to make a good-quality sound recording, you need an external microphone. For ease of use, the most useful microphones are:

1. An omnidirectional mike. This can be placed on a soft surface between you and the interviewee and records both voices.
2. A lapel mike. These small microphones can be attached discreetly to the person's clothing and give excellent results.

Unidirectional hand-held microphones pick up noise within a relatively narrow area. This means they have to be kept close to the person's mouth, which can be intimidating. If you use one, make sure you have it in a microphone stand rather than trying to hold it for an hour.

If you just want to pick up the interviewee's voice, the best microphone is probably a small tie clip or lapel microphone. It's easy for the person to forget about these – if fact, there's a danger of the person standing up and walking away with the microphone still attached. If you want to record your own voice as well, then you would need two lapel microphones, connected with a Y-connection.

Microphones that are built into ordinary tape recorders won't provide you with broadcast-quality sound. However, if you do use one, then make sure the built-in mike is pointing towards the subject's mouth. Place the recorder on a small table near the person.

### Preparing the equipment

#### Practise beforehand

An obvious point, but have a dry run. Handle the equipment, connect it up, and get it recording – again and again – so that you won't feel panicky when the time comes to record in earnest.

You should also try transferring a sample recording onto whatever the medium you will use for your final product and check that it sounds OK on whatever type of equipment it will typically be played back on.

#### Checklist for what to take with you:

- labels

- paper and pens
- extra recording storage
- batteries and extra batteries
- an extension cord
- a question outline

## **Making the recording**

### **Preparing the venue**

The enemy of the good recording is background noise. Pleasant noise such as birdsong can add atmosphere, but traffic or a humming fridge or squeaking chairs or tapping feet can spoil a recording. So:

- Try to pick a room which is not next to a busy road
- Try to record in a room that has soft furnishings – it's best if the person sits in a substantial armchair that won't squeak and won't move around
- It's also useful to have a small table in the room for the tape recorder. But keep the legs of the table out kicking distance.
- Ask to have ticking clocks taken out of the room.
- Listen through the headphones to check for ambient noise – the microphone will hear fans and air conditioning and fridges better than you.
- Ask to have the phone off the hook – unless you don't mind the interruption
- Make sure other people in the house know you're doing a recording

### **Setting up the equipment**

The two main reasons that beginner's recordings go wrong are the position of the microphone, and the interviewer not wearing headphones to monitor the sound.

You must wear headphones during the interview so you can hear the additional sounds that the tape recorder is picking up. If you don't, you might find that your recordings contains all sorts of bangs and hums that your ears didn't pick up.

The position of the microphone tends to be a problem with handheld unidirectional microphones. Often the microphone simply isn't near enough to the person's voice, or doesn't remain at a constant distance from the person's mouth. With some microphones, even the person leaning forwards and then backwards can alter the sound level. (This is why lapel mikes are so easy to use.)

The microphone should be near as possible to the person. However, it shouldn't be on the same surface as the recorder, or on a hard surface which gives poor sound quality.

Attach a lapel microphone about nine inches away from the person's mouth. You might have to ask the person to drape a scarf or tie round their neck so there's somewhere to attach the microphone.

### **Checking the sound levels**

At the start of the interview, chat as you set up the recording equipment. Record a little bit of the chat, and play it back to check that the equipment is working and the sound level is correct.

So long as the recording level is between  $-12\text{dB}$  and  $-4\text{dB}$  when the person is talking, you should be OK. But do a dry run with a sample recording – as described above.