

Choosing & using digital recorders

Digital technologies allow listeners worldwide to access oral history recordings. A digital recording can be reproduced, duplicated, transferred to other formats, and edited without noticeable loss of quality. Software programs are available with features designed to attach metadata text to digital recordings, providing copyright, ownership, and contextual information, and to aid transcribing, with foot pedals included. With these advantages over analog recording, digital technology is enhancing the work of oral historians.

Choosing recorders

- ◆ Inquire about current technology being used at some of the major oral history centers which maintain updated technologies.
 - The Oral History Association provides a list of oral history centers at http://www.oralhistory.org/network/mw/index.php/Main_Page.
 - Andy Kolovos, archivist and folklorist, assesses a variety of digital recorders and media and provides guides for field recording and digital editing for the Vermont Folklife Center Archive at <http://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/archive/archive-fieldguides.html>.
 - The oral history H-Net online discussion list, H-Oralhist, furnishes a searchable archive of topics, including equipment, at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~oralhist/>.
- ◆ Look for the most durable, dependable recorder you can afford. Favored among the current choices are solid-state memory card/flash card recorders.
- ◆ Choose solid-state recorders that create uncompressed WAV or AIFF audio files in PCM format of CD quality (16-bit, 44.1kHz sampling rate) or better. Avoid digital voice recorders that create highly compressed files in proprietary formats.
- ◆ Select a recorder with output terminals which will make possible cabled transfer of recordings from the recorder directly to a computer.
- ◆ Compare recordings made with the internal microphone and an external microphone and choose the method that works best for your recorder in your unique interview setting. Test the microphone carefully. Some digital recorders have excellent internal microphones.
- ◆ Look for recorders with lights or displays that indicate that the electrical power (battery or adapter) is working, the recording function is engaged, and the recording sound level is adequate.
- ◆ Select a recorder with both battery and electrical adapter capacities. Use electricity from a wall outlet with battery backup whenever possible. Include an extension cord in your interview pack.

Using digital media

- ◆ Record to a medium that allows easy transfer to a computer data storage device.
 - Consider the volume of sound data the medium will hold. A 1GB flash card holds 3 hours, 13 minutes of uncompressed WAV files in monaural PCM format at 44.1kHz.
 - Confirm that the hard drive has sufficient capacity for the sound files, which consume a lot of space, and that the hard drive will be backed up regularly. To prevent loss in case of hard drive failure, save the sound file to an additional hard drive.
 - Also, copy the sound files to an archival CD-R and additional CDs/DVDs for processing and public access. Oral historians recommend saving the files in at least four separate places. Once the files are secure, you may erase the file on the memory card and reuse the card.
- ◆ Store audio files on a hard drive and then copy them to high-quality, write-only CDs.
 - Ask your chosen archives what medium is acceptable for digital oral history recordings. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has not issued a standard for original digital audio recordings but does consider CD-ROM acceptable for the transfer and storage of electronic files.
 - Most archives use archival-quality gold CD-Rs for the preservation copy.
 - Use consumer quality CDs/DVDs for transcribing, reference, and complimentary copies.

The bottom line on equipment:

Before you go, practice. Before you begin, test. When you are done, protect your recording.
