Brief guide to writing oral history interview summaries

OVERVIEW

Each summary is made up of two parts: the 'Interview data sheet', which gives a lot of the basic descriptive and administrative metadata about the interview, and the content summary itself. The summary is very important for interview discoverability – without it nobody is going to find your interview, or be able to use it, or check it for sensitivity.

The purpose of a summary is to gather key basic information about the circumstances of the interview and give a concise guide to its contents, serving very much like the index to a book, but with some extra information to help users decide which interviews they want to listen to. Summaries need to include names, places, events and topics appearing in each interview, with indications of how substantial the reference is, and where in the course of the interview the reference appears.

At the end of this guide there are examples of the **interview data sheet** (p. 5), **summary** (p. 6), and **sensitivity review form** (p. 7).

SUMMARY LENGTH

A useful summary length is **250 words for every 30 minutes of recorded audio**.

TRACKS AND TIMINGS

The summary for digital recordings will be divided into WAV files, referred to from now on as 'Tracks'. An interview session may go over 1 or more tracks as there may be breaks for lunch etc. where the recorder is stopped and then restarted, causing the recorder to create a new track. Track numbering should run sequentially throughout the <u>whole</u> recording, regardless of the date it was recorded.

- Begin with the track number in **figures not words**:

    'Track 1:'

- If the track begins a new session, state this, with the date, after the track number and duration. Put all this in square brackets with the colon after. For example:

    '[Session one: 14 February 2005]:'

    Put the session number in words with a colon after it. (<u>See example B</u>)

    Please note: If the interview only comprises one interview session you should not include the session number.

- As individual tracks might be very long, time codes should be inserted to aid navigation with the track duration shown in hours, minutes and seconds [HH:MM:SS] format, in square brackets. For example: [01:05:32]

A time code should be inserted when there is a significant change of topic. In practice, this usually leads to time codes appearing at about 5 to 10 minute intervals (but sometimes less than that). However, if you find that what looks like a single topic has continued for a lot longer than this, insert additional time codes at intervals of no longer than 15 minutes. If the subject changes with a new question the time code should refer to **the start of the question**, rather than the start of the answer.

- The time code should show the time elapsed <u>in that particular track,</u> not the interview as a whole. (<u>See example B</u>)

- The summary for a track should end with the total duration of the track, for example: [02:41:01]

KEY POINTS FOR COMPILING SUMMARIES

- Fill in an 'Interview data sheet' for each interview <u>(See example A)</u>

- Summaries should be provided in electronic form

- Document file names should include an interview reference number and/or the interviewee's name, and indicate whether the summary is a draft or final version:

  C872-108 John Smith Summary DRAFT.doc
  C872-108 John Smith Summary FINAL.doc

Typing

- When typing, only use carriage returns between paragraphs.

- Never use tabs.

- Do not use accents or font formatting (bold, italics, underline etc.).

- Put the titles of books, newspapers, works of art, pieces of music etc. in single quotation marks.

- Only use ampersands (&) in company names.

Composition

- Concentrate on providing a clear statement of what is talked **<u>about</u>** in the interview, rather than detailing particular opinions or anecdotes. The summary should be a guide to what can be found out from the interview **in sequential order**, not a paraphrase of what the interviewee actually said. Where the interview focuses closely on one subject for a long period, a few short words of summary may be perfectly adequate.

- Time codes in the summary will give a fair indication of how much is said about each topic. However, it is often helpful to point out the character of some of the references in a summary – such as that a passage provides a 'detailed

description' of an event, an 'explanation' of an action or technique, a 'comic story' about a person, or whether a speaker only 'mentions' a person named in the summary in passing. Some examples of terms to indicate more or less substantial passages in the interview might be (in roughly descending order):

> description (for a long and detailed passage)
> discussion (where interviewer contributes a lot)
> story
> anecdote
> comment
> remark
> mention

Choose whatever terms you think are suitable, but be clear and consistent in using them.

- Be brief and avoid elaborate sentence constructions. Leave out prepositions and possessives where possible. So for example use 'Eldest of five sons' not 'He was the eldest of five sons'; and 'Mentions' not 'Next the interviewee goes on to mention'.

- Do not compress too much. Where a distinct aspect of a subject is referred to, it is helpful to make that clear in the summary: e.g. 'describes difficulties of finding work' rather than 'describes search for work'.

- Be careful with 'he' or 'she' where it follows references to a number of people. Better to repeat initials to avoid ambiguity.

> Example: 'OW's grandfather, James Walston [JW]. His politics. His taste in furniture.'
>
> Are the politics and the furniture OW's or JW's?

Names

- Check all names for accuracy and where possible give names of all people referred to in an interview in the form found in appropriate reference sources. Good general on-line sources are the Library of Congress at http://lcweb.loc.gov (follow link to 'Library Catalogues' and from there to 'Library of Congress Authorities' at the top right corner of the 'Online Catalog' page). Also http://www.biography.com. For architecture: http://www.riba.org/go/RIBA/Home.html and follow the link to the RIBA Library. For artists the National Art Library catalogue (Victoria & Albert Museum): http://www.nal.vam.ac.uk.

- Where names are to be abbreviated, give the full name in the first instance, followed immediately by the abbreviation in square brackets, then use the abbreviation throughout.

- If you use a well-known abbreviation for the name of an institution, such as RIBA or RSPCA, spell the name out in full in curved brackets at its first occurrence.

- Use names for countries etc., not abbreviations (United States, European Union).

- Give place names in the form used in the interview, but add other common forms (in local languages, etc.) in square brackets. For places in Britain, in the first instance, give the county which a place is in, unless there is no possibility of confusion; for places outside Britain, give the country, or state for USA.

Other references

- Where allusions to events (e.g. meetings, conferences or exhibitions) are unclear in the interview, as much clarification as possible should be provided, such as places or dates. Put these in square brackets.

- If you need to correct facts given wrongly in the interview, put your correction in square brackets. For more information see 'British Library suggested processes for recordings with amendments and closures'

- Interviews which are closed or restricted also require a summary. We frequently do not provide access to the summary until the access restrictions on the interview are lifted, but sometimes it may be appropriate to give a limited idea of the content while it is still restricted. The above principles hold true for closed material as well as open interviews. In such cases, you might want to review the summary with the interviewee before it is added to the catalogue. For more information see 'British Library suggested processes for recordings with amendments and closures'

Flagging sensitive sections of the recording

- While summarising, look out for any potentially libellous material and also any material relating to a third party who may be still alive, that might be considered substantially damaging to that individual (in line with new GDPR requirements). It is a good idea to document any sensitive passages using a sensitivity review form, which can then be reviewed with or by the project leader. (See example C)

EXAMPLE A

The British Library	Interview data sheet
National Life Stories	

Ref. No.: C1234/02 **Wav files ref.:** 021A-C1234X0002XX-0001M0.WAV to 0023.WAV

Collection title: Political Lives

Interviewee's surname: Doe	**Title**: Ms
Interviewee's forenames: Jane	**Gender**: Female
Occupation: Agent	**Date of birth**: 1934
Mother's occupation: Carpenter	**Father's occupation:** Piano tuner

Date(s) of recording, tracks (from – to): 30/09/05 (track 1), 14/10/05 (tracks 2-4), 20/10/05 (tracks 5-6)

Location of interview: Interviewee's home, Wiltshire.

Name of interviewer: Joe Bloggs

Type of recorder: Zoom H5 with two lapel microphones

Total no. of tracks: 6	**Recording Format:** Wav 24bit 48khz
Mono or stereo: Stereo	**Total Duration (HH:MM:SS):** 06:41:01

Additional material: Photograph of the interviewee in his studio. Sensitivity review form.

Copyright/Clearance: Assigned to the British Library. Track 6 between 00:43:03 – 00:44:05 is closed for 20 years until 31 October 2025, otherwise no restrictions.

Interviewer's comments: Traffic noise on tracks 2 and 3

EXAMPLE B
(*This is only part of the summary)*

C960/62 Robert Fournier

Track 1 [Session one: 30 September 2005] Robert Charles Privet Fournier [RF], born London, 1915. Description of paternal grandfather a French man and a carpenter, remarks on father not learning French. Comments on father using a spindle. Description of father's education and career as a carpenter, story about father, grandfather and another man building motorcars. [00:07:32] Description of mother's family, remarks on not meeting mother's parents. Description of mother Helen Maud Fournier (nee Privet), comments on her giving up work after getting married. Mentions RF's brother who died in the war. Description of father, Alphonse Robert William Fournier, story about father breaking a rib in a pub. [00:13:50] Further description of mother who became a Labour politician and alderwoman, mentions Dorothy Summerskill (MP). Description of brother, Victor Noel Gaston Fournier [VF], a navigator in the Royal Air Force, story about his death aged 21 flying over Wales. Mentions RF's childhood home, a flat on New Kings Road, London. Comments on playing with Meccano. Story about making a robot at school, remarks on always wanting to make things. Description of grandfather's and father's business making motorcars. Comments on mother's instinctive cooking. Story about parent's kind landlord. [00:24:10] Story about RF becoming an atheist. Comments on parent's dreading RF attending grammar school, remarks on going to a Central School. Short description of attending New Kings Road Primary School. Remarks on not getting on with other boys. Comments on being different. Description of attending Fulham Central School, comments on enjoying art, mentions being painted by his teacher Mr. Norton. Comments on father's work making airplanes during the First World War. Remarks on the influenza epidemic after World War One. Comments on Lord Walton being the hero of the Second World War. Remarks on mother's shopping habits. Comments on parents' social life. Remarks on mother's reasons for entering politics. [00:34:50] Comments on Russian films, mentions Eisenstein and 'Battleship Potemkin'. Remarks on seeing foreign films at the cinema and on going to Covent Garden, story about queuing to buy tickets. Remarks on parents' taste in music. Story about buying classical records from a friend. Description of discipline at school, remarks on receiving the cane. Comments on being relieved to leave school. Remarks on enjoying reading. Comments on parents' attitude to reading, mentions the 'Daily Herald' and the 'Daily Worker'. [00:41:45] Remarks on father never owning or driving a motorcar. Short description of variety houses in Fulham. [00:48:00] Long description investigating the Theatre Royal, Bristol, remarks on wanting to be a theatre historian, mentions Richard Southern [RS], remarks on cycling from London to Bristol. [00:53:50] Story about becoming a librarian at Fulham Library after leaving school, description of duties, remarks on reading everything under the sun, comments on reading 'A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity'. [00:57:10] Description of RF's relationship with Sylvia, remarks on living with her unmarried, mentions their belonging to a theatre group. Comments on the changes in Britain after the Second World War began. Description of Sylvia, mentions her mother who was a Communist. Comments on peoples' reaction to them living together. Mentions building a house in Hertfordshire after the war. [01:03:05] Further description of VF, mentions his employment with Hornby. Description of cycling from London to Bristol. Description of RF's social life and involvement in theatre group 'The Group Players'. [01:11:40]

EXAMPLE C

Interview Sensitivity Review Form (SAMPLE)

Collection Name: An Oral History of XXXXXX

Interview Reference Number: C1999/58

Interviewee Name: Victoria Black

Track	Timecodes	Details of potentially redactable sensitive content	Date of 1st Review	Author of 1st Review	Decisions Taken	Date of 2nd Review	Author of 2nd Review	Decisions Taken	Date of 3rd Review	Author of 3rd Review	Decisions Taken
2	00:43:36 - 00:46:51	Story about manager dismissing colleague who was caught stealing	05/12/2018	Camille Johnston	Colleague is named. Consider potential level of distress for third party	12/12/2018	Mary Stewart	Close section for lifetime of named colleague			
8	01:20:56 - 01:25:20	Story about disciplinary hearing: line manager and VB were attacked by individual	05/12/2018	Camille Johnston	Colleague is named. Consider potential level of distress for third party	12/12/2018	Mary Stewart	Close section for lifetime of named colleague			
9	00:56:10 - 00:58:31	Mentions colleague had an affair with Councillor	05/12/2018	Camille Johnston	Colleague is named. Consider potential level of distress for third party	12/12/2018	Mary Stewart	Check if this was publically known	15/12/2018	Mary Stewart	Already in public domain (news article), leave section open