
This sheet will
explain:

- What equipment is available for the recording of oral history.
 - Make some suggestions of the types of tape recorder and microphone you should buy.
 - Suggest where you can buy this kind of equipment.
-

What equipment should I use for oral history?

The problem with giving advice about recording technology is that the information will probably be out of date in a few months' time. However, the current generation of digital recorders provide high quality recording at relatively affordable prices, and you have a choice of many different devices at a wide range of prices.

Realistically you will have to look at how much money you have and decide which of the currently available recording devices you can afford. The following list doesn't claim to be exhaustive but it will give you an idea of the types of recorders available, and how much they will cost.

Recording devices

Oral history has been conducted on everything from wax cylinders to huge reel-to-reel recorders, to portable cassette recorders, to ultra-small minidisc machines, to digital recorders which record onto memory cards. Open reel tape recorders, such as UHERs, were used for interviewing by organisations like the BBC for a long time, and a lot of oral history has been done using these. While the sound quality on these machines is very good, they are heavy and as the quality of portable recorders has improved they have gone out of use.

Since the days of the UHERS oral historians have used cassette recorders, DAT tape, and minidisc, but these are no longer easily available and have been moved to the 'redundant technology' drawer.

It is now possible to make digital recordings using computers, laptop computers, handheld dictaphones, telephones, and a wide variety of .mp3 recorders which also store music, photographs etc.

While these can create very good recordings it is worth noting that none of them are designed for recording long interviews at high quality. For this it is still best to use a dedicated sound recorder which is designed specifically for this purpose.

You should aim to record .wav files (uncompressed) at a minimum quality of 44.1khz 16 bit (CD quality). Either 44.1khz or 48khz at 24 bits is usually reckoned to be better.

At the start of 2012 the cheapest quality recorder on the market is the Zoom H1 which retails between £80-£100.

This is the 'no frills' version of some of the recorders pictured overleaf and it comes without a tripod or USB cable. Due to handling noise you will usually need to use a tripod with this.

The Zoom H1 is simple to use, the internal microphones are of good quality, and it is affordable. However, like most of the cheaper recorders it is limited in the types of external microphones it will accept, so it isn't ideal for everyone.



More equipment suggestions overleaf

Microphones



Sony ECM-F8 table-top microphone. £15-£20



The Audio Technica ATR3350 is an example of a tie, or 'lavalier', microphone. £30-£40.



Sony ECM-MS 907 high quality digital microphone. £50-£90



Audio Technica PRO 70 is a high quality tie, or 'lavalier', microphone. £100-£120.



Audio Technica PRO 41, £47. If you use this sort of hand-held microphone, be sure to avoid cable-rattle by holding some of the cable in your hand. Your arm may get tired of holding the microphone, if you have no stand to put it on.



The Olympus LS-5 (left) and the Zoom H2n (right) are examples of small recorders which cost from £155-£200. These offer more features than the Zoom H1, have a more solid build, and come with cables etc. but will still not accept high quality external microphones.



The Zoom H4n (up to £300) and the Marantz PMD661 (up to £430) are both popular recorders which accept microphones with XLR connections.



These are more rugged than cheaper recorders but it is their high quality electronics and compatibility with high quality microphones that makes them so popular. There are always new recorders coming onto the market to challenge both these and the cheaper end of the market, so it is worth shopping around.



More on Microphones

In the margin are examples of microphones that are available. There are many makes of microphone, varying from £5 to as much as you are prepared to spend. Generally you get what you pay for, although tie microphones like the Audio Technica ATR3350 at around £30 will produce good results. Of the table top microphones, the Sony ECM-MS 907 is many people's choice. If you want to use two tie microphones you can use a two-into-one adapter. There are pros and cons of tie microphones and table-top microphones. For example, tie mics can be positioned closer to the mouth but may brush against clothes, table top mics may be more likely to pick up background noises.

Whichever microphone you use, it is important to position it close to the interviewee and to test the sound levels before you begin. If you are using a tie microphone, positioning it upside down may help to avoid 'popping' (some speech sounds can create a popping effect on the tape if they are too loud).

Memory Cards

While a few recorders may have some built in memory the majority will require a memory card of some sort. These will be either SD, SDHC, mini SD cards or Compact Flash, and most recorders will take sizes of up to or over 4Gb. It's worth checking this before you buy a large capacity memory card.



Headphones

From £4 for walkman-style headphones and £9 for larger styles.

Where can I get all this?

While you can buy headphones and memory cards on the High Street it is difficult to find a range of microphones or any of these sound recorders. Maplins may be your best bet. On the web there are a number of specialist dealers. Amazon is worth a look, while the EMOHA website links to suppliers who sell microphones, the Marantz PMD661 and other similar recorders (see website address below).

For more information go to the EMOHA equipment pages at: www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/equipment.html