

# HUMANITIES ACTION LAB



## Audio Tool Kit

*This toolkit produced by*  **TALKING EYES**

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# ABOUT THE HUMANITIES ACTION LAB (HAL)

The **Humanities Action Lab** is a coalition of 36 universities, community organizations and public spaces that collaborate to produce community-curated public humanities projects on urgent social issues. HAL partners create a major public project every three years that explores the history, memory, and current realities of a social issue of shared concern. Each project includes an exhibition, digital platform, oral histories, facilitated community dialogues, and interactive media. Students and community partners in each participating locality contribute their local histories to the international project, which then travels to each community that created it, opening a space to generate and exchange unique locally-grounded approaches to common global questions. The next HAL project will explore climate and environmental justice.

## WHY AUDIO?

Audio can transport you to a different space in subtle, but meaningful, ways. Every day we experience thousands of sounds, whether or not we pay attention to them, and they create the texture that defines our world. They provide a sensory understanding of what is happening around us, from the conversation at the next table, to the radio news anchor, to the child crying as his mother reprimands him in the street. Hearing someone tell his story in his own voice not only brings us closer to the source, but communicates personality, emotion, context and character. By capturing and curating sound, it's possible to create robust stories that educate, illuminate and immerse us in different spaces.



In this toolkit, we'll walk you through three different methods to collecting audio so you can document your local story effectively. We will define **oral histories**, **interviews**, and **recorded dialogues** to help you think about when and how you might want to use the different methods. Each tool offers different benefits and preparation requirements that you should be aware of when you structure your project.

## THE ADVANTAGES OF AUDIO

- Can be recorded using a cellphone or a high-end digital recorder
- Audio recorders are less intrusive than still or video cameras
- People are at ease and often forget audio recorders are present
- Audio is a valuable method for documenting and archiving first-person accounts
- Audio allows you to share stories on multiple platforms
- Audio allows listeners to hear directly from people whose voices and perspectives may have not been heard beyond their communities.



# CONSENT

Whether you are conducting an interview, oral history or dialogue, the audio will be shared with a wider audience, so it's important to make that clear to all participants before recording. All oral histories, interviews, and recorded dialogues are a collaborative process, and everyone – especially interviewees – should be fully informed about your intentions. It's important that participants can trust that their stories will be represented accurately. Transparency is key to this process. It's imperative to explain your area of research and how this project ties into a larger national initiative that will be made available to the public through a touring exhibition and website.

Every participant and interviewee must sign a consent form, which grants you permission to share their interview, oral history, or recorded dialogue publicly. This consent form also states that you are allowed to edit the media without final sign-off from your interviewee. Without this consent, you will not be able to include your media in the exhibition or website. A consent form is included at the back of this toolkit.



Keep in mind that participants volunteer their time and are not paid for their participation. Participants will be identified by their names, unless they request to remain anonymous. Determine this in advance and note it on the consent form.

If, during the recording, any participant wants to share something off the record, pause or stop the recording. Ask them to let you know when you're back on the record so you can resume recording. If you're unsure about what part of their statements are off record, ask for clarification and take note. Avoid using any off record statements in any edited content. If you are for any reason unable to stop recording off record statements, edit them out after the interview.

# POWER & VOICE

The initiative on climate and environmental justice seeks to address the role of power and voice throughout the project. We follow the principles provided in the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing and The Principles of Environmental Justice which encourage us to “let people speak for themselves.” Audio allows listeners to hear directly from people whose voices and perspectives may have not been heard beyond their communities.



Still, audio capture can enable power imbalance. Be mindful of how the interviewer, location, question framing, editing, and production can enable power imbalance.

We encourage partners to include ample time for preparation, reflection, and feedback from partners to develop a project design that seeks parity.



# WORKING IN TEAMS

There are many stages to producing audio and it can be valuable to divide the labor between team members. University and community partners can choose when and how to engage in this process when appropriate, such as conducting interviews or recording meetings or events. Dividing the labor between the tasks below will help make the workload more manageable.



## Roles

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### PRODUCER

Schedules interviews, interacts with subjects, communicates with the group, keeps tabs on what's happening that might be worth recording, prepares questions for interviews/oral histories, and sometimes conducts the interviews. This person will spend a lot of time building relationships with the subjects, community organizations, and their colleagues.



### AUDIO TECHNICIAN

Handles the actual recorder and possibly also conducts interviews/oral histories. If you are using a cellphone, this does not need to be a separate job.



### INTERVIEWER

Asks the questions to the interviewee in oral histories and interviews. Needs to be an active listener to conduct a more fluid conversation.



### PARTICIPANT

Participants in recorded and group dialogues agree to ask and answer a set of questions about a specific theme, issue or event. Participants must practice active listening.

### TRANSCRIPTIONIST

Takes all of the verbal speech within an interview and translates it into written text with timecodes.



### SCRIPTWRITER

Determines the story arc based on the interviews and then develops a clear narrative based on both existing recordings and narration that can be added to guide listeners through a podcast.



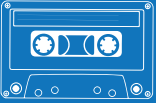



### EDITOR

Takes all of the raw audio files, interview and ambient, and trims it down for a podcast or exhibition. Can also overlap with the scriptwriter if editing down an interview.



# TYPES OF AUDIO

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you decide what type of audio you will collect. We encourage participants to consider the power dynamics involved in interviews and oral histories.

TYPE OF PROJECT	DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT	TYPES OF AUDIO
<b>ARCHIVE</b> 	Audio is an invaluable tool to document and archive your research. By recording <b>interviews, oral histories</b> and <b>dialogues</b> , you can preserve substantive information for future reference. Recording also eliminates the margin of error and room for interpretation that can result from notetaking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Recorded dialogues</li> <li>• Town meetings</li> <li>• Speeches</li> </ul>
<b>EDITED AUDIO CLIP</b> 	Edited audio clips can be integrated into the physical or digital exhibit to convey a sense of place and enhance the visual materials on display. The clips can be stand-alone sound pieces or can be combined with other visual elements to tell a piece of the local story.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Recorded dialogues</li> <li>• Town meetings</li> <li>• Speeches</li> <li>• Ambient sound</li> <li>• Music</li> </ul>
 <b>EDITED PODCAST</b>	A podcast is an edited compilation of voices and ambient sounds which is a more curated experience of your materials. Podcasting can reach a wide audience, but requires scripting, editing, and many rounds of revisions to accomplish a well-paced narrative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Oral histories</li> <li>• Recorded dialogues</li> <li>• Town meetings</li> <li>• Speeches</li> <li>• Ambient sound</li> <li>• Music</li> </ul>
<b>SOUND SCAPE</b> 	<b>Ambient</b> or <b>environmental sound</b> can create an aural representation of a place and bring it alive. It also can be used to create a soundscape for the HAL exhibition for an immersive experience of your chosen site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambient/ environmental sound</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Sound effects</li> </ul>

## What kind of audio suits your project?

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### INTERVIEWS

**Uses:** Gather information • Create an archive • Source material  
• Add to podcast/exhibit/website

Traditionally led by an interviewer who poses questions to an interviewee, interviews delve into the interviewee's experience related to the topic of focus. It's important to be aware of the potential power imbalance in this format, though it is a time-tested method of discovery and research.

### ORAL HISTORIES

**Uses:** Background research • Create an archive • Add to podcast/exhibit/website

A type of historical inquiry that aims to understand and preserve the ways in which the world has changed through personal anecdotes gathered in long, in-depth interviews. Oral histories can be a powerful tool to share first-person accounts of people who may be underrepresented in traditional or widely-accessible archives. There is also a potential power imbalance here to be careful of when taking this approach.

### RECORDED DIALOGUES

**Uses:** Document an exchange between two people grappling with a common question • Create an archive • Add to podcast/exhibit/website

These are two-way interviews between individuals who come together to discuss a particular theme or event. This approach allows for greater parity between participants, captures different perspectives on a topic, and exposes different ways of knowing about the same subject.

### GROUP CONVERSATIONS/MEETINGS

**Uses:** Capture real-time exchanges, decisions and ideas • Background information  
• Add to podcast/exhibit/website

Recording conversations or meetings in a group setting can provide additional context for your project that you may otherwise miss. These are situations where you can capture ideas, decisions, information and process as it unfolds instead of having an interviewee recount these things afterwards. This can be a challenge to record, however, as the situation is less controlled and there are multiple voices involved.

### AMBIENT SOUND

**Uses:** Create a soundscape • Add to podcast/exhibit/website

The naturally occurring sound of an environment – wind in the trees, dishes clinking. These sounds intuitively inform the listener about an environment – is it inside or outside? In the city or by the ocean? Ambient sound helps create a more visceral and immersive listening experience.

# ORAL HISTORIES, INTERVIEWS & RECORDED DIALOGUES



**Oral History** is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies to capture history for future generations. Oral histories can be a powerful tool to share first-person accounts of people on the frontlines of climate change and environmental degradation. This method can also illuminate frontline communities' resilience and resistance. A set of oral histories can demonstrate how community members understand climate change and environmental degradation over time.

Similar to oral histories, **interviewing** is often a personal dive into someone's life, expertise, area of study, or experience on the topic being documented. Unlike oral histories, interviews tend to be tailored to the individual interviewees and topics, so each person's voice helps round out the larger story.



Interviews should feel more like a conversation, and we encourage recorded dialogues as a form of mutual interviewing. For one-way interviews, the interviewee should do most of the talking. The best interviews and recorded dialogues are conducted by those who practice active listening, so each question builds on interesting details in the interviewee's or participant's answers. We'll walk you through the best practices before and during the interview or dialogue so you can conduct comprehensive and robust conversations.

*“ The best interviews and recorded dialogues are conducted by those who practice active listening, so each question builds on interesting details in the interviewee's or participant's answers. ”*

In **recorded dialogues**, participants choose a topic together, then develop a set of questions that they agree to ask each other and answer. Participants can decide to answer the same questions in different ways, to pose different questions to each other, or both. Both participants should be prepared to engage and learn more about each other's perspective during the exchange.

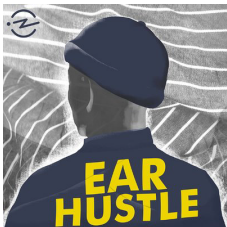

This exchange is designed for two people to think about a shared experience, and their shared or divergent perspectives on that experience, and why. For example, two participants may choose to discuss their experience with Hurricane Katrina. One participant might share their permanent displacement story, while the other participant may share their temporary displacement before returning to New Orleans.

*\*In both **interviews** and **oral histories**, the terms **interviewer** and **interviewee** refer to the people asking and answering questions. In **recorded dialogues**, we refer to the two people in the conversation as **participants**.*

*\*\*For more insight on the difference between oral history and journalistic interviews see Mark Feldstein's [Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History](#).*

If you are arranging a recorded dialogue, think about what might be a good pairing. Provide participants with information about your local story and topics that they might want to explore together to help them form questions. Consider how each perspective will add value to the project.

## Two Types of Recorded Dialogues

TOPICAL CONVERSATION	GUIDED CONVERSATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Both parties know what subject they will be discussing.</li><li>• Though there may not be prompts to guide the conversation, the goal is for each participant to reckon with the other’s perspective.</li><li>• They have at least some background knowledge of who the other person is.</li><li>• They are prepared for what the conversation may elicit (discomfort, unresolved ideas, statistical facts, surprise, challenge).</li></ul> <div><p>Check out episode 13 of <i>Ear Hustle</i>, titled “<u>Dirty Water</u>,” which contains an example of this kind of recorded dialogue starting at minute 19.</p></div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants generally (but not necessarily) already know each other.</li><li>• Prompts guide the conversation. Both participants respond to the prompts.</li><li>• In some cases, the conversation is around a personal experience participants shared together that has a broader social implication.</li></ul> <p><b>EXAMPLE 1:</b> Two people who were cell mates before reintegrating into society.</p> <div><p>Check out <i>THE AND</i>, a project that records guided conversations about relationships.</p></div>

## Technical Tips

In a recorded dialogue, a third person should be tasked with recording the conversation. Ideally, if you have a professional recorder with the capacity to have two microphones connected, each participant should have a dedicated microphone. If this is not the case, the audio technician should make sure that the microphone is directed at whomever is speaking. When moving the mic between the participants, the technician should take care to avoid creating any handling noise and should monitor for this by wearing headphones.

When deciding whether to record an oral history, an interview, or a dialogue, consider the following:

<b>ORAL HISTORIES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project focus determines the questions and interviewees</li> <li>• The same set of questions is asked to each interviewee</li> <li>• Inquiries should reveal a perspective about a broader historical theme</li> <li>• The recordings are unedited</li> <li>• The recordings and transcripts are made public through an archive</li> </ul>
<b>INTERVIEWS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An issue is determined and potential interviewees are selected to represent different angles on the issue</li> <li>• A customized set of questions is designed for each interviewee based on his/her personal experiences or expertise</li> <li>• Flexibility is allowed to follow the lead of the interviewee, who might reveal new areas of inquiry</li> <li>• Interviews are intended to be edited and used in various forms</li> </ul>
<b>RECORDED DIALOGUES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An issue or topic of shared concern determines the set of questions and participants to be recorded</li> <li>• The same set of questions, which is agreed upon in advance, is asked of each participant, with customized follow-up questions based on each participant's experiences or expertise</li> <li>• Flexibility is encouraged, and the format enables more experimental approaches to interviewing</li> <li>• Recorded dialogues can be edited and used in various forms</li> </ul>

## Pre-Recording Instructions

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A **pre-interview** will help you determine whether someone is interested in participating, and whether you think he/she is appropriate to interview or invite to participate in a recorded dialogue. This is your chance to introduce yourself and explain your project, process and goals. This will give you a sense of what the person might be like during an interview or dialogue, and give you a chance to learn basic information that might be helpful for formulating your questions.

# Pre-Recording Instructions

## Who is best suited to conduct the interview?

If you are working in small groups, it often makes sense to divide the labor between participants. Sometimes, there is a compelling reason for one individual to conduct an interview over another. For example, if the interviewee's first language is Spanish, it would be advantageous to



have a Spanish speaker conduct the interview. The interviewee will be able to communicate more comfortably in his/her native tongue. University and community partners can decide who is best suited to conduct an interview or oral history.

### CHOOSING AN INTERVIEWER

- Speaks the same language as the interviewee
- Has a rapport with the community/interviewee
- Knows/is willing to learn best interview practices
- Has technical audio skills

## Research

There are two levels at which research happens, at the project level and the micro level.

LEVEL	PURPOSE	STEPS
<b>PROJECT LEVEL</b> 	Research is directed at finding a focus to guide the project, or the “project design.” What are the internal and external developments that could influence an institution, a community’s or a family’s history?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop themes</li><li>• Outline major historical events</li><li>• Find good interviewees</li><li>• Look for places to gather ambient sound</li></ul>
<b>MICRO LEVEL</b> 	Research is specific to each individual session. Interviewers should be active listeners and ask additional or follow-up questions more specific to the conversation to elicit additional anecdotes from interviewees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Incorporate themes developed in project level research in interview questions</li></ul>

*Adapted from Columbia Center for Oral History*

## Consider the focus of your project & determine who to engage.

- Ideal participants have expertise on your topic and/or personal experience to share
- Look for diverse points of view and experience:
  - i. Ask community partners to offer recommendations
  - ii. Confer with experts, who might include professors or researchers.
  - iii. Find names in local papers and blogs.
- If you are conducting a recorded dialogue, choose two participants who are familiar with a particular topic and are comfortable discussing that topic together.



# Pre-Recording Instructions

## Contact potential participants:

- Make initial contact via email or a phone call.
- Conduct a pre-interview over the phone or in person.
- In certain situations, face-to-face meetings might be your best option. Consult with your community partners to determine the best approach and to find out if you need translators or if there are other cultural sensitivities you should be aware of.
- Both participants in a recorded dialogue should prepare and share questions that will guide their conversation together.

<b>ORAL HISTORIES</b>	<p>The Oral History Association suggests scheduling a non-recorded meeting to allow an exchange of information between interviewer and interviewee on possible questions/topics, reasons for conducting the interview, the process, and the need for informed consent and legal release forms. During the pre-interview discussion the interviewer should make sure that the interviewee understands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• oral history's purposes and procedures in general and the proposed interview's aims and anticipated uses.</li><li>• his/her rights to the interviews including editing, access restrictions, copyrights, prior use, royalties, and expected distribution of the recording, including potential electronic or online distribution.</li><li>• that his/her recording(s) will remain confidential until he/she has given permission via a signed legal release. (<a href="#">OHA</a>)</li></ul>
<b>INTERVIEWS</b>	<p>Interviewers are discouraged from sharing questions with their subjects in advance to avoid rehearsed responses. By asking questions in the moment, the interviewee will come across more natural and conversational. If the interviewee asks to see the questions in advance, you can share the gist of what you plan to discuss and reassure him/her that there are no wrong answers to your questions.</p> <p>The exception is when you plan to ask questions that refer to specific research or facts that might require more preparation from your interviewee. This is especially true when speaking with scientists, reserachers, activists or policy makers.</p>
<b>RECORDED DIALOGUES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All participants should agree on the topic they would like to discuss</li><li>• All participants will share and agree on a set of questions ahead of the dialogue</li><li>• All participants' recording(s) will remain confidential until they have all given permission via a signed legal release.</li></ul>



# Pre-Recording Instructions

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## Drafting a set of questions.

- Based on your research and pre-interview, **consider what themes, questions, and details you need to build the story.**
- If you are doing a recorded dialogue, talk through with the participant(s) the themes that you want to discuss together that reflect your unique experiences. The themes should emerge from your local story.
- **Avoid questions that elicit simple yes or no answers.** Questions with WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, HOW, or WHY often evoke lengthier responses rather than with “Do you...” or “Did you...?”

### FOR EXAMPLE:

- *“Think about an extreme weather event that your community recently experienced. **How** has your locality recovered?”*
- *“Think about an environmental justice struggle like Standing Rock, or the Flint water crisis. **How** does your community relate to this struggle and resistance?”*
- **Ask your interviewee to describe things**, since the audio has to paint all the visuals your audience won’t see. Use prompts like: “Describe where we are right now,” or “Describe what this place was like before the factory opened.”
- **Ask questions that compare then and now.**

### FOR EXAMPLE:

*“Compare the volume of maple syrup production in the 1970s to now.”*

- **Ask about visual materials** that interviewees and dialogue participants can describe or bring as prompts. Personal, meaningful items such as good luck charms, photographs, or tools of their trade can unlock stories.
- **Start with easy—but essential—introductory questions:** “What is your name and where are we?” “What do you do for a living?” “When and where were you born?”
- At the end of the interview or dialogue, it’s good practice for the interviewer or participants to **ask each other, “Is there anything else you’d like to add at this time?”**
- If you plan to make a podcast with your materials, **decide whether your format will include the interviewer’s voice or not.** If not, make sure the interviewees answer in complete sentences. People often respond conversationally and leave out context.

### FOR EXAMPLE:

If you say, “Tell me about the effects of Hurricane Harvey on this neighborhood.” You might get a response like, “I’ve never seen anything like it. It was awful.” A listener would have no idea what was horrible without including the interviewer’s question. To avoid this:

- Ask your subject to rephrase the question in his/her answer.
- Ask two questions at once: *“What are some of the challenges today and when did they begin?”* Adding *“and why?”* at the end of any question turns it into two questions: *“How did you become invested in this issue and why?”*

## Pre-Recording Instructions

### EQUIPMENT CHECKLIST

*Test your equipment the day before recording.*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Audio Recorder (phone or recording device)      | <input type="checkbox"/> Reformat SD card (if using one)  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Microphones (if you're using external mics)     | <input type="checkbox"/> Notepad  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Headphones (ideally noise cancelling)           | <input type="checkbox"/> Release forms  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Charge batteries/phone                          | <input type="checkbox"/> Pen (the interviewee has to sign a release in pen. Blue is preferred.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bring extra batteries or power pack/power cable | <input type="checkbox"/> List of questions  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Check storage space on phone/SD card            | <input type="checkbox"/> Ambient sound idea list  |



## The Interview

### ⚠ The Biggest Mistake First-Timers Make

Do not treat your list of questions like a script that you can't deviate from. First timers typically rely on their questions like a roadmap, which squelches the natural flow of a conversation. Your list of questions is meant to give the interview an overall structure and to help ensure you get the information you need. Don't let it limit you or keep you from exploring interesting leads that comes up in the conversation.



### Some Things to Consider

- **Be curious:** Explore your environment and your local sites. Think like a reporter. Curiosity will allow you to elicit interesting responses from interviews and oral histories. It will allow you to capture unexpected sounds around you.
- **Use small details to paint a bigger picture:** Keep an eye out for things that surprise you. This can happen in interviews, oral histories, or in ambient sound capture.



# The Interview

## When Ambient is Your Enemy

Find a quiet place with minimal background noise, even if you're indoors. Interviews require the quietest, best acoustics possible. Avoid empty, hollow rooms, which have a slight echo that sounds magnified in audio recordings. Ambient sound can destroy the best sound bites of an interview and compromise the sound quality. Trucks, sirens, telephones, refrigerators and air conditioners that go on and off seem innocent enough in the moment, but when you want to edit, they can sabotage the quality. Professionals even unplug refrigerators because the stop-start of the motor is enough to make two parts of an interview sound completely different. As a last resort, some people record interviews in a car or a closet to get the best sound possible.

### Avoid:

*Open windows  
Hollow rooms, esp. without rugs  
TVs or radios playing (even in the next room)  
Fans, air conditioners, loud venting systems, heaters that switch on and off*



## GETTING STARTED

- ☐ Have your interviewee **sign a release form**.
- ☐ **Check your audio:** do a test recording wearing headphones.
- ☐ **Record at least 15 seconds of room tone**, which is the environmental tone of the room. Make sure there is no heavy breathing, no conversations, no whispers, just the sound of the room.
- ☐ **Position the microphone close to the speaker**, about 5-6 inches away and a little below the mouth to avoid the "popping p" sound.
- ☐ If you're using a professional recorder, check your audio levels, which are measured in decibels. **Keep your levels between -12dB and -6dB.**
- ☐ If you're using an app, keep an eye on the waveform. Make sure it doesn't become too large in the window or your audio will peak.
- ☐ Remember to **monitor audio levels throughout the conversation** because people often begin speaking softly, get excited at some point, increasing in volume, and drift back to a softer voice.
- ☐ **Ask the interviewee/participants their name(s)** and have them spell it out.
- ☐ **State the date, location and topic of the interview.**



# The Interview

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## Interview Recording Tips

**Keep your audio recorder on.** Sometimes the best moments occur after you've stopped recording, because people relax.

**Be aware of a pause button** on any device you use: When recording, make sure you are not on pause or in standby mode. A good marker to know if you are recording or not is to see the time increase.

If questions will be edited out in your final project, have the interviewee answer questions in complete sentences.

Give him/her enough time to answer questions.

If your voice will be edited out, watch out for your own uh-huhs and laughter. Use quiet responses: a concerned nod, questioning eyes, a silent laugh.

Don't be afraid of pauses and silences. The narrator may be thinking, or might feel the need to continue a thought or fill in the silence.

If you're recording a dialogue, it's best if each participant has a dedicated microphone, which is possible on some professional recorders. If this is not the case, the audio technician should make sure that the microphone is directed at whomever is speaking.

In groups, don't let everyone talk at once. If you are interviewing a few people at once, have them gather around close to the microphone. Try to focus on one or two people. Less is more.

When using a professional recorder, always wear headphones to monitor your sound. If you don't wear headphones, there's a chance the battery will die or the sound will go above or below the optimal decibel range and you won't know until it's too late.

Don't confuse the headphone volume with the recording volume levels.

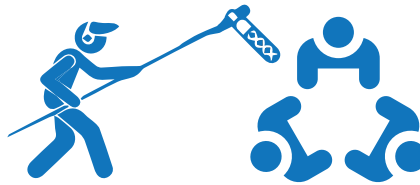
Avoid handling noise. Most recorders have very sensitive microphones which magnify all hand movements.

Make eye contact. Don't force your subject to stare at the top of your head while you fiddle with your recording device or your question sheet.

# GROUP CONVERSATIONS & MEETINGS

Recording any group setting is challenging if you want to have usable sound. While recording a group might be valuable for ambient sound or research purposes, it can be challenging to isolate individual voices to clearly hear what is being said. If you plan to attempt this, you will need:

- A directional microphone - this is an external mic that isolates the sound directly in front of it. (This is the opposite of an omni-directional microphone.)
- At least one designated person to ensure that the microphone is close to the source/speaker
- In a story circle, a boom pole with a microphone attached can help the audio tech alternate between speakers



One workaround would be to follow an individual who plans to attend an event and shadow that person closely. This will allow you proximity to the speaker so you get cleaner audio.

Meetings where people step up to a microphone to speak can be a valuable source of ambient audio.



# ((( AMBIENT SOUND )))

Audio can convey what your eyes might see. A lot of this can be done through **ambient sounds**, which are the naturally occurring noises in an environment. These sounds reveal a universe of subtle information that creates a visceral experience. They can be extremely useful to convey emotions or transition between spaces.

## FOR EXAMPLE...

*Wind in the trees*  
*Footsteps walking*

*Running water*  
*Humming machines*

*Unstructured conversation*  
*Cracking an egg*



## Ambient Sound Log

It is great practice to keep track of the ambient sounds you record in written form. To create an ambient sound log, write “Recording #1” and list the ambient sound you are capturing. Then on the line below list any other details about the recording. This could even be a sound that you didn’t intend to get, but might be useful, such as a car or plane going by or other animal sounds.

## FOR EXAMPLE...

**Ambient File #1:** Small stream with a low current. Other sounds: birds chirping, wind, water splashing

**Ambient File #2:** Boat ride. Starting the engine, moving around the boat, sound of engine, sound of water against the boat.

## EXERCISE

Sit quietly and identify 5-10 sounds in the room where you are right now. Describe what these sounds imply, or what you associate them with.



# Capturing Ambient

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## Ambient Recording Tips

**Build a list** of potential sounds to record that might add to your story. Be creative, no sound is too small or large.

**Find locations** where you can record multiple ambient sounds, such as a river where you will find water dripping, rushing, gurgling, leaves rustling, birds chirping, footsteps through mud.

**Test your equipment** before going into the field.

**Bring a notepad** to make an ambient sound log.

**At the beginning of a recording**, speak into the microphone and say “This is a recording of \_\_\_\_\_”

**Place your recorder as close as possible to the source**, about 5-6 inches away, so you can isolate the sound as much as possible from other interference or ambient sounds.

**Record the sound for AT LEAST 1 minute.** In some instances you might have to record for a longer time, depending on how you plan to use the audio (a soundscape would require 2-3 minutes).

**Stop and save the recording**, before going onto the next sound.

## Recording Ambient as a Group

- Working as a group is advantageous because recording ambient can require visiting multiple sites at different times of day.
- Delegate who will record which sounds so you have a rich reserve to draw from.
- Keep track of who records what so you keep your file names organized in your final project. (See media workflow on page 21.)

# ARCHIVAL SOUND

Archival sound is previously recorded audio created by someone else. Some examples of archival sounds include: speeches, radio shows/podcasts, news broadcasts, interviews, audio from other oral history collections, or someone's personal collection of video/audio documentation. It can even be sound effects, which are small isolated clips such as trains coming and going, thunder, or elevator doors. Sound effects like these can be purchased online for minimal expense. You might use sound effects if there is a specific sound that you can't get yourself.



Archival sounds can add great texture and historical depth to your piece. For example, you might use a 1970s speech from a deforestation protest. By using parts of this speech you can draw comparisons or show how long a specific issue has been contested.



Here are two podcasts that use archival sound really well:



## ATLANTA MONSTER

*From the producers of Up and Vanished and HowStuffWorks, Atlanta Monster aims to tell the true story of one of Atlanta's darkest secrets, almost 40 years later.*



## THE KITCHEN SISTERS PRESENT

*Stories from the b-side of history: lost recordings, hidden worlds, people possessed by a sound, a vision, a mission.*

***Ex: Episode 82 – First Day of School – 1960, New Orleans.***

## Secure Permission

You cannot use archival sound without permission. Just like you have to ask for consent from the interviewee, **you have to acquire consent from whomever owns the archival sound.**



When obtaining rights for archival sound, explain the scope and scale of the project, how and in what way you intend to use the media (a podcast / exhibition) and how much you intend on using.

In some cases, there might be a small fee associated with using the materials. **Either way there should be a written record of consent, either in an email or a contract/release form, between you and the person/organization/entity that owns the rights to the media in order to use it.** Keep records of all email exchanges as documentation of your process securing permission.





## Converting Video to Audio

Say you've found a speech and it's only available in a video format, but you want to include it in your podcast and don't know how. You can still use the speech, but you will need to extract the audio. (As per the previous section, you will need to secure permission to use this audio.)

There are several websites online that allow you to convert video files to audio files without downloading software, but you should be aware of pop-ups and false click links on their sites.

<https://www.onlinevideoconverter.com/mp3-converter>  
<https://audio.online-convert.com/convert-to-wav>

## Different Types of Audio Files



**WAV:** The most widely used uncompressed audio file. This is what you should be editing from.




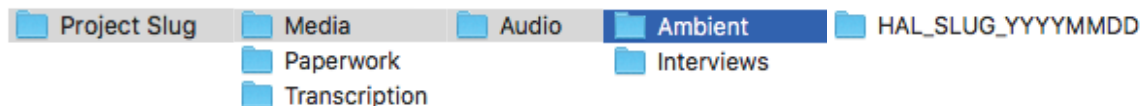
**AIFF:** An uncompressed audio file that was originally designed for Apple computers that didn't recognize WAV files.



**MP3:** A compressed audio file with lower quality than a WAV or AIFF file. When you are finished with your podcast/soundscape your final export will be an MP3.

# BACKING UP & MEDIA WORKFLOW

1. Create media
2. Use an external drive to store the media. We recommend using a second drive as a back-up to be safe. Never store your media on an SD card. They are not stable and are easily lost or reformatted. 
3. Determine the naming convention for your files. The convention should include HAL and the name of the university, i.e. *HAL\_RUTGERSNEWARK*
4. Set up your folders like so:



5. For any media that you capture, create a new folder inside either the AMBIENT or the INTERVIEW folder. Rename your files using this structure:

## **HAL\_SLUG\_YYYYMMDD\_CARD**

- a. HAL = Humanities Action Lab
- b. SLUG = University
- c. YYYYMMDD Date
- d. CARD = This letter identifies which recorder the audio came from if/when more than one person is recording.
- e. Your files should look like this by the end:

*HAL\_RUTGERSNEWARK\_20180523\_A01\_001.wav*

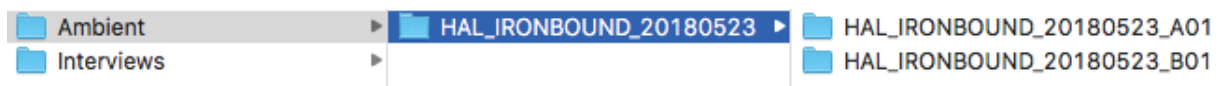
*HAL\_RUTGERSNEWARK\_20180523\_A01\_002.wav*

- i. If both audio recorders use a second card, they would be labeled A02 and B02.

*HAL\_RUTGERSNEWARK\_20180523\_A02\_001.wav*

*HAL\_RUTGERSNEWARK\_20180523\_B02\_001.wav*

6. If you recorded on multiple devices on one day, make a folder for that day with subfolders for each device. See the example below:



7. If you recorded an interview, create a folder for it under INTERVIEWS using the regular naming convention with the addition of the interviewee's name: *HAL\_SLUG\_INTERVIEWEE\_YYYYMMDD*. Rename the files in the folder the same way, with the addition of the file number:  
*HAL\_RUTGERSNEWARK\_DustinHenderson\_20180516\_001*.

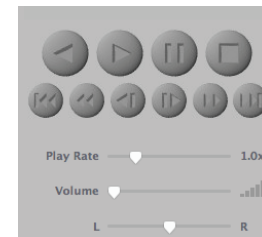
8. Finally, prep audio files for transcription.

# TRANSCRIPTION MANUAL

1. **Open Inqscribe** and create a new project.  
(You can download inqscribe here: <https://www.inqscribe.com/>)

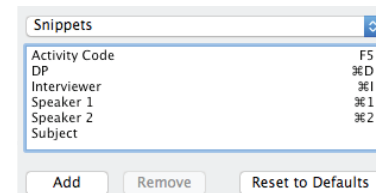
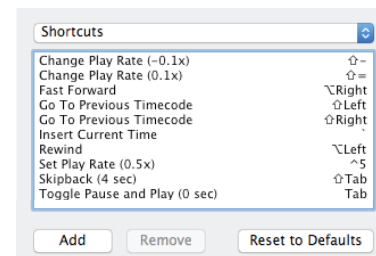


2. **Load files** you have prepared into Inqscribe. You can either drag and drop into the media window or use “Select Media Source” button.
3. **Set your controls.** On the left hand column you will see settings for the play rate, volume and audio pan as well as start, stop, fast forward etc. You will probably want to slow down the speed of playback so you have more time to type while the audio plays.
4. **Set shortcuts.** Inqscribe has some standard shortcuts preset. You can leave these or change them as you like.



*` will insert current time*  
*TAB will start & stop your media file*  
*^TAB will skip back 5 seconds*

Click on the edit button to change any or add your own.



5. **Set snippets.** Snippets are shortcuts to insert text. It's useful to set one for the interviewee and one for the interviewer so that whenever you hit those keys, the program will insert timecode and a name. While the ` key will insert a timestamp, at the beginning of a statement you should insert both the time and the person who is speaking. You can also create snippets for commonly used phrases or names of organizations that you know will come up frequently in an interview.
6. **Transcribe.** Mark the timecode every 20 seconds so you can easily find specific audio when you are editing. While you don't need to type every “ah” and “um,” transcription should be word-for-word, including repetitions and false starts. This is useful to know when you are ready to edit.
7. **In order to save** in Inqscribe you will need to pay for the license. You can also COPY & PASTE periodically into a separate word document.
8. **Save** with the same file name as the audio file you transcribed and put it in the transcription folder.

# GLOSSARY

<b>AMBIENT AUDIO</b>	The background noise present in a scene or location during the recording OR moments of natural conversation, actions, and events in daily life.
<b>ARCHIVAL SOUND</b>	Previously recorded audio created by someone else, like speeches, radio news broadcasts, or someone's personal collection of video/audio documentation.
<b>DECIBEL (dB)</b>	Logarithmic measurement of signal strength. If you are using a professional recorder, keep levels between -12db and -6db.
<b>FREQUENCY</b>	The property of sound that most determines pitch. Audible frequencies are generally between 20 to 20,000 Hz.
<b>LEVELS</b>	The strength of an audio signal. Recommended levels fall between -12db and -6db.
<b>MONO</b>	Audio that is made up of one channel, left or right.
<b>STEREO</b>	Audio that is made up of two or more channels.
<b>PEAKING</b>	Distortion that occurs in a recording when the audio level is too loud for the microphone's capacity.
<b>RECORD SETTINGS</b>	The bit-rate, frequency and track type at which you are recording your media.
<b>ROOM TONE</b>	The silence recorded in a space when no dialogue is spoken.
<b>SLUG</b>	A short name that references a project in file naming conventions.

# RESOURCES

## POWER & VOICE

[Communities in the Making: Pedagogic Explorations Using Oral History](#)

[Restorative Justice Dialogue: An Essential Guide for Research and Practice](#)

## ORAL HISTORY

[Columbia Oral History Association](#)

[Smithsonian Center for Folklife & Cultural Heritage](#)



## RECORDING

[TapeACall App](#)



[Voice Recorder App](#)

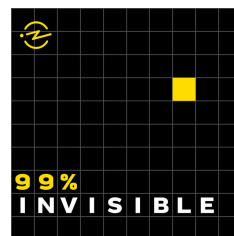
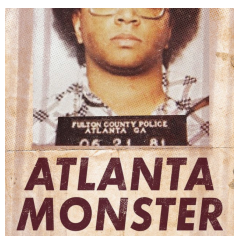


## TRANSCRIPTION

[InqScribe](#)



## PODCASTS



# HUMANITIES ACTION LAB

## **RELEASE FORM**

In order for the Humanities Action Lab project to use your words, voice and image, you must sign this release form. There is information provided below to give you some idea of the aims of the project and the uses the project may make of your contribution

---

Humanities Action Lab is a coalition of universities, issue organizations, and public spaces that collaborate to produce community-curated public humanities projects on urgent social issues.

Your contribution to the project may be made public to a general audience. Elements of the project including your contribution may be broadcast on TV or radio or at film screenings. Your contribution may be deposited in a library or an archive that is available to researchers and members of the general public. The project, including your contribution, may be posted on websites including the project website and the HAL website, and may be used for marketing and/or publicity by Humanities Action Lab and UNIVERSITY to promote the project as well as those Rutgers collaborates with in developing the project.

If you have concerns about allowing your words, voice and/or image or any other part of your contribution to be used publicly please make that clear prior to participating in the project. The project directors will work with you to determine how to accommodate the restrictions you put on use of your contribution. Nothing in this document guarantees that any part of your contribution will be used in the final project.

# **HUMANITIES ACTION LAB PROJECT AGREEMENT**

This will confirm my understanding and agreement with Humanities Action Lab and \_\_\_\_\_ (“University”) with respect to my participation in the Humanities Action Lab project (“the Project”).

1. I hereby grant, assign, and transfer to the University all rights, title and interest in all photographic, audio, and video recordings of me (“the Work”) generated by the Project, including film rights, television rights, literary rights, performance rights and copyright, provided, however, that I shall retain the non-exclusive right to copy, use and publish the Work in part or in full until my death.

2. Among any other uses of the Project that the University may make, it shall make the Work available to researchers and others in accordance with applicable federal regulations, University rules and general policies.

3. I understand that the University may use my image, voice and other personal characteristics in photographs or in videotapes, audiotapes, or other media in connection with the Work. I agree that the University may use, reproduce, exhibit, distribute, broadcast, and digitize my name, likeness, image, voice, recordings and transcripts and any other contribution by me in the Work, in whole or in part.

4. I understand that this release is binding on me, my heirs, executors and assigns.

5. This agreement contains our entire and complete understanding.

ACCEPTED AND AGREED:

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please Print)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## GENERAL LIKENESS AND RECORDING CONSENT AND RELEASE

For good and valuable consideration, receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, I hereby grant to HUMANITIES ACTION LAB and \_\_\_\_\_ (hereby referred to as UNIVERSITY) and its licensees, affiliates, assigns, agents, employees, vendors, and successors, the absolute, irrevocable right and permission with respect to any picture, photograph, film, video, telecast, and/or filmstrip ("the Production") made by or produced for HUMANITIES ACTION LAB and UNIVERSITY to use, record, reproduce, distribute, edit, reuse, transmit, publish and republish the Production and my name, photograph, voice, sounds, image, likeness, acts, poses, plays, performance and appearances in any manner, in whole or in part, individually or in conjunction with other materials, in any medium, now known or hereafter developed, including without limitation, Internet streaming and downloads, and for any purpose whatsoever throughout the world, an unlimited number of times in perpetuity, including without limitation illustration, promotion, advertising and trade, as well as to "double" or "dub," modify, amplify, and/or simulate my voice, acts, appearances, to such extent as may be desired by HUMANITIES ACTION LAB and UNIVERSITY for any lawful purposes. I also hereby grant HUMANITIES ACTION LAB/UNIVERSITY and UNIVERSITY and its licensees, affiliates, assigns, agents, employees, vendors, and successors, the absolute, irrevocable right and permission to use my prepared and extemporaneous remarks and a transcript of my statements ('Materials') including the right to edit or modify the Materials. I hereby represent and warranty that no third party's authorization or consent is required with respect to the permission that I have granted to HUMANITIES ACTION LAB and UNIVERSITY under this Consent and Release.

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I further agree that this Release constitutes the entire understanding between HUMANITIES ACTION LAB and UNIVERSITY, and me, and shall be governed by and interpreted under the laws of the State of New Jersey without giving effect to the choice of law principles thereof. I warrant that I have read this Consent and Release prior to signing it, understand this Consent and Release, and freely enter into this Consent and Release.

### ACKNOWLEDGED AND AGREED

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
(parent signature if this is a minor)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_