

Digital Storytelling and Oral History Ethics: Considerations for Project Planning and Classroom Assignments

CSB/SJU Libraries (last updated 9/2021)

In collecting stories of individuals or groups, be alert to these ethical considerations:

1. **Purpose:** Be clear on the purpose of your project or assignment – research vs advocacy vs marketing or promotion may mean questions are asked and responses are framed differently.
2. **Conducting Interviews:** The interviewer must be mindful of the ways they shape any conversation or story. Be open to sharing the power implicit in setting the direction of an interview.
3. **Protecting Participants:** While the intent of a project may be admirable, there may still be the possibility of harm through misrepresenting a culture, perpetuating stereotypes, or exposing the interviewee to unintended actions from government (e.g., ICE), social groups (e.g., hate groups), or other agents. How can you mitigate harm? Particular care must be taken with participants who are survivors of trauma or members of vulnerable populations.
4. **Permissions/Consent:** Recruitment and consent to participate need to be clear, with options for participants to be anonymous or credited by name, as well as opportunity to withdraw from the project. Be specific about how or where individuals' stories will be shared.
5. **Intellectual Property:** Who “owns” the story? Can you clarify the intellectual property rights (ideally agreeing on a [Creative Commons license](#))?

Recommended Resources

Note: The CSB/SJU Institutional Review Board (IRB) provides resources like [Informed Consent templates](#) and [Ethical Conduct of Research guidelines](#), which may be useful even if IRB approval isn't required for your project.

Bronson, E. (2018, July 31). *The ethics of storytelling: A how-to guide*. YWCA Seattle/King/Snohomish. <https://www.ywcaworks.org/blogs/firesteel/tue-07312018-1423/ethics-storytelling-how-guide>
An example of some ethical concerns working with stories of people experiencing homelessness.

High, S. (n.d.). *Research ethics*. Center for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (Canada). Retrieved from <https://storytelling.concordia.ca/resources/ethics/>
Emphasizes the need for informed consent, mitigation of harm, and right of withdrawal as well as intellectual property rights.

Larson, M. (2013). Steering clear of the rocks: A look at the current state of oral history ethics in the digital age. *Oral History Review* 40(1), 36-49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43863454>

Oral History Association. (n.d.). *Statement on ethics*. <https://www.oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics/>
General principles of preparation, consent, collaboration, and stewardship.

StoryCenter. (2016). *Ethical practice*. Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55368c08e4b0d419e1c011f7/t/579134a05016e13dde264720/1469133984611/Ethics.pdf>
Guidelines for ensuring the safety of storytellers and audiences. Includes Storyteller's Bill of Rights.