

Audio Inspiration – 12 Tips for Writers and Family Historians

This article provides options for digitally recording, editing and sharing audio interviews with loved ones. In my line of work – writing memoirs and doing interviews – I work with oral histories almost daily. I have tinkered with many tools and some are definitely better than others. I hope this legwork



saves you much time and aggravation. First, let's talk about why audio. The human voice is an intimate medium that triggers powerful emotions after a loved one is gone. It is a heartbreak whenever someone passes on without their voice and story recorded. Someday, an audio clip will mean the world to you and your

loved ones. I know, because recordings of my own family are priceless to me. My dad's songs around the house were the soundtrack to my childhood, and today when I listen to a cassette recording I made of him singing, my eyes well up with emotion. Here is a short clip, the chorus to *Red River Valley*. <https://youtu.be/3PCTBnwonCw> Also, recording audio is simply not that hard! My whole goal here is to encourage you to get that interview done...now! Or to shape one already done into a meaningful story. This article is about removing roadblocks.

Overall considerations:

✘ When possible, record in a soft-sounding room with carpet and drapes. Avoid restaurants and outdoors. If the venue is a family picnic or campsite, consider investing in a lapel mic with a windscreen. Windscreens look like a lucky rabbit's foot and be purchased online for a few dollars. It might seem

obvious, but set some ground rules for the interview to avoid distractions. Ask family members not to interrupt, and for Pete's sake, nobody should answer their phone during the interview. Move the dog elsewhere. You get the idea. Also, please heed this learned-from-experience advice:

Tip #1 – USE A BACKUP!!!

I have needed the second file enough times to declare with some authority that arranging a Plan-B is worth the effort. Magic may only happen once with your subject and you will be so disappointed if the batteries go dead, the memory fills up, or the lapel mic is plugged into the headphone jack (yeah, that happened). Also, I like to set the backup nearer to any additional interviewees to better catch what they say. The good news is that most people have a smartphone or tablet which can serve as a duplicate recorder. Next, don't be stingy when it comes to batteries. Just put some new ones in, will ya?

Tip 2 – Consider using a digital recorder:



Olympus
Digital
Voice
Recorder –
My
personal
favorite
to use.

I am a big fan of digital recorders. The learning curve is easy and the price is not crazy for a good little workhorse (generally under about \$60). Here are two models I use often,

made by respectable brands: The [Sony ICD PX333](#) and the [Olympus Ws-852](#). I got a similar Philips brand free with my purchase of Dragon voice recognition software, and while it is adequate, it feels cheaper and I just don't like it as well. Anyway, the two mentioned above are smaller than a Snicker's Bar (not the King Size either), they come with a USB connection, use 2 AAA batteries, and have oodles of memory for recording many hours. I especially like how the USB connection is built into the Olympus so you never have to hunt for a cord. You can add a micro SD card if you like, but I don't bother. There is plenty of built-in memory for many hours of audio, and besides, it's good practice to offload files right away so you don't risk losing them. Oh, and as a side note, I did spring for a beefy [Olympus LS -100](#) recorder which has a gazillion options you will never use for a family history interview. Its fancy features include multi-track recording for musicians, and plug-ins for high-quality microphones and the like. I don't mess with any of it, and find that the extra menus can get in the way when I'm trying to focus on the person I am there to interview, especially if I am nervous while setting up. I have made mistakes fiddling with the dials and lost audio as a result. The sound quality is very good of course, but the small versions are more than sufficient for everyday recording. Also, it is probably four times the size of the little ones. In general, these little recorders are straightforward to use, have great battery life, excellent storage capacity, and are easy to carry. The bottom line: If you plan to do multiple interviews and can afford the \$40 or \$50, I think you will enjoy using a digital recorder. This holds true even though smartphone apps are free. Apps have their place (as discussed next), and I really thought they would take over as my go-to device but I keep coming back to digital recorders. The best tool for the job, I guess.

Tip 4 – Smartphone/Tablet apps are free or cheap:

How great is it that smartphones have a built-in recorder? This convenience and price can't be beat. Also, the recording quality on Apple products is remarkably good, although even Apple is not quite as good at filtering out background noise as digital recorders. The sound on my Samsung Galaxy S5 is not as crisp as with my spiffy new iPad, but any of these options will do in a pinch. Sometimes I have an opportunity but no recorder handy so I pull out my phone or iPad on the fly. Another hack? You can use the built-in microphone on a computer or laptop as either a primary or backup recorder. So what are app drawbacks? As mentioned, the sound quality is not not as good as with my digital recorders. Also, be sure you set up your app to save to a memory card. Otherwise an interview will hog your memory or even stop recording mid-interview if you are not careful. I have been frustrated in the past when I selected an app that limited the file size. Some free apps cut off after a certain amount of time, and others won't allow easy uploading if the audio goes too on long. So double check limitations before you learn that hard way that your app stopped mid-interview. Another pointer is to do a dry run with your equipment in advance. "Practice like you play." In other words, record a longer file than just "testing 1-2-3," and try uploading it afterward. You might not notice a problem until you work with a longer clip.

- [Here is our review of free recorder apps.](#)
- [Here is our review of paid recorder apps.](#)

Tip 5 – Get help:

If you have someone in your life who can handle the technology and/or bring a second recorder, then by all means ask for some help.



Sound booth for recording audio interviews at the Family Discovery Center in Salt Lake City. Photo provided by FamilySearch.

One amazing resource is the new state-of-the art recording rooms at the Family History Centers sponsored by the LDS church. [A new one just opened in Layton, Utah](#), and there are others in places like Oakland, California. Check out Rachel Trotter's article: [Want to Learn More About Your History? The Family Discovery Experience Has You Covered](#). Another resource is StoryCorps. They have two recording studios in San Francisco and Chicago and their mobile booth travels around. [You can book time by clicking here](#). They also have a mobile app for recording short interviews on the smartphone. StoryCorps is a nonprofit and their services are free. If your loved one is a Veteran, look into resources with the [Library of Congress Veteran History Project](#), or a new [Veteran Memorial Center being built in West Valley City](#). As mentioned, we make part of our living doing professional interviews. If you would like us to interview your loved one or if you need help with your audio or transcription, [get in touch with us](#). We would be delighted to relieve this burden for you.

Tip 6- Save audio to the cloud



Audio files are large, even in a compressed MP3 format. This means that emailing them can be problematic and sometimes even uploading can present challenges. As mentioned, some pared-down free apps limit file sizes, so it might be worth springing for full functionality. Speaking of file types, you might be wondering if you should save in WAV or MP3 format. For general family history purposes, save in MP3 since FamilySearch cannot take WAV files and converting can be a stumbling block. Also, it just is easier to work with compressed files. The loss of quality is not noticeable to most people. Here are two options for saving audio files to the cloud. **Option 1: Upload to a service like DropBox, Google or iCloud:** This requires that you link the app to whatever file service you use (e.g., DropBox). If your phone/tablet automatically backs up files to the cloud, this means you already have a service set up. Ideally, connect your smartphone to high-speed WiFi because these files can take a while to save and will use data. Then open the recorder app, go to the save function and select the service you use. While it might be easier to email it, the file size is likely prohibitive. **Option 2: Pull the file off your phone/tablet/digital recorder using a USB cord:** If you are purchasing a digital recorder, spend the extra \$10 to get a model with a USB connection. I did not realize at first that the price difference is because cheaper models rely on memory cards instead of having a USB cord and port. That creates a hassle you will regret. Trust me, file management is the least-fun part of the process, so do anything you can to

streamline it. Otherwise you will put this housekeeping task off and risk losing the audio altogether. Did you know that most phones can connect to a computer using a USB cord or Apple Lightning Cord? Plug your phone to your computer, then select the file (using “Finder” on a Mac or “Windows Explorer”). Then drag, and drop the file from your device into the right folder on your computer. This is faster than using WiFi.

Tip 7 – Use Audacity to edit audio:

Audacity is the best software I have found for home audio editing. Is it free, reasonably straightforward to learn, and quite beefy. Basic functions include:

- Converting file types (e.g., from WAV to MP3)
- Deleting dead air
- Smoothing out background noise
- Combining clips together
- Trimming clips to get only the segment you need
- Digitizing older formats. You can connect a CD Player or Cassette Recorder to digitize old recordings! All you need is the Audacity software installed on your computer and an audio cable to connect the input/output jacks.

There are many tutorials on YouTube and elsewhere to get you started using Audacity and to learn its features. Here is a link from the source to download: <http://www.audacityteam.org/download/>

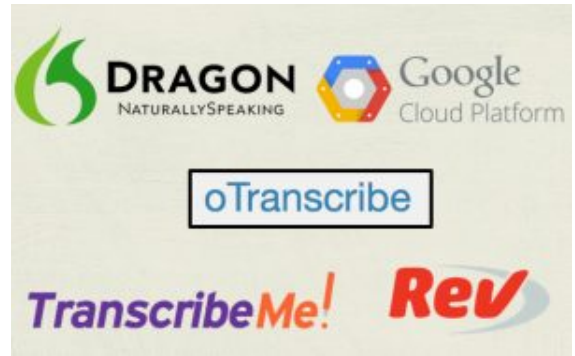
Tip 8 – Share audio with family and with the future:

Be sure to save a backup file somewhere! Will you be able to find the file 5 years from now when a family member asks, “Do you know where that interview is of Grandpa?” What if something were to happen to you? Here are some options for

sharing:

- **Flash drive (thumb drive):** This is one of the easiest, least inexpensive ways to share an audio file.
- **Burn a CD or DVD:** If you burn a CD, know that there are two file types: audio and data. To listen with an older CD player, it needs to be saved in an audio format. If you just want to share or save a backup of the file, burn the CD in a data format. If you give a data CD to someone, make sure they know they can't pop it into their CD player.
- **Share/Save using DropBox, Google, iCloud or similar service:** Once you have saved your audio file to the cloud, then services like DropBox allow you to share a link to the file by email, even if the person does not have an account with that service. The recipient will receive an email and can click on the link, then open or download the file on their own device.
- **Upload to FamilySearch or another genealogy site:** Audio files smaller than 15 MB may be uploaded. If bigger, they must be converted to a smaller format (like MP3 or MPEG-4) or edited into shorter audio chunks. For help, consider visiting a family history center or reaching out to us for guidance: <http://evalogue.life/contact-us/>
- **Transcribe it:** Although I love audio because it is so intimate, changes in digital formats or the loss of computer files can mean an interview is gone forever. The printed page, however, can be preserved for centuries. This leads to the next tip.

Tip 9 – Save Labor with Transcription Tools:



Transcription Tools

Transcriptions are valuable family history documents, and can be helpful when writing stories later. How to do transcription warrants more detailed coverage so check out the article link below to learn the latest-and-greatest ways to transcribe audio, including Dragon voice recognition software, Google Speech-to-Text, oTranscribe (a free online app that mimics a foot-pedal dictation machine), and three professional transcription services. Read about [Transcription and Voice Recognition Tools](#).

Tip 10- Combine audio, photos, music and narration to make video stories:

There are some great video tools that make it very easy for novices to combine audio, short video clips, photos, music and voice narration to tell compelling family stories. If you really want to engage family members, bring in more senses and keep it S-H-O-R-T! Young people are more visual than ever, and emotions are evoked with music, images and a story line. A good rule of thumb: keep each vignette less than 2 minutes. If that seems impossible, check out the video I made using Adobe Spark embedded in the paragraphs below.

“Photos” program on a Mac:

My family history video experience started with using the

“Photos” program on my Mac, but it was aggravating. The slideshow function too limiting, took forever to create, and after all that work the final product was still hokey. Still, in a pinch, photo apps and even Powerpoint can work. The good news—no, this is *great* news—there are two awesome answers that make videos as easy as a Sunday stroll. You will be pleased with the result.

Free Adobe Spark:

First, if you want to see an example of how it all comes together with a free Adobe Spark account, pre-built templates and stock music, check this out. There is no software to download, so in minutes you can open a free account and get started. I created this short video to tell about something uncanny that happened to me. One advantage of Spark is it includes the ability to add voice-over narration to each slide. Also, its prompts guide you to map out a good story. When you are done, you can download the video and save it, post it to YouTube or share on social media. <https://youtu.be/lVJK-DYjQG4> Here is a quick tutorial I made showing how Adobe Spark works. <https://youtu.be/Ikek-y5jNE8>

Animoto:

The next video tool (that I learned about at [RootsTech](#)) is Animoto. Their templates make slick videos you will be proud to share, and with ridiculously little effort. Animoto requires a subscription, with the cost starting at \$8 a month. Here is a video my family made using Animoto. It was inspired by the [FamilySearch](#) challenge to post recipes and an accompanying family story. We made an evening out of the challenge and created new memories around an old tradition. Check it out. <https://youtu.be/ODLwlKPpG7k>

Tip 12 – Good interviewing is more important than flawless audio:



I must not fail to mention that no technology can substitute for conducting a great interview in the first place. Asking engaging questions, putting your subject at ease, and intent listening mean a lot more than crisp sound. Finally, please remember this. Someday, a recorded voice will mean the world. What would you give to hear someone's voice again? If you do it now, I promise, it will be enough. Even one single oral history interview is more than most humans have ever left behind. So please move ahead now and record at least one interview while you can. The best time is now and "done is better than perfect." If you need some help, check out our easy tutorial for capturing an oral history in one sitting. Here is the link to our free mini course. <http://evalogue.life/mini-course/> Also, here is an additional link to a summary page for [great interview questions and interview-related articles](#).

Quick list of related articles and resources:

- [Would you like us to present this topic \(or something else\) to your group?](#)
- Product review: [Voice Recorder Olympus WS-52](#)
- Product review: [Voice Recorder Sony-icd-px333](#)
- [Free Voice Recording Apps Are Convenient, Create Great Memories](#)

- [Voice Recorder Apps – are they as good as they say?](#)
- [Transcription and voice recognition tools](#)

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Rhonda Lauritzen

By Rhonda Lauritzen, who is the founder and an author at Evalogue.Life, where we tell personal and family stories that inspire. (Let us help you tell yours!) Rhonda lives to hear and tell about people's lives, especially the uncanny and dig-deep moments. She and her husband Milan restored an old Victorian in Ogden, Utah and work as a team, weaving family and business together.