

Handout 9: Difference Between Oral and Written Sources

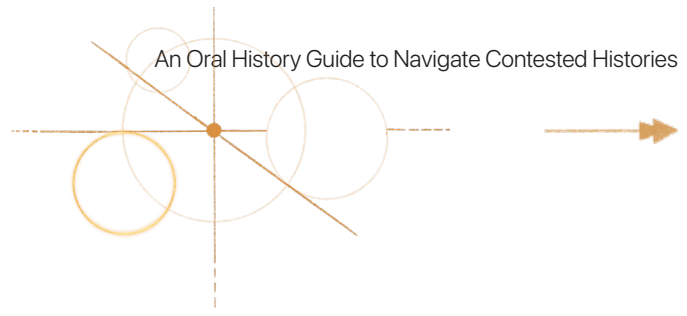
Session: Oral Sources vs. Written Sources

In his essay, Alessandro Portelli illustrates how oral sources and written sources differ. Probably the most obvious difference is the way they are received: oral sources are heard and listened to, while written sources are seen and read. The below table¹ outlines Portelli’s comparison or contrast of the two kinds of sources. The list is based largely on the Portelli reading; you may find other ways that oral history sources and written sources are different from each other.

Oral Sources	Written Sources
At the time of the interview, the source of the oral history is the narrator who is a living, breathing, animated human being.	Written sources are inanimate and text-based. They include text from books, documents, archives, court records, articles, legible & printed material.
As a recording, the information made available is that which is shared and exchanged between narrator and interviewer. It is based on the narrator’s memory (which is selective) and experience. The quality of the interview is based on the relationship between narrator and interviewer.	The availability of written sources is determined by the kind of collections held at the archive or the library. It is determined by what choices the archivist makes in building the collection, and the extent to which the records are made available to the researcher at the place of research. Their availability is also determined by the drive and motivation of the researcher to identify and access them.
As recordings of eye-witness testimonies about events that happened in the past, oral sources are always primary sources.	Written sources can be either primary sources (created at the time, photographs, diaries, court records, video footage, letters) or secondary sources (an interpretation based on multiple sources, such as an history book or journal article).
Sources are limited to the lifetime experience of the narrator and what they remember. The content of the conversation (and the recording) is dependent on the interviewer’s questions, on the narrator’s responses, on the dialogue and the relationship between the narrator and the interviewer.	Sources could be hundreds of years old. But the content of the source is independent of and oblivious to the researcher’s need.

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *“What Makes Oral History Different,” The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (SUNY Press, 1991).





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Oral Sources (cont'd)	Written Sources (cont'd)
<p>Research is conducted through the interview and through the collaboration between the interviewer and the narrator. In conversation, and through dialogue, together they try to reach a place of understanding. The interview conversation may be very loud and lively because it is interactive, social, dialogic, and based on a relationship created during the interview. The interview can be seen as a shared process of history making.</p>	<p>Written sources are cerebral. Written sources are read. The act of reading is individual and quiet, so conducting research using written sources is usually done in isolation and in silence. Think of a library or an archive where silence is the rule.</p>
<p>Oral history sources are “only potential sources until a researcher calls it into existence.” In other words, oral historians create <i>their own sources</i>. If the researcher doesn’t conduct the interview, then there is no oral source. As long as the narrator is willing, the interviewer can ask infinite questions during the interview; they can also ask questions for clarification and for more depth after the interview.</p>	<p>Written sources are fixed: they exist as long as the paper they are written on lasts. Written sources are not interactive, not responsive. We can’t ask them a question about something that isn’t already there. A written source is limited to what is written on the page or what is included in the archive and what is accessible to the researcher who may not have access to an archive or a library.</p>
<p>The source, the recorded interview, only exists because of the researcher.</p>	<p>The written source exists regardless of the researcher, it exists whether or not you read it.</p>

