# Guidance on oral history interviewing virtually

The coronavirus situation means that it is unlikely that students will be able to conduct oral history or other interviews face-to-face for the next few months at least. It is possible, in many cases, to move interviewing online, and conduct interviews via telephone or internet programmes like Teams, Skype, etc. This document gives you guidance on how to do this.

## Read the general guidance from UCL

First, please read the webpage here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/ethics/research-human-participants/guidance-research-and-ethical-approval-light-covid-19-pandemic>. This gives central advice from UCL on moving research projects online. Make sure you pay particular attention to all of the following sections:

1. ‘**Online interviews and focus groups**’
2. ‘**Data management and security**’
3. If your project is already in progress, read the sections on ‘**How to amend your ethical approval when moving studies online**’, and ‘**Implications for Data Protection Registration when moving research online.**’

Having read this guidance, ensure that you submit any necessary modification requests and that you have informed the data protection office of the changes to your research method.

## Consider if your project is suitable for moving online

Think about the following:

* Are your interviewees mentally and physically well enough to participate?
* Do your interviewees have access to good internet connections or phone lines?
* Are your interviewees good enough with technology to make this viable; or do they have household members who can help with the technology?
* Do you have access to a good internet connection or free unlimited phone calls?
* Are there any other factors that might make it difficult to do your interviews virtually?

Think through your specific project and decide whether it is reasonable to propose phone/internet call-based interviews.

## Think about how your interviewing practice will change

Now think about the ways in which interviewing will be different on phone/internet calls:

* Interviewing face to face allows you to build a stronger relationship with interviewees, and pick up on more visual, audio and body-language cues. You won’t necessarily be able to do this so well on phone/internet calls. How will you mitigate the effects of this?
* Reconsider the potential psychological impact of the interview on the participant and how you can mitigate against risks. You will already have considered this as part of the ethics application process, but in the current circumstances participants may be more than usually isolated or vulnerable. Take extra care to ensure you safeguard their well-being and follow up with them soon after the interview has taken place.
* Consider whether the context of pandemic and social distancing/self-isolating might make your particular topic particularly emotionally freighted for interviewees. Are you asking about health, bereavement, contagion, or any related topics? If so, how will you handle this?
* Oral history interviews can sometimes be 3 hours or even longer. On phone/internet calls you may not be able to do such long interviews. You might consider asking interviewees if they will undertake two or more shorter sessions.
* The sound quality may be less good. Make sure you do some tests with friends/family/your supervisor. Try recording using phone/internet and whatever form of recording you plan to use. Listen back and try transcribing to check whether this will work.
* Technology might break down mid-interview – what will you do if this happens?

You may have a tight timescale to complete your research. If you do not, you may consider delaying your interviews until a time when you can do them face-to-face.

## Think about ethics processes relating to informed consent

Finally, think about how you will ensure ethical procedures are followed. Participants need to be informed about the project before participating, and you need to record their informed consent to the use of their data.

If your project is already in progress you may need to slightly alter your information sheets and consent forms to reflect your new process.

**Information sheets:** can you send these via email to interviewees beforehand? If not, can you post the information sheets to your interviewees? If not, can you have a conversation with each interviewee before the interview where you read out the information sheet, giving them time to absorb/note down the information?

Before you start each interview, you should ensure, as you would in a face-to-face interview, that your interviewee has understood the information sheet and had a chance to ask any questions.

**Consent forms:** you need to ensure that each interviewee has the chance to understand what the consent form is asking them, to make their wishes clear, and to record their consent. Think carefully about how you can do this.

Can you send the consent form via email or post beforehand? Or talk it through with your interviewee beforehand?

At the end of the interview, while the recorder is still running, you can talk through the consent form with your interviewee and give them the chance to make their wishes known. You can record these on an electronic copy of the consent form as you go. Then you can ask your interviewee to record their consent verbally for the recording, and write on the form, “interviewee confirms on recording that they give their consent”. Verbal consent is used commonly in some disciplines, particularly working with groups where literacy is low, and it is a valid way of recording consent.

Interviewees should have the chance to retain a copy of the consent form for themselves, too. Can you do this by sending the completed form to them via email or post after the interview?

As UCL’s guidance makes clear, you should aim *not* to send personal data over email, as this is not encrypted end-to-end where one party is outside the UCL system.

## Discuss with your supervisor

As always for student projects, discuss with your supervisor and email [history.ethics@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:history.ethics@ucl.ac.uk) with questions.