
Research Your Roots: Capturing Your Family History

— Historical Society of Princeton —

What Today's Talk Will Cover:

- Introduction to the basics of oral history
- Tips for having a successful oral history interview
- **Preparing** for an oral history interview
- **Recording** your interview
- **Sharing** your interview with others
- **Preserving** your interview for the future

What Is Oral History?

Oral history is a method for studying and preserving the past by interviewing people who lived through it. Anyone and any topic can be the focus of an oral history interview.

In its most traditional form, oral history involves an “interviewer” sitting down with a subject, or “narrator,” who has some personal experience with or knowledge of a past event or period, and recording that conversation somehow.

FUN FACT: “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.”

How to Have a Successful Oral History Interview

**Short, simple questions are always best.
Avoid complicated words or abstract concepts.**

Ask “open-ended” questions that don’t have a yes or no answer. This will encourage interviewees to give longer, more specific answers.

RECOMMENDED:

“What was your family like?”

NOT RECOMMENDED:

“Did you have siblings?”

Especially at the beginning, ask more general questions that help the interviewee.

RECOMMENDED:

“What do you remember about your hometown?”

NOT RECOMMENDED:

“What street was your house on?”

Don't start the interview with highly personal or sensitive questions. Allow the interviewee to become more relaxed before diving in to hot topics.

Avoid “leading” questions that push an interviewee in a certain direction.

RECOMMENDED:

“How did you feel when you bought your first house?”

NOT RECOMMENDED:

“You must have been proud to buy your first house, right?”

Don't just ask the questions on your list!
**Ask follow-up questions to clarify unclear details,
points of confusion, or terms/words you're not
familiar with.**

However, once the interviewee begins talking, don't interrupt them! This breaks their concentration and disrupts the flow of their narrative. Wait until the interviewee has finished their thought before following up.

RECOMMENDED:

“Before we move on, I want to go back a second. When you said, ‘Alice,’ were you referring to Alice Smith, our family friend?”

Trust your instincts. When you hear something that moves you, ask more questions. Sometimes you can simply say “Tell me more.”

Admit when you are confused or don't understand something, but don't disagree with the interviewee's opinions or feelings.

RECOMMENDED:

“What were the reasons for your dropping out of school in eighth grade?”

NOT RECOMMENDED:

“Why didn't you stay in school like everyone else?”

Sample Questions To Get You Started

- When and where were you born?
- Where did you grow up? What was your childhood like?
- Where is your mom's family from? Where is your dad's family from?
- Have you ever been there? What was that experience like?
- Who has been the most important person in your life? Can you tell me about him or her?
- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did that person teach you?
- Describe your neighborhood. Where is/was it? What is/was the community like?
- What are you proudest of?
- Do you have any regrets?
- What are your hopes for your future?

Source for these and a great resource for more questions: [Great Questions - StoryCorps Guide](https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/)
(<https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>)

Good interviews combine...

Detail and **self-reflection**

Preparing for Your Oral History Interview

Do your research

- Learn about your interview subject beforehand to know what's important and interesting to cover
 - Familiarize yourself with the basics: when they were born, where they lived, their job, etc.
- Speak to other family members for additional background

- It's ok to go into your interview knowing the answers to your questions -- your interviewee's answers will still include personal details only they can provide.

Prepare questions and topics ahead of time, but know it's ok to change course.

- Use your research to draw up a general outline and some questions before the interview -- this helps to get the conversation started.
- Use this outline as a GUIDE, not a rule -- still allow the conversation to flow freely through different topics
- Most family interviews cover topics chronologically, but decide what works best for you!

Share questions and topics with your interviewee ahead of time

- It can take time to remember things! This helps your interviewee prepare and get their details straight, giving you the best possible interview.
- Your interviewee might also have ideas of things to cover

Talk to your interviewee beforehand about your plans for the interview and who will have access

- Let your interviewee know whether you plan to share the entire recording with family, whether you intend to put it online, etc.
- Discuss what to do if painful or potentially humiliating information comes up during the interview. Consider assuring the interviewee that you'll 1) erase anything they don't want on record or 2) keep the recording sealed for x number of years.
- Legally and ethically, the interviewee holds the rights to their story -- **you need their permission for any use you make of it**

I would recommend having a signed agreement between you and the interviewee, *especially* if you plan to publish interview excerpts or put them online.

This agreement should:

1. State that the consent of the interviewer AND interviewee must be given before the recording is published in any form by any party.
2. Ensure that both parties have understood how the recording will be used now and how it could and will be used in the future
3. Give both parties the opportunity to specify their wishes about these current and future uses.

This agreement also makes it easier to donate the oral history to an archive at a later date, should you choose to do so.

Interviewer's Declaration

I, the Interviewer confirm that:

- I recorded the interview and have discussed the current and potential uses of the recording with the interviewee.
- I understand that I own the recording copyright and the copyright in my contribution.
- I understand that the consent of ALL copyright holder(s) within a recording must be given before the recording is published in any form by any party.
- I undertake to store the recording and associated paperwork securely. I will ensure that a copy of this form will be stored alongside the oral history recording and any subsequent copies of the recording that are made.
- I hereby agree to abide by any access restrictions that are placed on this recording by either myself or the interviewee.

Interviewee's Declaration

I, the Interviewee confirm that:

- I consented to take part in the recording and have discussed the current and potential uses of the recording with the interviewer.
- I understand that I own the copyright in my contribution.
- I understand that the consent of ALL copyright holder(s) within a recording must be given before the recording is published in any form by any party.
- I hereby agree to abide by any access restrictions that are placed on this recording by either myself or the interviewer.

- I, the Interviewee hereby express any wishes to limit access to my contribution for a period of years:

Adapted from the Oral History Society's [joint statement of intent for oral history recordings for family research](#)

Recording Your Interview

In Person or Virtual?

If you are with other people, you can record an in-person conversation.

Using video or audio chat technology, you could also have a conversation with someone that is not in the same building/home as you are.

➡ Both are options!

One Interviewee or Multiple?

- Try to record interviews with only one person at a time
 - This allows the interviewee to speak freely without input and prevents confusion about who is speaking on the recording
 - There are advantages, however, to interviewing multiple people at once.
 - Individuals tend to remember more as a group than they would alone!
 - Recording at gatherings allow us to uniquely capture familial dynamics
- ➡ If recording a family gathering, identify the different speakers on the recording as soon as possible and consider transcribing the interview.

Where to Record?

- Find someplace quiet to conduct your interview.
 - Sounds that you may not even notice at the time WILL be audible on the recording
 - If possible, record inside (less ambient noise), but stay away from air conditioning units, telephones, ticking clocks, excitable pets, excitable kids, etc. This will ensure a cleaner recording and help both you and the interviewee focus!
- Consider doing a test recording before you begin the official interview to test your equipment and check for background noise!

Where to Record?

- If talking in person, consider sitting at a table rather than the couch
 - This provides a central surface for the recorder and prevents people from slouching -- better projection!

When to Record?

- Good interviews usually run around **90 minutes to 2 hours**.
 - Shorter interviews might not provide enough detail
 - Longer interviews will exhaust both you and your interviewee
- ➡ You will need more than one interview to hear someone's life story! Plan for at least three or four sessions if this is your goal.

When Recording:

- Start each interview by stating the following:
 - Interviewer's full name
 - Interviewee's full name
 - Your relationship to the interviewee
 - Date of recording
 - Location of recording
- If you pause the interview for an extended period of time, start a new file, or record over multiple sessions, please restate this information.
- Note the end of the interview with a similar closing statement.

What Do I Need?

- A way to record your interview (or two)
 - Extra batteries and/or your charging cord
 - Any questions or topics you prepared
 - Paper and a pen/pencil to take notes
- ⇒ There's no need to write down everything -- that's why you're recording the interview! Just jot down anything you want to remember or to follow up about.

Recording Options

- No need for anything fancy -- your phone or computer will work fine!
- Consider, however, having another device recording at the same time.
 - This provides a backup in case your battery dies or your primary device runs out of space

Recording Options: Audio Only

1) Record on a mobile device

IOS devices (iPhone, iPad, iPod Touch) have a [Voice Memos](#) app built in.

Android devices can download the [Samsung Voice Recorder](#) (sometimes pre-loaded on your phone) or other free recording apps

2) Record on a computer

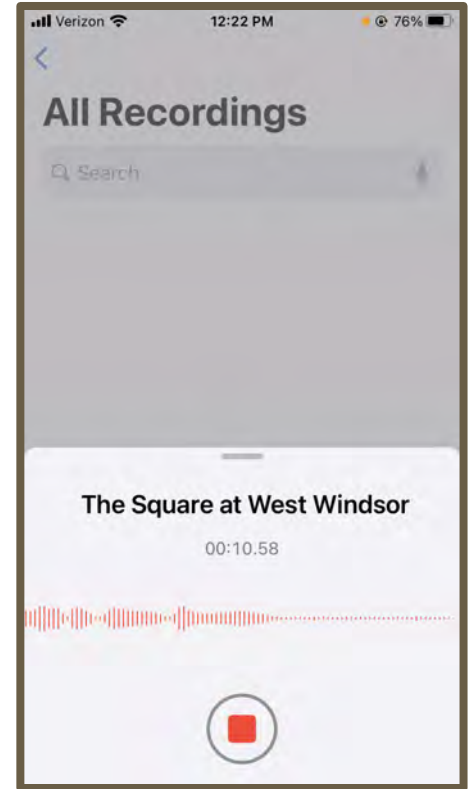
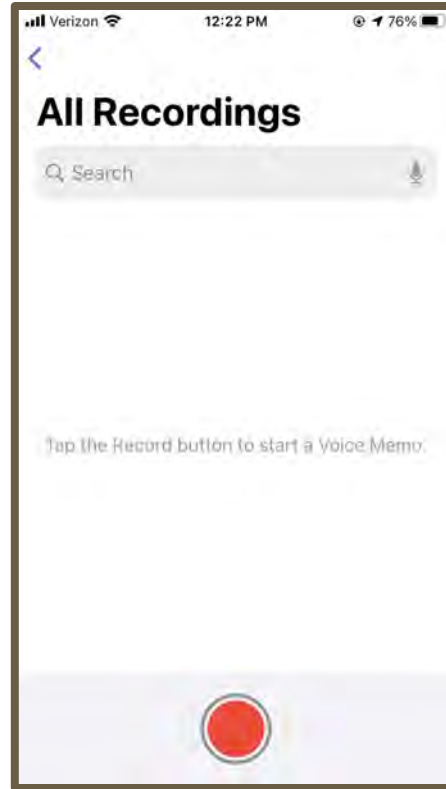
[Voice Memos](#) is also available on **Mac** and works very similarly to its phone counterpart

Windows computers have a built-in [Voice Recorder](#) program



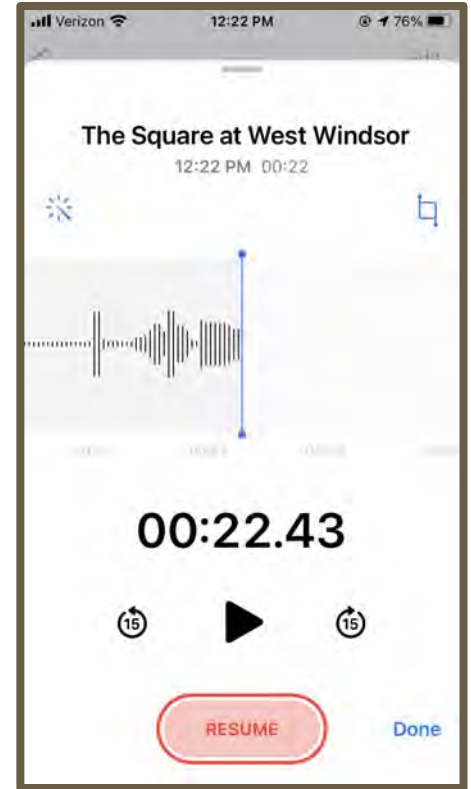
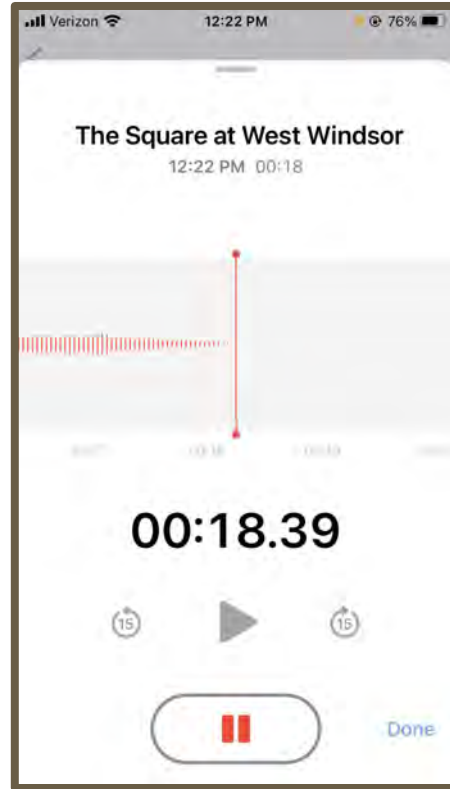
Voice Memos

To record using the Voice Memos app, simply tap or click the button at the bottom of your screen to begin. To stop, tap or click it again.



Voice Memos

Swiping up will expand the window and give you the option to pause and resume your recording.



Voice Memos

Once you stop the recording, your memo is saved automatically with your current location as the title.

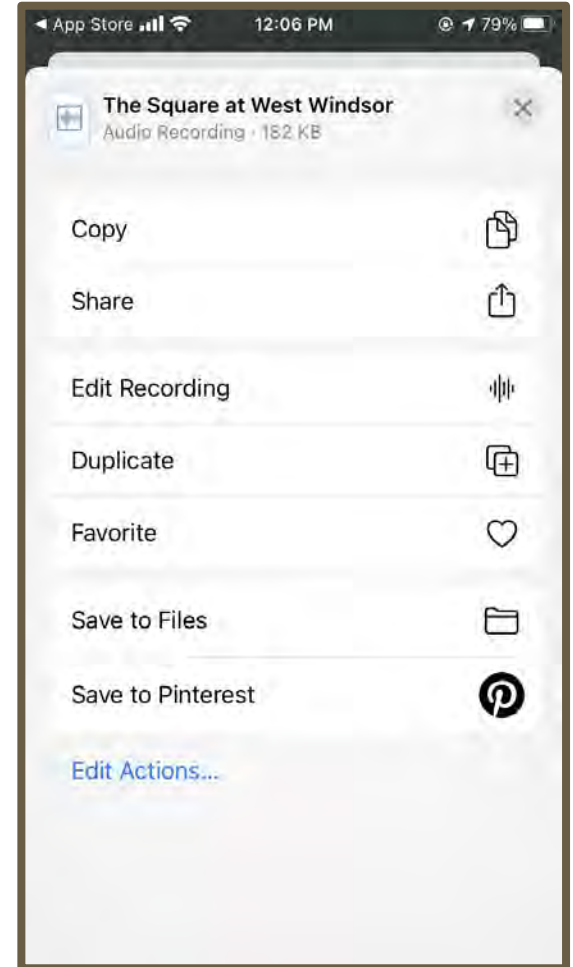
Simply tap on the title to rename the file.



Voice Memos

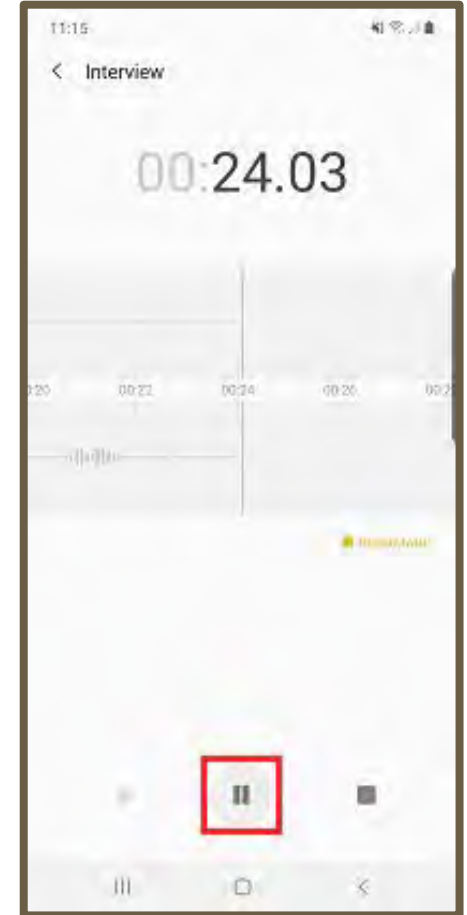
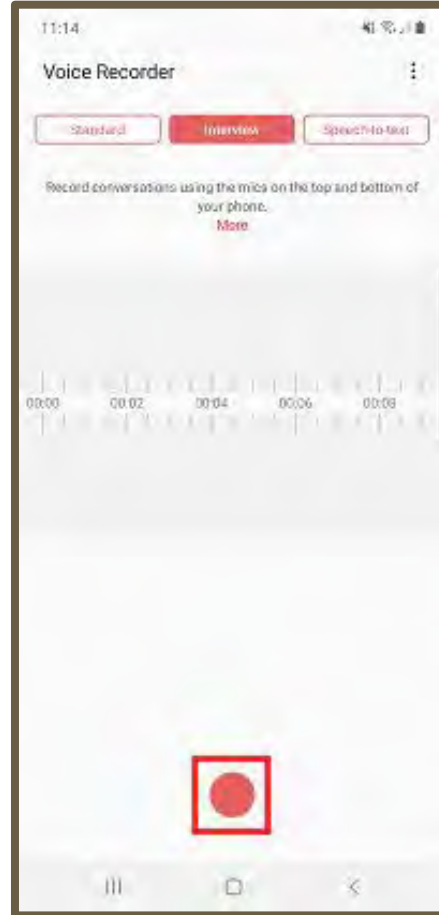
Click on the ... to pull up additional menu options.

From here, you can share and edit your recording.



Voice Recorder

To record using the **Samsung Voice Recorder** app, simply tap or click the button at the bottom of your screen to begin. To stop or pause your recording, tap or click the corresponding buttons



Voice Recorder

When starting a Voice Recording, you can choose between 3 different recording modes. For our purposes, choose between **Standard** and **Interview** mode.

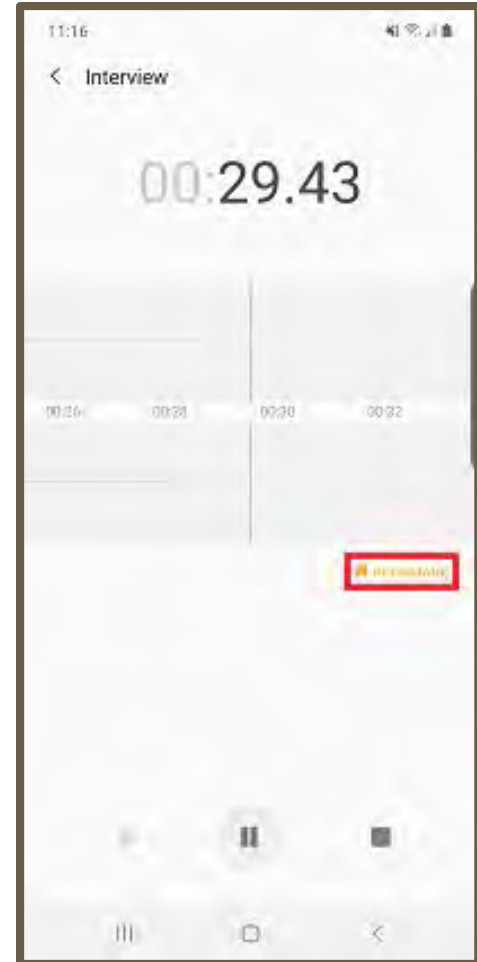
- Standard mode provides a simple interface and uses both microphones to create one recording.
- Interview mode uses both the top and bottom microphones to record the interviewer and interviewee.



Voice Recorder

One cool feature on the Samsung Voice Recorder is the **Bookmark button**.

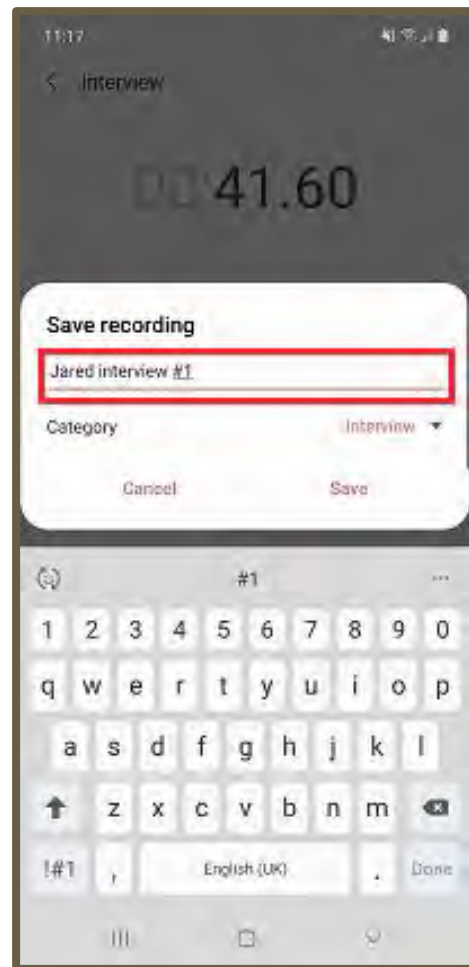
Tap this button to place a reminder on the recording. This allows you to easily return to an important part of the recording



Voice Recorder

Once you stop your recording, a screen will pop up prompting you to save it.

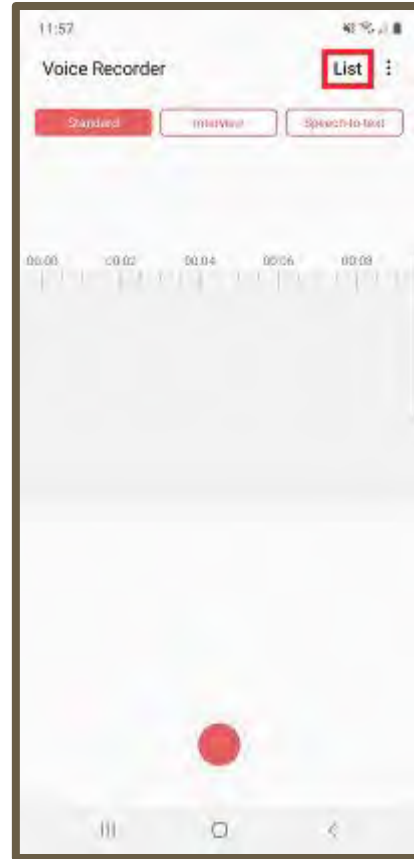
Enter a name for your interview, choose a category from the drop-down menu, and tap the Save button.



Voice Recorder

Once you have made and saved your first recording, a **List** option will appear at the top of the app.

Click here to access and play your recordings.

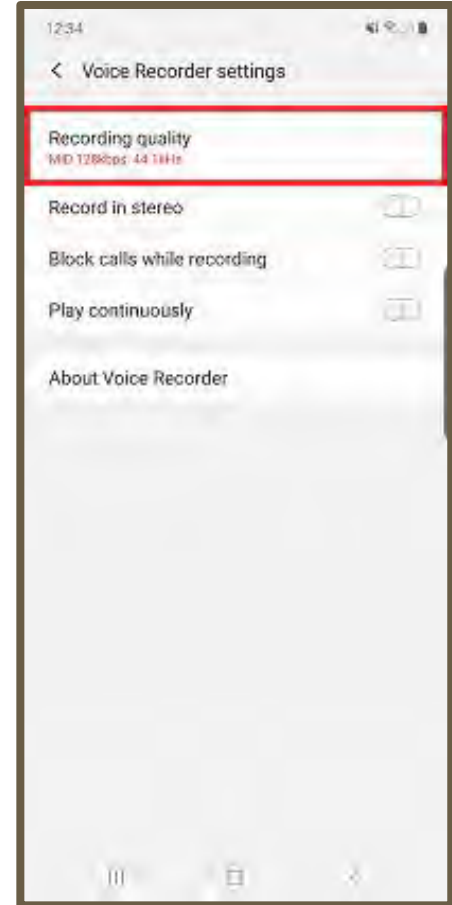
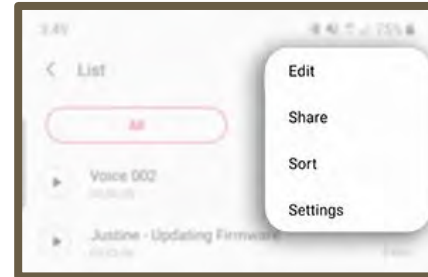
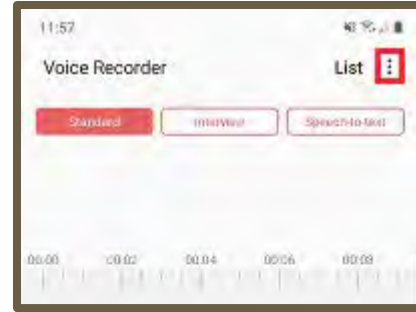


Voice Recorder

Click on the ... to pull up additional menu options.

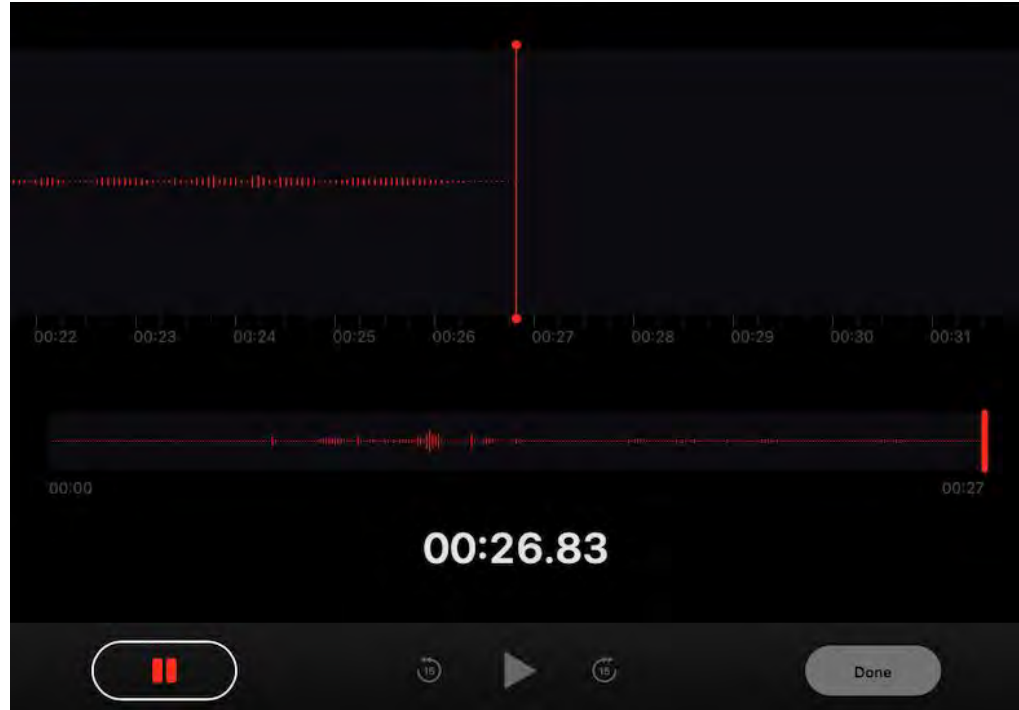
From here, you can share and edit your recordings.

You can also change your recording settings and choose to block calls while recording (recommended).

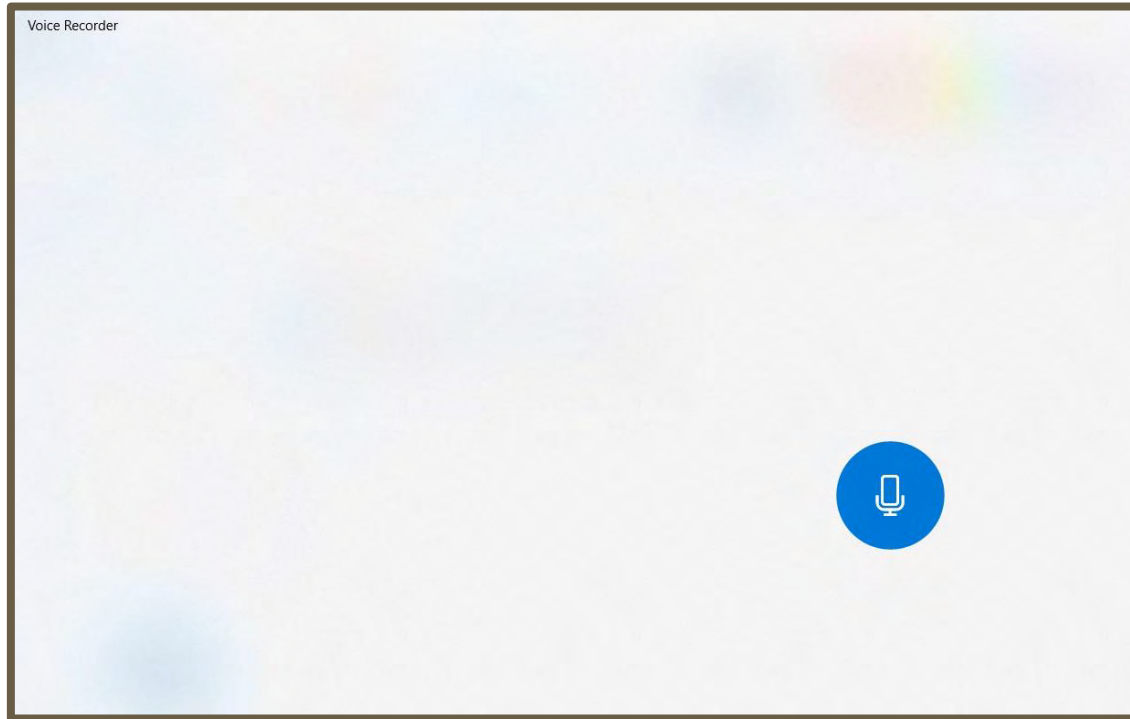


Voice Memos on Mac

The Voice Memos app on Mac operates very similarly to the one on Apple mobile devices.



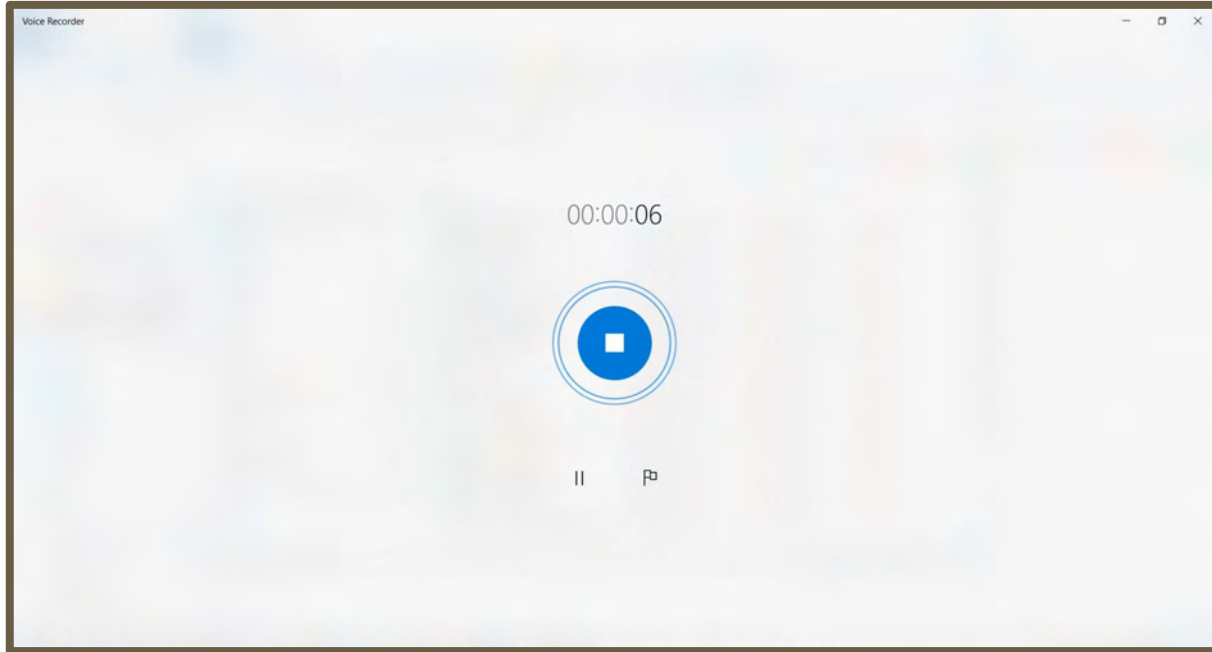
Windows Voice Recorder



This is the screen you will see the first time you ever open this application.

Click on the **blue microphone icon** to start recording.

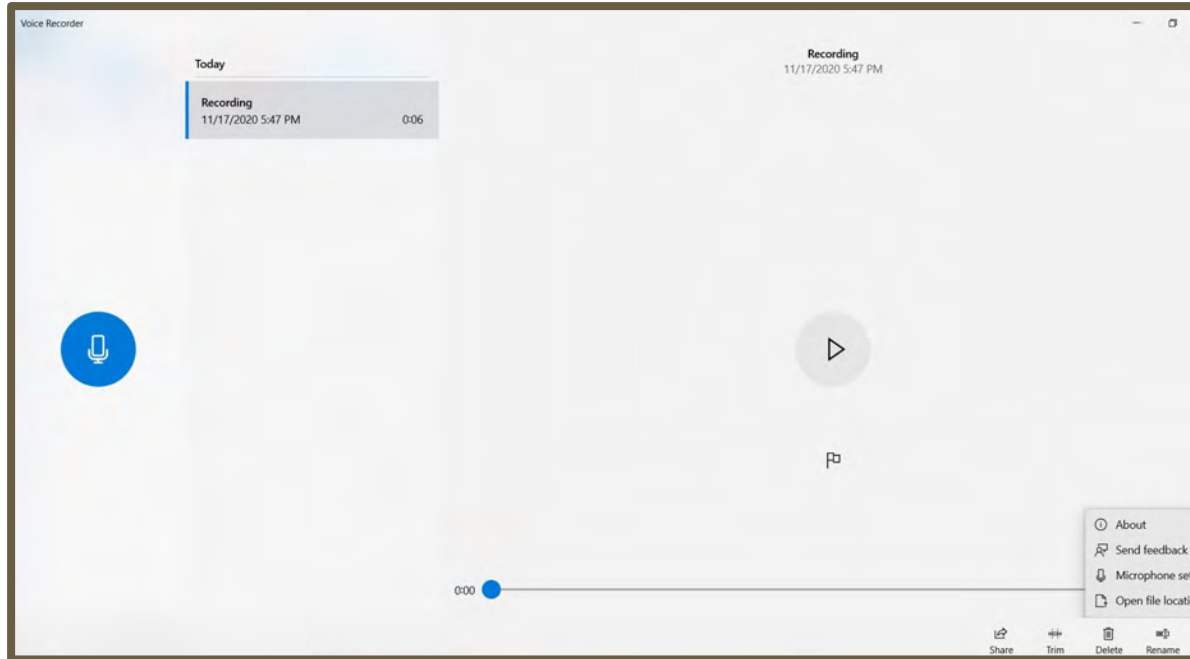
Windows Voice Recorder



This is the screen you will see while you are recording.

Press the **blue stop button** to stop the recording and the **pause button** if you just want to take a small break.

Windows Voice Recorder



Once you press stop, you will see this window. This is also the landing page of the application once you have recordings stored in it.

Your recordings are in the middle pane. In the bottom right, you can share, trim, delete, and rename your recordings.

If you want to start a new recording, press the blue microphone.

Recording Options: Audio AND Video

- 1) If you have an Apple device, you can record a [Facetime call](#) if you want to be in conversation with someone you are not isolating with.
- 2) The [Photo Booth application](#) on Apple computers also allows you to record video using your computer's camera.
- 3) You can use [Zoom](#) to record a conversation from a computer if you want to be in conversation with someone you are not isolating with.

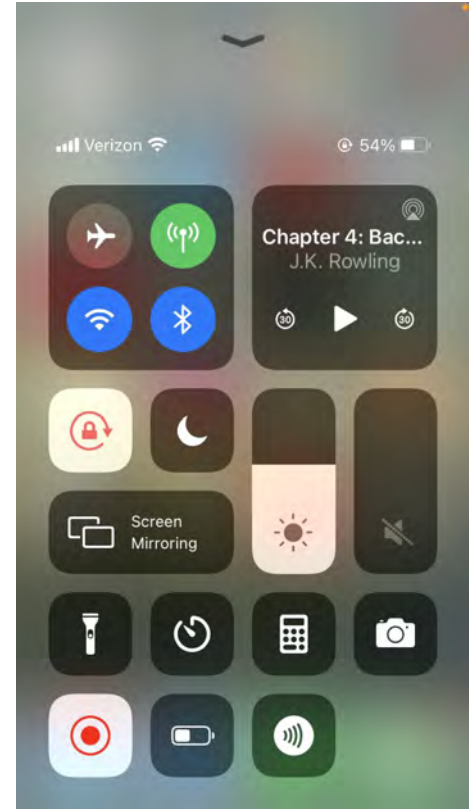


FaceTime

You can record an interview over FaceTime by using the **screen recording** feature.

Swipe up from the bottom of your screen to access the Control Center and tap the record button to begin. Tap it again to end your recording.

Screen recordings are saved to the Photos app



FaceTime

NOTE: By default, voice recording is disabled. If you want to record FaceTime Call with audio, long press on the Screen Recorder in the Control Center, and turn on Microphone.

Since it simply captures audio from your phone's microphone, thus you need to increase or even maximize volume on the phone.



Photo Booth

The Photo Booth app (available on Apple computers) is a good option for recording an in-person video interview

Select the video camera icon at the bottom left of the app and then click the Record Video button in the center to start.

Click it again to stop recording.

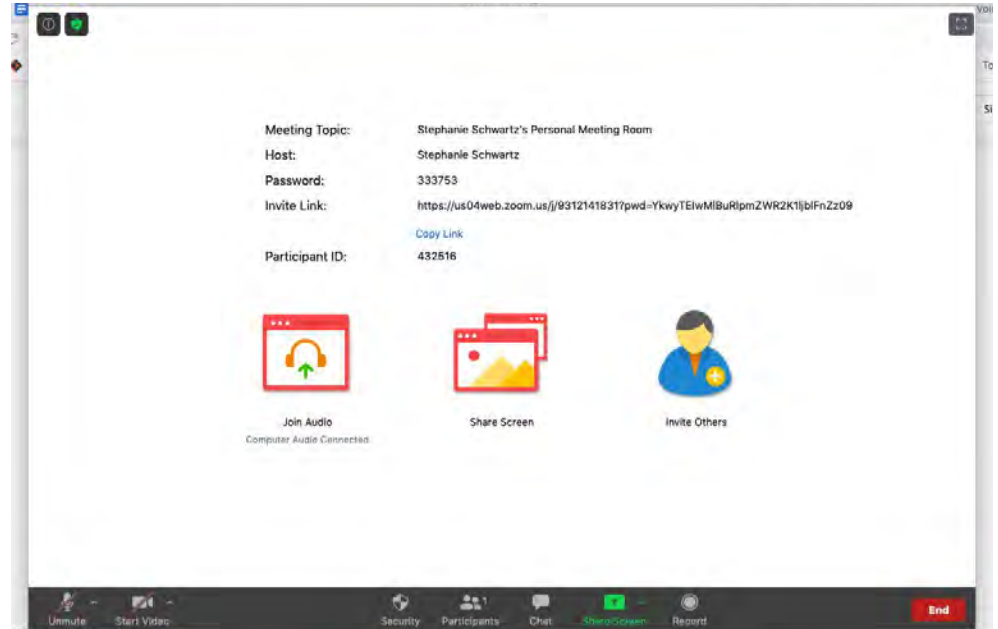
From Photo Booth, you can then export files to anywhere on your computer.



Zoom

To record an interview using Zoom, simply click the record button on the control bar.

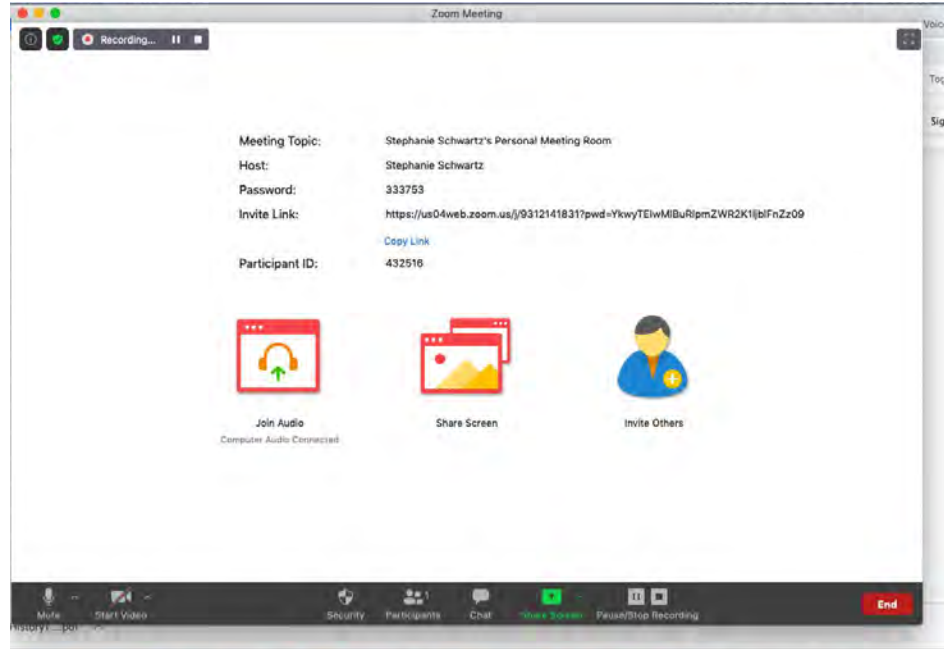
The host must record the meeting or grant the ability to record to a participant.



Zoom

Both the host and participants will see an “Recording” indicator in the top- left corner of the screen

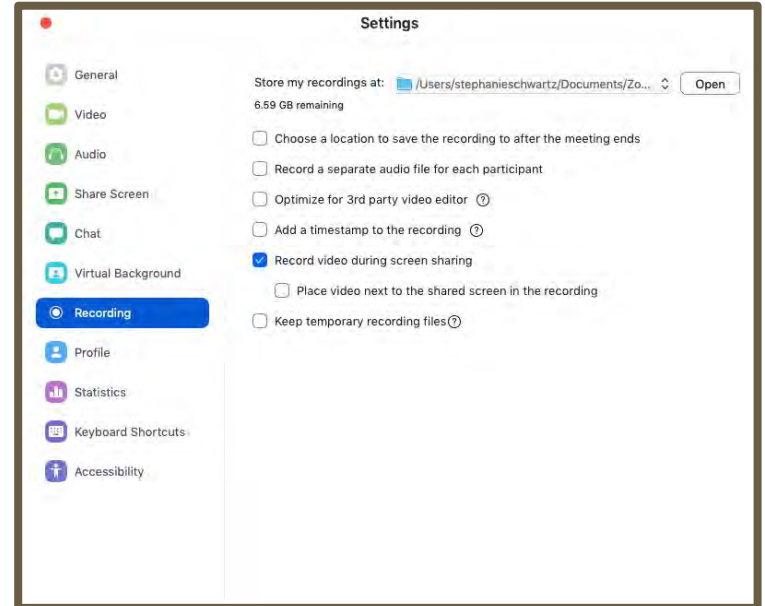
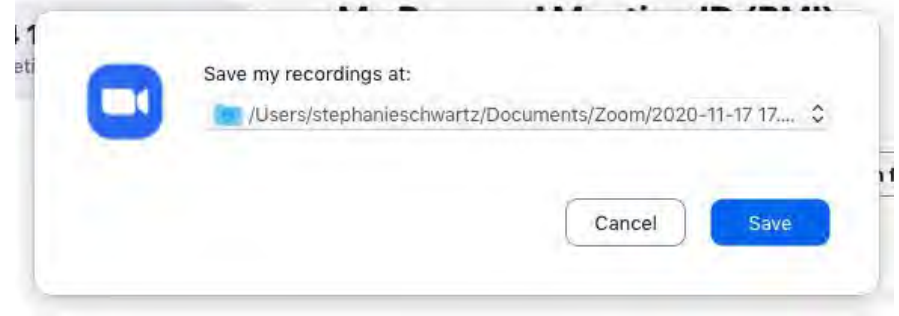
The host can pause or stop the recording using either that indicator or the bottom control bar.



Zoom

Zoom recordings will save only once the host ends the meeting -- not when you stop recording.

The app will ask you where to save the recordings. You can also set this location under Settings



Sharing Your Interview

Editing Your Recording

Editing your recordings before sharing them helps to make the final product more polished.

Through editing, you can remove moments of dead air (often at the beginning and end of a recording) as well as any unrelated interruptions or conversations that occurred during the interview

- **Voice Memos, Samsung Voice Recorder, and Photo Booth** all allow you to edit files directly in the app.
- **FaceTime** recordings can be trimmed using the **Photos** app.

Editing Your Recording

You can also edit recordings using [Audacity](#), a free and open source editing software.

- If there is more than one audio file (for example, somebody pausing to use the restroom), you can also use Audacity to knit files together
- When done editing, select File> Export. You can export as a variety of file types and qualities, including MP3 and WAV

Transferring Your Interview to A Computer

If you recorded your interview on a mobile device, you'll probably need to transfer the audio file to your computer in order to share it.

You can do so by:

- Directly connecting your device to your computer via a **USB cable**
- Transferring between Apple devices using **AirDrop**
 - AirDrop does not have a size limit, but larger files can take a lot longer to send and are more prone to network issues
- Uploading the file to cloud storage like [iCloud](#), [Samsung Cloud](#), [Dropbox](#), or [Google Drive](#) -- all can be connected to your phone and then accessed on your computer.

File Names

- Name your interview files using consistent and professional file naming practices
 - Allows others to easily identify what the file is and who the interviewee was -- what makes sense to you now might not make sense in the future

Recommended File Name Format:

IntervieweeLastName_IntervieweeFirstName_InterviewDate

Format Date as YYYYMMDD

File Types

Save your audio recordings as both a WAV file and a MP3 file

- MP3 files are smaller in size (and thus easier to share)
- WAV files are higher quality

For video files, both MP4 and MOV are acceptable options

File Types

Most of the audio only recording methods recommended create m4a files.

We use [VLC](#), a free, open source multimedia player, to convert files to the desired format.

1. Import the file into VLC
2. From Media dropdown menu, select Convert/Save
3. Select Add File button and select the file you want
4. Click Convert/Save button
5. Settings: Convert - dropdown Audio-MP3 from menu
6. Select Destination file you want
7. Hit Start
8. File will then convert and save to wherever you directed it

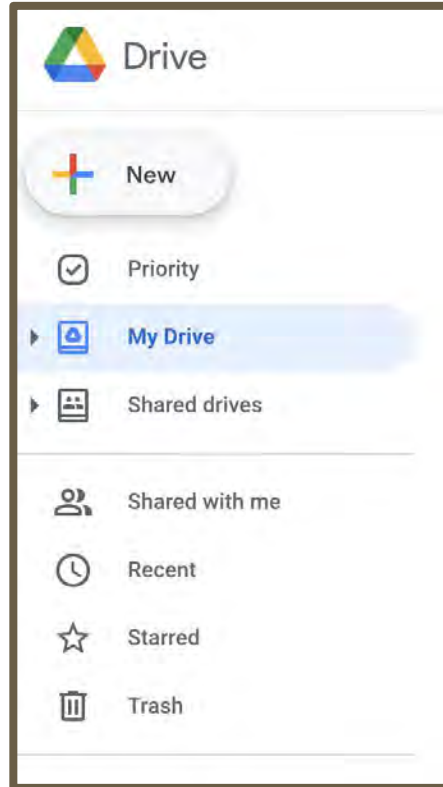
Sharing Your Files with Others

Most interview files will be too large to send over email, so you'll need to use cloud storage to share them.

Popular options include:

- [Dropbox](#)
- [Google Drive](#)
- [OneDrive](#)
- [iCloud](#)
- [WeTransfer](#)

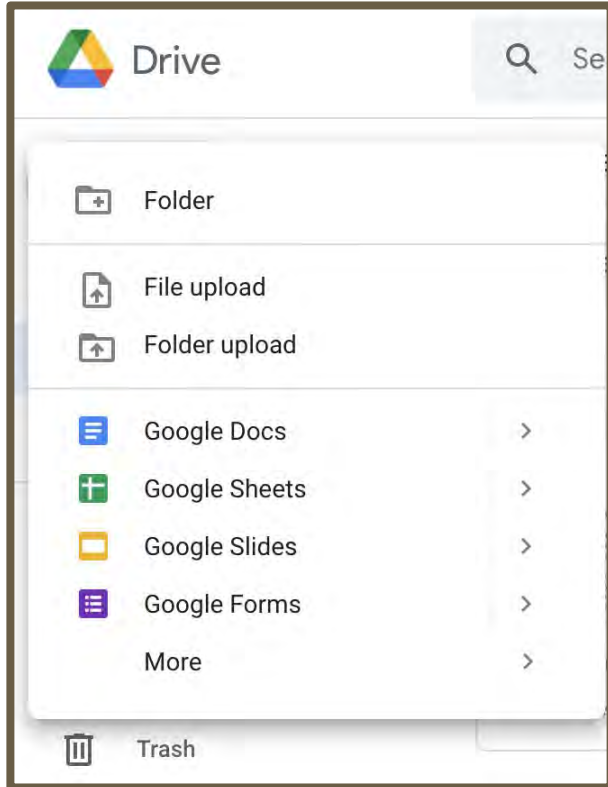
Google Drive



Log in to your Google Drive with your gmail account information.

In the left pane on the Drive landing page, click the “New” with the plus sign.

Google Drive



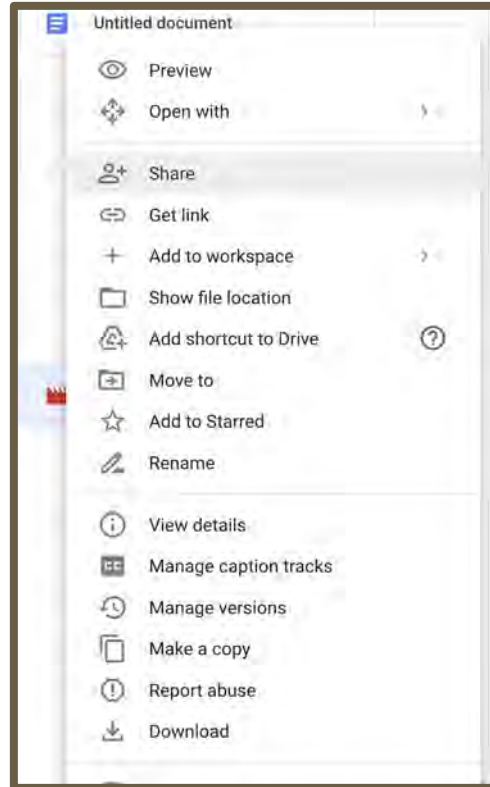
These options will appear.

Click "File upload."

Select your interview file from your computer.

The upload process may take a few minutes.

Google Drive

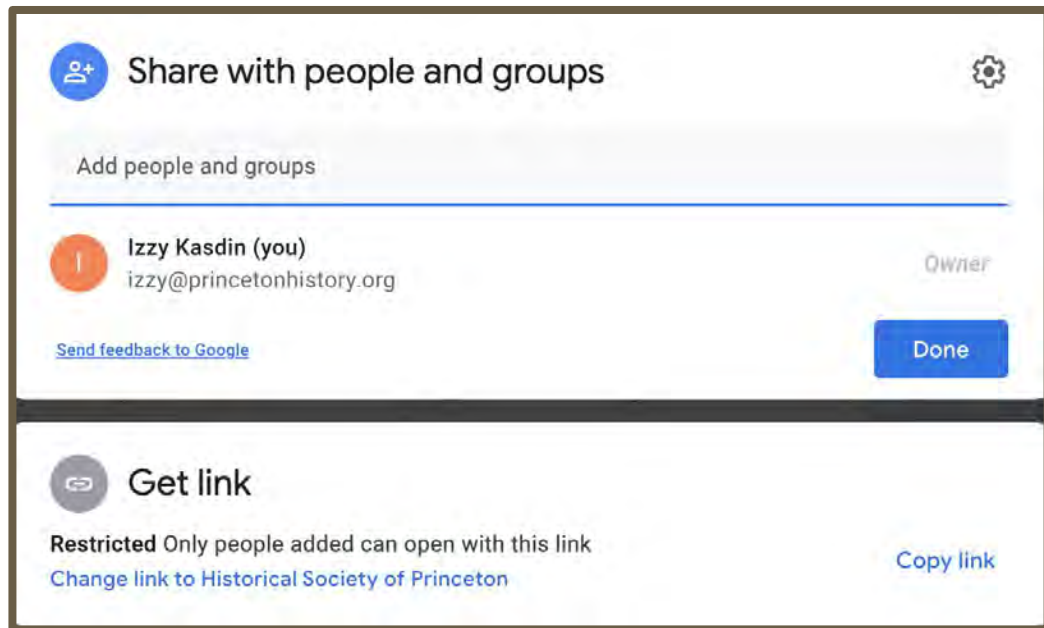


Once your file has uploaded, scroll to find your file in your Drive.

Right click on the tile with the file, and you will see these options.

Click "Share."

Google Drive



The screenshot shows the Google Drive sharing interface. At the top, there is a header "Share with people and groups" with a gear icon on the right. Below this is a search bar labeled "Add people and groups". A list of users is shown, with "Izzy Kasdin (you)" selected, displaying their profile picture, name, email address "izzy@princetonhistory.org", and the role "Owner". A blue "Done" button is located at the bottom right of this section. Below the list is a link "Send feedback to Google". The bottom section is titled "Get link" with a link icon. It shows the sharing status "Restricted" and the text "Only people added can open with this link". A blue link "Change link to Historical Society of Princeton" is on the left, and a blue "Copy link" button is on the right.

This screen will appear after you click, "Share."

Enter the email address of the person with whom you want to share the file, or copy a link to the file.

WeTransfer

The image shows a screenshot of the WeTransfer website interface overlaid on a Mentos advertisement. The WeTransfer interface includes a top navigation bar with links for Help, Products, About us, Sign up, and Log in. A white modal window is open on the left side, containing a blue plus sign icon and the text "Add your files" with a link "Or select a folder". Below this are three input fields labeled "Email to", "Your email", and "Message". At the bottom of the modal is a "Transfer" button with a blue plus sign icon. The background advertisement features a man with curly hair wearing headphones, a Mentos Pure Fresh gum container, and the text "GUM mentos REFRESH YOUR VIDEO CALL". A "SHOP NOW" button is located at the bottom right of the advertisement.

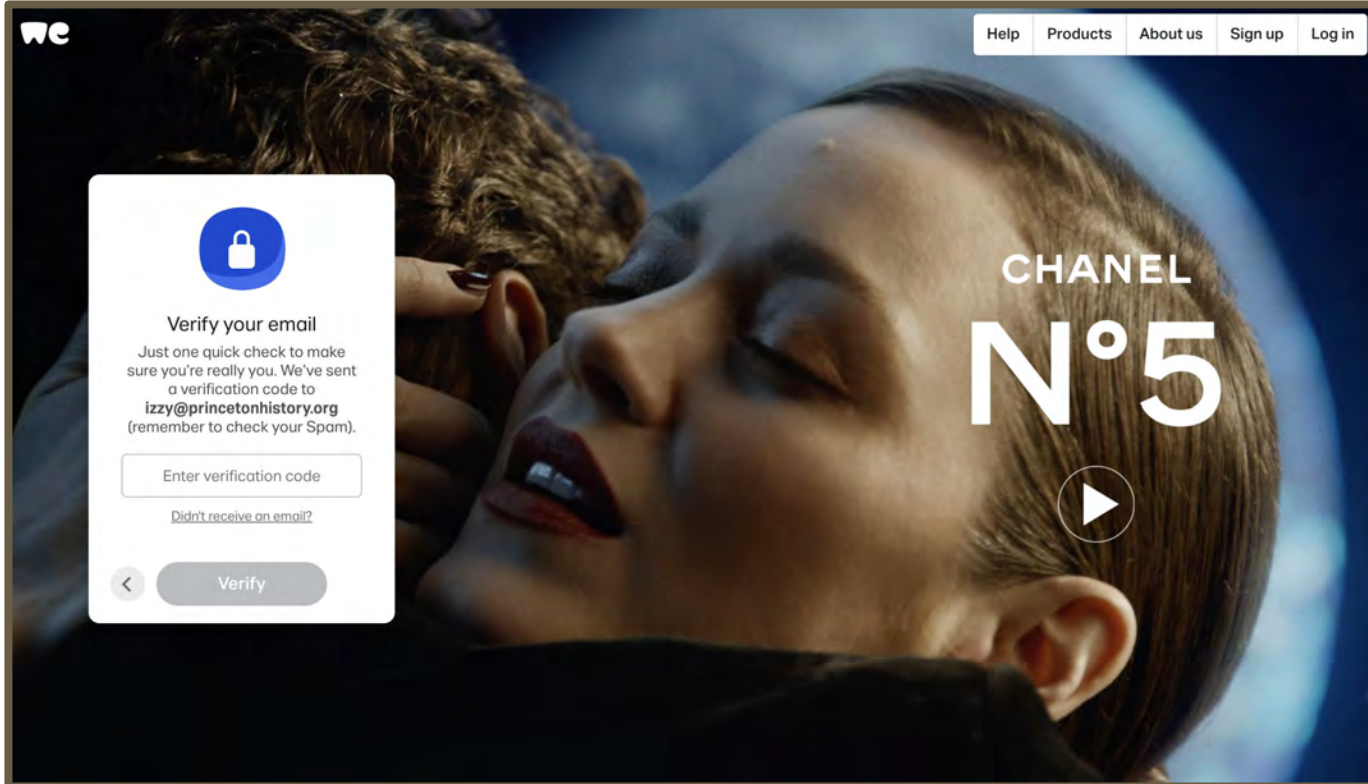
Press the blue plus sign to select the file.

Enter your email and the recipients' email.

Press "Transfer."

Transfer up to 2 GB at a time.

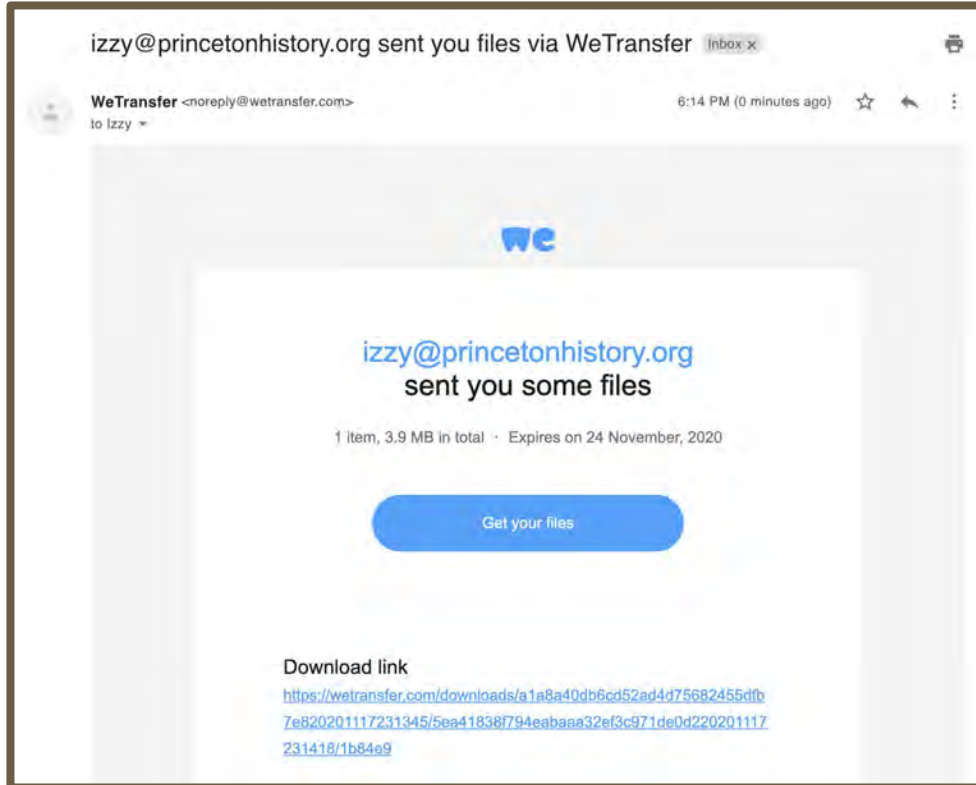
WeTransfer



WeTransfer will ask you to verify your email address, as the sender of the file.

Check your email and enter the code you receive.

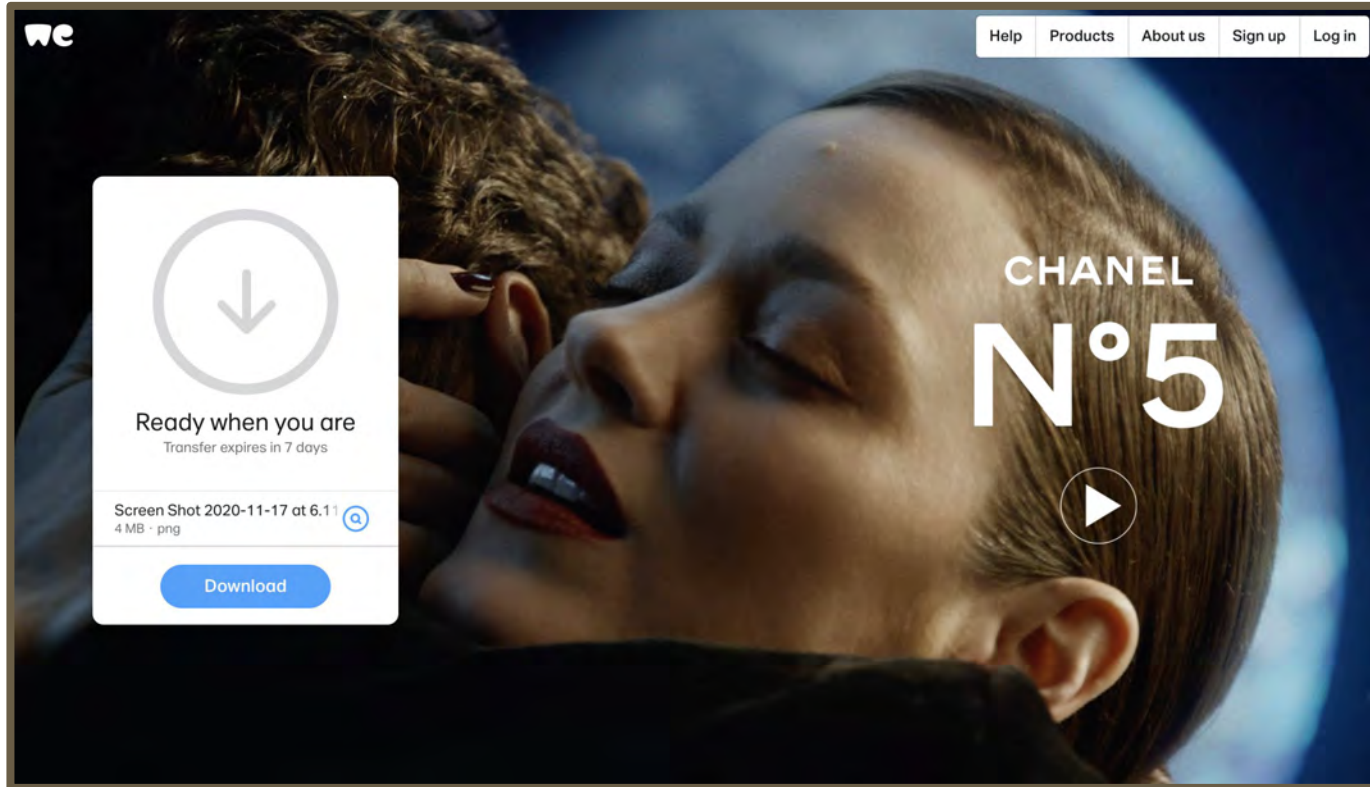
WeTransfer



The recipient of your file will receive an email like this from WeTransfer.

The recipient should click the link...

WeTransfer



...and it will take them to this page, where they can download the file directly to their computer by clicking "Download."

P.S. Don't be alarmed by these different ads in the background -- this is how WeTransfer remains a free service!

Preserving Your Interview

Best Ways to Preserve Your Interview

- Save multiple copies in multiple locations
- Save the same interview in different file formats
- Transcribe the interview so it exists in different formats

Donate to an Archive or Museum

- If your interviewee is a Princeton native:
 - Consider contributing your interview to [Voices of Princeton](#), A collaborative oral history project between the Princeton Public Library, the Historical Society of Princeton, the Arts Council of Princeton, and the Witherspoon-Jackson Historical and Cultural Society that **collects, shares, and archives stories and memories of Princetonians.**
- If not:
 - Think about what historical societies, libraries, or museums might be interested in your interviewee's story. What locations and institutions are featured?
- Each oral history project has its own consent and copyright requirements and paperwork