World Oral Literature Project
voices of vanishing worlds

Microphone Choice:

Microphones are the most important aspect of a recording set up. They vary a great deal in price and quality, and should therefore be researched fully before purchase. £100 (approximately $160) will buy you a decent microphone, although specific field situations may require more expensive equipment. A key component is the microphone's directional pattern. This refers to the microphone's field of sensitivity.

Common patterns include:

1) **Omni** is a pattern with almost no directional bias. Best used in a 'reporter' setting, when keeping a subject in the same position is difficult, or if both questions and answers need to be recorded. Keep the microphone reasonably close to the subject and be aware of the ambient sound which you will be picking up. **Diagram**

2) **Cardioid** is a heart-shaped pattern aimed at the speaker. Use close to a subject in a noisy environment, but remember that your voice will be recorded at a substantially lower amplitude. Be aware of the specific cardioid pattern as these vary widely: some will give you very little ambient sound, some a lot. You should not think of the ambient sound around you as 'waste' to be filtered out, but rather as an essential aspect of a natural recording, as long as it does not drown out your subject. **Diagram**

3) **Shotgun** is a long, narrow pattern of focused sensitivity. Often used on video cameras or booms, shotgun microphones need to be 'aimed'. Use when far away from a subject and when you have the time and concentration to keep the subject in the microphone's line of sensitivity. Be aware that the narrow pattern means a greater sensitivity to wind hiss and 'popping' (the effect of a person speaking close to the microphone and creating an unwanted 'p' sound when speaking). **Diagram**

4) **Binaural** microphones describe sound spatially. If an airplane is recorded passing overhead, you might even duck when listening back through headphones. Binaural microphones can be useful for recording a moving scene that you might otherwise want to film and can be worn in the ears themselves or on a '**fake head**'. A good way to use them is to mount them on a head-like object (this creates 'head shadow'), and keep them still while your subjects move in front. The recording must be played back on headphones rather than speakers for the effect to be noticeable.

The real issue is the amount of work that you are willing to put in while recording. An omni-directional microphone will not let your subject slip out of its field of sensitivity, but will also pick up all the ambient noise in the vicinity. The cardioid or shotgun microphone will allow you to exclude a higher degree of ambient noise, focusing on the sound coming from your subject. If the subject is moving, however, you will have to work harder to keep your subject in the microphone's field of sensitivity.

Condenser vs. Dynamic:

The terms 'Condenser' and 'Dynamic' refer to the way in which a microphone turns sound into a signal to be passed to a recorder. Condenser microphones tend to provide better sound, while dynamic microphones are less likely to break and do not require their own power source.

Click here for more information on microphone construction.
Click here for more discussion on technical issues.

Headphones:

Trustworthy headphones are essential. Low quality headphones will not provide an accurate impression of what your microphone is actually recording, and your recorder's visual levels will be your only guide to the sound quality.

Click here for further discussion on headphone issues.
Click here for a list of headphones and reviews.

Digital Audio Recorders:

Having the right recorder is very important as it forms the body of your recording set up.

Click here to read more about the **essentials** of sound recording.

Before purchasing an audio recorder, you should check that the product has:

1) The ability to record a high quality **WAV file**
2) A 'rugged' build which will not fail in the field
3) Support for a high quality microphone
4) A simple and usable interface for 'in the moment' adjustments. A recorder with a fiddly interface may take up more of your time than the subject you are trying to record, through which you risk losing your rapport with your recording subject. A perfect recording of an uninterested subject is pretty worthless.

Click here for a list of high quality recorders and associated reviews.

Labelling:

Clear and consistent labelling of recorded content is essential. Please include documentation detailing the person(s) recorded, location, date, and a brief description of the recording. A sample field documentation sheet can be downloaded **here**. It can help to start each recording with a brief audio statement of location and context.

The digital audio files themselves can also be electronically labelled. This can be done on the recorder itself, or on a computer once files have been transferred. To rename on a computer, simply right click on the file and select 'rename'. A file name based on the date, i.e. 2010_02_24, and a subject or location, i.e. Chenchu_India, can be very useful when archiving or disseminating content later.

Editing and Cleaning Audio:

In general, the less you adjust or amend your audio recording the better. Editing programmes may help to improve sound, but can almost never match a clear, well-authored recording.

The only piece of equipment that you may need is an editing programme to cut, combine or trim files. There are a number to choose from, all of which serve the basic functions. Interfaces vary widely, but popular choices include **Audacity** and **Logic**.

Click here for a list of free audio editing programmes.

The most important aspect of sound processing is frequency manipulation. The sound that you hear coming through your headphones is actually a combination of a number of different frequencies, some of which are wanted, others are not. Equalization of certain frequencies lets you manipulate the signal that you are hearing, e.g. adding intelligibility to the human voice by upping the high end frequencies, or cutting out electronic hum by removing the lows.

Click here for an excellent explanation of these basic processes.

Storage, Backup and Migration:

Once your audio has been processed, it needs to be backed up. A good rule to follow is **back up, back and back up again**. Backing up in a number of different formats is also advised. If you have internet access in the field, you can even email the audio files to yourself for protection.

If you want to pass content on to World Oral Literature Project staff without sending DVDs by post, you may want to make use of services such as **www.archive.org** or **www.yousendit.com** which will allow us to download large files without them clogging up our email inboxes.

Better yet, please feel free to send your recordings by post, on CD, DVD or memory stick, to:

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