



# Wikitongues Volunteer Guide





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# Overview

## Welcome!

**Wikitongues is a platform for every language in the world.** We promote the use and preservation of every language and dialect, for the sake of every person and culture. This overview will help acquaint you with our organization and activities.

## Our Mission

More than 7,000 languages are spoken and signed around the world, and as many as half may not survive the next eighty years. In more human terms, as many as half the world's cultures are at risk of collapse. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Thanks to changing social attitudes, positive shifts in politics, and the increasing availability of the Internet and digital tools, communities are making big gains toward sharing, preserving, and reviving endangered and minority languages.

Wikitongues is a united front around this welcome change. We're an international volunteer community building the first public archive of every language in the world, raising awareness about linguistic diversity and rallying to defend it.

## Our Community

**Wikitongues is powered by volunteers from around the world.**

- 1000+ people
- 80+ countries
- 350+ languages

## Wikitongues Leadership

Activities at Wikitongues are directed by a Governing Board that meets four times per year to vote on mission-critical programs. The Governing Board is supported by an Advisory Council of field experts and an Associate Board that contributes to fundraising and development activities.

### *The Governing Board*

**Daniel Bogre Udell**  
New York City, USA  
Co-founder

**Frederico Andrade**  
New York City, USA  
Co-founder

**Alolita Sharma**  
Bay Area, USA  
Unicode Consortium



**Wade Davis**  
Vancouver, Canada  
National Geographic  
Explorer-In-Residence

**Nicole Federico**  
New York City, USA  
Former President at  
Cariclub

### *Advisory Council*

**Ghil'ad Zuckermann**  
Adelaide, Australia  
University of Adelaide

**Catriona Malau**  
Newcastle, Australia  
Newcastle University

**Natalie Milbrodt**  
New York City, USA  
Queens Library

**Daniel Kaufmann**  
New York City, USA  
Endangered Languages  
Alliance

**Subhashish Panigrahi**  
Bangalore, India  
Wikimedia India &  
The O Foundation

**Godfrey Musila**  
Washington D.C., USA  
The Africa Center for  
Strategic Studies

### *Associate Board*

**Kristy Nguyen**, New York City, USA  
**Cameron Paul Willis**, New York City, USA  
**Jack Steele**, New York City, USA  
**Michael Herman**, New York City, USA  
**Dane Menten-Weil**, Madrid, Spain  
**Tad Cooke**, Burlington, USA  
**Joseph Hasselman**, San Francisco, USA

### **Volunteer Leaders**

On the ground, Wikitongues is stewarded by leaders from our volunteer community. Whether you need help getting started, have questions along the way, or you just want to meet others from Wikitongues, our volunteer leaders are here to help! Feel free to contact any of them directly, any time, via e-mail or messaging app. For any general questions, or if you have ideas, contact Kristen.

#### **Kristen Tcherneshoff**

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If you have trouble contacting your local volunteer leader, please let us know at [hello@wikitongues.org](mailto:hello@wikitongues.org).

### **Partner Organizations**

Around the world, Wikitongues works with aligned collectives, organizations, and institutions to support our volunteers and advance our mission.

- Library of Congress
- UNESCO
- Queens Public Library
- Wikimedia Foundation
- Participatory Culture Foundation
- Polyglot Indonesia
- Peace Corps Liberia
- Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana
- Endangered Languages Alliance



## Getting Started With Wikitongues

Wikitongues is 100% volunteer-driven. From linguistic documentation to content creation and social media management, there are several ways to get involved.

### Language Documentation

Most Wikitongues volunteers are actively engaged in linguistic documentation and preservation. Contribute to our public archive of every language in the world by recording video oral histories of the languages in your community.

To get started, contact your regional volunteer leader, and [read our next section](#) about best practices for producing language recordings.

### Community Organizing

Become a volunteer leader and organize grassroots language preservation and other aligned projects. To apply, please contact [kristen@wikitongues.org](mailto:kristen@wikitongues.org).

### Technology

If you have technical skills as a designer, web developer, or software engineer, join our open source community and build tools that support language activists. To join, please contact [freddie@wikitongues.org](mailto:freddie@wikitongues.org).

### Blogging

Bring awareness to languages around the world and ongoing preservation projects through our blog. If you are interested in writing about documentation, grammar, a personal story related to languages, or any other topic you think you would be fitting, please contact [kristen@wikitongues.org](mailto:kristen@wikitongues.org).

### Social Media

Wikitongues is on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Help us leverage social media to raise awareness about the value of linguistic diversity and cultural exchange. To join our social team, please contact [daniel@wikitongues.org](mailto:daniel@wikitongues.org).

### Wikimedia Contribution

Wikitongues is independent from the Wikimedia Foundation, the nonprofit that runs Wikipedia. However, we frequently contribute language videos and other content to the Wikipedia, Wikivoyage, and the Wikimedia Commons. If you're a Wikimedian, please join [our user group](#) or contact [satdeep@wikitongues.org](mailto:satdeep@wikitongues.org).



## Oral Histories Guide

Wikitongues is building the first public archive of every language in the world, focusing primarily on videos of people speaking their native languages; you may have already seen this work on our YouTube channel, Facebook, or Wikipedia.

Formally, these language videos are known as 'oral histories'. This section will serve as a reference of best practices for recording and captioning your own.



*Wikitongues co-founder Daniel Bogre Udell with Luz, a speaker of the Amazonian Shipibo language, in Cusco, Peru.*

## Why Do Oral Histories Matter?

Freely available language documentation is an essential step toward preserving linguistic diversity for future generations: the more languages are documented, the easier they are to teach, learn, and sustain.

The spectrum of linguistic documentation is wide. Indeed, most researchers spend a lifetime documenting the many aspects of a single language. To name but a few examples, you can map out inherent grammar structures, catalog unique sounds, or record the meanings of every word and phrase.

The oral history is a core component of what we might call ‘early stage’ language documentation, because it presents a raw example of language as it is candidly spoken. Both those looking to research the aspects of a language and those seeking to learn it can find value in a well-documented oral history. Perhaps most importantly, oral histories can offer a window into the life of a speaker or speakers.



## Who Should I Record?

A great place to start is in your personal network of friends and family. Ask around and see if anyone would be willing to be recorded.

After talking with these various people, you can try reaching out to organizations and clubs within your community. Head to your local library, where they often host language exchange meetups. Grocery stores and food markets provide great opportunities to meet people. We've found that social media has been a useful tool. For example, we had a volunteer traveling to Jordan and so we searched on Facebook for Deaf associations in Amman, in order, to record Jordanian Sign Language.

Many Wikitongues volunteers also record themselves speaking their own languages, rather than conducting interviews with other people. If you would like to record your own oral history, you are welcome to do so.

## Best Practices for Recording

Across the humanities and social sciences, oral histories are a popular methodology for documenting historical information about individuals, communities, and important events through planned interviews.

### Technical and Aesthetic Considerations

The Wikitongues community comes from a diverse set of backgrounds and has access to different technical setups. Whether you're using a professional camera and audio recorder, or just a smartphone, consider the following:

- **Clean audio is essential.** It's important to record your interview with minimal background noise and audio interference. Avoid crowded hallways, busy streets, or background music.
- **Stick to landscape dimensions.** Though it is common for people to use portrait ratios when recording with smartphones, it is better to film with landscape dimensions; that is, with your phone horizontal rather than vertical. This better optimizes your video for online media players.
- **Smartphones make great audio recorders.** If you have access to a professional grade camera, but lack comparable audio equipment, your phone can be leveraged to record external audio. For iOS devices, we recommend *iTalk*. For Android, we recommend *Audio Recorder*.



*Interviewees should be framed clearly from the upper body. When using a smartphone, be sure to record in landscape proportions, rather than vertically.*

For a complete chart of equipment guidelines, see [wikitongues.org/video-guidelines](http://wikitongues.org/video-guidelines).

### Conducting a Great Interview

The best oral histories are candid, unscripted stories. Sometimes, speakers of underrepresented languages may prefer to perform a monologue, read a poem, or otherwise stick to a script. In these cases, it is important to respect the speaker's wishes. However, if a speaker is open to a candid interview, here's how to do it well.

- **Create a Safe Environment.** The key to a great interview is creating an environment for your interviewee(s) to feel comfortable. Spend some time with the person or people beforehand. Show the recording equipment you plan to use. Ask preliminary questions: "What do you think you'll talk about?" Language, culture, country, a travel story, or any personal experience are all welcome topics.
- **Be a Good Listener.** The best interviewers provide a platform for their interviewees to speak freely. Asking an open-ended question can initiate a rich train of thought: "Tell me about your experience as a speaker of your language." As your interviewee elaborates, ask follow-up questions in response to their ideas: "Interesting point. Tell me more."
- **Be Comfortable in Silence.** One of the best information eliciting techniques is silence. After you've started the recording, allow the speaker to talk as freely and as long as possible. If they finish their thought or story, pause for a bit before you encourage them with another topic or question--the interviewee will often think of something else to share. If they begin to seem uncomfortable or unsure of where to go next, you can always chime in to set them at ease or help with ideas.
- With rare exception, we remove the interviewer from final edits of language videos. With that in mind, it is important that the interviewee rephrase questions. For example, if you ask, "What is your name?", the answer should be prefaced with, "My name is..."



- Keep in mind that each recording session will be different, and as you do more, you will become more confident and comfortable in your managing style!

### **Crossing the Language Barrier**

Oral histories are typically conducted in a single language, spoken by both the interviewer and interviewee. That is rarely possible in our case, so the first step to recording a Wikitongues oral history is finding a common language between you and your interviewee.

For instance, if your mother tongue is Javanese, and your interviewee speaks Balinese, you likely both speak standard Indonesian. In that case, you would ask your pre-interview questions in Indonesian. Your interviewee would then respond in Balinese and you can have them summarize what they said in Indonesian. Summaries are useful for someone who feels nervous in front of the camera: from those summaries, you can then derive follow-up topics.

### **When You're Faced with Time Constraints**

A thorough oral history session can last an entire afternoon. In fact, our longest video is about an hour! We understand that most of the time, you won't have this much time at your disposal. Perhaps the speaker you're recording only has 15 minutes. In these cases, confine your interview to a single open-ended question or a short series of questions to start them off with. Most of our videos are five minutes or less. **That's ok.**

## **Captioning and Translation**

Though it is not mandatory to collect captions for your videos, it is ideal: captions will make your oral history a better educational resource.

### **Transcription versus Translation**

*Transcript* refers to the text of your interview in the native language or languages spoken, while a *translation* is a literal translation of the video transcript. If you can, secure both a transcript and translation into an international language.

You can do this in person after recording the video or by follow-up via e-mail/phone/etc.

### **Format**

The ideal format for submitting transcripts and translations are .SRT files rather than loose text, because .SRT files sync automatically with most video and media players to create subtitles. Thankfully, .SRT files are easy to make.



To create an .SRT file, open up your preferred text editor and divide your transcript or translation by the lines they would appear as subtitles.

For example:

```
"Hello, my name is Joana. I am from Tarragona and Catalan is my  
mother tongue. I also speak Spanish and English."
```

Becomes:

```
1  
00:00:01,00 --> 00:00:03,00  
Hello, my name is Joana.  
  
2  
00:00:03,03 --> 00:00:11,00  
I am from Tarragona  
And Catalan is my mother tongue.  
  
3  
00:00:11,06 --> 00:00:14,00  
I also speak Spanish and English.
```

The above format adheres to the following two rules:

- Each subtitle is formatted with three line breaks:
  - The numerical *sequence counter*: **1**, **2**, **3**, and so on.
  - The opening and closing *time markers*, which are formatted as **Hours:Minutes:Seconds:Milliseconds** and joined by -->.
  - The raw text of the subtitle.
- Subtitles should contain fewer than 40 characters per line of text. You can use websites such as <https://wordcounter.net> to double check your lines.

When you're done making your .SRT file, simply save it with the file extension *.srt*.

### Non-Latin Characters

.SRT files support any character set supported by unicode, so whether your transcript or translation uses the Cyrillic alphabet, Arabic script, or any other writing system, that's ok! There's no need to romanize.

## Uploading Your Recording

After you've recorded an oral history you can upload the video and any relevant documents to Dropbox, Google Drive, or another platform, then head on over to <https://wikitongues.org/submit-a-video/>.



If you're unable to access one of these services, feel free to send Daniel, Kristen, or your community leader your videos via e-mail, Facebook, or another messaging service. We can ensure it gets submitted!

## Licensing and Attribution

### Attribution

Our videos share attribution between the organization (Wikitongues), interviewers (those who record the video), and interviewees (those who appear in the video).

### Non-Commercial License

By default, Wikitongues videos are licensed under a Creative Commons Non-Commercial Attribution 4.0 license, which allows for public reuse of the video for cultural, educational, and other noncommercial purposes, so long as the video is properly attributed.

### Open License

Interviewees may opt-in to their interview being released under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 license, which allows for public release of the video for any reason, even commercial, so long as the video is properly attributed. Interviewees most commonly opt-in to the ShareAlike license because they would like to see their video contributed to Wikipedia.

### Securing Release

For our purposes, paper release forms are not required. Verbal consent is acceptable. After your interviewee chooses their preferred license and while the video is recording, they should state, in the most international language they know, their full name, the date of the recording, and the license they prefer. If you would like to have the paper release form, to use or for personal knowledge, please either e-mail [hello@wikitongues.org](mailto:hello@wikitongues.org) or contact your relevant community leader.

If linguistic or cultural barriers prevent you from clearly explaining the difference between Non-Commercial and ShareAlike licensing, we will release your video under a Non-Commercial to protect the privacy of the interviewee.