

Guidelines for Oral History Interviews
The History Channel

Student Workbook

(adapted from Michael Gatto)

Why do some students hate to study history?

History too often seems like the study of long lists of names, events and dates. Students seldom get the chance to act as historians who record and interpret history for themselves and for others. Historians often act like detectives who are trying to solve intriguing puzzles. They search for information and collect it, but most important, they draw conclusions from facts.

Students can write their own histories of an important place, event or person. They can examine documents, letters, diaries, photographs, maps and folk songs to get closer to people and events of the past. Explaining and understanding the past connects us to our families, communities and country. We probably can never really fully understand those who lived before us, but the effort helps us understand our society, and perhaps finally, ourselves.

Connecting With the Past

Many people have a hard time understanding events that they, themselves, have not experienced. Students, especially, must learn the connections between their own experiences and past events, people, and places.

Too often, young people miss out on a golden opportunity to learn about the past, because they seem to be cut off from their elders. Conducting an oral history offers students an opportunity to reach out to the older generations in their own families and communities, in order to learn more about the past.

Instructions for Students

Picking an Interview Topic

First, you must decide upon some event or period of history about which you want to learn more. You may draw upon something that you have heard or read about in class or at home. By narrowing your topic, you will give your interview a focus and will encourage your interview subject to give details and put a personal stamp on the interview.

Picking Someone to Interview

Who remembers?

Remember that for an oral history, the person whom you are interviewing must have lived through that event or time period and must be able to recall details and other memories. If you want to learn about the Great Depression, for example, you must find someone who was at least in his or her early teen years during the 1930s. This means that the person must be at least 80 years old today. This is not as hard as you think; older people are all around you. They are your relatives, neighbors and family friends. You can always interview someone about a less distant event, too, like the Civil Rights Movement or the Vietnam War. In any case, most people will be thrilled that you are interested in their experiences and will go out of their way to make the interview an experience that you will not forget.

Who should you choose to interview?

- relative
- friend
- neighbor
- member of a veterans organization
- retired teacher or administrator
- member of a senior citizens group
- resident of assisted living facility

Names of Three Possible Interview Subjects:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who is your final choice for your interview?

You should record the name, address, and telephone number of your interview subject, so that you can contact the person, before or after the interview, if necessary.

Name _____

Address _____

Town/City _____

Zip Code _____

Telephone number: () _____

Email: _____

Directions to interview site:

Make an Interview Appointment:

Circle Day:

Monday - Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday - Friday - Saturday - Sunday

Date: ___/___/___

Time: _____ a.m./p.m.

Remember that the interview is probably an important event to your subject. Set up a special time and date so that both of you can prepare for the meeting and so that you will have time to review your final product. It may be helpful, when you speak with your subject on the phone, to ask him or her what he/she would like to talk about. This will help you prepare your questions for the interview. You even may want to send your subject a list of possible interview questions before you meet with him or her. This will help spark the person's memory about the names of people and places that he or she may want to share with you.

Post Card Confirmation:

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to an interview on audio- or videotape.

I will meet you:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

I would like to ask some questions about the topic of:

I would enjoy seeing and hearing about any photographs, letters,

or other keepsakes that you would be willing to share with others.
Yours truly, _____ Telephone Number _____

Preparing for the Interview

Background Reading: What have you found out about your interview topic?

"Just the Facts": Taking Notes

After doing some background reading, one of the best ways to begin sorting through the information that you have just learned about your focus topic is to fill in answers for the five "w's:" who, what, when, where and why. Start by writing your focus topic in the title box at the top of the page. Then, write, in your own words, quick notes that answer the five "w" questions listed down the side of the page. Most likely, you will find a lot of information about your focus topic in books, movies, and on the Internet. It is up to you to sift through the information and choose those facts that will help you the most to prepare for your interview. Remember that the goal of this exercise is to help you come up with the most useful questions to ask your interview subject.

Note-taking Example:

Title: Sit-in Movement of the 1960s

Who? Started by college students across the country, the sit-in movement later was coordinated by SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee).

What? An act of civil disobedience by African Americans who sat down at segregated lunch counters and refused to leave until they had been given service.

When? The sit-in movement began in February, 1960.

Where? Started at a Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, but quickly spread across the southern United States.

Why? To gain equal treatment for African Americans at lunch counters and other establishments that refused to serve customers on account of their race.

Writing Interview Questions

Memory Questions:

After you have decided on a focus topic and done some background reading, you should carefully consider and write down the questions that you plan to use in your interview, using your own worksheet or

the one provided with this manual. Your interview should begin with several memory questions. First, memory questions should help relax your subject and get them in a mood to reminisce. Second, these questions will help you gather information about your subject's personal experiences.

Note that your topic and questions will be shaped by the subject(s) you choose to interview. You will get the best answers if you ask your interview subject to talk about his or her *own* experiences, so encourage your interviewee to provide personal stories, sad and funny memories that you will not find in the standard school books.

Your Job is to Record and Interpret History

- Write and ask good questions.
- Get good stories that are told in an interesting way.
- Examine and understand the different beliefs, interests, hopes and fears in follow up questions.
- Evaluate your evidence to make conclusions.

Writing Additional Questions

In order to learn as much as possible from the interview experience you should write several questions that will encourage your subject to expand and explain their feelings and ideas. The second stage of questions should encourage your subject to dig deeper into the stories to explain why things happened and how they relate to other events.

Below are some basic questions to help you get started. Use your own worksheet, or the one provided, to write your own complete questions.

Explanation Questions

- What caused this event...?
- Why did this happen...?
- What happened next...?
- Can you describe the scene in one word...?
- Can you compare two events...?
- Explain the reason for...?
- What conclusion can you draw...?
- What is your point of view about...?
- Can you describe the scene...?
- Can you explain a photograph...?

Judgment Questions

The last group of questions should offer your subject a chance to talk about the "big picture" by telling about what was good or bad, important or less important. These questions should be asked last because they allow the interview subject a chance to sum up and make conclusions. Remember that this is your subject's opportunity to give his or her own opinion—you may or may not agree with the conclusions.

Judgment Questions

- What was the happiest (funniest or saddest) memory?
- What was your biggest accomplishment?
- What actions would you change if you had a chance to re-live those years again?
- What mistakes did people make during this period or event in history?

- What should people today remember about this time/event?

**MEMORY + EXPLANATION + JUDGMENT =
SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW**

Even with your best efforts some people may need some extra questions to encourage them to tell the full story.

Don't be afraid to ask for details or explanations.

Back up Questions:

Why was this important?

How did the story begin or end?

What else do you want to tell me about this?

What important question did I forget to ask you?

Interview Tips

Proper Attire

You want your interview subjects to relax and tell their best stories. Your clothing should not distract your subject from the purpose of the interview. You should be neatly dressed in comfortable clothes.

Practice

If you are not familiar with audio- or videotape recorders, you should make a practice tape at home.

Set Up

If you are videotaping your interview, the camera will be set up on a tripod. Put the camera as close to the interview subject as possible. If you have a camera operator ask him or her to keep the camera as still as possible. Use the zoom button only when a close-up seems to help the audience understand the story being told. (Do not put the camera more than ten feet from the subject unless you have a special microphone that is attached to a jack.)

Identify the Tape

Whether you use an audio- or videotape, you want to be sure to identify your project. Speaking clearly, say, "My name is _____ and, I am interviewing _____ on the topic of _____. The time is _____ a.m./p.m. and the date is _____."

Conducting the Interview

Let your interview subject know that this is an important project and that you are very interested in his or her personal experiences. Treat the interview as serious work. Ask each question from your list and wait respectfully for an answer. (Don't be afraid of silence! Sometimes it may take your subject a moment or two to compose an answer.) Look directly at the person who is giving the interview. Nod and smile to show that you are listening and understand the story. If you don't understand, ask a follow up question. Remember this probably will be your only chance to get these stories on tape.

Interview Skill:

Active Listening

If you find that your interview subject needs to be assured that you are listening and understand his or her story, try to paraphrase (repeat in your own words) an important part of the interview. This will let your storytellers know that you are connecting with them and their stories.

Example:

Interview Subject: "My assignment during the sit-ins was not to leave the lunch counter until we had been served. This meant that we had to keep our seats and remain nonviolent, even when people started yelling and throwing food at us."

Your paraphrase: "You were determined to stay at the lunch counter until you had achieved your goal."

Checking the Tape

When you feel the interview is complete. Stop the recorder and rewind the tape. Replay the tape to check to see that the recording can be seen and/or heard.

Ask your subject if he or she wishes to erase or add any comments before you leave. Once both of you are satisfied, ask your subject to sign the following permission form. This is an important final step of the interview (This will allow you to show the interview to others.) Before you leave, smile and say, "Thank you!"

Sample Permission Slip

<p>I give my permission for:</p> <p>_____ (student interviewer)</p> <p>to show this tape to his/her class and family members. I release all claims and rights to this tape.</p> <p>_____ (interview subject)</p> <p>Date: _____</p>

Written Transcript of the Tape:

You should make a written transcript of some part of the taped interview that you think is especially important. When you think back on the experience, which story comes to mind first? These stories are probably the best parts to transcribe on paper. Remember that a transcription is the exact words from the tape. In order to be true to your subject's wishes and to be historically accurate, do not change words.

Thank you note: Write a thank you note after you view or listen to the tape. Quote an important part of the interview in the note to let the subject know that you spent the time to listen and think about his or her story.

Conclusion: After the interview tape and transcript are complete it is a good idea to take a quiet moment to think about what you learned from the experience.

Write a thoughtful response to these sentence stems:

My most important job in this assignment was...

The most important thing I learned was...

I didn't know that...

One thing I did well was...

If I had another opportunity, I would improve...

Class Activities: You will want to discuss your experiences and share them with your classmates and teacher. The following activities will help you learn more through the interviews and experiences of you and your classmates.

Sharing Stories: Each student will prepare him or herself for this activity by bringing the interview transcript to class. Students then will pair up in groups of two to explain their interviews to each other. After students understand their partners' stories, students should switch partners and try to retell their first partners' stories.

Finding the Common Themes:

Before students divide into groups, each person should make a list of the major themes covered in his or her interview. Then, students meet in groups of three, sharing their lists with each other. After each student has explained the items on his or her list, the group should decide together how each interview subject's stories and experiences are similar. Students then can record the

similarities on a separate chart, which they will present to the class. After each group has presented its findings, ask the whole class to identify and discuss the themes that appeared most frequently in the interviews.

Class Journal: A group of student editors or the teacher should collect the written transcripts and select the best excerpts for publication. The editors should include original snapshots of the interview subjects to illustrate the class journal.

We Remember Celebration

It might be nice for the class to invite the interview subjects into school for a celebration at the completion of the project. The class could preview excerpts from the interview tapes and distribute copies of the class journal. The class could even hold a "book signing," asking the interview subjects to autograph their contributions in the class journal.

Worksheet: Memory Questions

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Follow Up
Questions: _____

Worksheet: Explanation and Judgment Questions

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Follow Up
Questions: _____

Worksheet: Taking Notes

Title:

Who?

What?

When?

Where?

Why?

ORAL HISTORY QUESTIONS

(Adapted from http://www.youthsource.ab.ca/teacher_resources/oral_question.html)

Here are a series of questions that you can use when interviewing a family member.

Basic Questions

What is your full name and why were you named this?

What are the names of your parents and siblings?

What is the date and place of your birth?

What was your schooling like? (That is, how did you get to school, what classes did you take, and what was your favorite subject?)

Did you get married? If so, to whom? When and where?

What major illnesses or health problems do you remember having?

Do you have any health problems that are considered hereditary in nature? If so, what are they?

Family History Questions

Do you remember hearing your grandparents describe their lives? What did they say?

Do you remember your great-grandparents? What do you know about them?

Who is the oldest person you can remember in your family from when you were a child? What do you remember about that person?

Lifetime Changes

What would you consider to be the most important inventions during your lifetime?

How is the world different now from when you were a child?

As you see it, what are the biggest problems that face our nation and how do you think they could be solved?

Family Life

NOTE: If your interviewee did not have children, then rephrase the next three questions to ask about nieces and nephews.

Do you remember anything that your children did when they were small that really amazed you?

What is one of the most unusual things that one of your children did regularly when he or she was small?

What is the funniest thing that you can remember that one of your children said or did?

Where have you lived as an adult? List the places and years that you lived there.

Why are you living where you are today?

Do you wish you lived somewhere else? If so, where?

Career

As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

What was your first job?

What kinds of jobs have you had?

How did you decide on your career?

If you served in the military, when and where did you serve and what were your duties? Were you ever injured in the line of duty?

If so, what were the circumstances and what were your injuries?

Travel/Vacation

What is the most beautiful place you have ever visited and what was it like?

What is the longest trip you have ever gone on? Where did you go?

What was your favorite vacation? Where did you go and why was it special?

What is the favorite place you ever visited and what was it like?

Personal

What person had the most positive influence on your life? What did he or she do to influence you?

Is there a person that really changed the course of your life by something that he or she did? How did it happen?

Do you remember someone saying something to you that had a big impact on how you lived your life?

Who said it, and what did that person say?