

LESSON

Oral History Project

Why Study History?

History deals with people, places, or events of the past. Have you asked yourself or others, “Why must I study the past?” or “Why must I study history?” Or, have you asked yourself these questions, “What makes a person, place, or event of the past significant? How am I connected to the past? Who am I?”

History discusses the contexts in which particular events occurred and the circumstances in which persons acted in certain ways. The contexts and the circumstances will help you identify and understand your own values better and also those of society. When you think about past events and relate them to the present, you begin to appreciate the similarities and differences between the past and the present.

History provides opportunities to examine the sources of materials you are studying and lets you develop critical thinking skills. To check on the accuracy of a single piece of information, you seek out several sources and not merely trust one source of information to reveal the absolute truth. Interpreting the events accurately and carefully is also extremely important in history.

Historical Research

Our knowledge about people, places, cultures, events, and society increases when we pursue research in history. The goal of historical research is to carefully examine historical records to determine what has happened in the past. In order to reconstruct past events, historical researchers depend upon *sources*. These sources could be official documents, business records, oral evidence, photographs, films, local history records, unpublished documents, diaries, letters, newspapers, memoirs, and maps.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians classify sources as *primary* and *secondary*. When an individual reports about an event after witnessing it, the report is said to be a primary source. Primary sources are categorized as:

- written documents (for example: diaries, letters, and manuscripts)
- government documents (for example: birth certificates, census records, and official letters)
- printed documents (for example: newspaper articles and autobiographies)
- visual artifacts (for example: photographs, films, maps, and cartoons)
- oral sources (for example: oral reports of eyewitnesses and speeches)
- physical artifacts (for example: tools, furniture, and costumes)

When an individual reports an event without witnessing it and reports it based on another person's description, then such a report is said to be a secondary source. An example of a secondary source is a history textbook. Videotapes, slides, audiotapes, and computer data can either be primary or secondary sources or both, depending on whether it is an eyewitness account.

Interpreting History

Researchers must bring an open mind to history research. That is, one should not make prior assumptions about the event. One must examine accurate and reliable primary and secondary sources related to the research topic. Based on this research, one interprets the events in the best possible way. A researcher's goal should be to draw correct conclusions based on thorough and comprehensive research.

Oral History

Oral history is a method of recording historical information by interviewing a person about past events. The person conducting the interview, the interviewer, has a set of well-prepared questions. The interview is recorded in audio or video format and then transcribed. Later the audio or video recordings and the transcripts are indexed and placed in libraries or archives. These can also be posted on the Internet.

Oral history offers several advantages. One gains firsthand knowledge about past events from a person who has actually witnessed the event. We get the feeling that we are truly connected to history—people, events, societies, and the present. Oral history interviews report both documented and undocumented historical events. They not only describe the lives of high achievers, but those of ordinary people as well—their experiences, beliefs, and actions.

A major limitation of oral history interviews is that people being interviewed might forget dates and sequences of events. Such an oral history record would not give a complete account of events. Therefore, whenever possible, oral history records should be used along with other primary and secondary sources.

Conducting Oral History Interviews

Students generally master the skills of conducting oral history interviews by starting with family members. The students are called *interviewers* and the persons they interview are called *interviewees*.

The following guidelines are provided for conducting simple oral history interviews with family members or community members.

Setting Goals for Conducting an Oral History Interview

Begin by setting your goals to interview a family member or a community member. Think about the following questions:

- Who would you like to interview?
- Why do you want to interview this person?
- What kinds of information would you want to gather from this person?

Consent Procedures

- Seek the consent of your interviewee.
- Let your interviewee know your purpose for interviewing (class project, etc.).
- Also, inform your interviewee about the length of time needed for the interview.
- Get permission to record the interview in audio or video format. (If you use a video camera, it will become an *oral-visual* history interview.)
- If you plan to publish and distribute the interview, seek both oral and written permission from the interviewee to do so.

Preparing for an Oral History Interview

- Prepare your questions in advance.
- Decide on questions to ask, the sequence of questions, how much detail you want in the answers, how much time you and the interviewee have, how many questions you want to ask, and how to word your questions.
- Questions should not only focus on what happened, where it happened, and when it happened, but also on *why* it happened, *how* it happened, and what your interviewee's thoughts and feelings are about the event. Seek descriptions, experiences, actions, and behaviors from your interviewee. Try to get what is known as "local color"—the information that is especially descriptive.
- It is better to have more questions than might seem to be needed.
- Avoid asking questions that elicit just "yes" or "no" responses.
- You might want to use detail-oriented questions to receive in-depth responses. At the same time, you must respect the privacy of your interviewee if they do not want to share some information.
- Suggested topics for conducting family interviews are: childhood; youth; middle age; old age (as the case may be); education; family experiences; neighborhood; family traditions; migration to the United States of America; religious practices; local, state, national, and international historical events; and personal philosophy and values.

Before the Oral History Interview

- Carry some paper for taking notes along with your interview questions.
- Choose a place that is free from noise and other interruptions to conduct the interview.

- Check equipment, electrical outlets, batteries, audio or videotapes, microphones, etc.
- Do a quick sound test for recording quality; replay this recording; and make suitable modifications in the equipment, volume of your voice and the interviewee's voice, etc.
- Avoid outdoor interviewing.

Now you are ready to conduct the actual interview.

During the Oral History Interview

- Speak clearly and loudly.
- Be aware as to not rustle papers or any other items near the microphone.
- Keep an eye on your recording equipment to ensure that it is running smoothly.
- Take some notes of key phrases, spellings of unusual names, and quotations as the interview proceeds so you can remember to ask follow-up questions.
- In case of equipment failure, reschedule the interview.

After the Oral History Interview

- Shortly after the interview, replay the entire interview, and prepare a brief summary of its contents.

Assignment after the Oral History Interview

- Transcribe one important portion of the interview and give the completed transcription and the tape to your teacher.
- Write your "reflections" about each stage of your oral history project interview experience.
- Present the summary of your interview and reflections to the class.

Name of Student-Interviewer:
Grade:
Name of School:
School Mailing Address:
School Telephone Number:
Name of Teacher:

Consent Form

I, _____, (print interviewee's name) agree to be interviewed by student-interviewer _____ (print interviewer's name) for the oral history project. I understand that my interview will be recorded on video tape/ audio tape.

- I hereby authorize my video recording/audio recording of the interview, any subsequent transcripts, and related materials (including interview notes) to become the interviewer's property.
- I am donating the video recording/audio recording of the interview, any subsequent transcripts, and related materials voluntarily.
- I hereby authorize this interview to be made available in a variety of formats, including video, audio, transcription, school or student website, etc.

I have read the above description. The interviewer has explained to me all the items and he/she has answered all my questions regarding the interview. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to be interviewed and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the interviewer.

Interviewee's Signature

Date

Name and Address:

Sample Oral History Interview Transcripts

Example 1: How to begin and conduct an oral history interview

Courtesy: Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AR 72701

Arkansas Democrat Project
Excerpts from an interview with
Fred Morrow
Telephone Interview
12 June and 19 June 2005
Interviewer: Jerry McConnell

Jerry McConnell: This is Jerry McConnell, and I'm here speaking by telephone with Fred Morrow, [who is] in Loveland, Colorado, on June 12, 2005. This is an interview for the *Arkansas Democrat* Project. The first thing I need to ask you, Fred, is, do I have your permission to tape this interview and then turn it over to the University of Arkansas [Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History] archives?

Fred Morrow: You sure do.

JM: Okay, good deal. Now then, let's just start from the beginning. This is sort of a free-ranging interview. Why don't you just start off telling me first—let's make sure so that the transcriber will know that—give me your full name.

FM: Well, my full name is Fredrick Michael Morrow.

JM: Frederick Michael Morrow. M-O-R-R-O-W?

FM: Like tomorrow, you're right.

JM: Yes, okay, very good. Fred, where and when were you born?

FM: I was born June 11, 1942, in Poplar Bluff, Missouri.

JM: Poplar Bluff, Missouri, okay. And who were your parents?

FM: My dad was Fred Morrow and my mother was Lois.

JM: Okay.

FM: Hastings—Hastings was her maiden name.

JM: Hastings was her maiden name. Okay. Did you—tell me where you went to school.

FM: Well, I went to school at a number of little rural schools because I grew up on a farm, and then I went to Neelyville High School through my sophomore year.

JM: What was the name of that high school?

FM: Neelyville, just like “Neely” and then “ville.” It was named after a fellow named Neely.

JM: N-E-E-L-Y?

FM: Right.

JM: Neelyville, and that’s in Missouri.

FM: It’s five miles north of the Arkansas border, and it would be about ten miles—or not that far—from Corning, Arkansas.

JM: Yes, okay. That was just—that was your sophomore year?

FM: I went to Neelyville through my sophomore year, and then we moved to Poplar Bluff, the hub city of that area.

JM: Yes, okay.

FM: About twelve miles north of Neelyville.

JM: Did you finish high school there?

FM: Right.

JM: Yes. Was your dad a superintendent or a school official, or something?

FM: He was the county school superintendent for a number of years, which was an elective office.

JM: Yes.

FM: He did that for eight or twelve years, and then he became the school superintendent at Poplar Bluff High School. He was there for eighteen years.

JM: I understand that there’s a stadium named after him or you in Poplar Bluff, right?

FM: [Laughs] Yes. The high school football stadium is named Morrow Stadium, and I tell everybody—whenever I’m ever back in town—it was because of my athletic ability.

JM: Yes, okay.

FM: It's actually named for my father.

JM: Yes, okay. How much athletics did you play?

FM: I played high school basketball and, of course, at Neelyville I played baseball. At Poplar Bluff they didn't have a baseball program, [so] I just played basketball.

JM: Yes, yes, okay. Were you pretty good?

FM: No, but we had a pretty good team.

JM: Okay.

FM: We played twice against Bill Bradley in the state playoffs and beat them one year. [Editor's note: Bill Bradley was an All-American at Princeton University, [New Haven, Connecticut], and later a star for the New York Knicks professional basketball team.]

[The interview continues].

Example 2: How to conclude an oral history interview

Courtesy: Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, AR 72701

William Jefferson Clinton History Project
Excerpt from an interview with
Sheila Foster Anthony
Hendersonville, North Carolina
22 July 2004
Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

AD: That's an interesting story. Is there anything else that we have not touched on? As I go back and think, I think we got just about everything.

SA: I can't think of anything else.

AD: Well, I appreciate your time, and I appreciate you having me into your house. Thank you very much.

SA: You're so very welcome.

[End of Interview]

Please note:

The lesson plan is suggestive of a beginning point for teachers. Teachers are advised to modify to meet their specific classroom needs.

LESSON PLAN

Lesson: Oral History Project

Recommended grade level: 8th grade

Time required: 3-4 class periods of 50 minutes duration (for phases 1 and 2 of the lesson).

Curriculum fit: English

English Curriculum Frameworks: OV1.8.8, W.4.8.1, W.4.8.4

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- understand the importance of history, historical research, and oral history by conducting an oral history interview.
- demonstrate comprehension of the concept of oral history by conducting an oral history interview, summarizing and transcribing their interviews, writing reflections of their experiences, and presenting their oral history project work to class.

Procedure:

Phase 1: Understanding the Lesson

- 1) Ask students to work in pairs.
- 2) Instruct the students to read the lesson, “Oral History Project.”
- 3) Assign one segment of the lesson to each student-pair.
- 4) Assist each of the paired groups in understanding their respective segments.
- 5) Instruct each of the student-pairs to present their segment to the class.
- 6) Explain with examples the concepts that the student-pairs present to the class and facilitate instruction and discussion.
- 7) Discuss the “Sample Oral History Interview Transcript” and the “Consent Form” with the students.

Phase 2: Question-Writing (Individual) Activity

- 1) Instruct students to choose the person they want to interview.
- 2) Ask students to receive written “consent” from the person to be interviewed.
- 3) Instruct students to write a set of questions that they would like to ask during the interview and turn them in to the teacher for editing.
- 4) Read each student’s questions and edit them for clarity and grammar.

- 5) Present one or two well-written student-questions to the class.
- 6) Describe the “Assignment after the Interview” segment of the lesson.
- 7) Instruct students who do not have tape recorders or video cameras to borrow from others for the project.

Phase 3: Oral History Project

Allow sufficient time for students to complete the oral history project and the “Assignment after the Interview” segment.

Phase 4: Oral History Project Presentation

- 1) Call upon students to present the summary of their oral history interviews and reflections to the class.
- 2) Ask students to turn in their summary, reflections, transcription, and the tape to the teacher.
- 3) Provide feedback to students regarding their oral history project interview summaries, reflections, and transcriptions.

Oral History Project

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Assumption	guess; belief
Business record	billing statements, tax papers, receipts of businesses such as banks, general stores, hotels, and companies
Circumstance	situation, condition
Comprehensive	including all aspects; covering all topics
Consent	permission
Context	background
Critical	important
Detail-oriented	take the direction of covering every topic
Emerging	coming up; developing
In-depth	complete; not casual
Memoir	autobiography; a description of personal experiences
Modification	adjustment; change
Official document	letters, certificates, etc., belonging to an office
Oral evidence	spoken facts and incidents
Prior	before
Pursue	follow; practice
Sequence	one after the other; order
Thorough	careful; complete

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Hoopes, James. *Oral History: An Introduction for Students*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979.
- Lanman, Barry A., and Laura M. Wendling. *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education*. Lanham: AltaMira, 2006.
- Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thomson. *The Oral History Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Ritchie, D. A. *Doing Oral History*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Sommer, Barbara W., and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2002.
- Totten, Samuel. "The Beauty of Conducting and Publishing Oral Histories." In *Educators as Writers: Publishing for Personal and Professional Development*, edited by Carol Smallwood, 127-132. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.