

INTERVIEW AN ELDER

How to Conduct an Oral History Interview

Activity:

Interview an older family member or friend via phone or video chat. Record the conversation if you have their permission to do so. Take notes if you cannot record the conversation. Think up interview questions before your interview. This worksheet will give you some question suggestions, but you can also make up your own questions.

What is an oral history interview?

An oral history is a recorded interview in which a historian asks a person questions about their life and memories. These interviews are excellent ways to collect information that might otherwise not be recorded. Oral Histories paint a picture of what life was like in the past.



How are oral histories used?

Historians use oral histories to learn about what the past was like and preserve stories of people, places and important events. Historians often quote oral histories and use them when conducting research about a time or place. You can help preserve the past for future generations by interviewing your own relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Pre-Interview Tips:

- ❖ Make sure you have your interviewee's permission before you start your conversation, especially if you plan to use the information in a public project or homework assignment.
- ❖ Set an appointment and agree to an amount of time to talk. 30 minutes is probably good for your first interview. If you want to talk more, you can always set another appointment.
- ❖ A voice recorder is ideal for taking oral histories. If one is not available, you can take notes.
- ❖ You'll need a quiet space where you won't be disturbed and where your interviewee will feel comfortable.
- ❖ Prepare ahead of time and come with a list of questions you want to ask. Begin with simpler questions to get the conversation going. Consider sending questions to your interviewee before you meet so they have time to think about the topics and time period you are interested in.
- ❖ Avoid asking leading questions and yes or no questions. Instead ask open-ended questions using terms like, "Tell me about...", "Describe..." and "Explain...". Keep your questions short.
- ❖ Send a thank you note or email after your interview.

Tell me about...



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Possible questions to guide your conversation:

These introductory questions will get your conversation started. As you talk, ask for more information about anything interesting that the interviewee mentions. Do research before the interview to familiarize yourself with important historical events that took place during the interviewee's lifetime.

- ❖ What is your full name?
- ❖ Where and when were you born and where have you lived?
- ❖ Tell me about your parents. Where and when were your parents born? Where did they live? How did your parents meet? What were your parents' jobs?
- ❖ Describe the community you grew up in. What was your neighborhood like growing up? Who were your neighbors? What was your house like? What technology did you have in your house growing up?
- ❖ Tell me about your childhood. What school did you go to? What was school like for you? Who were your friends? What did you do after school and on the weekends? What did you want to be when you grew up? What was your favorite toy or game?
- ❖ What was your first job? Did you work as a teenager? When did you leave home? What other jobs have you had? What do you do for a living now or what did you retire from?
- ❖ What significant historical events do you remember hearing about as a child? What significant events happened when you were an adult? How did these events affect you and your family? (Wars, natural disasters, segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, etc.)
- ❖ Tell me about your favorite memory. What are you most proud of? What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

Other possible topics to discuss:



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