

“I don’t want to just look as if it’s just the Holmes family. There were hundreds of people all over the South for the last hundred years who have made sacrifices to pave the way for the successes which we have. I don’t think that is really appreciated.” –Herbert Holmes

Guidelines for Conducting Oral History Interviews

Historical documents and books can't tell us everything about our past. They often neglect people on the margins of society - ethnic communities, disabled and unemployed people for example - whose voices have been hidden from history. Oral history fills in the gaps and gives us history which includes everyone. Ritchie describes the reason for doing oral history is “to ask questions that have not been asked, to collect the reminiscences that otherwise would be lost” (p. 46).

History is all around us in the memories and experiences of older people. People you know may be able to remember historical events like World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, or the first landing of a man on the moon. Unfortunately, because memories die when people do, if we don't record what people tell us it is history that is lost forever.

IMPORTANT: These activities should only be done with permission of an adult. Take a chaperone with you to any interviews you conduct.

I. Selecting an Objective

First, identify your objective. Are you researching a specific event or time period? Are you hoping to learn about the experiences of a pivotal individual? Do you want to highlight a particular organization or institution? Write your objective below and discuss with your teacher.

II. Finding Interviewees

Use dates collected from the documentary and brainstorm for names of people in your community who would remember that time. Ask friends, relatives, and neighbors for suggestions. Contact local history groups, colleges, businesses, and professional or volunteer organizations. Visit retirement homes or assisted living facilities. Prioritize your list by placing the oldest and most significant people first. Write your list below and review with your teacher.

III. Research and Prepare Questions

Look at your objectives again. Read and learn about your subject matter through newspapers or books. Write down the names of places and people involved and any important dates. Knowing your subject will build rapport with the interviewee and help them with forgotten information.

It is best to use *open-ended questions*. For instance, asking, "You grew up in Atlanta?" can be answered with simply yes or no. Asking "can you describe your childhood in Atlanta?" leaves more room for the interviewee to provide details. Other open-ended questions include:

- "How did you feel about that?"
- "What sort of person was she?"
- "Can you describe the house you lived in?"
- "Why did you decide to change jobs?"

Write down some possible questions for your oral history interview below.

IV. Conducting the Interview

The following are some tips on interviewing for oral history.

1. **Have an adult chaperone.**
2. Be on time.
3. Conduct the interview in a place where the noise and distraction level will be low.
4. Be prepared. Have your questions ready and your notebook out.
5. Introduce yourself. Give your name, age, the class and school you attend. Describe the class and what you have been studying.
6. Ask your interview subject if you can record the conversation. Have the subject sign a **Release Form** so you can share the information you collect with others.
7. Begin the interview by asking where and when the interview subject was born.
8. Keep your questions short and clear
9. Don't interrupt or ask too many questions. Your aim is to get them to talk, not to talk to yourself. Always wait for a pause before you ask the next question. Listen carefully and maintain good eye contact.
10. Respond positively: body language like nodding and smiling is much better than "uhs" and "ums."
11. **Be polite.** Say please and thank you and address people formally (using Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss, and so on).
12. Provide time for the person to answer questions. Be patient when answers take a long time.
13. Do not argue with or correct the subject. Oral histories are not always accurate. They do provide important information about feelings and impressions.
14. End your interview by thanking your subject. Before you leave provide an address or phone number where you can be contacted. Remember that your visit will often have a major impact on someone who has perhaps never told anyone their memories before.
15. Turn your recorded interview in to your teacher and discuss how to create a transcript and where the information might be deposited.

Sources:

- *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* by Donald A. Ritchie, Oxford University Press, 2003
- The Library of Congress – Using Oral History Lesson Overview, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.htm>
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- The Oral History Society – Getting Started, <http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/#wherestart>

Sample Release Form

Check with the school office for your school's guidelines on release forms. Here is a sample of wording for a release form.

SAMPLE

In view of the historical value of this oral history interview, I (name of interview subject) knowingly and voluntarily permit (name of student interviewer, name of class, and name of school) the full use of this information for educational purposes.

Signature (signature of interview subject)

Date (date)