

# Tell Your Story - Oral Histories

Lesson Citation: *History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives*, "Activity: Conduct Your Own Oral History,"

<https://history.house.gov/Education/Lesson-Plans/Oral-History-Lesson-Plans/Conduct-Oral-History/>  
(April 16, 2022)

Subject: History/Social Studies/Science & Technology

Grades: 7-12

<p><b>Skills:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Research</li><li>● Literacy skills</li><li>● Writing</li></ul> <p>Connections to Maine Learning Results listed below</p>	<p><b>Materials:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Transcripts of oral histories</li><li>● Listen to oral histories</li><li>● Technology for students to record interview (computer/phone)</li></ul>
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## Goal:

This activity is designed to guide students in planning and conducting an oral history interview. Students have the opportunity to connect with a family member or friend and learn about their personal/family immigration story. Students will practice research methods, interview techniques, and active listening. They will engage in dialogue with an older generation and with those of different backgrounds than their own.

## Instructions:

1. Lead a brief discussion about oral history using the questions below:
  - What is oral history?
  - What are the potential benefits of conducting oral histories?
  - What are some of the possible limitations of oral histories?
  - How might oral histories help people learn more about their family or community history?

Maine MILL has a large collection of oral histories and our current exhibition focuses on why people from around the world have chosen to come to Maine, and specifically Lewiston-Auburn; why they have stayed (or left); and the stories and identities that make up our community. These are stories of survival and adaptation. On the Maine MILL website there are links to transcripts and recordings from recent immigrants to Lewiston/Auburn. Teachers are

encouraged to share a portion of the recordings and/or transcripts with their classes as examples of recorded oral histories. You may choose to share all or a portion of these based on the needs of your class.

2. Have students choose someone they would like to interview. Students may choose to interview a family member or friend or another trusted adult, or a peer.
3. After the students choose an interviewee, have them select a focus. The interview could cover the interviewee's job, their childhood, the reason they moved to the state they live in now, or their time in the military, for example. Ask the students to contact their chosen interviewee and get their consent for an interview.
4. Students will conduct background research. Instruct the students to come up with areas to look into: e.g., the history of the company the interviewee works for, information on their childhood town, background on the state they used to live in, or details of their military branch. Sources can include newspapers and books, as well as any relevant photos or artifacts from the interviewee. Ask the students to take notes and start a list of topics they want to cover in the interview.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How can background research help an interviewer create topics and questions? How can it help them in the interview?
- How are photos and artifacts helpful sources for oral histories? Explain.

### **Expert Tip**

Have a notecard with important dates, names, and places you found in your research with you during the interview. This could help your interviewee remember details.

5. Ask students to schedule a 30 to 60-minute interview. Discuss methods of conducting remote interviews and recording options: e.g., over the phone or computer; video or no video; handheld recorder or smart device recording app.

Remind the students they don't have to stick to the order of their questions and to ask follow-up questions when appropriate. Tell them to ask their interviewee if they want a break at the half-way point to stretch or get a glass of water. Students should take notes during the interview to keep track of the questions they asked and jot down ideas for follow up questions.

### **Discussion questions**

- What are effective interviewing techniques?
- What does it mean to actively listen?
- What makes a good follow-up question?

### Expert Tip

Be patient! When it seems like your interviewee is done answering a question, wait a couple seconds before asking the next one. They might think of more to say.

6. After the interview, lead a discussion using these questions:

- What was the most surprising thing you learned from your interviewee?
  - What was challenging about the interview process?
  - What would you do differently next time?
  - Would an in-person/zoom interview have been different?
  - If you had the opportunity would you conduct another oral history interview? Why or why not?
- a. Assessment: Students should share recorded interviews with teachers at the end of the project. Possible extension projects could include a reflection paper, a research paper on family history, a transcript, or a presentation with clips from the interview.

### Maine Learning Results Standards:

English/Language Arts Anchor Standards: L.1-.6; SL.1-.4; W.1-.3

Social Studies (History Strand) Standards: Grades 6-8 Standard: Students draw on concepts and processes using primary and secondary sources from history to develop historical perspective and understand issues of continuity and change in the community, Maine, the United States, and world. Grades 9-diploma Standard: Students draw on concepts and processes using primary and secondary sources from history to develop historical perspective and understand issues of continuity and change in the community, Maine, the United States, and world.