

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

Skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Research• Literacy skills• Writing	Materials: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transcripts of oral histories• Listen to oral histories• Technology for students to record interview (computer/phone)
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Summary:

This component of Museum L-A's Traveling Trunk provides another opportunity for students to learn more about the diverse people who worked during the latter part of the Industrial Revolution. Each person tells about working in the mills at a young age. These oral histories help to illuminate the prevalence of child labor in the late 19th and early 20th century and could easily provoke questions and discussions. The stories describe the working conditions in the mills and provide insight into the living conditions in a growing urban city.

Instructions:

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 family friend and learn about their personal history. Students will practice research methods, interview techniques, and active listening. They will engage in dialogue with an older generation. Possible products include a reflection paper, a research paper on family history, a transcript, or a presentation with clips from the interview. Students are encouraged to analyze how their interviewee's personal history connects to their overall family history.

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 history?

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.

Next, the 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.

Conduct the Interview

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.

Reflection

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 interview have been different?
- What can your whole family learn from this interview?
- How does this individual's history contribute to the overall history of your family?
- If you had to opportunity would you conduct another oral history interview? Why or why not?