

Capturing an Oral History

Digital Stories of Our Heroes

Oral histories help us to understand people and communities, giving personal and cultural context to history. Capturing an oral history is not difficult as long as you prepare for the interview in advance.

Preparing for the Interview

- Students should conduct research to know the context for terms, events, and people linked to the social and historical events being explored.
- Students should generate interview questions in advance.
- The interview team should be prepared to ask follow-up questions based on the information shared by the interviewee.
- It is always a good idea to conduct a practice interview ahead of time.

Arranging the Interview

- Secure an interview location that is convenient to the interviewee and will be quiet enough for recording the interview.
- Contact the potential interviewee both in writing and over the phone to establish a rapport that is open and caring.
- Describe the purpose of the project and make it clear to the interviewee why he or she is of value and interest to the students.
- Ask the interviewee to provide any related photos, journals, or other artifacts that s/he may have; these can help to stimulate memories and lead to more insights.
- Give specific examples of typical questions that will be asked to allow the interviewee to reflect and prepare.
- Consider providing the interviewee with a full list of questions in advance. This can help the person to prepare his/her thoughts, ideas, and stories.
- Advise the interviewee in advance to avoid wearing light-colored or patterned clothing to the interview.

- Call the interviewee the day before the interview to express your interest in the interview and provide a subtle reminder of the interview location and time.

Interview Equipment

- To best capture the audio of interviewee and interviewer(s), use an external microphone.
- Familiarize yourself with all of the features and controls of the audio/video equipment.
- Test all equipment prior to the interview.
- Test all equipment after setting up at location.
- Try to use natural light as much as possible.
- Make sure you have enough video/audio storage. For digital recordings, 1GB will generally enable you to capture 10 minutes of video OR 17 hours of audio OR 375 images (more info). For tape recordings, you should plan to use a tape with the capacity to record double or triple the anticipated interview time.

Setting Up at the Interview Location

- Choose a spot within the location that is away from external noise (air conditioner vents, cell phones, etc.).
- Use an external microphone or lap-on microphone, if possible.
- Place the interviewee in front of a simple, light-colored background.
- Place the interviewee in front of a window or bright light; light sources, preferably as much natural light as possible, should be located behind the camera.
- Use a tripod when recording video.
- Use multiple cameras if you wish to film the interviewers as well as the interviewee.
- Set up camera(s) to capture a full frontal image (head and shoulder shot) of the interviewee.

- Be sure to set the view wide enough to capture hand gestures and slight sideways movements. (If you are participating in the Veterans History Project review the specific [recording guidelines](#).)

The Interview Process

- Welcome the interviewee and thank him/her for coming.
- Ask the interviewee if he/she has any questions.
- Advise the interviewee and the interviewer(s) to speak clearly and forcefully.
- Conduct a brief recording test and play it back to help interviewee and interviewers understand if adjustments in speech pacing or volume need to be made.
- Advise the interviewee to look into the camera while speaking.
- The principal interviewer should state on tape the name of the project, the location and date of the interview, and the name of the interviewee and the interviewer(s). (You may refer to the interview team collectively — i.e. the seventh-grade students at ABC School.)
- The interviewer(s) should maintain eye contact with the interviewee and demonstrate active listening skills (nods of encouragement, smiles, attentive body posture); interest in the interviewee’s story should be apparent.
- The interviewer(s) should be sure to let the interviewee answer each question fully and finish his/her narrative before shifting to a new question.
- The interviewer(s) should stimulate the interviewee’s narrative by asking for details and examples or posing intelligent follow-up questions when appropriate, but be careful not to wear her/him out on any one subject.
- At the end of the interview, thank the interviewee for sharing his/her stories and time.

- Send a written thank-you note within one week following the interview and offer to provide the interview recording; if possible, provide a gift to the interviewee (e.g., a copy of the video log or transcript, pictures, a printout or file of the digital story presentation, a chapbook containing student reflections of the interview).

Oral History Interview Reflection

- Was the interview environment free of anticipated distractions?
- Was the proper introductory information been included?
- Did the interview team:
 - ✓ ensure both interviewers and interviewee could be heard?
 - ✓ demonstrate a good knowledge of the subject?
 - ✓ demonstrate active listening skills?
 - ✓ ask clear, singular questions?
 - ✓ ask questions that elicit extended answers?
 - ✓ avoid interrupting the interviewee?
 - ✓ avoid asking leading questions?
 - ✓ avoid making biased comments?
 - ✓ allow the interviewee time to think and respond?
 - ✓ thank the interviewee for sharing his/her stories and time?