



Creating Oral Histories Using Historic Photographs

Student Handouts



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Oral History Introduction

What is Oral History?

Oral history is a record of someone's memories. They are gathered by interviewing an individual or sometimes a group of people about a specific topic, usually about a time period, historical event, or a specific person or place. Interviews are when you ask people questions with a particular goal in mind—in this case recording their memory of an event, person, etc.

Why is Oral History Important?

Oral histories are important because they record stories that often don't get put in history books. Think about what is missing from our history lessons. Do they talk about where your grandparents grew up, their first job, or their favorite childhood games? What else is missing?

These stories often get left out of history books, but they are still important because they show what life was like for everyone – not just famous people like politicians or celebrities.

What would you like to learn about the past that isn't in books or on websites?

Using Photographs to Create Oral Histories

Sometimes interviewers use images to help jog interviewees' memories and start conversations. This technique is called photo elicitation. Anthropologists, historians, and other researchers use photo elicitation to learn about other cultures or times, but we can also use it to learn about our local history or even our families.

The Power of Photographs

Using photographs as part of an oral history interview can be a powerful tool. Photographs can trigger memories, sometimes very emotional ones. Have you ever flipped through images in a scrapbook or scrolled through pictures on a phone and remembered something you had forgotten? Or did an image make you happy or sad just by looking at it?

Using photographs in your interview will help your interviewee remember things better. They will also help you keep the conversation going. When the interviewee runs out of things to say, you can simply ask about another thing in the image. This way there are fewer awkward moments.

Vocabulary

Interviewer —
The person asking the questions during an interview

Interviewee —
The person answering the questions during an interview

Look at the images hanging up in the classroom. Are there any that make you remember something? If so, what?

A Caution about Oral Histories

One thing to remember is that oral history relies on a person's memory, and nobody remembers everything. So it is important to double check the information you receive during an interview as much as possible.

Memories are most reliable when they are our own, not a retelling of a story that someone else told us. Like the game Telephone, stories often get distorted the more they are retold. So, the most reliable memories are ones that someone experienced recently.

What do you remember about your first day of kindergarten? Do you remember who you sat by or what you learned? What don't you remember?

Preparing for the Interview (Overview)

Step 1: Identify the goal

- What do you want to learn?
- What are you going to do with the information when you are done? Are you going to make a video, a podcast, a poster?

Step 2: Ask to interview someone. Tell them:

- What the interview is going to be about
- How long the interview will be
- How the interview will be used in the future

Step 3: Research your topic and the person you are interviewing.

- Read books and articles to learn about the topic.
- Talk to people who know the person you are interviewing to learn about them.

Step 4: Pick your photographs or other images (such as maps and postcards).

- Make sure they relate to your goal AND the person you are interviewing.
- Make sure they are large and clear images. Adults don't see as well as you do!

Step 5: Create a list of questions to ask. See below for tips and tricks!

- Practice asking your questions before the interview.

Step 6: Work with your teacher, family, and group to figure out the best way to record your interview. Be sure to test your chosen method!

Step 7: Print off your images and an oral history release form.

Research your topic. Put five facts you want to remember during your interview on your Pre-Interview Worksheet.

Create Good Questions!

During an interview you will have to ask a mix of open-ended and closed questions.

Open-ended Questions are questions that can have multiple answers. They ask why, how, what happened, and “tell me about X.”

Closed Questions are questions with only one answer. They can be yes/no questions, or questions like “when did you move,” “who was your best friend,” and “what did you eat for lunch.”

During your interview, you will need to use both open and closed questions: Open to get the big picture, closed to understand a detail, and open again to know how the interviewee feels about that detail.

For example, you could ask:

- Is this house similar to the one you grew up in? (closed question)
- How is it the same/different? (open question)
- What was your favorite part about living there? (open question)
- Who lived there with you? (closed question)
- Tell me about them. (open question)

Leading Questions

Be sure not to ask leading questions -- questions that make the interviewee answer a certain way or disagree with the interviewer.

For example: Why was Bloomington a great place to grow up in the 1960s?

This forces the interviewee to agree that Bloomington was a great place to grow up when that might not have been their experience. Instead, you can ask “what was growing up in Bloomington in the 1960s like?”

Create a series of open and closed questions related to your topic. Write them on the Pre-Interview worksheet.

Oral History Project Pre-Interview Worksheet

Interviewer: _____

Date: _____

Interviewee: _____

Location: _____

Questions/Topics	Research Notes
1.	
a.	•
b.	
c.	•
2.	
a.	•
b.	
c.	
3.	•
a.	
b.	•
c.	
4.	
a.	
b.	•
c.	
5.	
a.	
b.	
c.	
5.	
a.	1.
b.	2.
c.	3.
5.	4.
a.	5.
b.	
c.	

Conducting a Photo Elicitation Interview

Step 1: Make sure the interviewee is comfortable and that you can see and hear each other.

Step 2: Before you start recording, introduce yourself and get to know each other a little bit.

- You may also want to test your equipment at this time.

Step 3: Have them sign the release form.

Step 4: Tell the person you are going to start the recording and let it run for 3-5 seconds with no one talking.

Step 5: Say who you are, the date, who you are with, and where you are.

Step 6: Ask the person to introduce themselves.

Step 7: Ask if you have permission to record this interview. **NEVER** record someone secretly!

Step 8: Begin your interview.

Step 9: When you are done with the interview (either out of questions or out of time) continue to record and thank them for sharing their memories and answering your questions.

- Ask if there is anything they would like to add before you end the recording?

Step 10: On the record tell them how the stories they shared are going to be used and have them give a verbal acknowledgement.

- Tell them you will give them a chance to review the final edit and make any changes to the release form.

Step 11: Turn off recording and thank again.

Tips and Tricks:

Do	Don't
Look engaged in the conversation	Be afraid of silence
Ask one question at a time	Be afraid to ask for clarification
Let the conversation flow where it will. Be prepared to ask questions out of order	Interrupt if the interviewee says something untrue
Start with easy questions	Be nervous. You got this!
Speak so they can hear you	

Grab a partner and practice asking your questions and using printed images during an interview.

Post-Interview Review

Write a short summary of your interview:

What are your key takeaways? (Make sure they relate to the goal of your interview)

1.

2.

3.

What did you learn during your interview that you want to research more?