

Sharing Histories: Guide

Step 1: Get Started

1. **Figure out the basics.** There are as many types of oral histories as there are historical topics, themes and events. Decide whether you want your oral history to be:

- Topical (Through this oral history, do you want to find out more about a particular topic?)
- Geographical (Through this oral history, do you want to find out more about a region or place?)
- Historical (Through this oral history, do you want to find out more about a historic event?)
- Autobiographical (Through this oral history, do you want to find out more about yourself or your family?)

What you decide will dictate the resources you will use for your oral history.

2. **Develop goals.** It is imperative that you have a game plan. As basic as it may seem, it is helpful to create a KWL (Know, Want to know and Learned) Chart. This will help you organize your thoughts and will help hone in on what you want to get out of your project.

3. **Plan.** Create a preliminary list of resources, possible interviewees, accessible written records, etc. Remember: the best oral histories are backed up by print resources. The better you can substantiate what you hear in the interviews, the greater impact your oral history will have. For example, if your goal is to delve into the psychological impact of the Vietnam war on soldiers, you may want to visit the local VFW as well as contact psychologists that have treated Vietnam War veterans.)

4. **Be Flexible.** As you acquire information, your plan will change. There is no way for you to anticipate some of the information you will hear in the interviews. Always be aware of your plan, but don't be so rigid that you miss an opportunity to explore something that better suits your objectives. You'll have more

flexibility if you're not racing against the clock, so start interviewing early. This will ensure that you pursue the topic that most interests you.

5. **Share the information.** Think about how you want to present the information you find. Although this step is towards the end of the process, it is important that you think about it because your presentation may necessitate photos, video, audio, etc. Know all of the information and footage you want to gather before you conduct the interviews to ensure that you have everything you need.

****Step 2: Research****

1. **Get familiar with the topic.** Even the best interviewers exhaustively research their subjects before meeting them. Familiarize yourself with the social, economic and political environments of the time in question. This will allow you to ask informed questions. Use the following research guide to help you organize the background information you find during your research.

2. **Find background information.** Find as much information as you can about the person you are interviewing. If you clearly know what you're talking – and asking –about, it will encourage the interviewee to share more information.

3. **Jog their memory.** Try to jog the interviewee's memory with newspaper clippings about the topic you are exploring or from the time you want to learn more about. (It would be valuable to pull old letters/correspondences for the interviewees to review, if you have access to such materials.) Seeing these documents may help the interviewee remember details that are important to you, even if they seem insignificant to your subject.

4. **Take advantage of the resource.** Don't spend too much time asking fact-based questions for which some research could have just as easily yielded the answers. Oral histories provide a unique perspective that other resources can not, so take advantage! It is appropriate to ask the interviewee to validate or invalidate pieces of information, but stick to the realm of your subject's expertise. Only solicit information that a person who lived during the time can provide.

Step 3: Set up the Interviews

1. Asking for the interview:

- State who you are.
- Explain how you got this person's name.
- Describe your project and why this person might want to donate his or her time to this project.
- Schedule the interview around your subject's available time first, not yours.

2. Recording the interview:

- If you record the interview, which is recommended, get the consent of the interviewee first.
- Test all of your tools way in advance. (Make sure pens have ink, recording devices are working properly, extension cords are available if necessary.)
- When recording on paper or electronically, be sure to include an introduction including date, time, place, name of interviewee and interviewer and a brief synopsis of what you hope to get out of the interview. You'll thank yourself later when reviewing the material.

Step 4: Conduct a Successful Interview

1. **Be flexible.** Allow yourself flexibility so you can capitalize on the information being given to you by the interviewee. Don't stick to your list of questions too rigidly; use it as a general guideline to help you get the interviewee talking.
2. **Relax.** If you are relaxed, your interviewee will be more relaxed and is more likely to talk and share.
3. **Write a spectrum of questions.** Have some questions that are open-ended ones, allowing the interview to include whichever details he or she chooses to, and have specific questions that require the interviewee to supply very detailed information about a particular topic.
4. **Facilitate.** Your job is to facilitate the process of remembering. Your questions should jog the memory and help the informant remember the past.
5. **Use different angles.** Try to ask the same question in different ways. This will help build substantial

information for a particular topic since, sometimes, an initial answer can be superficial and not well thought out.

5. **Follow-Up.** After the interviewee answers a question, take a moment to process what has been said and try to come up with a question that will encourage the interviewee to divulge more information or look at the situation from a different angle. Sometimes a simple "why do you say that" or "why do you feel that way" will spark something very valuable.
6. **Use your research.** Use the background research you did about the social, economic, and political background to come up with questions.
7. **Fill the gaps.** Be aware of the gaps in information during your research and write questions that may help you fill these gaps. You can also ask the interviewee to confirm something you read or to share his or her perspective on an event or topic.
8. **Open it up.** Give the interviewee an opportunity to volunteer information by asking if there is anything else he would like to add or anything else he would like to be asked about.
9. **Take notes.** Take good notes—even if you are recording the interview. However, don't focus so much on your notes that you are unable to process what is being said.
10. **Let silences lie.** If there is a moment of silence after the interviewee answers a question, let it lie. Often, the interviewee just needs a moment to think and intends to continue. Sometimes, the interviewee will also be uncomfortable with the silence and try to fill it, in the process revealing more information.
11. **Limit the length of the interview.** If necessary, you can ask to follow up at a later date.
12. **Don't talk too much.** Keep your opinions to yourself. You are there as a facilitator, not to express your opinions. Keep this in mind when writing questions as well. Try not to shade your questions with your own opinions.

****Step 5: Follow-up after the interview****

1. **Give thanks.** Write a thank you note to the interviewees.
2. **Send project.** Offer to send a copy of the final product.
3. **Transcribe the interview.** This is a long process, but well worth the effort. When transcribing, try to stay true to the vocabulary and speech of the subject. It is important to maintain the integrity of the speech patterns of the interviewee.
4. **Allow edits.** It may be a good idea to send the transcribed interview to the interviewee and allow him or her to add information or make notes. He or she may have thought of something after the interview ended and this will give him the opportunity to share it.
5. **Follow leads.** Look at your research and, where necessary, conduct more sleuthing. Compliment the oral histories you hear from the interviews with written histories. This will place the new information within a social, political and economic context.

****Step 6: Organize and Present your Findings****

1. **Organize your notes.** The focus of your research will dictate the best way to organize the information you have gathered. Regardless of how you organize your research, be sure to keep track of your sources. You may still need to go back and clarify or recheck information.
2. **Review.** Once you have completed your interviews, go back and review the research you did. Supplement the oral histories with this documented research so you create a well-rounded, complete picture of the time, event or place you were investigating.
3. **Choose medium.** Choose the medium through which you would like to communicate. Take the materials you have into consideration. Be sure the medium through which you choose to present the findings allows you to highlight the materials you gathered (i.e. video footage, audio recordings, primary source

documents, etc.).

4. **Focus.** Be sure to highlight the primary findings. You will have probably gathered an abundance of information, so it is your responsibility to organize and present your findings in a way that is easily accessed and comprehended by your readers or viewers.

5. **Be aware of perspective.** Your interviewee had unique experiences, biases and views. Present the material in such a way that allows the viewer to appreciate and be aware of this perspective.

6. **Share and enjoy.** You have preserved a part of history as viewed through an individual who experienced it. Share your story with other classes around the country and find out what treasures were uncovered by other students at www.timeclassroom.com/histories.

Name _____ Date _____

KWL CHART

Narrator/Topic: _____

- 1) Know: Brainstorm what you know about your narrator and/or topic.
- 2) Want to know: List information you want to find out about your narrator and/or topic.
- 3) Learned: Write what you discovered about your narrator and/or topic.

<u>KNOW</u>	<u>WANT TO KNOW</u>	<u>LEARNED</u>



Researcher _____ Date _____

Research Log

Subject Researched: _____

RESEARCH GOAL: _____

| Date | Location of Resource | Call # | Title/Author/Publisher/Year | Brief Notes | Page

1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						
9.						
10.						

Interview Checklist

Narrator's full name _____ Date _____

- I confirmed the time and place of the interview with the narrator.
- I informed the narrator in advance of the conditions and purpose of the interview.
- I tested all of the equipment I will be using during the interview, including tapes, recorders and microphones.
- I packed extra supplies, including batteries, pens, microphones, extension cords and tapes, in case of malfunctioning equipment.
- I have my list of interview questions.
- I brought the consent form.
- I remembered to bring all additional supplies, including maps, letters, photos and newspaper clippings, that may enhance the interview.

Q & A Log



Narrator: _____

Interviewer: _____

Date: _____

Contact Information: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____



Sample Release Form

I understand the historical value of this oral history interview and, therefore, I _____ grant permission to _____ for the full use of this information for educational purposes.

SIGNATURE

DATE