

A Brief Guide to Developing Student Oral History Projects

This guide gives tips on the pre-interview, interview, and post-interview phases of an oral history project and offers a bibliography and a selection of useful online resources.

Pre-Interview

- Begin by laying the groundwork for your oral history project. Oral history projects almost always turn out to be far more ambitious than originally expected. Establish a focus on a particular event, topic or historical era. It might be the impact of segregation in your community, or an oral history of African American migration during the segregation era. Initiate brainstorming sessions with your students. If they are involved in the project from its first, conceptual stages, they will be more likely to devote the time and energy needed to complete the undertaking successfully. With the participation of students in the class, develop a schedule for all phases of the development and completion of your project.

- Once a particular topic has been decided upon, begin to gather local resources related to the topic in question. This might involve investigating community resources, local archives and libraries. Investigate local newspapers from the era (many are available on microfilm), and gather maps and photographs. Invite speakers to discuss the topic with your students. The more informed your students are about the specific history of Segregation in your community, the more successful their interviews will be.

- Create a consent form for interviewees to sign. Consent is required for any future use of the material gathered in an oral history interview and it is a good way to instill a sense of professionalism in your students. Many of the books listed in the bibliography include sample consent forms.

- Make sure that you have the equipment your students will need to conduct interviews (a good tape recorder with a microphone) and have your students practice using the recorder until they are familiar with its operations. The Web sites listed below offer suggestions for recording equipment. Bear in mind, though, that excellent oral history projects have been developed on a shoestring budget.

- Practice interviewing skills among students. There are some common pitfalls that beginning interviewers are likely to encounter, and developing good interviewing techniques takes practice. Oral history consultant Paula J. Paul offers some fun tips for developing good interviewing skills in her essay "Fish Bowls and Bloopers: Oral History in the Classroom," online at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/oralhistory/paul.pdf> . If you can find an interviewee who is willing to act as a "guinea pig," an in-class mini-interview is a

good way to practice interviewing techniques before students begin their personal interviews.

- Set up contacts for oral history interviews. Contacts might include friends and family members of your students, or members of a local church, retirement community or civic organization. Have students contact their interviewees. Students should inform them in advance about the general areas they will be discussing and let them know how much of their time will be needed (an hour or an hour-and-a-half should be sufficient). Students should also find a time of the day that is convenient for their interviewees, and let them know that they will be asked to sign a consent form.

Interviewing Tips

Oral history interviewing is an art that improves with practice. Baylor University's Oral History Workshop on the Web has useful "Interviewing Tips" and "Interviewing Do's & Don'ts" online at http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Workshop_welcome.html. Many of the publications listed in the Bibliography also offer detailed interview techniques. Some of the best advice for conducting a successful interview will come from your students, who should be encouraged to evaluate and discuss with their classmates what went well and what went wrong in their interviews. The following are just a few suggestions that students should consider when conducting interviews:

- Make sure you are familiar with your equipment and that it is functioning correctly. In addition to your tape recorder, bring an extension cord or extra batteries, extra cassette tapes, and a pencil and paper. You may also want to bring a camera.
- Find a quiet place where you and the interviewee will not be interrupted.
- Don't begin right away. Introduce yourself, thank the interviewee for their time, and make the interviewee feel comfortable.
- Ask the interviewee if they are ready to begin. When the tape is started give your name, the interviewees name, date, location and the project you are involved in.
- Begin your interview with some simple questions that will make the interviewee feel comfortable.
- Ask questions one at a time. Pause before going on to the next question.
- Speak clearly and slowly so the interviewee can understand you.

- Ask open-ended questions and try to organize your questions in some sort of logical order. However, don't feel compelled to move from question to question. Have the interviewee's responses organize the interview.
- Be an active listener and show interest in what the interviewee is saying. Follow up on questions raised by the interviewee's responses. (Don't simply move on the next question!)
- Don't interrupt. If you have something you want to follow up on, write it down so you won't forget.
- Don't contradict the narrator or offer your own opinions.
- Check your recorder occasionally to see that you haven't run out of tape.
- Have a good closing question that will allow the interviewee to summarize their thoughts on a subject or event.
- During the interview, write down any names that you are unsure of the correct spelling, and ask your interviewee for correct spellings after the interview is completed.
- Thank the interviewee and have them sign a consent form.

After the Interview

- Have your students evaluate the interview and discuss with other students in the class what worked and what didn't.
- Have student interviewers send a thank-you note. In addition to this being the polite thing to do, you may decide that a follow-up interview is needed, and this is a good way to stay in touch.
- The taped interviews will have to be transcribed. Baylor University's Oral History Workshop on the Web has a detailed "Transcribing Style Guide" online at http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/Styleguide.html. You may find it useful in teaching students how to prepare transcripts that conform to accepted standards.
- Check student transcriptions for errors.
- Prepare a copy of the tape and transcription for the interviewee.
- Find a suitable repository or repositories for your oral history tapes and transcriptions. This may be a state or local historical society or a local college or university. Contact the Oral History Association (<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>) for repositories in your area.

- You may want to develop these oral histories into some sort of finished product: a magazine, exhibit, performance or Web site. Depending upon the finished product, this may involve organizing and editing interviews, writing introductions, assembling or creating illustrations and photographs, and designing graphics.