

ORAL HISTORY INSTRUCTIONAL UNIT

- **Session One: Deciding on a Topic**
- **Session Two: Getting Background Information**
- **Session Three: Asking Questions**
- **Session Four: Interviewing and Active Listening**
- **Session Five: Logistics**
- **Session Six: Transcribing**
- **Session Seven: Tying Up Loose Ends**

SESSION PLANS

Session One: Deciding on a Topic

Use the "Doing Oral Histories" and "What Is Oral History?" with students to introduce oral histories. Refer to the "Frequently Asked Questions" as needed to respond to questions and review the section on "Criteria for Good Oral Histories" with students.

1. Initiate a general discussion about "People and happenings in Your Hometown through Time."
2. To generate a potential list of topics, conduct a brainstorm session with the group. Write each topic on the board. This should be a freewheeling session with lots of funny responses and no judging or criticizing. The purpose of this activity is to create a rich list of possible topics that are historically important and that can be done within your local area. Students can then choose a topic of interest to them.
3. To begin the brainstorming, you might want to do a warm-up such as, "What are some of the jobs people have in this community?" or "What are some of the funny/tragic/important/controversial things that have happened in this community?"

4. Select one topic at random from the list generated and have the group do another brainstorm listing all the subtopics of the primary topic.
5. Have each student select two topics from the list that interest him/her.
6. Have students work in groups of three to list all the subtopics for each of the six collective topics of the group. Use a separate sheet of paper for each topic with subtopic listings.
7. At this point students may select a topic, choose a new topic and generate another list, or still be undecided. Collect the students' lists to review and add comments in order to refine topics as appropriate.

Session Two: Getting Background Information

1. Most students need to do some background reading about a couple of topics to decide if they are really interested in the topic. But once a topic is determined, it is still necessary to do further research in order to get enough information about the topic to decide what questions should be asked.
2. Researching background or context can take several forms depending on the topic(s) initially selected by the student:
 - Skimming books and community newspapers in the library
 - Surfing the Internet
 - Talking to family members and neighbors
3. Students should read and talk to people to get basic background information. As they do this, they write three to five questions that they want answered about their topic in an oral history interview. Facts or details about the topic that need further exploration or elaboration should also be noted.

4. At some point bring students together again as a group to generate a list of various people within the community that might be resources on the topics selected. Don't hesitate to involve other adults in this process to expand the list of potential interviewees. Have students talk with family members about possible interviewees. Skim the yellow pages in the local telephone book.
5. As students finish their background research, have them share their findings with the group. Then ask the group if there is anything they would like to know about this topic. This should generate additional questions.

Session Three: Asking Questions

1. Select any topic and with the group brainstorm the questions you could ask about the topic. List the questions on the board.
2. Identify which questions are open (lots of possible responses) and which are closed (one correct response).
3. Have students work in small groups generating questions for the topics of two students. Try to generate at least ten questions for each topic.
4. Review the "Asking Open and Closed Questions" handout.
5. Mix up students within the groups; in their new small groups have them list questions for the topics of two more students that have not yet been done.

6. To get more open questioning practice, select a student and have the rest of the students ask him/her questions. This can be done in the form of a game by listing the name of all the students on the board. Then as they ask the “interviewee” questions, write +2 points for open questions or -1 point for closed questions beside the name of the student who asked the question(s). Tally at the end of the interview to determine the winner.
7. Form small groups again, if needed, and have students generate questions for topics from another two students who don't have question lists yet. If some students still need help generating questions for their topic, arrange more sessions as needed OR have students work with a family member to generate a list.
8. Have students refine and sequence a final list of possible questions. This will eliminate overlap and repetition and may result in some rewording of questions.
9. Students may begin to feel nervous about doing an actual recorded interview, so do a fishbowl interview with an invited guest as the interviewee, you as the interviewer, one student doing the recording, and the group members as observers. A general topic for the interview could be “Growing Up in the Fifties.” This is a good opportunity for the students to practice listening skills and to identify questions that build on the interviewee responses. Note: this activity could be repeated with all the students asking a question of the interviewee.
10. Have students listen to the questions you ask and then debrief with:
 - A question I asked that wasn't very effective...
 - A question you wish I had asked...
 - Three things I did that you hadn't thought about...
 - A question I used that you want to use...

- A response I used to follow up information that was given...
- Something you worry about in doing your interview is...

Session Four: Interviewing and Active Listening

1. Have students practice asking open questions by interviewing a partner for 5-10 minutes. The first interview topic could be "Life in My Home." If any recording equipment is available, have students practice with it during these interviews.
2. When the first interview is over, have students in their pairs critique the interview by answering the following:
 - A really good question you asked was...
 - A question that could have been better was...
 - A good question I wish you had asked me was...
 - A question I wish I had thought of is...
 - To get more information about a topic, a good extending question would be...
3. Have the other person interview his/her partner on the topic of "School Life in 1990s." Emphasize listening to their partner's responses and asking questions based on what he/she says to get more details about a topic.
4. Have the group interview you on the topic "My Life as a Teacher," or interview a guest on the topic "Living in XXXX Community."
5. Critique the interview as a group:
 - What was really good about this interview?
 - What wasn't so hot about this interview?
 - What questions got lots of information on the topic?
 - When could we have asked an "extending question" such as "Tell me more about...."
 - What could we have done better?

6. Review what information is needed at the beginning of an interview to identify and set the stage for an oral history interview: name of interviewer, date, place of interview, name of person being interviewed. Spell names verbally for the record so the person transcribing will write them correctly. It is also useful to have the birth year of the interviewee.
7. Generate questions or closing statements for ending an interview.
8. For additional practice, students could interview a family member at home or a neighbor and, if possible, practice using the equipment.

Session Five: Logistics

1. Have students complete the “Oral History Checklist for Interviewer” and review what needs to happen next.
2. Students should begin to make a final worksheet with the specific topic, the names of possible interviewees, and a general list of sequenced questions based on their research and conversations. It is best if students DO NOT interview from their written list of questions, but select three or four questions and put them on an index card to take with them, just in case.
3. Resolve arrangements for equipment and have each student practice using it by interviewing another student on a general topic.

4. Rehearse calling a person to arrange an interview by doing “Telephone Call Role-play” with the teacher calling a student and requesting to do an interview. Have students critique your telephone call:
 - What was the purpose of the call?
 - What information did I give?
 - What other information should I have given?
5. Select a couple of students to do the same role-play telephone call requesting permission to do an interview of that person and critique the good/not-so-good of the role-play.
6. Distribute permission forms and review information about photographs and using equipment.
7. Review things to take: tape recorder, extension cord, audiotapes, batteries, microphone, permission forms, index card with questions, pen/pencil, and name, address, and telephone number of the person being interviewed.
8. Keep a log for your records with name of the student, interviewee, date of interview, topic, equipment being used, arrangements for transcribing (who will do it using what computer).
9. For additional practice, ask students the problem questions in the “Interview Bloopers” handout.
10. Students need practice using the equipment and placing the microphone where both persons can be heard. This can be done in a group session or individually at scheduled times depending on the equipment available. Practice is needed to get equipment set up, test the microphone to decide correct placement during the interview, adjust the volume, regulate their own voice volume, relax, and more.

11. If time permits, have two students do a "Mock Interview Role-play" in front of the class to demonstrate meeting the person, getting started, setting up equipment, and beginning an interview on "Summer in My Hometown." Have the class debrief with:
 - An example of a good interview technique I saw was...
 - Something they forgot to do was...
 - I hope I remember to...

12. Initiate a discussion of "Interview Etiquette." What are some of the things your folks tell you to do when you go to someone's house? (Examples: Dress appropriately, don't chew gum, say please and thank you, be polite, show respect, etc.)

NOTE: After students have completed their interviews, they will want to talk and share "How it Went." Time for this sharing and exchange of learning should be scheduled.

Session Six: Transcribing

1. Make a copy of all interview tapes before beginning to transcribe. To avoid damaging the original, do not transcribe from the original tape.

2. Verify arrangements for computer use and that each student has a computer disk.

3. Transcribing takes a lot of time. There is no shortcut. Transcribing an hour-long interview takes, on an average, six to eight hours. Students should start transcribing as soon as possible.

4. Have students look at transcript examples in this site. Select any transcript to browse.

5. Have students quickly review the "Guidelines for Transcribing." As they begin the transcription, they can refer to the guidelines.

6. Use someone's audiotape and begin to transcribe with heading information:

- Interview with (name of person)
- Date of interview
- Location of interview
- Interviewer
- Primary topic of interview
- Key words: Texas, churches, segregation, Civil Rights, etc.

7. Listen to the first question and write it down.

8. Listen to 1-2 sentences of the tape. Replay.

9. Write what you remember. Replay the tape filling in words.

10. Listen to another 1-2 sentences of the tape. Replay.

11. Write. Replay, filling in words.

12. When a sentence is not completed, put a dash at the end—
(found under insert/symbols on most computers).

13. Listen to another 1-2 sentences of the tape. Replay.

14. Write. Replay, filling in words.

15. Set a deadline for completion of transcripts to ensure a final completed product.

16. It is sometimes helpful to have someone listen with you when transcribing.

17. Some students may wish to transcribe straight onto a computer, but most will probably want to write it out longhand first.

18. Sometimes the interviewees want a copy of their interview transcript. This can be very helpful to fill in gaps or to correct errors in transcribing.

Session Seven: Tying Up Loose Ends

1. Have students update their checklists to determine what they have left to do.
2. Write a thank-you letter to interviewee and mail.
3. Verify that tapes are labeled and arrange to make copies.
4. Have students exchange their printed transcripts with a buddy to edit. Buddies should read transcripts and note:
 - typos
 - misspelled words
 - where clarification or explanations are needed, (insert information in brackets [])
 - filler words that could be deleted
5. Return papers to buddy and tell him/her what you found interesting about the transcript or information gathered.
6. As a group discuss what you would do differently if you were going to do another oral history interview and what students felt they learned.
7. Celebrate the completion of your project and the knowledge gained.

Helpful ideas for this instructional sequence were found in:

1. Paula J. Paul, "Fish Bowls and Bloopers: Oral History in the Classroom," *Magazine of History* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 43-46.
2. Roundtable, "Voices of Experience: Oral History in the Classroom," *Magazine of History* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 23-31.