

Principles and Best Practices for **ORAL HISTORY EDUCATION** (4-12)

CLASSROOM GUIDE

Introduction

What is Oral History?

Oral history is the recording in interview form of personal narratives from people with first-hand knowledge of historical events or current events.

Why integrate oral history in your classroom curricula?

Oral histories can be used as primary and secondary sources or as case studies, which connect to core curricula and interdisciplinary subject areas, lending a personal dimension to history. Practicing oral history methodology develops critical thinking, and organizational and communication skills. It helps students meet state and national standards and helps classrooms in alignment with skills outlined in the Common Core. The question-based, process-oriented methodology can also have a positive impact on teachers.

The interviews can be used in multiple ways in the course curriculum, in public events, and in the presence of the narrators themselves. Interviews can also raise student awareness about particular issues or moments in history. Students develop public speaking, communication and social skills, multimedia creativity, and community building.

Oral history fosters intergenerational appreciation and an awareness of the intersection between personal lives and larger historical currents. Oral history projects inspire active participation in history, further education, and civic life.



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Principles and Best Practices for Teachers and Students

This document outlines principles and best practices adapted for 4-12 classrooms based on the **Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices**. It is organized by three main stages of an oral history project — pre-interview, interview, and post-interview. This document is not meant to be a primer on conducting oral history projects; you can find many sources on the internet and in libraries.

Before deciding to implement oral history into your classroom, determine the objectives and goals of why you want your students to learn how to conduct oral history interviews. Do your research. Look at guides and curriculums for information and inspiration. Essential questions to consider: *What resources are available? How will you record, disseminate, and preserve the interviews? What are the student learning outcomes? What is the time frame of the project?*

The more proficient you become in oral history methodology, you will find that it integrates into your classroom curricula as a skill that your students will enjoy and will help them thrive academically.





Pre-interview

Introduction. Establish purpose and make clear curricula connections. Become familiar with oral history methodology and pinpoint the skills that oral history projects will develop. Share examples of exemplary oral history. Explore project ideas to get excited about the possibilities.

Student investment. Foster student interest in the project; participate in classroom discussions, which determine project focus and purpose, based on unique interests of the group or content focus. Consider the varying levels of student abilities and interests, and determine what roles can be taken based on desired skill-building objectives.

Training. Implement classroom lessons that ask students to practice skills in careful listening, public speaking, questioning, analyzing, thinking critically, empathizing, and communicating interpersonally. Conduct as many interview experiences that your schedule allows, so that student interviewers become comfortable with conducting oral history interviews.

Narrators. Find narrators relevant to the project focus. Brainstorm potential narrators: ask students, families (consider letters home), and community members for ideas. The teacher or students may make first contact through an email, a phone call, or regular mail, establishing the purpose and usage, procedures, approximate interview length, and interview schedule. Students clearly notify potential narrators what the interview is for and how it will be used.

Narrator rights. Narrators voluntarily give their consent to be interviewed and understand that they can refuse to answer a question at any time. Establish with the narrator what the interview is for and how it will be used, including possible online usage. Narrators hold the rights to their interviews until and unless they transfer those rights. Interviewers must take care to avoid making promises that cannot be met. Let narrators know that you will keep them informed of projects that utilize their interview.

Interview length. Determine approximate length of the interview before interviewing, based on the skill levels of students, subject matter, and the narrator's unique circumstance.

Research. To be prepared for the interview, conduct careful research that is both subject-focused and contextual. Quality research can create rapport with the narrator and hone interview questions that inspire storytelling. Students should read both primary and secondary sources related to the era, topic, or theme of their interview.

Interview questions. Compose a preliminary interview outline or potential questions based on project purpose and research. Generally, interviews should ease the narrator into storytelling and reflection with increasingly concrete questions based on the project focus and purpose. Though the outline or questions probably won't be followed exactly in an interview, they establish guidelines for the interviewer and organize focus.

Equipment. Every effort should be made to use the best quality recording equipment, given available resources and accessibility. Become familiar with your equipment, whether you use sound recording, film or video, or audio software.

Interview space. Determine a space to conduct the interview, considering all the variables to an interview, including equipment capabilities, comfort level, sound considerations, and location unique to the narrator's story. Get out of the classroom if possible.



Community School 154, Harriet Tubman Learning Center, 5th grade students interviewing a Significant Elder of Harlem, New York City. Courtesy of the Apollo Theater. Apollotheater.org



Interview

Narrator care. Show respect for the narrator at all times. Before starting the interview, build rapport with the narrators by helping them to feel comfortable and ensuring that their needs are met. Remind narrators of their rights and the goals of the project. During the interview, take care of the narrator to accommodate tiredness, emotions, breaks, or needs. Allow the narrators to tell their stories in their own words and from their own perspective. Avoid stereotypes, misrepresentations, or manipulations of the narrators' words.

Introduction. Tag the interview in order to establish an organized archival index, including names, date, time, location, and subject matter of the interview.

Interview length. Consider the parameters based on the original contact made with the narrator. Be ready to be flexible so that the interview isn't too short, covers the desired content if possible, and does not go overly long just for the sake of time goals.

Being present. Listen carefully and stay focused, so that the project focus is balanced with what the narrator chooses to relate. Not all prepared questions have to be asked — follow-up, impromptu questions based on critical listening create quality interviews and allow for the narrator to reflect authentically.

Expecting the unexpected. Be prepared that the interviews might not go as planned. In many cases the unexpected turns of an interview redirect the focus or can deepen understanding of the subject that was first established. Interviewers must also respect the narrators and honor their right to respond to questions in their own style and language.

Release form. Explain the reason for and the details of the release form. Take time to describe to narrators the ways that their interviews might be used, including online usage. Make sure that you get the release form signed, or, if necessary, record the agreement of the release. Until they have signed or recorded a release, narrators hold the copyright to their interviews.

Post-interview

Organization. Document the process, including the preparation and methods used for archival purpose and project development. This will help with student assessment and to determine if project goals and objectives have been met.

Preservation. Consider how best to preserve the original recording and any transcripts made of it and to protect the accessibility and usability of the interview. Consult guides and websites for the latest archival standards for the media format used. Talk with your school or local librarian about options for storage.

Reflection. Conduct reflections on the interview content, process, and product. Revisit original project objectives, and explore how the project's purpose might be developed or how it is met.

Process. Based on the objectives and purpose of the project, determine how the interview will be processed for sharing and preserving.

Dissemination. Create and share the oral history project in a way that stays true to the narrator's voice, while highlighting the objectives and purpose. Keep narrators informed about how their interviews are being used. Offer to give the narrators or their families a copy of the interview and your project.

For more information about the Oral History

Association: oha@gsu.edu, 404.413.5751

Website: oralhistory.org



Community School 154, Harriet Tubman Learning Center, 5th grade students interviewing a Significant Elder of Harlem. New York City. Courtesy of the Apollo Theater. Apollotheater.org