

Hands-On History

Oral History Interviews

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IMAGINE THIS: IT'S THE YEAR 2050, and a kid just opened their social studies ebook to learn about the mysterious, long ago past. "In 2020," they read, "millions of students and teachers across America transitioned to remote learning as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the country."

But does that tell the whole story? If your family includes one of the many students who learned virtually last year, it almost definitely doesn't.

Of course, every single bit of history was once someone's daily life. So how can we capture that? One way is through oral history.

When you do the work of oral history, you interview someone about their experiences and record their answers. It's a great way to make sure that ordinary people have a voice in the histories we pass down. And it's something you can do at home!

Who do I interview? *The short answer: anybody you like!*

You could interview a family member, a friend, a classmate, a neighbor, a teacher, or another community member. Just make sure to respect your interviewee—explain that you'd like to interview them, what you'd like to talk about, and why, and ask if they're comfortable being interviewed and recorded.

What do I ask them? *The short answer: anything you want!*

If you're stumped, try thinking about your interviewee's life. Did they grow up in a different place or during a different time than you? What was their daily routine like? Did they live through an important event—like an election, a war, a protest movement, or the passage of a new law? How did they feel about it? How did it change their life?

Write down ideas for questions you want to ask, but once your interview starts make sure you're being a careful listener. Let your interviewee share their stories with you and then ask follow-up questions—even if they aren't the questions you planned to ask.

And on that note, if there's a question your interviewee isn't comfortable answering, respect that, too. Let them tell you as much or as little as they like.

How am I supposed to record it?

First things first: if you plan to record the interview, ask your interviewee for permission beforehand.

If you get the go-ahead from your interviewee, then feel free to record! You might record audio or video, or you could take handwritten or typed notes.

In any format, audio quality is really important, so before you record an oral history interview, set up a practice interview with someone willing to help. Make a short audio or video recording, and then play it back to make sure you can hear—loud and clear—what the person is saying. You may have to experiment with putting the audio recorder, video camera—or whatever device you use—and/or its separate microphone in different places (in relation to the person you're interviewing) to get the best sound possible, so it will be easy to hear the answers later.

And be sure and keep your audio and video recordings somewhere safe, so you can listen to them and share them in the future.

Oral history inspiration

To see oral history in action, you can visit the Washington State History Museum! Our *REMEMBRANCE* gallery features recorded interviews with Japanese Americans speaking about their family's experiences with incarceration during World War II. Their interviews are powerful, and a great reminder of why oral history matters: it records the stories of people who lived through history.

For more in-depth information about recording oral history interviews, visit the Oral History Association website at www.oralhistory.org.

For more oral histories, visit the Washington State History Museum to see

Pandemic Perspectives

THROUGH DECEMBER 10, 2021

This exhibit features oral histories, artifacts, and photos of Washingtonians living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Learn about how a global crisis has impacted individuals right here at home through stories recorded by 24 UW School of Public Health students.

This exhibition is drawn from a collaboration between the Washington State Historical Society and the University of Washington School of Public Health as a senior capstone project for students.

