

# Using Oral History in the Elementary School Classroom

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**A**ll too often, students see history only as a product—a massive collection of unrelated names and events, dates and places. But if students are presented with history as a process, they can become aware of how the product (written history) is created. Oral history is an excellent means for students to gather information and produce historical records that are relevant to them. Student can then claim some ownership of the history.

## What is Oral History?

Oral history is a process that combines historical investigation with ethnographical skills. The researcher explores, through questions, historical events with people who can recall the experience of living at that time. Oral historians often collect sound or video recordings and then prepare typed transcripts of the interviews. With the use of such information, researchers are able to construct a narrative of that historical event or period from different points of view.

## Guidelines for Students of History

Both the process of interviewing and the creation of a report can be guided by the standards set forth by the Oral History Association. OHA encourages those who produce and use oral history to recognize certain principles, rights, and obligations for the creation of historical source material. These include obligations to the interviewee, to the profession, and to the public, as well as mutual obligations between sponsoring organizations and interviewers.

Oral history interviews are conducted by people with a range of affiliations and sponsorship for a variety of purposes: to create archival records, for individual research, for community and institutional projects, and for publications and media productions. While these principles and standards provide a general framework for guiding professional conduct, their application may vary according to the nature of specific oral history projects. Regardless of the purpose of the interviews,

oral history should be conducted in the spirit of critical inquiry and social responsibility, and with recognition of the interactive and subjective nature of the enterprise.

It is important to name and give credit to the individuals who are interviewed. “Giving due credit to your interviewee in your project, and thanking your interviewee for his or her time” must be part of the lesson.

The guidelines go on to detail the responsibilities of all parties involved in the gathering of oral histories. Teachers should examine them, in order to properly guide students as they gather data.

## Young Historians

While the OHA guidelines are lengthy, a teacher should not be discouraged when considering an oral history project. The process can be simplified for the elementary grades. Taken in a social history perspective, a teacher might consider how fascinated young children are when “old timers” are telling them about their experiences in the community. This gives the student the opportunity to explore local history, be fully engaged in the process, and then have ownership of the product.

In the upper elementary grades, students can use an oral history to create the biography of a local person, or to gather information for comparing with the biography of a famous person. An oral history transcript can be one of several multiple sources of information, adding depth, color, and relevance to their understanding of the past.

In the second or third grades, interviews can be constructed to develop the historical significance of the local community where students live. Shop owners, fire fighters, librarians, and police officers can be interviewed to find out how they view their roles in the community.

In kindergarten, students’ natural curiosity leads them to ask questions. Age-appropriate instruction in social studies encourages them to begin exploring themselves as individuals and as members of families. Questions and responses can be

captured and developed into an oral history of kindergarteners and their families. As the exploration begins to expand to the community, the process can simply be adapted in scope by redesigning questions and interviews to include more and older individuals. This activity promotes equity, diversity, and the recording of family history.

### Starting with Family

As students grow older, their questions might begin to explore issues such as: what role has their family played in the local community, city, or state? How do family members explain historical events that have occurred and does this explanation change as the child develops? How do others view national events in comparison to the child's view of that same event? Such questions will encourage a student's higher-order thinking.

The process of preparing for and then doing interviews has many advantages that may not be apparent. When designing interviews, the student is naturally encouraged to think critically. This process is enhanced if the teacher reminds students to prepare "follow-up" questions that might evolve as an interview progresses.

Students develop a sense of historical relevance. Students ask their own questions and reach their own conclusions. The entire investigation should have great personal relevance, since students own it. The teacher can construct bridges from the students' narratives to more conventional historical sources, drawing links from "their story" to "the big picture" of history.

### A Multi-Dimensional Curricular Tool

Oral history can and should be social in nature. It's history "from the bottom up." It confers importance to the lives of everyday persons and their experiences. If students begin to realize that ordinary people have histories, it is only a short step to realizing that children also have histories, and that they (your students) are important. Working on an oral history project can help students develop a more positive self-image through personal empowerment. This positive contribution lends itself to multicultural considerations as well; building on the assumption that all individuals have a history that is worth telling and recording.

The process of oral history lends itself to the teaching of writing. Written narratives or transcripts of interviews could be part of an authentic assessment and might be included in a student's a portfolio. If continued from year to year, a student historian has the opportunity to meet the assessment needs of the school and learn autobiographical writing at the same time!

### Conclusion

While traditional historical instruction continues to suffer an apparent lack of relevance, using oral history offers teachers

at all levels a process that will add depth and excitement to a unit of study. Those who may be unfamiliar with the process might be skeptical of adapting it for the classroom, but those who have employed oral history projects often make them a permanent addition to their methodology. Teaching history to young learners as a process, not just a product, helps make it meaningful to young learners. 🌐

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