

History at Home: Oral History

Purpose:

This activity introduces children to what oral history is and how to do it. It also gives children the opportunity to learn about the lives of their parent, grandparents, or other relatives.

Info for Parents or Guardians:

You could share a little or a lot of the information that follows with children depending on their ages before you start the activity. This activity is geared towards children ages 7 and up. If the children are younger, speak in more general terms and provide a greater amount of help with the activity.



Vocabulary:

1. **history:** the study of past events.
2. **historian:** a person who studies and writes about the past as their job and is regarded as an expert on a particular time period or geographical region.
3. **primary source:** an original record or first-hand account of a topic or event from a person who had a direct connection to with it. A primary source serves as an original source of information. Examples: autobiographical books, journals, birth, death and marriage documents, photos, artifacts, letters, and newspaper articles written by someone who witnessed or experienced an event directly.
4. **secondary source:** a source that was created after an event by someone who did not experience or participate in it first-hand. A secondary source describes, discusses, interprets, analyzes, evaluates, or summarizes primary sources. Examples: encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, textbooks, bibliographies, scholarly books and articles.
5. **oral history:** the collection and study of historical information about important events or everyday life from people through audiotapes, videotapes, or transcriptions of interviews.



Background Information:

How do we know what happened in the past?

We can use journals, legal documents, books, newspapers, artifacts, photos, paintings, letters, historical records, the internet, etc. to find out about what happened in the past.

History is the study of events that have happened in the past. People who learn about and write about the past professionally (as a job) are called **historians**.

Some documents and books are considered first-hand accounts of something that happened, while others are considered second hand accounts. **Primary sources** are first-hand accounts of an event or moment in time and are in their original form. Journals, autobiographical books, newspaper or magazine articles (written by someone who witnessed an event), photos, letters, historical artifacts, (like the ones in the museum) and historical records like tax and census records, birth certificates, death certificates, marriage documents, etc. are first-hand accounts of what happened, so they are considered primary sources.

Secondary sources are books, newspaper articles or documents that have used a variety of primary sources to write about an event, but that are created by people who do not have first-hand knowledge of the event. Non-autobiographical books, the internet, and Wikipedia are generally second hand accounts of something, so they are considered secondary sources.

What is oral history?

One way that we can learn about the past is by doing oral history. Oral history is the collection of information about people and/or the events that they have experienced. Historians and people that collect oral histories professionally try to verify the information that they collect, and then analyze it. It is also important that they store the information so that it can be used later by other scholars.

In oral history projects, a person being interviewed talks about an event for an interviewer who records the memories and creates a historical record. Since oral history is done by asking people questions about their lives or events that they experience, collection methods can vary from handwritten notes to audio or video recordings. Unfortunately, oral history is limited by the length of the human life span, and we are only able to learn about events that happened during the lifespan of someone who is still alive.

Why is oral history important?

We all have stories that help give meaning to our lives. In modern times, historians realize that the memories of everyday people, and not just those of the rich, famous or powerful, are of historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories or stories, then one day they will be lost.



Oral History Activity

Today, you are going to do an oral history interview. You can interview anyone. It can be a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, brother, sister, cousin, friend, etc. This is a beginning level activity. You will can use a cell phone to audio or video record someone, or you could simply write someone's responses to your questions on a piece of paper.

Steps to Complete

1. **Prepare questions for the interview. Write all of your questions down and group them by category.** This helps to keep the interview moving along smoothly, and makes you seem more confident and interested in what the person is saying. There is a list of basic questions below that you can use when interviewing someone and simply want to know more about their life. These questions would be good for parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. You can come up with your own questions if you like.
2. **Make sure that your questions will help you to get the most information from my interview subject.** If you ask a yes or no response question, you will likely get a yes or no response. Sometimes it is helpful to ask open-ended questions. An open-ended Question is a question that it encourages someone to answer more than "yes" or "no." It can gently persuade the interview subject to tell you more.

Examples of how you can turn a question into an open-ended one:

Question: Did you grow up in Mobile?

Open-ended Question: Can you tell me about where you grew up?

Question: Did you go to go Mardi Gras parades when you were a kid?

Open-ended Question: Describe your favorite childhood memory of a Mardi Gras Parade?

3. **Gather together the materials that you will need in order to conduct the interview and find a quiet place to interview the person.** You might only want your list of questions, and need a pencil or pen, or you might want to use a smartphone or even a recorder. How you do the interview is up to you.
4. **Ask the person the questions while recording the interview, or simply write down the person's answers to the questions.** The most important thing is the LISTEN to the person's stories, and ask them follow-up questions about things that sounds interesting. Instead of going down a checklist of questions, have a conversation with the person, using the questions to guide you to the next interesting topic.

For more information on how oral histories work, view this series of videos on oral history from the Minnesota Historical Society.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sOmEpj2STM>



Sample Questions for Oral History Interview

VITAL STATISTICS

Name:

Date of Birth:

Birthplace:

Do you know where your name came from?

Do you have a nickname?

WORK HISTORY

What did you want to be when you grew up?

What was your first job?

Which of your jobs did you like the most? Least?

Is there a job that you would have liked to have? If so what was it?

What mistakes at work taught you the most?

HISTORY FIRST HAND

What three world events have had the most impact on your life?

Which United States President is your favorite or impressed you the most?

Where were you on September, 11, 2001? What do you remember about that day and how you felt?

What do you think is the most important invention or discovery from your lifetime? How is the world different now from when you were a child?



If you could time travel, where and when in history would you visit? And why?

REFLECTIONS

What have been the happiest moments in your life so far?

What three words best describe you?

What are you most proud of?

What are you most thankful for?

What advice do you have for me?

GROWING UP

What is your earliest memory?

Who was your best friend when you were little? Are you still in touch?

Where have you lived?

Where did you go to school?

What was your favorite subject in school?

Did you have any pets?

Did you have a favorite game or toy?

What activities did you participate in during middle or high school?

How was life different when you were a child?

EXPERIENCES AND HOBBIES

What is your favorite place that you have visited?

If you could go anywhere, where would you go?

What kind of books do you like to read?



Have you ever played a musical instrument?

Have you ever met any famous people?

Do you have a hobby? If yes, what is it?

FAVORITES

Color:

Food:

Holiday:

Sport:

TV Show:

Time of Day:

Season of the Year:

