

Spoken Word

How to Conduct an Oral History Interview

Oral or spoken history is an important way of learning about the past. Speaking with people who lived through important historical events, such as the civil rights movement, will allow you to learn about history through their memories of the event. Oral history is a great way to learn about family history and where you come from. Conducting an oral history interview can preserve and save these important memories.

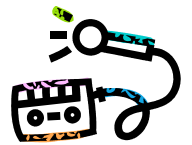
Conducting an oral history interview can be fun. It's like being a reporter. First, you have to decide who you want to interview. A great place to start is by asking your parents and grandparents!

Follow these guidelines for conducting an oral history interview:



Step one: Set a place and time to interview your subject. Choose a convenient time and comfortable place for you and the person you are interviewing. Schedule for short sessions of 30-40 minutes. If you have a lot of questions, plan on several interview sessions. They can be very tiring for you and the person you are interviewing.

Step two: Learn how to use a tape recorder. Practice using it with friends. Make sure you have enough tape and batteries to last during your interview. When you're ready to start the interview, begin your recording with your name, your subject's name, the time, and date. Don't worry if you don't have a tape recorder. You can also take oral history by writing down the person's responses in a notebook. You may have to ask the person to slow down or repeat to make sure you can write down the whole story!



Step three: Write a list of questions that you want to ask your interview subject. Use questions that require more than just "Yes" or "No" answers. Turn this sheet over to look at some sample questions to get you started on your interview questions.

Step four: Meet your interview subject at the appointed date and time. Don't be late. Practice your manners and interview your subject politely and with respect. It's also important to speak clearly during the interview. Most important, thank your interview subject before you are finished. Remember, you couldn't do the interview without them!



Step five: After the interview collect your notes. Ask yourself these questions:

What did I learn about history through this interview?

What was one of the most interesting parts?

Why is it important to learn about people's historical experiences?

You may want to use your interview to create a memory book or summary report of your experience. Try drawing a picture or writing a poem of an event your subject described. You may even choose to create a full-fledged family history. Whatever you do, be sure to keep your recording or notes in a safe place. You have recorded important, perhaps even irreplaceable, history.



Try asking your subject these questions to help the interview get started.

Be creative and think of more questions to ask!

What do you really want to know from your interview subject?

Where did you go to school?

What was a typical school day like?

Did your family have any pets? What were their names?

What was your first job? Did you enjoy it?

What were your parents' occupations?

How did your family celebrate major holidays?

How many members of your family served in the military? Did they fight in a war, and, if so, which one?

Did you live during a major event in Alabama or United States history (examples: Great Depression, World War II, Vietnam, or Montgomery Bus Boycott)? If so, which one?

What you remember most about this event?

What kind of house did you grow up in? Was it big or small?

What family traditions are important to you?

What games did you play as a child?

What songs do you remember?

When did your family come to the United States?

Have you heard any stories about how family members first came here and first settled?

Remember, your list of questions is a guideline. Sometimes the person being interviewed has a special story he or she might want to share with you. You may ask directly, "Is there a special story you'd like to have recorded? Would you share it with me?" Sometimes these stories are very funny, sometimes they are sad. Be prepared for the unexpected!



Go to www.archives.alabama.gov for more information