

Capturing an Oral History

Digital Stories of Our Heroes

Preparing for the Interview

- The interviewing team should have adequate background knowledge, as the interviewee will give responses that will lead to new questions and give new information and insights.
- Student interviewers should know the context for terms, events, and people linked to the social and historical events being explored.
- Questions should be generated in advance.
- It is always a good idea to conduct a practice interview ahead of time.

Arranging the Interview

- Contact the potential interviewee both in writing and over the phone to establish a rapport that is open and caring.
- Describe the purpose of the project and make it clear to the interviewee why he or she is of value and interest to the students.
- Ask the interviewee to provide any related photos, journals, or other artifacts that s/he may have; these can help to stimulate memories and lead to more insights.
- Give specific examples of typical questions that will be asked and provide the final list of questions prior to the interview to allow the interviewee to reflect and prepare.

Setting Up at the Interview Location

- Select a location convenient to the interviewee.
- Select a quiet spot – try to record away from external noise (air conditioner vents, cell phones, etc.).
- Use an external microphone or lip-on microphone and encourage all individuals involved in the recording to speak up.

- Locate and focus cameras to capture a full frontal image (head and shoulder shot) of the interviewee.
- Review the Veterans History Project recording guidelines if appropriate.

Equipment

- Get familiar with all features and controls of the audio and/or video equipment. Test all equipment prior to the interview and again after setting up at the interview location.
- Try to use natural light as much as possible.
- Be sure to have back-up batteries for all equipment and extra audio and video tapes.
- Use a ninety-minute tape to record a thirty-minute interview.
- Use multiple video cameras if you wish to film the interviewers and interviewee.
- Review the Veterans History Project equipment guidelines if appropriate.

The Interview Process

- The principal interviewer should state on tape the name of the project; the location and date of the interview; the name of the interviewee and her/his rank, branch of service, and military service location if appropriate.
- Also identify the entire interview team (children may be referred to collectively, i.e. the seventh-grade students at ABC School).
- The interviewer(s) should stimulate the interviewee's narrative by asking for details and examples or posing intelligent follow-up questions when appropriate.
- The interviewer(s) should be sure to let the interviewee's finish his/her narrative before shifting to new questions.

Interview Rapport

- The interviewer(s) should maintain eye contact with the interviewee and demonstrate active listening skills (nods of encouragement, smiles, attentive body posture); interest in the interviewee's story should be apparent.
- Be sure to give the interviewer time to answer each question fully.

Time and Exit

- Be sure to give the interviewee enough time to tell her/his story, but don't wear her/him out.
- Appreciation should be expressed as the interviewer(s) exit and a written thank-you note should be sent to the interviewee within one week following the interview.
- Offer to share the interview video or audio tape with the interviewee.

Oral History Interview Checklist

- Is the interview environment free of anticipated distractions?
- Has the proper introductory information been included?
- Does the interview start with the interviewee providing a brief biographical sketch?
- Has the interview team:
 - asked clear, singular questions?
 - avoided asking leading questions?
 - asked questions that elicit extended answers?
 - avoided making biased comments?
 - demonstrated a good knowledge of the subject?
 - allowed the interviewee time to think and respond?
 - avoided interrupting the interviewee?

Guidelines for the Veterans History Project

- Ninety minutes is the maximum interview time for the Veterans History Project.
- The interviewee must complete a biographical data form.
- A Veterans History Project release form must be signed by the interviewee granting permission for the use of the interview for historical and educational purposes.
- Both forms must be submitted with the interview recording to the Veterans History Project.
- The entire oral record should be submitted in its original, unedited format along with a transcript of the interview (ideal) or a transcript log (list of interview questions).

For Further Reading

[Using Oral History: Lesson Overview](#)

For Further Viewing

Brigham Young University. *Capturing the Past: How to Prepare and Conduct an Oral History Interview*. Distributed by Direct Cinema Limited, Santa Monica, CA. Videocassette: 31 minutes.