

# Conducting an Oral History Interview

GRADES 6-12



## Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 6-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is two 45-minute sessions.

Oral histories provide information about the experiences of people whose stories we do not often hear. In this lesson, participants will learn about the early steps of planning an oral history interview and how to navigate challenges one might experience while conducting an oral history interview. This lesson will culminate in participants taking part in a trial interview and reflecting on that process, with the goal of being able to apply these skills when conducting a more formal oral history interview in the future.



## Objective

Participants will be able to identify best practices for conducting an oral history interview.



## Materials

- Asking Effective Questions Worksheet (1 per each participant)
- Optional: Recording equipment to record trial oral history interviews



## Inquiry

Ask participants:

- Why do we collect oral histories?

Oral histories offer firsthand accounts of the past. They provide information that may not be documented by other sources and give voice to people whose experiences may not be reflected in traditional sources. They offer personal perspectives, memories and commentary that allow us to consider history in different ways. Personal stories and reflections can help engage our audiences.

- What steps might be involved in recording an oral history?



## Investigation

Ask participants:

- How would you choose a person to interview? What qualities might make someone a good choice for an interview?

Share information on the ideal candidate for an oral history interview and the information that should be discussed before an oral history interview, including having an initial conversation, answering any questions about the interview process and creating an outline. Have participants look through an example outline for an oral history interview.

Example Outline:

- Early Childhood
- Experiences in boot camp—acclimating to Navy life
- Photo lab school—feelings about this assignment
- Working in the photo lab
- Importance of photo lab to Intrepid's mission
- Types of assignments (flight deck, accidents, cruise book, portraits)
- Layout of the photo lab
- Day-to-day routines
- Favorite/least favorite activities in photo lab
- Secrecy/clearances
- Mishaps in the photo lab (sink overflow story)
- Relationships with other crew members (story about the photo officer)

Discuss the best types of questions for an oral history interview and the benefits of open-ended questions versus closed questions. Also, discuss how to get more out of a narrator with follow up questions. Have students practice by imagining interviewing a submariner about submarine school. Have them write their questions down and share them with the larger group.

- What are some questions you might ask this submariner?
- What questions are the strongest? Which questions could be improved?

#### Example Questions

- Describe your first day at submarine school. How were you feeling?
- How did you adapt to submarine school?
- Which lessons were your favorite? Which were a struggle for you?
- Who made an impression on you?
- Did any of your classmates struggle? Tell me about them.
- Looking back, did submarine school prepare you for the fleet? Why or why not?

Have participants fill out an “Answer Effective Questions” worksheet and review the rewritten questions with the whole group.



## Activity

### Interview a Peer

Divide participants into pairs and give them the assignment of conducting a 20 minute interview with a partner. If needed, go over “Before You Start” information that should be followed when conducting a recorded oral history interview.

#### Before You Start

- Review interview format with the narrator
- Tell the narrator that there will be moments of silence
- Encourage narrator to look at you, not at camera
- Request that narrator not use your name when speaking
- Begin the interview by stating the interview date, location, narrator’s name and your name

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The pairs should meet for a “pre-interview” in which they pick a topic to focus on and create an outline. For the interview, pairs will take turns as interviewer and narrator. If possible, have participants record the interview and watch it later. The facilitator can provide time for participants to conduct the interview during the same session or have participants take part in a pre-interview and conduct the interview at a later date. After their interview, participants will discuss how they felt about the process and what they could improve.

- What was easiest? What were your strengths?
- What was the most challenging? What could you improve on?

## Conduct an Oral History Project

Have participants conduct an oral history interview with a veteran, family member, or community member. Have participants share what they learned from the interview and how they can improve as an interviewer.



### Lesson Connection

To have participants see examples of how oral history interviews can be used to learn about a topic, please see our lesson: **Exploring Benefits of Naval Service.**



### Background

## Preparing an Interview

For an oral history interview, an interviewer wants to identify people who have a connection to the past or past events that we’re interested in studying. For example, museum ships might want to interview a person who served on that ship. We also look for narrators (those being interviewed) who represent experiences that are not always covered in other sources.

Finally, we want to find narrators who are comfortable talking about their experiences in detail. They should be able to recall information and be willing to answer questions. Before an interview, it is important to have an initial conversation. This helps the interviewer and the narrator get to know each other. The interview can ask preliminary questions about the person’s experiences, which will help guide the interview.

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An initial conversation also allows the interviewer to explain the process and the narrator to ask questions. This first conversation, which should be in person or on the phone, is critical for building trust.

The narrator might have questions about the interview process. Here are some common questions that narrators might ask you:

- Why did you choose me?
- How will you use the interview? Who else will see it?
- What questions are you going to ask me?
- Why do I need to sign a release?
- How long will it take?
- What should I wear?
- May my family sit in on the interview?
- Can you show me an example of another oral history?
- Will I get a copy of the interview?

Once you've identified someone to interview, the next step is creating an outline for the interview. The outline will list the topics that you want to discuss with the narrator. In order to create a strong outline, you will need to have a basic sense of the narrator's experiences, which you will learn from the preliminary conversation. You also will need to research the historical context that relates to the person's story.

## Asking Questions

An oral history interview is a guided conversation. The interviewer will ask questions that will help the narrator share their experiences about the historical topics in the outline. The interviewer's questions should be open-ended, meaning that the questions cannot be answered by a single word (such as yes or no). Questions that start with how, why or what can help prompt longer answers. Also, try starting with "describe" or "tell me about."

- Closed question: Did you go to boot camp?
- Open-ended question: What was the first thing you did when you arrived at boot camp?
- Open-ended prompt: Tell me about your first day at boot camp. How were you feeling?

The interviewer should ask questions that allow the narrator to access their memories. This is especially important when the person is describing events that happened many years ago. Some types of questions can help activate the narrator's memories. For example:

- Most people can describe experiences that were personally meaningful or important to them. Try asking about a significant person in their life, a time when they felt particularly happy/angry/proud/frustrated, or their favorite/least favorite part of an experience.
- Try to draw upon all of the narrator's senses. Ask how things sounded, smelled or tasted.
- Some people have a strong memory for specifics, like dates or names, but many people struggle. Try not to ask about very specific details unless the person seems comfortable with that.

Encourage your narrator to tell detailed stories by asking follow-up questions. This will help you get a deep understanding of their experiences. For instance, if you ask a narrator to talk about

their first day at a job, you might follow up by asking additional questions about their boss, coworkers, office or work environment, day-to-day tasks, etc.

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## Additional Resources/References

For access to primary source documents:

<http://docsteach.org/>

<https://www.fold3.com/>

<http://dp.la/>



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## Documents and Images

### Example Outline:

- Early Childhood
- Experiences in boot camp—acclimating to Navy life
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### Example Questions

- Describe your first day at submarine school. How were you feeling?
- How did you adapt to submarine school?
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- Who made an impression on you?
- Did any of your classmates struggle? Tell me about them.
- Looking back, did submarine school prepare you for the fleet? Why or why not?

### Tips for a successful interview:

- Your interview might not follow your outline in order. As stories spring to mind, your narrator might tell their story in an order that you don't expect. This is very likely to happen, and is completely OK! Make a note on your outline so you can circle back to important topics.
- Do not interrupt or rush your narrator. For one thing, this will make your recording difficult to use. For another, the narrator might become frustrated if they sense that you are not listening to them. Remind yourself to wait for the narrator to finish speaking, wait for a brief pause, and then ask the next question.
- Sometimes, oral history interviews can bring up powerful emotions. Certain memories can lead to strong feelings of sadness, grief or anger. If your narrator becomes emotional, offer them words of reassurance. Turn off the recording device and give them a moment to take a break. Often, the narrator will be able to continue after a moment or two. If not, you may need to stop the interview.

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## INVESTIGATION: ASKING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Asking effective questions is key to a successful oral history interview. Effective questions guide the conversation and elicit detailed, thoughtful and engaging stories from the narrator. Successful questions are open-ended and clear. They help the narrator access memories, experiences and sensations.

**Rewrite the questions below so that they are more effective.**

1. Did you like the Navy?

2. Was it scary to be in the war?

3. What was the engine room like?

4. What date did you first come on board *Intrepid*? What was the commanding officer's name?

5. The atomic bomb killed so many civilians in Japan. Do you think dropping the bomb was a good idea?

**Once you're finished, go to the next page for some thoughts on how to approach these rewrites.**



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## POTENTIAL ANSWERS

Here are some ideas for improving these questions. Your answers may vary!

### 1. Did you like the Navy?

This is a yes/no question. It's also very broad. For some narrators, this might be a good starting point, and you could follow up with more specific questions. However, a little more direction would be helpful, especially if there are specific things you'd like to learn.

*Ideas for rewriting:*

- What did you like best about the Navy? What did you like least? (Or more specific versions of this: your job in the Navy, your living quarters, etc.)
- How did you feel about the Navy overall? (Also broad, but allows the narrator to insert their own specific feelings, rather than like/dislike.)
- What did you expect upon joining the Navy? How did your experience compare with your expectations?

### 2. Was it scary to be in the war?

Exercise care when asking about combat or other potentially emotional topics. Start slowly so you can assess the narrator's comfort level. This particular question asks the narrator to react to a specific emotion, rather than allowing the narrator to supply their own perspective.

*Ideas for rewriting:*

- Tell me about the first time the ship came under attack. Where were you? (Grounds the person in a place and time, and you can gauge where to go next.)
- What was running through your mind when you learned that the ship was under attack? What were you feeling?

### 3. What was the engine room like?

This is an open-ended question, so it's not a bad start. But the question doesn't indicate what the interviewer is looking for—what was the physical condition of the engine room, or what was it like to work there, or something else? Better to be more specific.

*Ideas for rewriting:*

- Imagine describing the engine room to someone who has never been inside. What did it look like? How did it sound?
- Imagine standing in your station in the engine room. What controls are right in front of you?

- You worked in the engine room. For people who aren't familiar, what was the purpose of that space? Why was it important to the functioning of the ship?

#### **4. What date did you first come on board *Intrepid*? What was your division officer's name?**

Some narrators will have an excellent memory for details like this. Others may struggle, especially when recounting experiences from decades earlier. A narrator may feel demoralized if they cannot recall dates and names. If you already know names and dates, you can supply them.

*Ideas for rewriting:*

- Our records show that you joined the crew in April 1944. Describe what it was like to step on board *Intrepid* for the first time.
- How much contact did you have with your division officer? How would you describe their leadership style? Their personality?

#### **5. The atomic bomb killed so many civilians in Japan. Do you think dropping the bomb was a good idea?**

Asking narrators about significant moments in history is an important part of an oral history interview. However, this particular question imposes a point of view on the narrator. This can cause the narrator to feel defensive or lose trust.

*Ideas for rewriting:*

- Where were you when you learned about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan?
- What were your thoughts at the time? Has your perspective changed? If so, how?