



**ORAL
HISTORY
SOCIETY**

Lesson Plan: Preparing
for an oral history
interview with a whole
class or group

by Julia Letts and Helen Lloyd

What is Oral History?

Think about

Think about past times. Wouldn't it be fascinating if we could hear people from that time speaking about their lives? (A Roman soldier's wife, a Victorian chimney sweep...)

Listen

Listen to recordings of people speaking about life in the past. Play Audio extracts.

Discuss

Discuss proposed class/group interview. (The subject of our example is 'Growing up in the 1960s').

Helping people talk (Exercise 1)

- In pairs, practise asking each other to talk for about 3 minutes about memories of first attending school.
- Report back on what you learnt. (If recording equipment is available, record one of these short interviews and play part of it back)

Things to think about:

- Don't ask too many questions, which may prevent the person you're recording from telling their story in their own way.
- Use general prompts like "Tell me about your first weeks at school". Avoid questions that get one word answers.

Helping people talk (Exercise 2)

- You (teacher or youth leader) choose a personal memory that you are happy to talk about e.g. past holiday, family wedding, own school experience.
- Give some basic information about your memory – with photos if available.
- Warn class/group that you will answer with one word if you can, so they must use open-ended questions e.g. “Describe your family” rather than “Was your family poor?”
- Tell them to think about the order they ask the questions in. What do they need to know first? How can they get you to ‘set the scene’ – before asking you for greater detail or how you felt about things.

- Give basic information about interviewee: date of birth; where brought up; what parents did; brothers and sisters; year of immigration, if applicable. (This can be written down and recorded at start of interview, to save beginning with short questions and answers.)
- Show photos if available.
- **Class discussion: what do we want to find out?** Many young people think of an interview as being like a celebrity questionnaire – “*What’s your favourite film?*”; “*Who do you most admire?*” These might be suitable questions for later in the interview, but explain that it’s confusing to jump about from subject to subject and better to go through a life-story in order.
- As they suggest prompts, put them on a whiteboard or flip chart in what you think is a suitable order, until you have an outline of the whole recording.

Preparation for actual interview 1

Here's an example of a list of prompts:

- Family; place where brought up; school; out-of-school activities; moving to this country or this place (if applicable).
- First memories of country/town/village
- What are your memories of shops in the 1960s?
- Food?
- Clothes?
- Technology?
- Travel?
- People you remember
- Any other special memories ?
- Looking back, what do you remember best?

Preparation
for actual
interview 2

- Explain that this list will help them with the interview, but the real art of interviewing is listening to what someone says and asking something that follows on from it.
- If the actual interview is recorded straightaway, they can look at the prompts on the board. If the interview will take place later, get them to write their own brief prompts for future use.
- Remind them that if they can't think of a question they can always try "What else do you remember?"

Preparation for actual interview 3

The Actual Interview

- Set up interview space and test recorder.
- Decide who asks the questions and in what order.
- Say it's important not to put hands up or look as if you'd like to interrupt, while the interviewee is speaking, as you can't know what to ask until you've heard what they have to say!
- Collect your interviewee and explain what will happen.
- Record the interview.
- Towards the end, make sure someone asks a 'wrapping-up' question ("Looking back....")
- If time, ask interviewee for any memories not covered.
- Turn off the recorder and check the recording.
- Ask the interviewee to sign a consent form. (Explain to the class why this is needed – see [Ethics and copyright.](#))

Possible follow up activities

Depending on age of class/group, you could get them to:

- Write thank-you letters
- Write a short account of what they've heard or draw an illustration.
- Write an imaginary story or drama set in the 1960s.
- If you have a good recording, make 'production decisions' about the best bits. Consider transcribing or editing these memories.
- Share what they've learnt with another class.
- Compare the oral testimony with written sources/photos. What insights have they gained from the interview?