

ORAL HISTORY TOOLKIT

A Student's Guide

Lauren Webb | National History Day in Utah | Updated December 7, 2023

PART I – What Is Oral History?

Let’s pretend that “future you” is walking around a library in the year 2075.

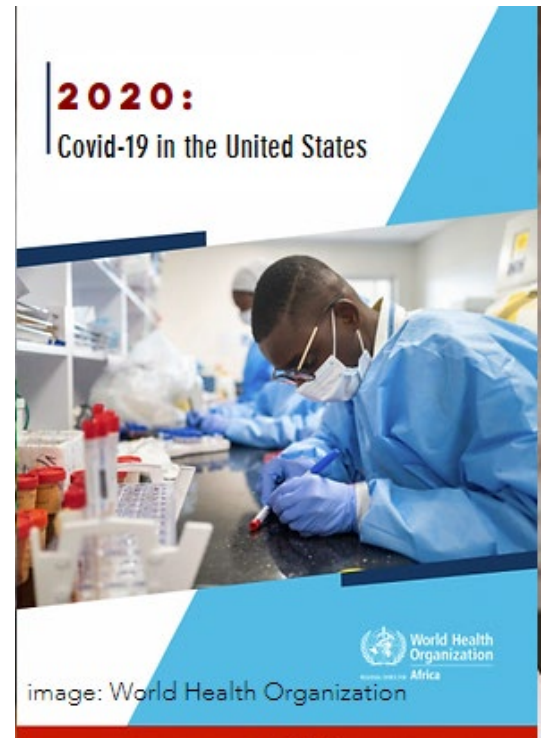
You are an adult by this time. Maybe you even have children of your own!

Out of the corner of your eye, you see this book →

“Whoa!” you say, “I haven’t thought about Covid in years!”

You pick up the book. What do you think it will say about the Covid-19 pandemic?

We can only guess, but it might look kind of like this:



Images: Center for Disease Control, The New York Times

What a walk down memory lane!

As you are looking at the book, you hear the voice of a young student:

“Excuse me, but I saw you looking at that book. Were you alive during the Covid-19 pandemic?” the student asks.

“Why, yes, I was,” you say.

“We’re learning about that at school! Could I ask you some questions about what it was like?” the student asks.

Take a minute to think about which memories you would share with the student.

Is the way you explain the pandemic the same or different from what you were reading in the book? Probably both!

You might not remember exactly how many people got sick or what was happening in Washington D.C., but you do remember going to school from home. In fact, you could tell this student stories about at-home school that couldn't be found in any book—like when your dad didn't know you were in zoom class and walked by the camera in his underpants! It was so embarrassing!

When someone who lived through a historical event explains their experience to someone else through a spoken conversation, we call it **oral history**!

It's easy to find books about historic events that look like the imaginary library book. A lot of history books talk about large groups of people, like *Germans*, or organizations, like *the U.S. Government*. The history books that talk about just one person are usually about famous and powerful people, like Abraham Lincoln or Rosa Parks. But just like you have unique memories of the pandemic, regular people who lived through things like World War II or the Space Race have stories that can help us understand how ordinary people experienced extraordinary events.

Each of us sees the world differently, and each of us has memories about ourselves or our families that are important to us. When we do oral history, we always work from a place of respect, showing the person we care about them and their story. With this in mind, we're going to learn about what we can do before, during, and after an oral history interview to make sure that we're remembering to be respectful and to appreciate what the person is sharing with us.

Let's get started!

PART 2 – Before the Interview

Doing Your Research

Oral histories are **primary sources**—they are interviews with people who were part of the event you are studying.

Before you begin doing oral history, YOU need to prepare. Be sure to study several credible secondary sources on your topic (and maybe even several primary sources, too).

IMPORTANT: You should have a very strong understanding of your topic before you interview anyone! You'll want to know enough to be able to follow the conversation: it would be a lot harder to interview someone about World War II without knowing phrases like "Holocaust" or "Pearl Harbor."

Preparing the Interview Questions

You should write down the questions you plan to ask before the interview. You can also share them with the person you are interviewing before the actual interview.

Most of the questions should be **open-ended**, which means the interviewee may have a lot to say in response.

Think about how you would answer the following two questions:

- *How old were you during the Covid-19 pandemic?*
- *Could you please tell me about your favorite memory of the Covid-19 pandemic?*

Based on your answer, which of those questions is open-ended? Which answer do you think will offer more information?

It's okay to ask questions that aren't open-ended if you're seeking clarification or specific details, like dates, names, or places, but you'll get more information if you ask mostly open-ended questions.

Let's practice!

Think of a famous person from history you would like to talk to—maybe George Washington, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, or even someone from recent history, like Michael Jordan. What would you want to talk to them about? Write two or three open-ended questions that you would ask that person.

1.

2.

3.

Have a friend pretend to answer your questions as the historical figure you chose.

Did their answers provide the information you wanted? Did they have a lot to say? If not, how would you change your questions so that they're more open-ended?

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Now you can start brainstorming some questions you might want to ask in your real interview! Here are a few common questions to help you get started:

- Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. I would like to ask you about your experiences during [event].
- Please tell me how to spell your name.
- How old were you during [event]?
- What do you remember about [event]?
- How did [event] impact you and/or your family?
- Where did you live? Did you always live there? If not, how did you end up there?
- Tell me about your neighborhood/community. What were your most significant neighbors, friends, or relationships, and why?
- How have you seen your neighborhood/community change?
- Describe a time when you felt most proud of your community.

- What role does politics play in your life?
- Have you ever been part of an influential club or organization? Could you tell me about that?
- What’s the most important thing you’ve learned about life so far?
- Tell me about how your ethnic, racial, cultural, or other identity has impacted your life.

Circle the questions from the list above that you would like to use in your interview. Then write additional questions that are relevant to your research topic below.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

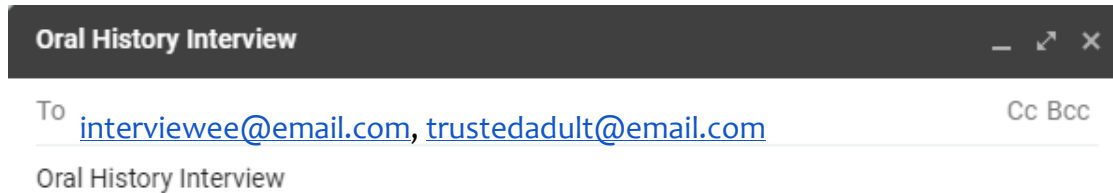
8.

9.

10.

Contacting the Person You Plan to Interview

IMPORTANT: Never communicate with a stranger—over email, zoom, or in person—without including a parent, teacher, or other adult you trust. When you contact someone asking for an interview, include a trusted adult in the email by adding their email address in the “To” bar. It will look kind of like this:



Step 1. Request an Interview

You will begin by sending an email to the person to request an interview. There are several specific things you should include in your first email:

- A. An introduction of yourself and why you are contacting them
- B. A brief explanation of your project topic
 1. A clear explanation of what the interview will be used for: Explain that you’re doing research on a topic for History Day and that the project will be shared with teachers, judges, and possibly on the internet with the general public.
 2. **IMPORTANT: You may only use the interview for the stated purpose with the interviewee’s permission. Oral historians always have interviewees sign a “use agreement” (more on that later), so you need to be very clear in explaining the purpose and use of the interview in your first email.** Ask them if they would be willing to participate in an oral history that will be used for this purpose.
- C. Respect and appreciation
 1. Remember that you are asking someone to take time out of their day to help you; all communication should be respectful and appreciative of their time and expertise.

Here is an example from an interview I conducted with Mary Olsen, who volunteered during the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics in 2002.

This is the first email I sent her, with the important elements highlighted in pink:

Email #1

Hello! My name is Lauren. I'm a history student at the University of Utah and often chat with your son-in-law about what I'm up to with my studies. This morning, I was telling him that I'm working with the Utah Division of State History on creating materials about oral history for elementary school students. I mentioned having the idea to interview someone about the 2002 Winter Olympics, and he told me that you worked the events for a couple weeks.

If you're interested, I would love to meet with you on zoom sometime next week, probably for about an hour. Because our goal is to help kids understand the process of oral history, we can talk about whatever you'd like. If there's something specific you'd like to explore, I would be happy to do that, or I can brainstorm a specific thread of questions. With your permission, we would use clips in the interviews in the learning materials as an example for the kids.

Thanks for your time; I'm looking forward to hearing from you! Have a beautiful day!

Step 2. Make Arrangements for the Interview

If they agree to be interviewed, the next step is to set up a meeting time and method (in-person or virtual) that works well for both of you.

In this email, you'll want to let the person know what to expect and how to prepare. Be sure to explain the following details clearly:

- A. the time, length, and form of your meeting (video conference, telephone, or other)
- B. the topics you want to explore (be sure to include the questions you've written)
- C. recommendations for making a good recording, like sitting in a quiet room with a good internet connection
- D. how you will use the interview
- E. the use agreement

Include the Zoom link in this email, if applicable, and continue to show your respect and appreciation.

Can you find those things in the second email I sent to Mary?

Email #2

Thank you again for taking time to chat with me. I wanted to explain the process of how things will go tomorrow in case you have any questions or concerns we can address beforehand.

I'll call you on zoom at 9:45. People usually have the easiest time concentrating if they are somewhere private and quiet. If this is okay with you, I plan on recording our conversation so I can refer to it later. I will let you know when I begin the recording. We will probably talk for about 45 minutes.

I thought through some possible topics that I'll list here, but if there is anything specific you want to talk about, please let me know!

1. Please introduce yourself, including how you came to live in Salt Lake City and how you would characterize your experiences in Utah.
2. Describe your life situation at the time of the Olympics- Did you have a career? Did you have kids? How close did you live to Salt Lake? etc.
3. Tell me what you remember about the preparations for the Games. Did it affect your life in any way? How early did volunteer preparation begin, and what do you remember about it?
4. What was the most memorable thing about the 2002 Olympics?
5. One of the most widely remembered characteristics of the 2002 Olympics was that they happened soon after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Would you say that the aftermath of that event was being felt in Utah? In what way?
6. As a follow-up to the previous question, did you feel like there was some national healing that took place at the Olympics, or is that something people have started to observe in hindsight?
7. What effect did the Olympics have on your local community? On you as an individual?
8. I recently read an interview with Senator Romney in which he said that the Olympics were "the best years in Utah history." Do you agree with that? Please explain.

I'll end by asking if I missed anything or if there was something you remembered that you wanted to add.

After our chat, I'll send you a copy of the recording for you to review. If, at that point, you still feel comfortable with me sharing pieces of our interview, I will have you sign a use agreement saying it's okay for me to show some of the recording to students to help them learn about oral history.

Please let me know if you have any questions or if there's anything I can do to make this process more comfortable (or more fun!) for you.

Thank you again! I look forward to talking with you tomorrow!

Did you send your email? Great job! You're almost ready to interview!



PART 3 – Conducting the Interview

IMPORTANT: Never communicate with a stranger—over email, Zoom, or in person—without including a parent, teacher, or other adult you trust. When you interview someone, whether in person or on a video call, always have a trusted adult stay with you in the room.

Learning to Listen

Listening can be one of the hardest things for an oral historian—or any regular person—to learn to be good at. But it’s also one of the most important things for an oral historian—or any regular person—to learn to be good at!

I bet you already know how to be a good listener: good listeners focus on what the other person is saying and don’t interrupt. But those things take practice: try out the activity at the bottom of this page!

Good listening shows **respect**. The person you will be interviewing will likely be older than you, and they’ll know a lot of things that you don’t know. Maybe they’ll be a different race or gender than you are. They definitely grew up in a time when things were very different from what seems normal today. They might say things you disagree with or that you can’t relate to. If that’s the case, remember that **different doesn’t mean bad**. Try to understand why they feel the way they do. That’s what oral history is all about!

Listening Activity

Find a friend and sit across from them. Ask them to tell you about their happiest memory. For two minutes, **just listen!** Don’t say anything, not even “mm-hmm.” After two minutes, tell your friend what you understood by saying, “What I heard you say is…” If you misunderstood anything, have your friend correct you.

Take a minute to think about your experience. Write down some of your thoughts below:

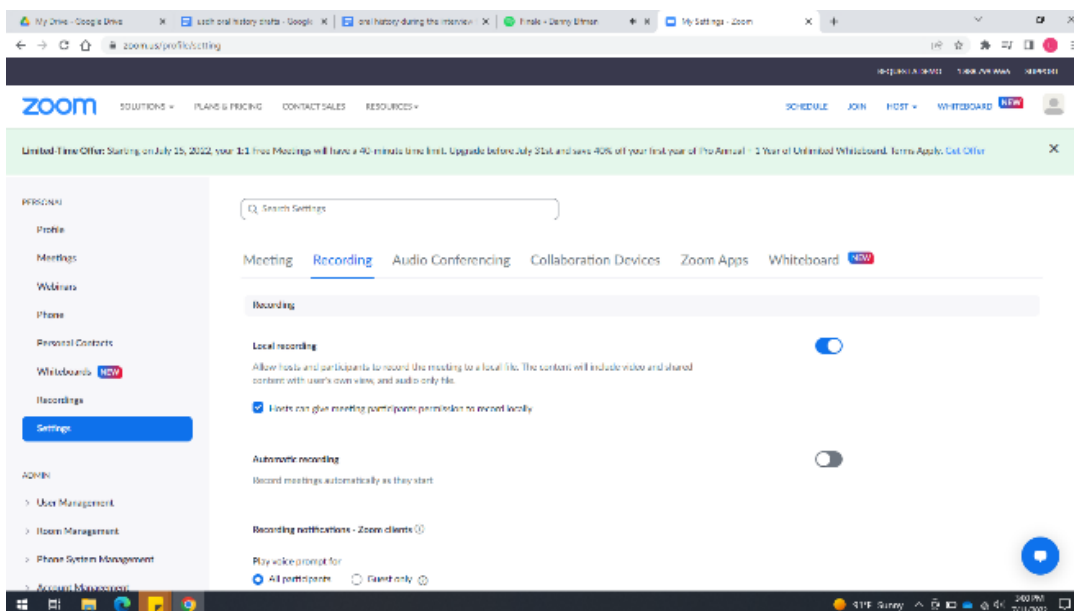
Was that hard? Why? Why do you think that that kind of listening would be important in an oral history interview?

Is there anything you learned from this exercise that you would like to implement in your real oral history interview? Make a note of your ideas below:

How to Record Your Interview

Oral historians always record their interviews so they can listen to them again later. It's a good idea to record the interview on two devices (just in case there's a problem with one recording). For example, if you are conducting the interview in person, you can film the interview on a phone or camera. At the same time, you can record the audio with a different phone or recording device.

Another great way to conduct and record oral history interviews is on Zoom! You will need to adjust the settings before the interview starts to tell Zoom to record the meeting. Go to **SETTINGS**, then **RECORDING**, then select the option to record the meeting onto your computer.



IMPORTANT: Once you have started the interview, don't forget to press RECORD.

Stop the recording when the interview is over. When you end the meeting, your computer will ask you where you want to save the file. Select a folder that you will remember and be able to find easily.

During the Interview

Here's what an oral history interview usually looks like:

1. Before you start recording, make sure the person you're interviewing is comfortable. Whether you are doing the interview in person or on Zoom, it's best for both of you to be in a room that is quiet and has a good internet connection. Politely remind anyone else in the room to be quiet and to let the interviewee answer the questions.
2. If you plan to use the video of the interview in your project, make sure you'll have good video quality: have the person centered on the screen and make sure the footage is clear and well-lit.
3. Remind the interviewee that you'll be recording and that you will send them a copy of the recording and the use agreement. (Even though you have already covered this in your emails, transparency and consent are always the best policy).
4. Tell the person that you'll start by introducing yourself, them, and the project, then you'll begin with the questions. You should also mention at this time that you will be taking notes during the interview (see point 8).
5. Tell the person you are starting the recording. Then be sure to click **RECORD!**
6. Introduce yourself, the interviewee, and the project. Mention the date and location of the interview. Here's what that looked like in [my interview with Mary](#).
7. Start asking questions! Start with simple background information to give everyone time to settle in. [Here's another example](#) from Mary's interview.
8. Most oral historians take notes during the interview. This will help you remember important points when you're doing your analysis, but it can also help you stay on track. You don't want to interrupt, so if something they say brings a question to your mind, write it down! You can come back to it when they finish their response.
9. It's okay to stray from your questions. It's likely that the person will say something you hadn't thought of or that you have questions about. Go ahead and ask them about it! In my interview with Mary, she mentioned how fun it was to collect pins during the

Olympics. I hadn't thought to ask her about that, but I did anyway! I was glad I did, because then [she showed me her cool pins!](#)

10. If you start to feel lost or flustered, just take a minute to gather your thoughts. It happens to historians all the time.
11. Once you have asked all your questions, ask if there is anything else the interviewee wants to talk about.
12. Try not to go over the time allotted for the interview. Interviews should not be scheduled for longer than an hour or an hour and a half.
13. Be yourself! Every oral historian has their own personal style!

During the interview, you can use the interview worksheet at the end of this packet to keep yourself on track and take notes!

PART 4 – After the Interview

Sending and Receiving the Use Agreement

IMPORTANT: The person you interview does not sign the Use Agreement until after the interview is over and they are comfortable with what they said.

After the interview, you will email the person you interviewed a copy of either the audio or video recording. (Send them the version you want to use in your project). Ask them to watch/listen to the entire recording. If they realize they said something they don't want other people to hear, they should **not** sign the Use Agreement. If this happens, you **cannot** use the interview in your project or for any other purpose.

Most likely, they will watch the recording and tell you that you can use it for your project. In that case, they should sign the Use Agreement and return it to you.

Here is a Use Agreement for National History Day student researchers that you can copy and use. Send it to the interviewee and ask them to sign it and send it back to you. You cannot use the interview until you receive the signed Use Agreement, so you should let them know how soon you need it back, based on when your project is due.

National History Day Use Agreement

I, [interviewee's name], grant permission to [your name] to use my recorded voice, memoir, or interview, as a contribution for scholarly and educational purposes in creating educational resources for public school students. It is expressly understood that the full literary rights to this interview belong to [student name] and I waive any future rights to its contents of this recording, memoir, or interview.

Signature of Interviewee _____

City, State, and Zip of Interviewee _____

Signature of Interviewer _____

Date of Agreement _____

Subject of Recordings _____

PART 5 – Analyzing and Using the Interview

Once you’ve done all this work to complete an oral history, make sure you use it! Analysis of oral histories is very similar to analysis of other primary sources.

Make sure you ask questions like these:

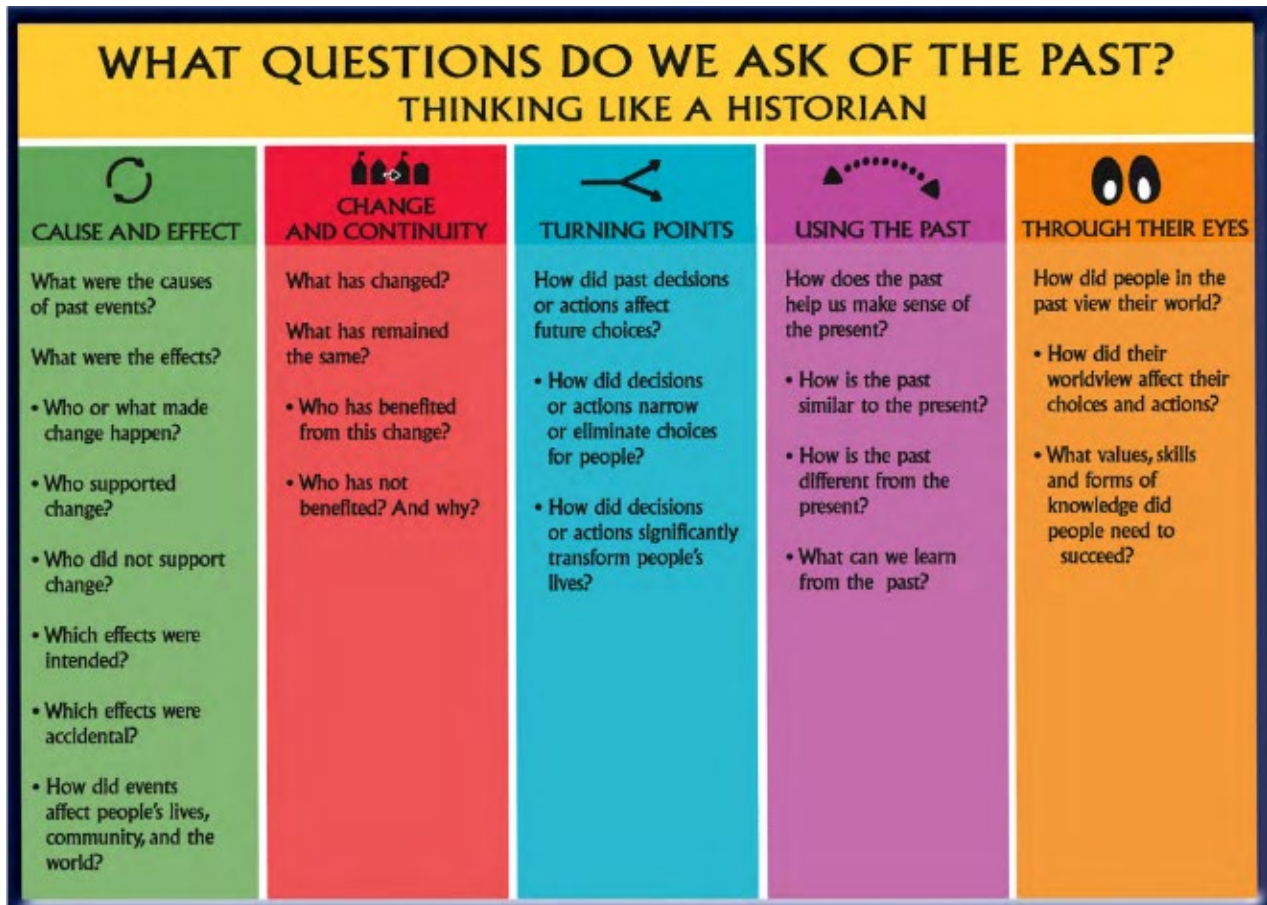


Image: University of Wisconsin

History and Memory

Historians recognize oral history as an important source of information, but it must be used with care. Since oral histories are based on memories, usually about events that happened a long time ago, it is important to ask yourself additional questions about these sources:

What had you already learned about the topic before completing the oral history? Did the oral history support or contradict your research? Why do you think that might be?

What claims did the interviewee make? Did they try to be persuasive in any way? Why?

How did the oral history add to your knowledge about the topic? How could you verify information from the oral history that didn't come up in your background research?

What is the connection between the daily life of the person you interviewed and the broader historical themes you've been researching?

What can this oral history tell you about how ordinary people experienced specific historic events?

How to Cite an Oral History Interview

Don't forget to cite your source! This is how I would cite my interview with Mary in my bibliography using MLA style:

Olsen, Mary. Personal interview. 28 June 2022.

This is how I would cite a quote from the interview on an NHD exhibit board or website:

Mary Olsen, 28 June 2022.

Remember, oral histories are **primary sources**, so they belong in the Primary Sources section of your bibliography.

Congratulations!

You're ready to be an oral historian! Good luck, and refer back to these notes if you need help!

Interview Checklist

- Adjust Zoom settings, if relevant
- Check your environment: Is everyone comfortable? Is it quiet? Do you have a good internet connection?
- Remind the interviewee that you'll be sending them the use agreement after the interview
- Explain that you'll start recording, state your introduction, and then start asking questions. Let them know you'll be taking notes
- Start recording- on **two** devices, if possible!
- State your name, the date, the interviewee's name, and your project
- Ask your questions, starting with basic background information
- When you have talked about everything you wanted to talk about, ask the interviewee if they had any additional information they wanted to share
- Stop the recording and **save it** to your recording device(s)
- Thank the interviewee for their time
- Email them a copy of the recording and the use agreement

My Questions:

Ideas to Come Back to:

Thoughts for Analysis:
