

Vote Like a Girl Oral History Project

Whose history? Collecting women's stories

The year 2020 is an important year in women's history. It marks the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which allowed women the right to vote. But this didn't mean equality for all women, or even for all citizens. Even today, people still fight for equality and justice. By hearing individual stories, not just famous people but also the stories of our family members and neighbors, we can learn more about the lives of women and other groups of people whose stories have not always been told. We can do this through collecting oral histories.

What are oral histories?

For historians, an important part of researching the past is learning about the experiences of all different kinds of people—not just the very famous people, but the stories of families and daily life. One way this is done is through interviewing people who remember an event or lived through a certain time. This is called **oral history** (“oral” means “spoken”). Have you ever listened to an adult tell you a story about when they were younger? Then you have already been an oral historian!

Conducting Oral Histories

I. Brainstorming a Topic

Begin by thinking about what you might like to know more about. Here are a few ideas for things to ask about:

- Title IX, provided equal opportunities for women and men in education, particularly to ensure equal funding for women's and men's programs, including sports.
- Many colleges and universities became “co-educational” (allowing women to enroll) in the 1960s and 1970s. (In most cases, this meant all-male colleges admitting women. But there are also instances of all-women's colleges admitting men.)
- People encountering sex, race, or religious discrimination in the workplace.

- Identify a major piece of national civil rights legislation from the past 50 years. This could relate to racial, sex, or religious discrimination. How did the passage of this legislation affect people in your community?
- How has childhood changed over several generations? Talk to people who grew up in different times to learn what the expectations were for girls and boys, or for people of different racial backgrounds. How does that compare with childhood today?
- Is there someone special in your life who you'd like to learn more about?

II. Choosing an Interviewee

Find someone you could interview (in person or over the phone) about their life. Tell them you want to interview them for an oral history project and that you think their stories would be valuable. It might be someone in your family, a neighbor, or a teacher.

Some people might not want to be interviewed, and that's ok. There are many wonderful people in your life with valuable perspectives. Try and think of someone else you can interview. And who knows—maybe the first person will be interested in talking to you after you prove that you are serious about your project.

You will be the **interviewer**

The person you interview will be your **interviewee**

III. Oral History Best Practices

- Try to find a day when you will both be free for an extended period of time so no one feels rushed.
- Find a quiet space where you can sit and talk without any interruptions. If you are calling your interviewee on the phone, suggest that they also find a peaceful place.
- Have a list of questions to help guide your conversation. You can even share your questions with your interviewee so that they have time to think about what they might say.
- Be an active listener. If someone says something interesting that was not on your list of questions, it's ok to follow that new line of thought. This can sometimes lead to unexpected and important information.
- Try not to interrupt. This is about learning from others. Give them time to speak and show that you value their time and what they have to say.

- Don't worry if there is silence. Sometimes people need time to gather their thoughts.
- Don't worry if you don't get to every question, or if your interviewee doesn't want to answer a question.
- You can record your interview if you and your interviewee are comfortable with this. Recording your interview means that you have it to refer back to after it's over—and you are freer to listen and watch your interviewee, rather than taking notes. Just be sure that your interviewee is ok with being recorded. Here are some tips on recording your interview:

[Recording in-person interviews with a cellphone](#)

[Recording a phone call with Google Voice](#)

[How to Record a Zoom Call](#)

[How to Record a Skype Call](#)

- Remember to thank your interviewee when you are finished!

IV. Questions to Ask

A. Before your interview

It's helpful to ask yourself a few questions about your interviewee before you get started. This is especially important if you are interviewing someone you know well. Asking these questions helps you think differently about someone you think you know. After all, the point of an oral history interview is to learn something new!

Ask yourself:

- What do I already know about this person?
- What do I not know about this person?
- Where is this person from? What language(s) does this person speak?
- What do I admire about this person?
- What else would I like to know about this person?

B. Interview questions

When you're conducting an interview, sometimes one or both of you can be nervous at first. That's ok! Start with some easy questions that can make both of you feel more relaxed.

If you are recording this, or just taking notes, start by noting the date of your interview and where it is taking place. If you are recording your interview, you

might begin my saying “My name is [your name], and today is [date]. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this oral history. I want to make sure that you are ok with recording this interview. Is that ok? Thank you. Can you start by saying and spelling your name?”

- What is your name? Can you please spell your name for me?
- Tell me about the place you grew up and the people you grew up with
- What was a big event in the news you remember from when you were my age?

Here are some questions to help you get started, but you should also think about questions that specifically relate to your interviewee or to the topic you wanted to learn more about.

- What was a challenge you faced growing up?
- How do you think that things have changed for kids growing up today from when you were little?
- Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you were being treated differently because of your gender (or race)?
- Have you ever voted? What do you remember the first time you voted? What does it mean to you to be able to vote?
- What is something you would like to change about the world?
- What is an activist? Do you consider yourself an activist?

- What other questions will you ask your interviewee?

V. After the Interview

A. Be sure to thank your interviewee for their time and for sharing their stories with you! It’s great to thank them in person, and a follow-up handwritten card is also special, so that they know how much you value their participation.

B. Put your new knowledge to work. Here are some things you can do after your interview to celebrate your interviewee:

- Write down ten new things you learned about your interviewee from your interview
- Pretend your interviewee has won an award. Decide what the award is for and write a speech about his/her accomplishments and why he/she has won
- Write a biography of your interviewee

- Write a pretend journal entry from his/her perspective on an event from your interviewee's life or the news that you talked about
- Write a letter as if your interviewee is introducing her/himself to a new pen pal when she/he was the age you are now
- Make a work of art depicting your interviewee that includes quotes from your interview
- Write a poem about your interviewee
- Write a short story based on what you learned about this person's life

Write Like a Historian

For historians, an oral history is an important part about understanding the past. The next step is to see how the information that an interviewee shared compares with what other people had to say. Remember that oral histories are one person's recollection of events that happened in the past. Sometimes people's memories are fuzzy, or sometimes the information that people share contradicts what most people think they "know" about something that happened. This is all ok, and it's part of making sense of history! Here are some ways you can take the information you learned in your oral history interview and apply it to your growing knowledge of the past:

Did your interviewee talk about any big historic events? If that's the case, did your interviewee have new information to share that makes you re-think what you thought you knew about history? How does the information shared by your interviewee compare with information in textbooks or other sources?

Did your interviewee talk more about personal experiences that happened in their town growing up? If so, can you find local newspapers from that time period, to see what the papers said?

Now that you've learned what it's like to conduct oral history research, see if you can find another person to interview. What new things can you learn about the world from talking with people about their experiences?