

UNIT III: THE DEPRESSION (1919-1940)

Topics: Cultural Minorities Women

Lesson 26: Conducting an Interview

Objective:

Students will learn the skills of oral history and apply these skills when conducting an actual interview and writing an interview summary.

Materials:

Tape recorders

Blank tapes

Activities:

The following six segments provide valuable suggestions to use when instructing students on the skills of taking a historical interview.

1. **Select and research a topic.** The best interviews are those which select specific topics to pursue in depth. You don't get a good answer if you ask someone to "tell me about the old days". Direct the questions to a specific area, like family life, diet, early transportation, or a specific event like World War 1. Study as much about the topic before the interview to identify areas of interest and to provide a background for questions. The topics for interviews could easily come from the texts or classroom discussions, with oral histories as a way of personalizing them and involving the students in an active research role. Farm life, religion, immigrants, recreation - there are any number of topics. Select areas of interest and encourage students to learn as much about it as possible (class discussion, outside reading) before the interview.
2. **Select the subject to be interviewed.** There is no formula for finding subjects, but there are a few important considerations. The subject should be someone who can talk easily with children. A grandparent, older relative, neighbor, or someone else the child knows would often be an excellent candidate. Unless the student is very self-confident, he or she might find it difficult to talk to a stranger. As a rule, students should select their own topics and their own subjects--something that interests them and someone they know who has information about the topic. However, the teacher might want to write prospective subjects a letter explaining what the students have been studying in class, why they are being interviewed, and especially if the session is to be taped, how the information is to be used. Subjects will probably talk much more freely if they know what will happen with the information they give.
3. **Request an Interview Release Form.** Make sure persons to be interviewed give the proper permission and release of information. The following form can be copied and used to gain this release:

Release of Information

In view of the historical value of this oral history interview, I _____
knowingly and voluntarily permit _____ the full use of this
information for educational purposes.

Signature _____ Date _____

- 4. Prepare interview questions.** Asking the right questions is the key to a good interview. The best questions seem to be those that are specific but open-ended, allowing the subject to relate his or her own experiences. Questions must be specific. Don't ask: "Tell me about your childhood." Instead, narrow the focus: "Tell me about the favorite games you played with your brothers and sisters," or "What household chores did you do around the house? Were there any you particularly disliked doing?" A general question about childhood requires the subject to do all the work of sorting out a thousand images and memories; a specific question calls to mind distinct memories which are much easier to discuss.

Keep the questions open-ended. "Yes/no" questions need a follow-up question which draws out memories or impressions. If the student asks: "Did you attend a one-room school?", follow it up immediately with a specific question which calls for an elaboration: "Tell me about your favorite teacher," or "Describe the school building". Let the subject come up with the details. The best questions help the subject recall details by focusing on particulars.

A useful rule-of-thumb for questions is whether students could answer them about themselves. This frequently helps focus questions that are too general, such as, "Tell me about going to school". Could a fifth-grader answer that one easily? It would be much easier if it were broken down into more specific questions about classes, school lunch, classmates, music, and recess games.

A good class activity would be to brainstorm about questions on particular topics. Have each student prepare three or four questions, things he or she would like to know. Compile a master list of questions from the entire class and then allow still more group brainstorm time for more. Hearing others' questions usually stimulates additional areas of interest. From the master list, each student could select about a dozen questions and write each on a 3 x 5 notecard to take to an interview. The cards should be arranged in an orderly outline which flows smoothly from topic to topic. Students might want to choose a partner and interview each other on a few questions before they meet their subjects. Take the cards to the interview and make them the basis for the session.

SPECIAL NOTE: Do not ask questions which draw attention to the subject's age or health. Do not phrase the question "Can you remember ... ?" An elderly subject may be sensitive about becoming forgetful. Emphasize that the subject has a wealth of experiences which they can share.

5. **Arrange for the interview.** Once the subject has been selected and informed how the information will be used, arrange for a time and a place for the interview to occur. A teacher might want to ask one or two subjects to come to class to be interviewed by the entire group. This would be especially good before students did interviews on their own to gain some experience in interview techniques.

For individual interviews, choose a time when the subject can devote his or her entire attention to the interview. It is almost always best to interview only one subject at a time and to have that person alone. Others in the room might distract the subject or try to enter into the discussion. Try to allow for at least an hour. The interview will probably not take that long, but there must be no hurry. The subject must not feel rushed, or he or she will try to condense answers and leave out interesting details.

Usually, the subject's home is the best place for the interview, a place where he or she feels relaxed and is surrounded by familiar items which recall memories. The student might offer to come to the subject's home but should hold it wherever the subject prefers.

If the interview is to be taped, the subject should be informed when the interview is first arranged. Do not appear at the door with a tape recorder if it has not been previously discussed. Most subjects will not object to a tape for classroom use, but they should be given full warning.

6. **Conduct the interview.** The student should, of course, be on time and prepare to begin. The student should keep in mind that the subject is taking time to share information; this means best manners and appreciation for the subject's willingness to participate.

If the interview is to be taped, the student must be thoroughly familiar with the equipment before the interview. Practice, practice, practice with the recorder that will actually be used. Take an extension cord so that the recorder can be placed anywhere in the room. Once the recorder is taping, leave it alone; do not keep adjusting it or checking to see if it is recording. The subject will soon forget that it is there if it is ignored.

If the interview will not be taped, the student should have paper and pencil. Do not ask the subject to supply it. Without a recorder, an interviewer might ask a classmate to sit through the interview to take notes. Or, two students might want to go together during an interview to trade off question and note-taking. Having two interviewers, with or without a tape, is good and may keep the questions flowing smoothly.

In either case, talking around a kitchen or dining room table is excellent. Make sure the subject is comfortable and that both interviewer and subject can talk freely. Go through the note-cards slowly. If related topics surface during the discussion, allow the subject to talk about them, but if the conversation gets completely away from the topic, take up the next question. This is an interview, not a conversation! Feel free to jot down key words which might remind **you** of a new question to ask later. When the student has finished the cards, he or she should ask if there are related items or experiences that were not covered. Keep the note-cards in the order in which questions were asked and they will provide a handy outline of the discussion. At the conclusion of the interview, the student should thank the subject for the willingness to share.

7. **Summarize findings and confirm information with subject.** As soon after the interview as possible, preferably the same day, the student should summarize the major points of the interview. This might be an outline or a series of paragraphs on the major topics covered. Especially if the interview was not taped, the summary must be done soon or one forgets the specific details. The summary is an excellent written assignment. Asking the student to give a copy of the summary to the subject can be a good idea. The student would feel the importance of putting down the information accurately, and it is a way of saying thank-you to the subject. The student should ask the subject if there are any errors in the written summary, and if so, they should be corrected and a revised copy given the subject. A teacher might want to begin a notebook with all students' summaries so they could be shared with other class members and serve as a resource for future interviews. Summaries are much more useful than the original tapes themselves.

A WORD ABOUT TAPING. Listening to tapes is very time-consuming. In interviews, information is not condensed and it takes a lot of listening to get much useful information. Transcribing interviews into text is a very lengthy process. It takes a good stenographer from six to twelve hours to transcribe one hour of dialogue. A summary of major points would normally be much better for class use. Furthermore, subjects might feel more free to talk if they knew they were not making a permanent record.

However, if the subject is a close relative, a tape can have special merit. A very meaningful gift idea is an interview with a grandparent or elderly relative about early childhood memories or genealogical information. Some people have taped interviews to give as holiday or birthday presents. It is the association with the particular subject, however, rather than the general information about state or local history that makes the tape special.

SAMPLE TOPICS FOR ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS IN IOWA HISTORY

Below are several topics which would lend themselves to oral history interviews. The list of items in each category are possible discussion points. No interview would cover all of the points, but one or two might help the subject recall details relating to the major topic. A class could come up with several more topics and, by brainstorming, discussion items within each topic.

Transportation

early family cars - buggies - train rides - learning to drive - fixing flat tires - early gasoline pumps and service stations - family rides in the country - vacations - sleighs and sleds - the winter of 1936 - going down to the depot to watch the trains - paved roads and mud holes my first bicycle - early school buses - the Model-T

Food

gardens - home canning - butchering - favorite things for breakfast - school lunches - picnics - baking bread - traditional Christmas food - grocery store delivery service - washing dishes meal time routines - pickles - entries at the county fair - camp-outs - grandma's pies - milk delivery - margarine with the coloring in the little pouches - root cellar - sugar rationing

Education

country schools - favorite teachers - classroom pranks - high school and beyond - games at recess - school programs - the class I hated most - walking to school - my first date - homecoming - football games - school clubs - kindergarten - school uniforms - girls' activities parties - report cards - my best friend

Farm Life

when we got electricity - farm chores for children - 4 H - keeping the stove going - threshing time - our horses - Christmas - raising chickens - milking - the chore I hated most - blizzards - tornadoes - cleaning the cream separator - the country doctor - rural churches - the neighborhood - learning to swim - corn planting - hired hands - relations with town kids - putting up hay - our first radio - the county fair

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