

# YOUR STORY MATTERS: UNDERSTANDING AND COLLECTING ORAL HISTORY

## A UNIT in Two Lessons

### Unit Overview:

Understand what an Oral History is and why it is important to collect and save first person narrative recordings. Learn how to collect and record oral history. Students will select a person to interview, develop appropriate questions, conduct the interview, and analyze the interview.

### Unit Summary:

Oral Histories are primary-source first-person narrative recordings that help to round out the story of the past. At times, an interview may serve as the only source information available about a certain place, event or person. Oral history helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced life in a specific time and/or dealt with major historic events. This lesson will introduce students to what an Oral History is. They will have the opportunity to listen to a recorded oral history and learn how to collect an oral history from someone that they know.

### Time Allotment:

Taught in two 30 to 40 minutes of teaching time. 60 additional minutes of home connection activity.

### Grade Level: 6-8

### Standards

#### *History-Social Science Content Standards*

#### **Chronological and Spatial Thinking**

1. Students explain how major events are related to one another in time.

#### **Research, Evidence, and Point of View**

1. Students frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research.
2. Students distinguish fact from opinion in historical narratives and stories.
3. Students detect the different historical points of view on historical events and determine the context in which the historical statements were made (the questions asked, sources used, author's perspectives).

#### **Historical Interpretation**

1. Students explain the central issues and problems from the past, placing people and events in a matrix of time and place.
2. Students understand and distinguish cause, effect, sequence, and correlation in historical events, including the long-and short-term causal relations.
3. Students explain the sources of historical continuity and how the combination of ideas and events explains the emergence of new patterns.
4. Students recognize the role of chance, oversight, and error in history.
5. Students recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered

## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define** what an Oral History is and **describe** what it is used for.
- Express** what they have learned from listening to a recorded oral history.
- Collect** and **produce** oral history from a family member on their own.
- Consider** how their personal experience today might be meaningful in the far future.

## Materials

Recorded Oral Histories:

*Ollie Rosetta - Ethnic Oral History Collection FCHS*

*Joe Ybanez - Ethnic Oral History Collection FCHS*

Handout:

*Questions for at-home Oral History Interview*

## Introduction Activity

**Set-up:** Discuss as a class why oral history is important. Emphasize that it is important to understand people's stories and their experiences related to a historic event.

Tell students: We all have stories to tell, stories we have lived from the inside-out. We organize the memories of our lives into stories. Personal oral histories add real life experiences to the facts. And they give voice to people, regular people, who often are not involved in writing history.

Oral history captures these stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Historians currently recognize that everyday memories from everyday people, not just the rich and famous, have historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories, those stories, then one day they will disappear forever.

## Learning Activity #1: Listening to stories from our community

Share with the students that the Fresno County Historical Society collects the oral histories of local residents to help preserve the history of Fresno County. Over fifty interviews were conducted in the late 1970s as part of the CETA-funded Ethnic Oral History Project. These oral histories with members of the African American and Mexican American communities profile life in Fresno and surrounding towns from pre-World War I through the 1970s.

Have each student select one of the two oral history excerpts from the Fresno County Historical Society Ethnic Oral History Collection (provided in the *Materials* list). As they listen, have the students write down highlights from what they heard about the individual's life experience. Answer the following questions:

- When was the interview recorded? Give the full date.
- Who was interviewed? Full name
- When did the interviewee's family come to California?
- Why did the interviewee's family come to California?
- What did they or their parents do for a living?
- What were some of the significant life experiences that they endured (1918 Flu, racism, financial success, family challenges, etc.)?
- What was something unique that you learned from this person's oral history?

## Learning Activity #2:

**Set-up:** Explain to the class that they will be conducting an interview to collect their own oral history. Ask students to think of a person they wish to interview. Students may want to brainstorm with their parents or caregiver to determine someone they would be able to interview, such as a grandparent, neighbor, or family friend.

Interview preparation: Have students establish 3-4 informational questions including the following:

- Date of recording (example: October 20, 2020)
- Full name, age, date of birth
- Occupation

Interview questions: Have students identify 8 interview questions from the [interview questions handout](#) to collect information on the interviewee's life (personal and family).

Encourage students to select **open-ended questions** that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no."

Students will need to use a recording device for the interview (such as voice memo on a cell phone) and take notes. Remind students to ask for permission to conduct the interview.

## Assessment

Use the following questions to guide a recap discussion, as a quiz, or a guideline for a quick writing assignment.

### Learning Activity #1:

**Quick write:** Have students complete a quick write and answer the following questions: What did you learn about Fresno during the time of the interview? What are three take-aways that you learned from the oral history about the person?

### Learning Activity #2:

**Quick write:** Have the student write a 1-page reflection paper. Reflect on what they discovered about the interviewee's life. Have students consider the following:

- Historical and significant events, including well known individuals who made the news
- Social and economic conditions
- Culture and other interesting information about the time

## Extension Activity

### Learning Activity #1:

- **Quick Write:** Have students write a 1-page reflection paper on what current events are affecting their local community, the state, and the country. Have them write about how their own personal experience today might be meaningful in the far future.

**Learning Activity #2:** Have students type up a transcript of the interview that they conducted. They may use free software to assist with the transcription [otter.ai](https://otter.ai/) (<https://otter.ai/>) and edit the document as needed. Then have the switch transcripts with another classmate to read and learn about their oral history project.

**Learning Activity #3:**

**Class discussion:** Have the class evaluate the process of conducting an oral history interview. Discuss the following:

- What questions were effective and led to interesting answers and stories?
- Which questions were not as effective?
- Was it hard to keep interview subjects on the topic?
- What strategies worked to pull the person back to the focus of the interview?
- What good follow-up questions did you ask?
- What might have made the interview more productive?

**Distance Learning Options**

- Hold discussions via video conferencing software like Zoom or Teams.
- Alternatively, require students to contribute to an online discussion board 1-2 times per week.
- Hold live stream or video presentations in which each student is required to fill 1 minute of time.
- Each group share out to class to ensure all students comprehend the content.
- Assign a short reflection essay.