



The Densho Guide to Conducting Oral History Interviews

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Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project

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About this Resource

With the assistance of a grant from the Kip Tokuda Memorial Washington Civil Liberties Public Education Program, Densho adapted this resource for educators seeking to provide guidance for students on how to conduct oral history interviews. We also hope the guide will be useful for any community member interested in conducting an oral history interview.

About Densho

Densho (伝承) is a Japanese term meaning “to pass on to the next generation,” or to leave a legacy. Our organization’s name reflects our mission and purpose. Founded in 1996, Densho is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve and share the history of Japanese American incarceration during World War II with the utmost care and integrity. As the leading digital archive for Japanese American incarceration history, we are committed to ensuring that the stories and materials of the people who lived through this critical event are accessible and meaningful for current and future generations. Densho has conducted and preserved over 1,200 oral histories with incarceration survivors and their descendants, and we continue to collect more.

Feedback and contact information

We are very interested in receiving comments, suggestions and questions about this guide and our materials. You can contact us by:

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Introduction

"I enjoyed this conversation. I'd like to see this type of thing continue. What it will do to the present society, I don't know. But at the same time, this type of documentation, I think, will certainly be of interest to people in the future. It will portray the life of what we have today, and maybe they can benefit from it."

- Frank Yamasaki, reflecting on why oral histories are important



Frank Yamasaki - The Importance of Oral Histories

In this clip, Frank reflects on his oral history.

Frank Yamasaki, like many Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II, believed in the power of storytelling to ensure that the injustices of the past are not forgotten or repeated. His words capture the spirit of oral history: a practice rooted in witnessing, remembering, and transmitting a deeper understanding of past lived experiences to future generations. Born and raised in Seattle, Washington, Frank was forcibly removed from his home and incarcerated in the Puyallup Assembly Center and then later in the Minidoka concentration camp in Idaho. His principled refusal to be drafted into the military from camp led to his imprisonment in McNeil Island Penitentiary. After the war, he returned to Seattle carrying not only the weight of these experiences but also the hope that sharing them could help build a more just society.

This oral history guide was created by Densho, a community-based organization with a deep commitment to preserving and sharing the stories of Japanese Americans who endured wartime incarceration. Since its founding in 1996, Densho has worked closely with members of the Japanese American community to document and digitize oral histories, photographs, and archival materials that bring this important history to life. Our approach is shaped by the trust built through decades of community collaboration and a steadfast belief in ethical storytelling—ensuring that narrators' voices are honored, contextualized, and shared with care.

While the guide is designed to support oral history work across a variety of topics and disciplines, its foundation is firmly rooted in Densho's mission and expertise. Drawing on our work in education, oral history, and archival preservation, this guide reflects our philosophy as stewards of Japanese American incarceration history. That foundation is what makes this guide unique and impactful. It not only supports teachers in implementing oral

history as a learning tool, but it also emphasizes the power of personal narrative in developing empathy, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

For students, collecting and learning through oral history both humanizes the past and highlights connections between history and the present. In this guide, educators will find the tools to empower students to connect with history on a personal level, to amplify voices that have long been silenced, and to honor the legacy of storytellers like Frank Yamasaki, whose courage and reflections continue to guide Densho's work today.

People as Primary Sources

What is oral history?

Oral history is a method of historical research: the collecting of people's accounts of their own past experiences through systematic interviews. Oral history *narrators* (the people interviewed) can share personal accounts and stories that they consider to be historically significant. Oral history offers a unique opportunity to learn about the past through lived experiences, often highlighting stories and voices that are left out of official records and mainstream historical narratives.

Historians use many different kinds of evidence to get as complete an understanding of the past as possible. An oral history interview presents one kind of evidence, and it is often conducted as part of a research project. An oral history is conducted systematically and documented with care, so that it may serve as a valuable primary source for studying a particular aspect of history. A *primary source* is an unmediated, first-hand account from a person who had a direct connection with the history being studied.

In a professional setting, a person working on an oral history project will do more than just an interview—that person (or team of people) will usually plan a number of related interviews, compare the accounts, critically analyze the individual interviews, and fact-check some information by comparing it to other kinds of sources for verification. The project also involves research on the historical context surrounding their topic and storage of the interviews for potential use by others.

It is important to note that not all interviews qualify as oral histories. For example, when a TV talk show host interviews a celebrity, they do so for entertainment, not historical research. Similarly, when a journalist interviews a military leader about an unfolding war, they seek news updates not historical accounts. When students in school interview each other about their favorite music and foods, they are sharing personal information and not past experiences related to a specific event.

What do all of these examples have in common? These interviews do not count as oral histories because they are not conducted for the purpose of documenting history. Unlike

these examples above, oral history interviews ask people about their memories of and reflections on past experiences related to a particular historical event or moment.

Oral Histories in a Secondary Setting

Oral histories can be a powerful addition to a secondary classroom, helping students to connect deeply with historical events, to understand multiple perspectives, and to practice skills like critical thinking, inquiry, and empathy. Whether used as a standalone project or integrated into an existing unit, oral history allows students to see themselves as historians, researchers, and community storytellers.

In secondary settings, oral history projects can align with a wide range of subject areas while compelling students to reflect on the power of storytelling. In English Language Arts classes, students can build their literacy skills by crafting interview questions, engaging in active listening, speaking with narrators, and reading background texts that provide context for the narrator's life. Oral histories can become the foundation for a personal narrative unit, literary analysis, or research writing. In Social Studies classes, oral histories can help students contextualize historical events, understand cause and effect, and make connections between the past and present. For example, an interview with a family member or community elder might bring a textbook topic—like wartime incarceration, civil rights, or immigration policy—into sharper focus.

When planning to integrate oral histories into their instruction, educators should reflect on how they can deepen and enrich the existing curriculum. Oral histories offer students the opportunity to connect academic content with real-world experiences, making learning more meaningful and relevant. To help identify where oral histories might have the greatest impact, consider the following guiding questions:

- How might students' understanding of a topic be deepened by engaging with lived experiences?
- Where are primary sources already used in your curriculum, and how could oral histories add depth or new perspectives?
- Are there local or family connections to a unit or topic that could be explored through oral histories?

These questions can help teachers clarify the purpose of integrating oral histories and ensure that the learning experience is grounded in both content and context. While each classroom is different, the underlying principles of oral history—listening, honoring lived experience, and making meaning through dialogue—can be adapted to fit a wide range of secondary grade levels and learning goals. Use this guide to build a structure that works for your students, your subject area, and your school community.



[Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga - Having a Child in Camp](#)

This clip shows the power of a personal description, in this case a young mother talking about the difficulty of giving birth in a camp. Stories like these help make historical descriptions feel real and relatable.

History Gets Personal: Why Oral Histories Matter for Students

Oral histories help students explore a more complete, personal, and nuanced understanding of the past—one that includes diverse voices and lived experiences often missing from textbooks. These firsthand accounts allow students to see how historical events have shaped, and continue to shape, people's lives today. By gathering, listening to, and analyzing stories, students learn to approach history as active investigators rather than passive recipients. As they prepare for, conduct, and reflect on oral history interviews, students also build key literacy and historical thinking skills. Most importantly, oral histories help students make meaningful connections—linking the past to the present, and bridging what they learn in class with the stories of their families and local communities.

Eyewitnesses to history

Oral historians have similar motivation to journalists in seeking eyewitness accounts of major world events; however, in the case of oral history, these accounts are of the past, which means they are tempered by time and memory. Even so, eyewitnesses can offer vivid accounts of the past that are not captured in official records. They can provide personal and human dimension to distant events: When did someone realize the event was happening? What did it look, smell, and feel like, and how did they learn more about what was happening? An oral history account can reveal what meaning an event has for the narrator many years later—meaning that is influenced by present circumstances as well as the personality and background of the narrator.

“History belongs to the victors”

Not if an oral historian can help it! This expression refers to the idea that history is often written by the “winners,” meaning it often reflects the perspective of powerful people (like those who win a war or conflict). Sometimes an oral history project is undertaken to balance the historical record through inclusion of people who were on the “losing side” of a conflict, or who are absent from the official historical record altogether.

A collective history from everyone

Oral history projects also help collect accounts from “ordinary” people who are not

famous or in power. Such a project might target, for example, a cross-section of the population of a particular location. These projects also counter dominant histories written by the “winners,” offering the equivalent of a “person-on-the-street interview” in journalism.

New and varied perspectives

Some oral history projects examine the collective experience and perspective of a particular group of people, such as a marginalized group. For example, quite a few projects have been done with various ethnic communities, groups of women, members of a particular profession, labor organizers, and civil rights activists. These kinds of projects show how people in the same group can have very different experiences, illuminating the great diversity within that collective.

How could this happen? Reflecting on tragedy

Some tragic events in history are terrible on such a large scale that they are almost unfathomable, and sometimes they are even purposefully erased or forgotten. Years after an event like this occurs, an oral history project can help uncover the voices of survivors and reflect on what happened. Oral history testimony can be critical in documenting a situation hidden or covered up at the time. It can also help us understand similar events that may be occurring today.

Think locally

Some oral history projects are community efforts that may focus on relatively small groups or lesser-known events that aren’t covered in the history books. For example, students could partner with a local historical society or community organization that might take on such an effort for an exhibition or the publication of a booklet. The anniversary of a special building or organization might inspire a project. Conversely, a major change, such as dismantling a monument, might also become the focus of a student-based oral history project.



[Frank Yamasaki - Media Coverage Following September 11, 2001](#)

This oral history was recorded just two months after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. In this clip, Frank is able to give a unique perspective on the aftermath and his personal reactions as a survivor of the World War II incarceration.

Planning a Project that Includes Oral History

Oral history projects are especially powerful when students are exploring topics where published sources are limited or when the goal is to center lived experience. Teachers might consider developing an oral history unit when students are studying family, school, or community histories; when they're investigating topics that are missing from dominant historical narratives; or when the addition of a personal perspective would bring greater depth to their learning. Oral history can also be a meaningful approach for multimedia projects, where student work might include audio or video recordings. In some cases, students may be collaborating to document the stories of a particular group or to explore a shared experience from a range of perspectives.

Whether the focus is local history, identity, or a broader social issue, oral histories allow students to step into the role of historian—gathering, preserving, and amplifying stories that might otherwise go unheard. The following sections will guide you through defining objectives, preparing students, and identifying narrators to help ensure your project is thoughtful, grounded, and aligned with your curricular and course goals.

Defining Clear Objectives

As you plan for your oral history unit, be as clear as possible about your objectives for developing an oral history unit of study. Consider the following questions when developing your purpose:

- What do you want students to take away from engaging in oral histories?
- How do you envision students' final product?
- Who are students working with, and who are they trying to reach?
- What tools and resources does your school and local community have?
- What is your timeline?
- What do students already know about this topic? What background information do they need?
- How does this unit complement or extend your course's standards and your students' knowledge and skills?

Your objectives will affect how you develop your unit, including how to prepare students for an interview. For instance, if students are looking for an individual's response to a historical event, they will need to familiarize themselves with the background on the event and sources that reported on it at the time. Alternatively, if they are collecting oral histories from a particular population, they will benefit from themselves with other interviews with members of that population, understanding their common threads and variations.



[Helen Harano Christ - Contemplating Freedom at the Camp Fence](#)

This story told by Helen shows how an oral history clip can capture a detailed child's memory of a small event, but the storyteller can expound upon its significance later in life.

Preparing Students for Oral Histories

Once you've identified your goals, aligned the project with course standards, and considered what students already know and can do, it's time to begin preparing them for the work of oral history.

Start by introducing students to what oral histories are and why they matter. You might draw on sections of this guide—like *People as Primary Sources* or *History Gets Personal: Why Oral Histories Matter for Students*—to highlight the value of lived experience in shaping how we understand the past. Oral history clips included in the guide can serve as powerful examples.

From there, preview the overall process with students. Depending on your timeline, you'll likely spread this across several lessons. Below is a general flow you can adapt to your classroom context:

1. **Build Background Knowledge:** Students may need to learn more about the historical topic or context surrounding their interview focus.
2. **Reflect on the Purpose:** Ask students to consider why they're collecting oral histories and what they hope to learn. You should also share how conducting oral histories will strengthen their understanding of your chosen topic.
3. **Identify a Narrator:** Students can look to their families, communities, or local organizations to find someone with relevant lived experience.
4. **Prepare for the Interview:** This step includes researching, crafting questions, and practicing active listening skills.
5. **Conduct the Interview:** Help students consider logistics like location, recording tools, and respectful conversation techniques.
6. **Reflect and Analyze:** After the interview, guide students in reviewing what they heard and identifying key themes or insights.
7. **Share and Extend Learning:** Create space for students to present what they learned and reflect on the process.

If you're not teaching a full unit but still want to conduct an oral history, steps 3–7 will help guide your process.

Step 1: Build Background Knowledge

Decide whether students need additional context to understand the historical background of the topic they're exploring. Building a strong foundation helps students develop more meaningful questions and understand the significance of the stories they will hear.

Here are some suggestions for building students' background knowledge:

Use Primary and Secondary Sources Together

Pair available oral history clips with historical documents, articles, or images to give students multiple entry points into the topic. This helps students see how personal narratives connect with broader historical events and encourages them to think critically about the different types of sources historians use to construct meaning. Combining these resources can also highlight what oral histories uniquely offer—details, emotions, and perspectives that are often absent from official records.

Create a Timeline or Visual Map

Help students understand the sequence of events and geographical context related to the topic or community they're studying. Creating a visual timeline or map can support students in making sense of the when and where of historical events, which is especially helpful when the interview topic involves a series of complex or unfamiliar events. These tools can also serve as visual organizers that students return to throughout the project to track connections between individual stories and historical developments.

Invite Students to Share What They Already Know

Activate prior knowledge by encouraging students to share what they already know about the topic. This can foster engagement and give you insight into students' starting points. A KWL chart (What I *Know*, What I *Want* to know, and What I've *Learned*) is a helpful tool to support this process. Students can use it to organize their thinking, guide their research, and reflect on new understandings throughout the oral history project.

Build Off Community and Families' Funds of Knowledge

If the topic is local, consider inviting a community partner—such as a museum educator, staff from a cultural or historical organization, or even a family member with lived experience related to the topic—to share insights with students. These guests can offer valuable context, help students understand the significance of the topic within their community, and spark ideas for interview questions or possible narrators. Partnering with local voices reinforces the idea that history is all around us and often preserved through

relationships and community knowledge.

Research

Students can conduct some preliminary research on your topic using reliable sources. The process of researching can help them become familiar with the topic to prepare their questions, to have ideas about what further details to ask for during the interview, and to understand particular references the person makes.

Step 2: Reflect on the Purpose

Before students begin identifying narrators or drafting interview questions, it's important for them to pause and reflect on why they are conducting oral histories in the first place. Helping students articulate the purpose of their project ensures that their interviews are focused, meaningful, and connected to the broader goals of your unit.

Use an Essential Question to Guide Reflection

Begin by introducing or co-creating an essential question that aligns with the focus of your oral history project. A strong essential question is open-ended, thought-provoking, and invites students to explore deeper themes or make meaningful connections across time, place, and community. It should clearly tie into the overall purpose of your oral history unit and help students reflect on what they know, what they're curious about, and what perspectives are missing. This reflection will guide students in shaping the direction of their interview and selecting a narrator whose story can speak to the heart of the question.

What is an essential question?

Essential questions are designed to stimulate critical thinking, provoke inquiry, and spark more questions. Rather than asking for simple facts, essential questions invite deeper exploration and reflection. These questions are tools that help students uncover meaning, wrestle with complexity, and connect ideas across time and context.

- They are open-ended, meaning they don't have one "right" answer.
- They can be broad or overarching or they can be specific to a topic.

Below are some examples and non-examples. As you read through them, consider: What makes the questions on the left essential questions? What makes the examples on right non-examples?

Examples	Non-Examples
What is justice?	What is the legal definition of justice?

How does memory shape history?	When was the first history book published?
How did Japanese American incarceration impact families and communities?	Were Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II?
Why did a country take away the rights of its citizens?	Which executive order authorized the removal of Japanese Americans during World War II?

Clarify the Why

Ask students to consider their own purpose within the context of your unit of study. After introducing the purpose, students could reflect on the questions that will prompt them to think critically about the value of lived experience and the role of oral history in understanding complex topics. Example questions include:

- Why are we collecting oral histories?
- What can personal stories reveal that textbooks or articles might not?
- What do I hope to learn through this process?

Make the Connection to Your Course Goals

Be sure to share with students how conducting oral histories will deepen their understanding of your chosen topic or unit of study. Whether you're focusing on family immigration stories, wartime incarceration, local civil rights movements, or cultural heritage, explain how these firsthand accounts offer a personal and powerful lens for exploring the broader historical narrative.

Plan for other uses of your oral history materials

The oral history interview students conduct will become a part of their own project, but it may also be useful in the future for someone else's research on a related topic. Consider whether students should plan for preservation of their interview and the accompanying information in its original form, independent of the project. The interview may be of lasting value, for instance, if your class is trying to compile a collection of individuals or topics that are not well documented.

Step 3: Identify a Narrator

After students understand the purpose of their oral history project, they should be prepared to contact a narrator. By following these simple standards of behavior to set up contact with a narrator, students can communicate well, avoid misunderstandings, and respect potential narrators' time and attention.

Here are some key guidelines to share with students as they find a narrator and request an interview:

Finding the Right Narrator

Depending on your topic, students might have relatives, elders, or other connections who might know good people to interview. Or you might call community organizations, search through local newspapers, or post notices in neighborhood locations. Another good option is to ask colleagues and librarians at your school to recommend someone with personal knowledge of the topic students plan to research. Once students have identified a potential narrator, encourage them to do some background research—this can help them ask more informed questions and build a respectful, thoughtful interview experience.

Making the contact

When students contact someone to request an interview, they should begin by introducing themselves and explaining their purpose. Generally, they will explain that the oral history interview is for educational purposes and not for commercial use. Students should let potential narrators know how they got their name, or who referred them. When students make first contact, narrators will determine whether this person is an appropriate source for their project. For example, they may not be able to accommodate you, or they may recommend someone else.

Introductions

In addition to their name, students tell the narrator their school and subject area, whether they are working independently or as part of a team, as well as the reason for their interest in the narrator's experiences.

Explaining the purpose

In addition to the basic interview topic, students should explain the larger project. How will their interview fit into what students are learning and researching? What is the final project? Understanding the larger scope of the project will help narrators prepare their responses to questions about more specific topics.

Let narrators know what to expect

Let narrators know if anyone else will accompany students during the interview, how they will record or take notes, and what equipment they will bring. Students can also confirm how long they expect the interview to last.

Do narrators need to prepare anything?

Students can let the narrator know they don't need to write up notes to give to them. They should certainly let them know in advance if they have an interest in photos or

artifacts, or communicate their interest if they offer to show students such objects. Remind students to be considerate, because you don't want the person to spend hours looking for something that won't be useful.

Permissions, privacy and rights issues

Students should be sure to inform the narrator that they will bring a release form for their signature. It is a good idea to explain the release form and leave a copy. Explain how others will have access to what they say. In addition, students can ask for permission to record the interviews and take photos.

Summarize the process for the person being interviewed

Explain what happens before and after the interview, including what students will do with the interview, how a person can correct a misunderstanding if necessary, and where the interview materials will be kept.

Ask for some basic preliminary information

The interview will be partly spontaneous, as students will respond to what they hear from the narrator. However, they still need to do some careful preparation and plan your basic questions. When you schedule the interview, ask some basic questions about the person's experiences related to your topic. Students might determine some dates, places, or incidents to cover in their questions based on their preliminary research.

Step 4: Preparing for an Interview

Explain to students that after identifying a narrator and setting up the logistics of the interview, it's time to prepare for the actual interview. To ensure students are meeting the objectives of your oral history unit of study, remind students that their preparation should also include them thinking about the essential question and their specific purpose in gathering the information from the narrator, remembering why they chose that person.

To teach students to prepare for an interview, share the following guidelines:

Initial Decisions & Practice

Students should make a decision about how to record the interview and gather any equipment they may be using. What quality of recording do you need, for example, for online use or video production? In addition to some practice with the equipment, it's useful to practice interviewing as well.

- **Decisions on recording the interview**

Recording the interview is ideal when possible, in order to focus your attention on

the narrator and be able to listen to exactly what they had to say as many times as you need. You will want to check that your recording device has good sound quality in case you want to transcribe it. Use your equipment ahead of time to become familiar with it.

- **Decisions regarding photography**

It's a good idea to take a couple of still photos of the narrator, especially in their own surroundings. Just make sure to ask for permission in advance.

- **Decisions regarding transcription**

Transcription is the process of converting spoken words from an oral history interview into written text. It's a key part of the oral history process because it allows others to read, search, and analyze interviews without having to rely only on the audio or video recording.

Teachers should decide to what extent transcription makes sense for their students and project goals. Some may want students to transcribe a full interview; others may focus on short excerpts or key moments. Even if full transcription isn't part of the project, it's recommended that students learn what transcription is and *why* it's important to the oral history process: to preserve stories accurately, make them accessible, and support deeper analysis.

Preparing interview questions

Students will want to prepare a list of topics to be covered, or general questions to ask. However, be prepared to ask some follow-up questions in response to something the narrator says during the interview (as discussed further below).

- **Open-ended questions**

Open-ended questions are best to introduce topics and to get full answers instead of "yes" or "no" responses. Questions that begin with phrases such as "What was it like when . . ." or "Tell me about the time that . . ." allow the narrator freedom in constructing their own answer and emphasis.

Plan ahead for the first open-ended question that students will ask after they have covered preliminary biographical questions. They want this question to inspire a relatively long answer. Be prepared to help the narrator get going. For example, students may need to rephrase the original question and ask it again, maybe even several times, to get as thorough an answer as you need.

For oral history interviews, it is important for judgments or emotional responses to come from the narrator and not from the interviewer. Although the interviewer will have some empathy, it is better not to ask questions such as, "You must have been thrilled when that happened, weren't you?" The interviewer should let the narrator

take the stage and refrain from leading them too much.

- **Asking about historical photos and artifacts**

Depending on your topic, students may want to ask the narrator (when they arrange the interview) whether they have old photos or artifacts to share. Photos and family objects can contain many memories! It can be very useful to have some material like this, not only for students to view and photograph, but also to support the narrator's account. It also might be easier for the person to talk while they are looking at something from the past.

- **Preparing for surprising or unexpected answers**

Interviewers need to be flexible in exploring topics they didn't anticipate, without losing sight of their purpose and original questions. It's possible that some unexpected information will require some further research afterwards, or even some follow-up questions at a later date.

Release Form

For most projects, a release form will be needed. A release form helps inform the narrator how the interviews will be used. The narrator signs the form to grant his or her permission to the interviewer/school to use the information for the purposes they have specified. Although an example release form is provided in the appendix, teachers should also check that this form aligns with any school or district policies.

Personal Information Form

A personal information form (or life history form) is also sometimes used. It is a form with the narrator's basic information, including their name, address, telephone number, birthdate, and birthplace. The form might include family information, such as names, birth dates, and dates of death for parents, siblings, spouses, and children. Depending on the project, it could include a list of places the person lived, schools they attended, jobs they held, or relevant organizational affiliations.

Step 5: Conducting the Interview

Once students have identified their narrator and prepared their questions, they're ready to conduct the interview. This section outlines key steps and best practices for supporting students through a successful and respectful oral history interview.

Opening the Interview

Allow for some time to set up for the interview. Students should set up and test all of the equipment when they arrive so that they don't have to worry about it during the interview. During the interview, they want to focus on their narrator and not be distracted by fiddling with equipment.

Review with the narrator the basic information they gave them earlier about the purpose as well as what access others could have to the material. If students need to create multiple recordings for a longer interview, label and number each of them as they go along. And, just in case a label or notes go missing, begin each recording with a statement of names, the date, and the place of the interview.

Begin the interview with simpler questions, to establish basic biographical information. They will want to establish some comfort with the interview process before asking more probing or difficult questions.

During the Interview

- **Recording the interview**

Students should record in a quiet place, with doors closed and if necessary, a sign on the other side of the doors saying, "Quiet please—Recording in Progress!" They can listen for a moment to see if there is anything they need to do to minimize sounds in the background. They should be aware of ambient sound, and keep from tapping your pencil or pushing your chair in and out.

Students should give affirmation to their narrator, but without speaking too much more than necessary—lots of nodding and smiling won't interfere with listening later on. They will not be happy afterwards, while listening and transcribing the interview, if you hear yourself interrupting the person or saying 'uh huh' every other minute.

- **The Art of Listening**

While interviewing, it is critical to be an active listener, to support the narrator in telling their story and encourage them to say more. Be sure to keep eye contact and not fiddle with your equipment and notebook too much. Students can ask for details when they need to, and remember that it's important to demonstrate their interest in what the narrators have to say.

Students should also take cues from the narrator—do they need to think for a minute to decide how to answer? If so, be patient, and wait. It is not a problem to have a bit of silence on a recording, but it might be counterproductive to intrude on narrators' thought process. Do they respond well to a series of questions asking for

further details, or do they not need a lot of prompting? Are they getting tired? Students should consider these questions as they decide how to respond and ask follow-up questions.

- **Follow-up Questions**

Some of the questions students ask will be follow-up questions in response to what they have heard. If the narrator gives a short more factual account, the interviewer might respond by asking, “What did you think when x happened. . .” or “What did it feel like when . . .” Frequently, someone will skip around while speaking rather than recount events in the order the interviewer believes is most logical. Some of the follow-up questions will be to back-track and fill in, or to confirm the order of a sequence.

At certain points, the interviewer will need to ask for clarification. Clarifying follow-up questions could be along the lines of, “Now which brother was that?” or “So you didn’t know what was happening until . . .?” or simply, “Could you explain that in more detail?”

If the person mentions something that is no longer in use or not common knowledge, ask for a definition or description, even if students think they know. “Can you explain how that was used?” or “What did it look like?” might change your assumption or be important for someone else listening to the recording later.

Closing the Interview

The interview closing is time for reflection. It’s important to ask the narrator if there is anything they wish to add to their interview, any stories that were missed. Some narrators are more introspective than others and are able to articulate reflections on their lives, while others may not feel comfortable.



Gene Akutsu - The Importance of Speaking Out

This is an example of a powerful closing statement by a narrator when asked to reflect.

Step 6: After the Interview

After the interview, it's important for students to take some quiet time to reflect while the conversation is still fresh in their minds. Encourage them to jot down their immediate reactions—what stood out, what surprised them, what felt emotional or powerful, and any moments that raised new questions. This helps students begin to process the experience and transition from conducting the interview to analyzing its meaning. Reflection can also help students identify key themes, follow-up research they might need to do, or specific excerpts they may want to transcribe or share later. Even 10–15 minutes of post-interview reflection can make a big difference in the depth and quality of their final work.

Field notes

Field notes are detailed, written records created by the interviewer during and after an interview. Students should make field notes right away of information that did not appear on the personal information form. Their observations will be useful for understanding the interview later on. Is there anything that wouldn't be clear from the recording, for example, to explain something the person was looking at during an audio recording?

Organizing the interview material

After the interview, help students keep their materials organized so they can use them later. Remind them to clearly label everything—audio files, notes, and any written reflections—so someone else could understand what it is. If they recorded the interview, they should save a backup copy just in case. If they only took notes, they should make a copy before using them.

When students listen to the recording, they can make a list of the topics the narrator talked about and write down the time each one starts. This list (called an index or log) will help them find important parts later—whether they're looking for a quote, choosing what to transcribe, or deciding what to include in a final project.

Loaned material

If the narrator has loaned students any clippings or photos, they should copy them immediately and return the originals.

Follow-up with the narrator

Students should send a thank-you note and a copy of the interview for narrators' personal use. If you're requiring students to develop a transcript, they might also send a copy of your transcription after it is prepared, for their review.

Transcribing an interview

Even if students don't transcribe their interview, students should know that it is a typical part of the oral history process. You can explain to students that when oral historians transcribe an interview, the narrator's voice and intonation are left out, which means some of the meaning goes too. In addition, when transcribing an interview, it is necessary to record carefully *what* was said, without correcting the person's speech or leaving out errors that they correct themselves. Yet it is also important to record *how* something was said, for example, with enthusiasm, laughter, or frustration (as demonstrated above). The transcription should reflect the primary source (the oral history recording) as much as possible.



[Kara Kondo - The Day of Mass Removal](#)

Kara's recounting of the day she had to leave her home behind shows how evocative an emotional oral history clip can be.

Step 7: Analyzing and Interpreting Oral History

After conducting an interview, students may feel a strong connection to the narrator's story—but that's only the beginning of their work as historians. In this step, students shift from gathering information to interpreting it. Oral histories are rich, personal sources, and analyzing them requires careful attention to context, perspective, and purpose. Just like with other primary sources, students should be encouraged to think critically about what was shared, how it was shared, and why. This step invites students to reflect on the narrator's point of view, consider how memory and storytelling shape the account, and explore how the interview fits into broader historical themes. Whether analyzing a single interview or comparing multiple ones, this process helps students develop deeper historical understanding—and strengthens their skills as researchers and thinkers.

Every Story Has a Point of View

Our human nature is to talk about our experiences in narrative form, for instance, to structure our account with a beginning, middle and end. We might include details or create episodes that make our experiences work better as a story. We may recount events in an order that builds suspense, or we may even turn the people involved into heroes or villains.

When viewing or listening to a recorded interview, or when reading a transcript of an interview, students should keep in mind that the account is one person's interpretation of events. The reader or researcher therefore needs to analyze the account with consideration for its particular point of view and potential biases, just as one does with other written sources. This includes allowing for the complex workings or lapses of memory.

In addition, the interview is an event with its own context—the account will be affected by the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator, the frame of mind of the narrator that day, and the environment of the interview.

An analysis of a single interview will take all these factors into consideration. This means that the interviewer (or a reader of an interview) should already have done the research needed to have a basic understanding of the historical context surrounding the content of the interview. However, even with this basic historical context, the interviewer or reader may need to look up specific details or new information revealed in an interview. The research students do before and after the interview should ultimately inform their analysis of the oral history.

Critical reading of an interview

A *critical analysis* of a source is a part of a historical method that considers the content of a source in terms of its context. Rather than accepting all statements in a source as truth, a critical reading is a process of inquiry into the background and point of view that shaped these statements. In other words, critical analysis considers not only what is said but also how it is said and why. (A critical reading is not a matter of criticizing the narrator!)

When critically reading an oral history interview, it is especially important to think through the following points of context that would affect what the narrator chose to say. As a teacher, you can direct students to consider the following questions:*

- Who is the narrator, and why might they have a particular point of view on their subject?
- Who is the interviewer, and what kind of relationship is there between narrator and interviewer?
- How did the narrator structure their account, and what does this say about their point of view?
- What historical events or circumstances may have influenced the narrator's experiences and point of view?
- What was the purpose of the interview?
- What were the circumstances of the interview?

Identifying common themes

When working with a collection of oral histories, a comparison of accounts becomes part of the analysis process. A researcher might compare excerpts from various accounts dealing with one place, event, or date; students could do this through reading various interviews they have collected as a class. In addition, students might identify certain themes that reoccur in different accounts and make a comparison along those lines.

Building a composite story of a shared experience

Often an oral historian will compare interviews to construct a fuller account of an event or situation. These comparisons are not just for verification, but to find different emphases and points of focus to draw from. Students can apply this same historical thinking by comparing the oral histories they've collected—either with one another or with existing interviews—to explore different perspectives, themes, and points of emphasis.

*The set of questions is adapted from Linda Shopes, "Making Sense of Oral History," *History Matters*. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>

Court's rec for possible multimedia element: here, we could add one of our YouTube playlists to show students how a collection of oral histories provides various points of views. A playlist or even a new link to a collection that has contrasting viewpoints on the same topic would be a great example.

Step 8: Sharing and Extending their Learning

As the oral history unit comes to a close, it's important to provide students with space to share their learning and reflect on the process. This final step helps students consolidate their understanding, consider the broader impact of their work, and explore meaningful next steps.

Reflection

Encourage students to reflect on their experience in a way that fits your classroom. This could take the form of a class discussion, written response, visual presentation, or multimedia project. This reflection time offers an opportunity to revisit the essential question, reconnect with the purpose of the interview, and consider how their thinking has shifted through listening to and learning from their narrator. Students might also reflect on the skills they developed throughout the process—like listening deeply, asking thoughtful questions, and interpreting lived experiences.

One interview can be used for different purposes by different researchers

As an extension activity, students can also consider how their interviews might be useful to future researchers. Oral historians often highlight the importance of storing and labeling materials carefully because interviews can be revisited for different purposes. For example, someone exploring Densho's archive might focus on education in incarceration camps, while another researcher might examine gender roles or family dynamics. In the same way, a single student interview could support multiple research interests, helping to build a more complete and diverse historical record.

Informed Action

Students may also choose to take their learning beyond the classroom through informed action. This could include sharing their interview with the school or broader community, contributing to a classroom archive, or creating a final product—such as a podcast, digital story, short film, or art piece—that brings attention to the topic they explored. Students might also look for ways to make local connections by partnering with a community organization, museum, library, or cultural center to share their work more widely. Informed action reinforces that oral history is not only about preserving the past—it's also about using those stories to spark dialogue, foster understanding, and inspire change. By sharing what they've learned, students honor their narrators and help ensure those voices continue to be heard in both their immediate communities and beyond.



[Frank Yamasaki - Former Teacher Visits Camp](#)

In this clip, Frank describes a visit from his former high school teacher while Frank was imprisoned at the Puyallup Assembly Center.

APPENDIX

- Appendix A: Aligning Oral History Projects with Washington State Standards
- Appendix B: Interview Planning Checklist
- Appendix C: Field Notes
- Appendix D: Narrator Information Form
- Appendix E: Interview Release Form
- Appendix F: Resources

A: Aligning Oral History Projects with Washington State Standards

Oral history projects naturally support key learning goals in both secondary English Language Arts and Social Studies classrooms. Below are some examples of how various educators might approach teaching oral histories in their respective courses.

Example 1: Oral Histories in a Secondary English Classroom

Oral history projects offer meaningful opportunities to engage students in both reading and writing tasks aligned with Washington State's College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Grades 6–12. Below are two key areas where these standards connect directly to oral history work.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (Grades 6 - 12)

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (Grades 6 - 12)

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism

These standards are addressed most directly in **Step 7** on how to conduct oral histories, when students analyze and interpret their oral history interviews, and in **Step 8**, when they reflect on and share their learning. In alignment with the reading standards, students closely examine transcripts or recordings to determine meaning, draw inferences, identify central themes, and cite specific evidence to support their conclusions. The writing standards are addressed as students conduct research through interviews, gather relevant information from multiple sources, and present their findings in writing, presentations, or multimedia formats. The personal and narrative nature of oral history makes these literacy skills more engaging and meaningful, encouraging students to think critically, write purposefully, and connect deeply with the content.

Secondary teachers focused on developing students' abilities to understand key ideas,

analyze narrative structure, and conduct effective research can do the following:

- **Guide students to cite specific textual evidence** from interview transcripts, notes, or recordings to support conclusions in written reflections, class discussions, or multimedia presentations. This reinforces close reading and analysis—even when the “text” is spoken, not written.
- **Support students in identifying central themes and key details** within an oral history. Help them explore how those ideas develop across the interview and how they connect to the essential question guiding the unit.
- **Facilitate cross-textual analysis**, encouraging students to compare the oral history with other sources—such as historical documents, news articles, or additional interviews—to surface themes, tensions, or new perspectives.
- **Provide structured opportunities to summarize and synthesize information** across multiple sources. Ask students to reflect on how personal narratives add complexity to historical or social issues and how lived experience can offer insights that traditional sources may not.

These practices help students see oral history not only as storytelling, but as evidence that can be interpreted, questioned, and connected to broader contexts—strengthening their reading comprehension, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills.

Example 2: Oral Histories in a 6th - 8th Grade Social Studies Classroom

Oral history projects also offer significant ways for students to practice social studies tasks aligned with Washington State's 6-8 Learning Standards for Social Studies. Below are two key areas where these standards connect directly to oral history work in a middle school social studies setting.

Social Studies Skills, Grades 6-8

By the end of 8th grade, students will:

3. SSS2.6-8.1: Create and use research questions to guide inquiry on an issue or event.
4. SSS2.6-8.2 Evaluate the breadth, reliability, and credibility of primary and secondary sources to determine the need for new or additional information when researching an issue or event.

These standards are addressed most directly in **Step 7** on how to conduct oral histories, when students analyze and interpret their oral history interviews, and in **Step 8**, when

they reflect on and share their learning. As students prepare for and conduct their interviews, they evaluate the credibility and perspective of both oral and written sources, deepening their understanding of the complexities of historical memory. Through this process, they begin to see oral histories not only as stories but as important primary sources that must be analyzed, contextualized, and compared to other historical evidence.

Middle school teachers focused on developing students' inquiry and source analysis skills can do the following:

- **Support students in crafting meaningful, open-ended research questions** that guide their interview planning and connect to broader historical or civic themes. These questions help focus students' inquiry and give direction to their interview process.
- **Model how to assess the credibility and reliability of sources**, including oral histories. Guide students in considering the narrator's perspective, potential bias, and the context in which the interview took place.
- **Encourage students to compare oral histories with other primary and secondary sources**, such as timelines, maps, textbook accounts, or newspaper articles. This allows students to identify similarities and differences in how historical events are remembered, experienced, and recorded.
- **Use reflection activities to help students identify gaps or new questions** that arise after conducting an interview, prompting additional research or follow-up inquiry.

These practices help students build strong research skills while also fostering empathy, curiosity, and a deeper appreciation for community knowledge. Oral history invites students to investigate the past not just through documents, but through people's lived experiences—making social studies more personal, participatory, and powerful.

Example 3: Oral Histories in a 9th - 12th Grade Social Studies Classroom

Oral history projects also offer engaging ways for students to understand history in a more personal and meaningful way, in alignment with Washington State's K–12 Learning Standards for Social Studies. Below are two key areas where high school history standards connect directly to oral history work.

History Standards, Grades 9-12

H3: Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.

Enduring Understanding: Historians recognize and analyze multiple points of view to explain the ideas and actions of individuals and groups. Historians can and do disagree, and must present evidence from more than one source to prove a position.

By the end of 11th / 12th grade, students will:

5. H3.11-12.1 Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.
6. H3.11-12.3 Analyze the relationship between historical sources and the secondary interpretations made from them.

These standards are addressed most directly in **Step 7**, when students analyze and interpret their oral history interviews, and in **Step 8**, when they reflect on and share their learning. Through this process, students learn to critically evaluate the narrator's perspective and consider how personal identity, historical context, and memory shape the way individuals recall and interpret past events. Oral history gives students first hand insight into the idea that history is not a single story—it is made up of many experiences and interpretations.

High school teachers focused on developing students' historical thinking skills can do the following:

- **Teach students to recognize and analyze multiple perspectives** by comparing oral histories to traditional secondary sources, such as textbooks or documentaries. Help students identify where interpretations diverge and why.
- **Support students in connecting individual narratives to historical context.** Encourage them to explore how larger events—such as war, migration, protest, or policy changes—shaped the narrator's experiences and point of view.
- **Guide students in analyzing the relationship between oral histories and secondary interpretations.** For example, students might compare a narrator's account to how the same event is represented in a textbook, scholarly writing, or public memory.
- **Encourage students to construct evidence-based arguments** by drawing from multiple types of sources, including interviews, archival materials, and historical texts. This reinforces the idea that historians must synthesize and interpret evidence from various perspectives.

These practices help students develop key skills in sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration—core components of historical thinking. Through oral history, students engage directly with the complexities of historical interpretation and see themselves as

participants in the ongoing work of making sense of the past.

Example 4: An Interdisciplinary Oral History Study on Japanese American Wartime Incarceration

Oral history projects are uniquely positioned to support interdisciplinary learning, creating opportunities for collaboration across English Language Arts and Social Studies classrooms. A study focused on Japanese American wartime incarceration offers a rich example of how oral histories can deepen students' understanding of both historical content and literacy skills, while fostering empathy and civic engagement. This kind of project invites students to analyze personal narratives alongside historical records, reflect on the impact of government policies on individual lives, and connect the past to present-day issues of race, citizenship, and civil liberties.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (Grades 6 - 12)

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (Grades 6 - 12)

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism

History Standards, Grades 9-12

H3: Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.

Enduring Understanding: Historians recognize and analyze multiple points of view to explain the ideas and actions of individuals and groups. Historians can and do disagree, and must present evidence from more than one source to prove a position.

By the end of 11th / 12th grade, students will:

7. H3.11-12.1 Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.
8. H3.11-12.3 Analyze the relationship between historical sources and the secondary interpretations made from them.

Here is a more detailed example of how teachers could work across disciplines to develop this unit of study:

- **Step 1: Build Background Knowledge**

Students begin by exploring the historical context of Japanese American incarceration during World War II. Teachers can introduce a combination of secondary sources (e.g., textbooks, historical overviews, timelines) and primary sources (e.g., photographs, government documents, oral history clips from the [Densho Digital Repository](#)) to help students understand the causes, impact, and legacy of incarceration. Students use this foundational knowledge to begin considering the human stories behind these events and how those stories have been remembered—or forgotten—over time.

- **Step 2: Reflect on the Purpose**

Teachers guide students in co-constructing essential questions that reflect both historical inquiry and literacy goals. These questions might explore themes like civil liberties, identity, or resistance. Students could also reflect on the significance of collecting oral histories as a method of preserving memory and challenging dominant narratives. This reflection helps them define what they hope to learn through the interview process and why these stories matter—both historically and today.

- **Step 3: Identify a Narrator**

With a clearer sense of purpose, students begin identifying potential narrators who have lived experience connected to Japanese American incarceration, such as former incarcerated, descendants, or community members involved in redress or remembrance efforts. Teachers may support this process by reaching out to local cultural organizations, museums, or archives. Students learn how to approach potential narrators and prepare to explain their project and purpose.

- **Step 4: Prepare for the Interview**

Students conduct additional research to inform their interview questions, drawing from both historical texts and previously recorded oral histories. They learn how to write open-ended questions, anticipate follow-up questions, and practice active listening. Teachers can model the structure of an interview and discuss tone, pacing, and the importance of empathy and curiosity during the conversation.

- **Step 5: Conduct the Interview**

Students conduct their interviews. They begin the session by restating the purpose of the interview and clarifying how the information will be used. During

the interview, students practice listening attentively, asking thoughtful follow-up questions, and minimizing distractions. Teachers help students think through logistics in advance and reflect on how to build trust and comfort with narrators.

- **Step 6: Reflect and Analyze**

After the interview, students take time to reflect on what they learned and how the conversation impacted them. They revisit their essential questions and review transcripts or recordings to identify themes, key insights, and emotional moments. Students begin analyzing the narrator's point of view in historical context and consider how personal memory interacts with broader historical narratives.

- **Step 7: Analyze and Interpret Oral Histories**

Students apply critical reading and historical thinking skills as they examine their oral history interview(s). They draw inferences, identify recurring themes, and cite specific textual evidence from transcripts or recordings. Students also compare the narrator's perspective with other primary and secondary sources to deepen their understanding of multiple viewpoints. This step directly supports both reading comprehension and historical analysis standards by encouraging students to think critically about voice, context, and reliability.

- **Step 8: Share and Extend Learning**

Students synthesize what they've learned by creating research-based products—such as essays, podcasts, exhibits, or digital stories—that integrate personal narratives with historical analysis. They may choose to share their work with classmates, families, or local communities, or contribute their interview to a classroom or community archive. This final step encourages students to see oral history not only as a tool for learning, but as a contribution to collective memory and civic understanding.

Teachers working across disciplines can do the following:

- **Collaborate on shared essential questions** that frame the study in ways that invite multiple disciplinary lenses—such as civil liberties, resistance, and identity.
- **Support students in conducting research across genres and media**, helping them critically analyze both oral and written sources for credibility, bias, and perspective.
- **Guide students in drawing connections between personal narratives and broader historical themes**, such as how memory, identity, and policy intersect.
- **Facilitate opportunities for students to communicate their findings** through informative or argumentative writing, exhibitions, digital storytelling, or civic engagement projects that connect past injustices to present-day issues.

B. Interview Planning Checklist

Person to be interviewed: _____

Location: _____

Appointment Date and Time: _____

Contact Info: _____

☐ Appointment confirmed

Equipment and materials needed:

- ☐ camera/phone
- ☐ microphone (recommend using a separate usb microphone, not the one built into the phone or camera)
- ☐ notebook and pencil
- ☐ prepared questions
- ☐ Narrator Information Form
- ☐ Release Form
- ☐ other: _____

Follow up:

- ☐ thank you note sent
- ☐ digital copy of interview made
- ☐ submission and confirmation, if needed, of written transcript
- ☐ storage and cataloging of materials, as appropriate

Sharing the Info:

- ☐ copy of the interview sent to narrator for their personal use

Notes:

C. Field Notes

Start time: _____ End time: _____

Others present:

Description of interview location:

Conditions that day, or changes to the plan:

Materials viewed:

Equipment notes:

Other notes:

D. Narrator Information Form

First Name: _____

Middle Name: _____

Last Name: _____

Nicknames (if any): _____

Maiden Name (if any): _____

Interview Display Name (How you would like your name to appear with your interview):

Street Address: _____

City: _____ State _____ Zip: _____

Telephone: (_____) _____

E-mail: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Place of Birth: _____

Country of Birth: _____

Name at Birth: _____

Gender: M F

Ethnicity: _____

Nationality: _____

E: Interview Release Form

Full name: _____

Address: _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by _____.

The purpose of the interview is for research, education, and historic preservation. Possible uses of the interview (in whole or in part) include the following: educational projects or curriculum, video documentaries, computer websites, educational publications and exhibits.

Thank you again for your participation.

Interview Date: _____

(Signature) _____

F. Resources

Sources:

Moyer, Judith. "Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History"
http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

"Practical Advice: Getting Started-- What is Oral History?" Oral History Society. <http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/index.php>

Shopes, Linda. "What is Oral History?" Getting Started: Making Sense of Oral History. *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*. February 2002.
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/>

"Tutorial: Using and Interpreting Oral History Interviews, " Columbia River Basin Ethnic History Archive.
http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/crbeha/tutorials/int_oh.htm

Related Subject:

"Folklife And Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction To Field Techniques," American Folklife Center, Library Of Congress. First Edition Prepared By Peter Bartis, 1979; Revised 2002. <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/>

Useful Websites:

Library of Congress Preservation "Caring for Your Collections"
<http://www.doingoralhistory.org>

Indiana University, Oral History Research Center <http://www.indiana.edu/~ohrc/index.html>

Oral History Association home page at Dickinson College <http://www.dickinson.edu/oha/>