

Interviewing Your Family

Interviewing is a way of recording information gained from people with firsthand knowledge of events. The goal of interviewing is to record these personal traces of the past, so that they will be preserved for the future.

History passed on verbally is called oral history. For some cultures, the sharing of stories from one generation to the next is still the primary way that history is preserved and shared. In the past several decades, historians have been paying increased attention to collecting and recording oral history. All kinds of people are being interviewed about their lives and experiences. Their stories help us remember that history is not just the record of the rich and famous, but is made up of every person's experience, regardless of age, social status, gender, or race.

Interviewing family members is a highly effective way for students to learn about their families' histories. The techniques on the following page will help them learn the most from their interviews.

We suggest demonstrating and practicing good interviewing techniques with students in the classroom before they begin interviewing family members.

Try "fishbowling" to demonstrate good interviewing techniques and procedures. Two student volunteers sit facing each other in the middle of the class circle (fishbowl) and act out an interview on a topic. After five minutes, stop the interview and ask the observing classmates what they noticed. Which questions were particularly good at eliciting information? Are there additional ways to make the interview more interesting, improve the level of information, or make both parties more relaxed? After the discussion, have the students try the interview a second time using their classmates' suggestions.



Interview Techniques

Before the Interview

- Contact the person you would like to interview. Explain the reason for the interview. Pick a time and place for the interview that is convenient for both people.
- Prepare a topic and at least 5 sample questions ahead of time. The following are good topics for interviewing older family members about their youth:
 - Pastimes
 - Popular music and activities of the day
 - Activities at school: sports, music, clubs, etc.
 - Military service
 - Clothing styles
 - The town where they grew up
- When you write your questions, use open-ended questions. They require more of an answer than yes or no. "Describe a time that..., tell me about..., what was..., how did you...?"

During the Interview

- If you are recording the interview by writing, be sure to record exactly what is being said. Do not edit your words or the interviewee's words.
- Ask only one question at a time. Do not roll three questions into one.
- Use active listening skills. Use your body, your voice, and your face to convey your interest in the person being interviewed. Use direct eye contact, nod your head, place your body square to the interviewer, not tilted away, and do not slouch. If you must comment, be supportive but non-judgmental: "It sounds like you had fun in the mud," rather than, "I can't believe you rolled in the mud."
- Ask follow-up questions to clarify points and get more details.
- Thank the person for their time and information.
- Offer to show the speaker the final project.

After the Interview

- As soon after the interview as possible make a note of your mood and feelings.
- Make sure that you can read your interview notes. If necessary type them.



Family Interview

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Date of the Interview: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____

Question: _____

Answer: _____