

Everyone is a Historian

One form of primary source research that works great for documentaries are oral histories. Oral histories are interviews with people about things they directly experienced. Interviews with historians or experts about their work are NOT oral histories.

Instead, oral histories are all about capturing first hand experiences to understand a time, place, event, or person.

This worksheet will help you practice taking an oral history. If you are doing this exercise in class, pair up with a classmate. If you are doing it by yourself, you can choose a friend, family member, or neighbor who you'd like to know more about!

1. Do some preliminary research on the person you're interviewing. For this exercise, that might mean asking them some background questions, or stalking them on social media!
2. Prepare a list of questions. Start with the three below, but then add at least 3 more created from specifics of this person's life, interest, or perspectives based on your research.
3. Find a time to sit down when you can clearly record their answers. Make sure there are limited distractions and record them either with a video or audio recording.
4. Although you've prepared questions, it's ok to deviate from your plan or improvise. If your subject comes up with an answer that would take you down another path but is useful for your research, don't be afraid to ask follow-ups!
5. Once you've finished the interview, be sure to listen to it through and take notes on any names, places, or topics you don't understand. Research those things and if you need, follow up with your partner through email or through another interview to ask them to clarify.

Questions to get you started!

- Tell me about where you grew up. What was it like? What was your daily routine?
- Tell me about your community. This can be your friends and family, religious or cultural community, or your neighborhood.
- Where are your ancestors from? What do you know about that place? How do you know what you know?
- Describe a current or historic event that has affected you. What impact did it have on your life?