

Oral History Project:

Students will conduct a face-to-face interview with someone 75 years of age or older.

The interview should be center around the subject's life at roughly the same age point as the interviewer's present age.

The primary purpose of the interview is to understand what American life was like in the past. The interview should not only present what life was like during the period discussed, but what the subject thought about it then and thinks about it now.

This assignment will test a student's ability to effectively conduct an oral interview, to conform and adapt to shifting topics, and to analyze the results.

Guidelines:

Part I: Introduction - The Project should include basic "census-type" information such as your subject's age, race, gender, marital status, apparent physical condition, date and location of the interview. Keep to only about 1/2page long in a "list" or "bullet" format.

Part II: Transcript - This part of the project is comprised of an edited transcript of the interview showing your best questions and answers in a typical Q/A format. This transcript section should be accurate, typed, and **not longer** than 9 pages nor shorter than 6 pages. **Do not paraphrase**; use your subject's **exact** language in the response.

Example:

Hollinger: How many chickens did you have on your farm?

Angelina: Oh, we had near 'bout 150, but a bunch died in the summer of '32 or '33, I can't quite remember exactly.

Part III: Summary and Analysis - The project should contain a 2- 4-page summary of the interview and personal analysis of the results.

- Describe the interview setting and your initial impressions of the interviewee. How did you meet this person?
- What is the subject's living status – alone, in an assisted facility, with their partner?
- Carefully analyze the subject's personality and their responses. Were they trying to communicate more than the words represent?
- What was their attitude during the interview? Their appearance? Their degree of comfort?

- In what ways did historical events influence their opinions? What specific examples did they provide illustrating the pros or cons of one era over another? What other factors would have influenced their answers?

Part IV: Personal Insights - What did you learn from the project; both from a procedural viewpoint of conducting interviews, but also from the viewpoint of a history student.

Tips:

- Use of a tape-recorder is highly recommended, but do not turn in the tapes. A photo is of great benefit.
- Students are strongly encouraged to interview non-family members, though it is not absolutely essential. Special consideration will be given to those who visit a retirement home or hospital for the elderly. Call to make an appointment and ask the staff to suggest someone who would make a good interview subject. Showing some initiative here will pay off.
- Prepare questions beforehand, but don't compromise flexibility. Most students who walk in "cold" and try to wing it are disappointed with the resulting interview, as are those who are too rigid and never stray from their list. The best interviews are those that begin with prepared questions and then deviate into the most interesting aspects of their subject's responses. Don't just guide your subject; listen to them as well.
- Try to keep the interview on historical topics and background biographical information. Current events are not really relevant to this assignment, though they can be good ice-breakers in the conversation.
- Don't deprive yourself or your subject from expressing a sense of humor. Courtesy and a friendly demeanor are absolute necessities when conducting an interview.
- No telephone interviews allowed. Face-to-face only.
- Give them a token gift to remember you by. Perhaps a photo of the two of you together, or some flowers, or a copy of your final project. Show them that you really appreciate their efforts and that their answers were truly important to you.