

## Conducting an Oral History

Oral histories are a great way to record the thoughts and experiences of people from all walks of life who have experienced historical events. You and your group will be recording an oral history, and the materials in this packet will help you along the way.

### Checklist:

Entire group:

- Choose someone to interview who is willing to be recorded on tape, has lived through school desegregation, and hopefully has a lot to say on the subject.
- Listen to examples of oral histories, and observe what was good and bad about each one.
- Conduct practice interviews in class. Your teacher will assign a topic, and you will practice writing, asking and answering questions. Take turns at different roles so each person gets a chance to be both the interviewer and interviewee.
- Write 5-7 questions about school desegregation for your oral history, using the background information from your research.
- After the oral history is recorded, decide as a group on the most interesting part (about 5-7 minutes long at the most) to play for the entire class.
- Turn in your final tape(s), transcripts, and individual reflections at the end of the unit.

Interviewer:

- Have your subject sign the release form (included in this packet).
- Set up a time and place with your interviewee to record the oral history.
- Practice using the tape recording equipment, making sure you're very familiar with how it works.
- Conduct the oral history, asking the questions your group has prepared and following the "Interviewing Guidelines".
- Write and send a thank you note, signed by each group member, to your interviewee.

## Writer

- Collect questions from each group member.
- Review the questions, eliminating any repeat questions, editing them if necessary so they make sense and are based in historical research, and arranging them in a rough order.
- Write an additional 5-7 questions about school desegregation.
- Bring the list of questions to the oral history interview
- During the oral history, take notes on what the speaker says. You don't need to record every word, but jot down the main ideas or stories in the order the speaker says them, maybe in an outline form.
- Give your notes to the transcriber.
- After the oral history is complete, write a brief summary of the interviewee's background (where he or she is from, when he or she experienced desegregation, etc) and the topics covered in the interview.

## Transcriber:

- Practice transcribing using sample oral histories from the *Documenting the American South* website (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp>). Choose an oral history that sounds interesting to listen to, and practice writing down what the speaker is saying as you listen.
- While conducting the oral history, take notes on what the speaker is saying. You don't need to record every word, but jot down the main ideas or stories in the order the speaker says them, maybe in an outline form.
- Collect the tape(s) after your oral history, and store them in a safe place. Part of your job is to keep track of the tapes until you turn them in.
- Listen to the tape of the oral history. Decide on the most interesting parts of the interview, and transcribe them in a Word document. You can transcribe the entire interview if you'd like, but you must transcribe a total of at least 15 minutes of the interview.

## Question Guidelines:

- Ask open-ended questions; these will get much longer and more interesting answers than "yes or no" questions.
- Create an outline of the questions you'd like to ask, but remember to be flexible. You can add in questions you think of during the interview, and leave out prepared questions if they don't fit into the conversation.

- Practice asking follow-up questions or statements to get interviewees to elaborate. Some examples are, “Could you tell me more about that?” or “Is there anything else you remember about that time?”
- Don’t ask leading questions that indicate how you expect the interviewee to answer or that sway their opinions. For example, you wouldn’t ask, “Don’t you think desegregation was the best thing to happen to schools in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?”, but instead something like, “How did you feel when you first heard about school desegregation?”
- It’s often good to end the interview by asking if there’s anything else on the topic the speaker would like to add. This leaves an opening for any stories or opinions the speaker wasn’t able to address while answering your prepared questions.

#### Interviewing Guidelines:

- Bring extra batteries and blank tapes to the interview.
- Arrive on time, and test to make sure all your equipment is running correctly before you begin the interview.
- At the beginning of the tape, read this introduction:
  - o “This is [your name] interviewing [interviewee’s full name] on [today’s date, including year] on the subject of school desegregation. This interview is taking place in [town and state] and is part of [your teacher’s name at your school’s name] school desegregation oral history project.”
- Make sure not to interrupt the speaker, and let him or her have time to think of answers. You may have to sit in silence for a few seconds, but that’s okay; this will give the speaker time to fully collect his or her thoughts.
- Practice listening! Concentrate on what the speaker is saying, instead of jumping ahead in your mind to what you’re going to ask next.
- Although it should be at least 20-30 minutes, the interview probably shouldn’t last more than 45 minutes to an hour because both you and the interviewee will get tired.

#### Transcribing Guidelines:

- Make sure to label the tapes with the date, name of the interviewer and interviewee, location, the name of your project and school. If you have more than one tape, label them in order.
- As you transcribe, record the speaker’s words as closely as you can. Don’t correct the speaker’s grammar or word choice.
- You can make notes about sounds that may have interrupted the interview, such as phones or doorbells ringing.
- It will take a while to transcribe the interview, so you may want to listen through or review the notes you took, and only transcribe the most interesting sections.

**Release Form**

Name of Project \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that this oral history will be recorded and used by the students and teachers of [your school's name] for the purpose of preserving the history of school desegregation in the United States. The oral history will be held in the school's library. I give my permission for this use.

Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Conditions (e.g., prefer that transcripts are never published online and/or in print, oral history to be used only by students in this class and not the entire school, etc.)

---

---

---

---

---