

Using Oral History in the Classroom

**Humanities Texas Teaching Workshop
July 19, 2023**

**Todd Moye
todd.moye@unt.edu**

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS®

What is oral history?

- “Oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews... consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format.” (Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*)
- A form of “popular education” with connections to Foxfire, the Highlander Folk School, Freire, etc.
- An “interpretive and meaning making process” (Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority*)
- A way of knowing
- An empathetic practice

Why teach with oral history?

- “History happened here.” Oral history helps emphasize that real people make history.
- Oral history brings history alive—students connect with real, authentic voices.
- Oral history is adaptable to different learning styles and different forms of expression.
- Oral history incentivizes students to take charge of their learning.

Incorporating existing oral history resources into the classroom

20th c. Texas History: [The Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project](#), [Portal to Texas History](#)

WWII: The Library of Congress [Veterans History Project](#): [D-Day Journeys](#) and [Determined to Serve: African American Women in World War II](#)

Civil Rights History:

[The Library of Congress Civil Rights History Project](#)

[The Farmworker Movement Documentation Project](#)

General Political History/Major Issues found in TEKS:

[Truman Library Oral Histories](#), [Eisenhower Library Oral Histories](#), [Kennedy Library Oral](#)

[Histories](#), [Johnson Library Oral Histories](#), [Nixon Library Oral Histories](#), [Carter Library Oral](#)

[Histories](#), [Reagan Library Oral Histories](#), [Clinton Presidential Oral Histories](#)

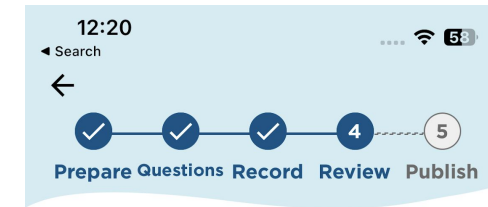
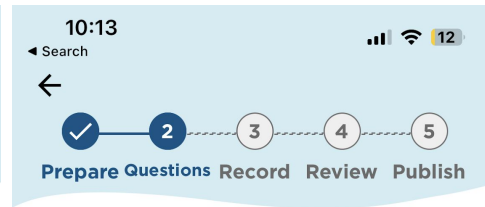
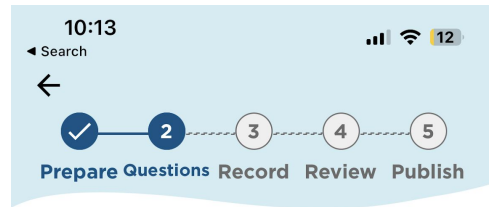
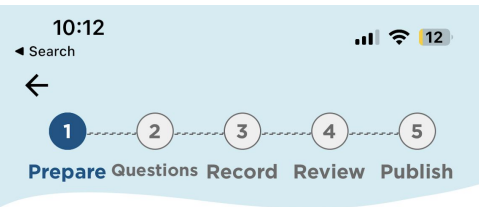
Designing an oral history project

- What do you hope to document (e.g. the history of your school, a civil rights movement in your community, experiences during the pandemic, some other subject of local history)?
- Will you require students to conduct oral history interviews, or will you allow them to opt in?
- What resources do you have for the project?
- What are the learning outcomes for students?
- Do your oral histories have to be recorded? Do they have to be archived? If so, does the archive have to be maximally accessible?
- Will there be a final product other than archived recordings? Examples could include exhibits (physical or online), performances, etc.

Technology

- Keep it simple, and master whatever recorder you do choose before turning students loose
- Consider end use before recording
- Digital audio and visual recorders: pros and cons
- Cellphone recordings: pros and cons
- The storycorps [app](#): pros and cons

Storycorps life cycle



Plan Your Interview

Choose the person you want to honor with an interview. Explain that your conversation will become part of American history at the Library of Congress.

Decide when and where you will record your conversation. Pick a quiet place—a room with a door and a rug is best.

Pick the questions you want to ask.

Before recording, turn off everything noisy in the room (TVs, radio, fans,

Skip

Plan your conversation! Select questions from our suggestions or write your own.

My Custom Questions

Best Questions

Parents

Grandparents

Family Heritage

Growing Up &

Review Your Questions

Skip

Best Questions

Can you tell me about a person who has been kindest to you in your life?

Can you tell me about one of your happiest memories?

Can you tell me about one of your most difficult memories?

Can you tell me about someone you'll always remember?

Review Your Questions

Let's get started!
What would you like to do?

Prepare My Interview

Record Now



You're almost done, please complete the form below so others can find your interview

*Interview Title

Recording - 07-17-2023

*Summary

Write a 1-3 sentence interview summary that states participant names and ages, their relationship(s), and a brief summary of topics discussed.

Summary description...

Recording Location

Help us map the StoryCorps universe by providing your location. This information won't be visible online.

Best practices for oral history

Before the interview:

- Informed consent is necessary; a release form may or may not be
- Do your homework. Decide on topics to cover and/or prepare questions
- Oral history interviewing requires empathy and deep, engaged listening. Practice it!

In the interview:

- Provide an introduction: “I’m So-and-so. Today is [the date], and I’m recording an interview with Mrs. What’s-her-name about her experiences in [whatever], where she was a [more detail].”
- Try to ask open-ended questions
- Think of a funnel: cover broad topics first, then narrow in on specific details with **follow-up questions**—the more details the better

After the interview:

- Save the recording in at least two places, if possible
- Provide the interviewee with some tangible token of thanks

Oral history resources on the web

- The OHA's [Principles and Best Practices for Oral History Education \(4-12\)](#)
- The Oral History Association's [Oral History in Education](#) section
- Glenn Whitman, [Case Study: Oral History in the Classroom](#)
- The Smithsonian's ["How to Do Oral History"](#) guide