

## Research Activity Two: Taking an Oral History

**Objective:** students will:

- know what an oral history is
- construct questions on given topics to ask an interviewee
- conduct and tape an oral interview
- digitize and edit the interview

\*see ISBE standards in the unit introduction

**Materials:**

Interviewing guidelines

Tape recorder and tape

Paper and pen for taking notes

Computer and editing software

**Time Required:** several hours; includes time to 1) identify the interviewee, 2) research the topics to be covered, 3) compose the questions, 4) schedule and conduct the interview, and 5) edit the tape



**Online Resources for sample interviews:** *Harvesting the River* Online Audio Archives  
<http://www.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/audio>

**Opening:**

The main idea of this lesson is that historical researchers can find out about a person, a family, or a community and its events by interviewing people who witnessed the time and place they are studying.

The people in our families and communities are rich resources of information about the past. They are living witnesses to history. Often this information is lost because no one records and organizes it. To preserve this history and to learn about history first-hand, we can interview systematically people in our community or family about the events at particular time periods in their lives. A person does not have to be famous or to have lived through exciting events to be an important source of history.

This unit's focus is agriculture in Illinois, so an interview with a farmer or a retired farmer would provide information about crops, livestock, machinery, and methods. It might also yield information about events, such as fires, droughts, tornados, insect infestations, or economic depressions that affected farming. The person being interviewed may also have information about the history of the farm, his ancestors, and the future of the farm.

**Procedure:****Guidelines to the Oral Interview:****Part One: Select the Interviewee**

- Decide what period of history (the lifetime of a living person) the project will cover — childhood, early adulthood, a certain decade, a period in the history of a town, etc.
- List several people that would fit into the identified era.
- Narrow the choice to one or two.
- Contact the chosen person and ask him or her to sign a permission form to interview him on tape for the specified project, explaining what the interview is for and how it will be used.

**Part Two: Pre-interview Research**

- Get as much information about the topic and the person as you can (from family members, library sources on the community), in order to become familiar with the general timeline of events during the specified time period or place.
- Prepare a general list of specific questions and topics that you would like to cover in the interview. Use open-ended questions more than Yes/No questions to avoid getting very short answers. (The interviewee, in the course of the interview, may also introduce new topics that you will want to pursue, so this is not a rigid script of questions).

**Part Three: Practice:**

- Practice using your equipment so the technology during the interview will go smoothly.
- Practice an interview with a friend, family member, or classmate as a trial run. The interviewer should do less talking than the person being interviewed.
- Pack pens and paper in case technology fails.

**Part Four: Conducting the Interview**

- Select a quiet place to use for the interview (no TV, radios, barking dogs, etc.)
- Put the interviewee at ease because people are often nervous about being taped; they are afraid their memory may fail or that they will be boring.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Do not interrupt the interviewee. (If there is a memory lapse, you can provide a suggestion or reassure him/her that you can fill in the information later.)
- If the interviewee strays from the question, bring him/her back with a comment or question.
- If the interviewee gets tired or fidgety, you can close the interview and reschedule more time later if needed.

**Part Five: Processing the Information**

- For a digital audio history, the interviewer can digitize the oral interview by connecting a tape player to a computer and using the appropriate software. This

digitized version can be edited into short files, each on a topic, such as those in *Harvesting the River*.

<http://webdev.museum.state.il.us/RiverWeb/harvesting/archives/audio/?TopicID=hunting>

(Sample set of audio files made from tapes.)

By sharing each interview with others, a larger picture of the time and place in question emerges — a history of the town, of a family, of a generation, of a decade, etc.

**Closing:**

Have the Interviewers in each group play the tape for the rest of their group. (or important sections of it)

Ask for some examples from Interviewers of interesting or vital information their informant gave to them that helped their research.

Ask the class what they think the value of oral histories is. List the answers on the board.

Now we have studied two types of historic research: analyzing photographs for historical information and interviewing people for their stories and information. You will be integrating your research findings into your final product. Next we will investigate some other methods of historical research that involve genealogical research Web sites. These can tell us when some of our subjects were born, married, and died, and who their ancestors and descendants were. We will learn about local genealogical organizations that can help us, too.

**Assessment:**

- The interviewer will choose and interview one person who is pertinent to the topic covered.
- The interview produces a list of possible questions and topics to be covered that are pertinent to the assignment.
- The interviewer returns with an audible tape of the interview, and/or notes taken during the interview.
- The interviewer produces a digitized tape.
- The interviewer shares the report with the class.
- The class members share interviews with one another and with the community when the Web album/site is finished to create a larger understanding of the history lesson.