

## Classroom Connection: A Step-by-Step Process for Student Interviewing in History Class

1) Get students talking. I use an activity to get students talking. Students receive 20 prompts and they gather stories from peers. Not only is it a great ice breaker, it also shows students that some content questions engage better than others and some people need more elaboration and encouragement than others. It also reminds students that their initial goal in interviews is to get interviewees talking.

*Sample questions:* Tell a story about your favorite childhood store. Who did you want to be when you grew up? What vacation has affected you the most?

These are normal ice-breakers many people use, but the purpose of these is to ask students to reflect after the activity: What types of questions were easier for some people to answer? Any patterns? Did you learn something new because of the question or the way you asked it? Were there some people who didn't say much when you asked a question? What did you have to do to help them? Are some people more talkative? If you get a long answer, how do you keep track of follow-up questions without interrupting? Do you write keywords in a notebook quickly as a reminder to come back and follow up or make mental notes?

The discussion after the ice breaker is key as it sets the foundation for understanding that the interview the students will conduct is intended to be as conversational as possible and that the questions can help with that process. I use this on the first day of the semester as we discuss the oral history interview.

2) Show and evaluate interview models. A value of conducting oral history work as part of curriculum building is that you also have student models to show students in successive years. I show models of audio and video interviews from students and from local historical societies and we critique the interview methods using our tip sheet for interviews.

*Sample of things to have students evaluate:* Did the interviewers record formal introductions? Did they ask one question at a time? Did they frequently interrupt the interviewee? Did they ask good follow-up questions? Did they use more open-ended questions than close-ended questions? Did they avoid unnecessary starts and stops? Was the audio quality good? How did they achieve good audio quality?

3) Teaching students to identify good questions.

A) Gather biographical data ahead of time. When were they born? Where did they live? Where do they live now? This is also a time to identify key life events—some students choose to use a family tree to have a visual model for organizing the information. This forces students to narrow their focus on certain eras, regions, or topics that may require a little research before the interview. The teacher can keep a copy of this student-collected biographical information to help the student prepare, particularly if students reach out to teachers for help outside class time.

B) It is helpful to encourage students to use more open-ended than close-ended questions. For example, I ask students to consider a better question than “Were you born in Wisconsin?” They

quickly see that asking the interviewee to describe the village or town where they spent the early years of their life will yield more detailed information.

C) Students should prepare starter questions. I help by offering a few sample interview questions.

Early interview question suggestions (particularly for family member interviews): To get an idea of time and place ask *When were you born? Where were you born? Describe the house you grew up in? Street? Farm?* These questions, asked one at a time, are easy and establish context. Location questions may take the pressure off the interviewee. First house or street questions can lead the interviewee's brain back to the early years. Sensory triggers and objects can lead to building connections to side stories.

To get information about previous generations: *I don't know much about your parents Please describe them for me.* Many times, an interviewee's parents are no longer alive. The interviewee may have early life memories or have been told stories by their parents. The interviewee can fill in details about their parents, which helps the student learn more about an earlier generation. Once the interviewee passes, the stories from the previous generation may be gone.

To get ideas on immigration and migration: *When did first family members of yours move to this area?*

For life story interviews: I have students break the interviewee's life into stages ahead of time and tell the interviewee that you are going to ask some elementary age questions (match it with a decade), high school age questions (match it with a decade), and post-high school questions. Sophomore interviewers are always encouraged to ask driver's license stories. Students may be surprised at the interviewee's answer on how they got their license. This is an intergenerational connection that can help the student and adult interviewee bond.

Some phrases and words work really well: *"Describe" "Paint me a picture" "I wasn't there... What was it like?"* Students are taught to keep track of local and national timelines as transitions to help jog the interviewee's memory if they seem to be having trouble. For example: *"Ok. we are in the 1950s and you just told me that you were in high school. In school, we learned about the Red Scare, Sputnik being launched, and fallout shelters. Describe any experiences you had with fallout shelters."*

I give students a few sample questions for farmers: *Describe the chores you did on the farm. What was done by hand and what was done by machine? Describe farm life (the kitchen table, milking, field memories, threshing).*

Transportation sample questions include: *Describe the roads of your youth. What memories can you share about the construction of (insert highway)? What were gas stations like when you were my age?*

For sports and recreation: *What can you tell me about (insert local recreational landmark or activity)? Tell me about popular sports in the community when you were young. Best games? Best teams? Girls' sports in the 1970s?*

Municipality changes: *Where were the outskirts of town when you were growing up?*

Sample questions for veterans: We use pre-service, early days of service, wartime service, and coming home as categories and the questions suggested by the [Veterans History Project of the Library of Congress](#) as guidelines. For example: *If you served abroad, what are some memories you have of that experience?*

4) Practice large group interviews. If possible, the teacher models an interview with another teacher, student, or community member in front of the class before students conduct interviews by themselves. The interviewing teacher can pause and talk to the student audience at various points to ask for suggestions on good follow-up questions or to share the thought process of the interviewer. Think-alouds, in which the teacher models what they are thinking in front of students before asking the next question, work not only in reading instruction but also in other areas of inquiry (Kukan and Beck 1997).

5) Practice informal, 10-minute individual peer interviews. Ask the interviewee to provide some one word responses, as well as embellished longer responses. The one word answers require the interviewer to ask for elaboration. The longer answers require the interviewer to listen and ask a follow-up question based upon what was said.

6) Conduct a formal interview. Students check that equipment works and they know how to use it. They bring a pen or pencil to make notes. When they arrive, they chat informally to reduce any anxiety, but also scan the room for distractions. They review the process with the interviewee and have them sign the release form. They build in a break at the anticipated mid-point when the interviewer can check in with the interviewee. This also builds student reflection time into the interview process. In terms of media, the break allows for a second audio track to be created, which gives the student digital and organizational flexibility after the interview. It both reduces file size and can help them with transcriptions or identifying where key quotes are located. It can also be good to have anxious students write a reminder note in the questions at the mid-point to “slow down and ask for elaboration.” The goal is to collect the best interview and not to rush to complete it.

7) Using the information collected. I start by reminding students to think about where their interviews may go. The stories need to be preserved in ways that others can understand them. Some interviews might be preserved for family histories, others for a community night celebration, while others only the instructor sees. Release forms are used and we teach students archival practices and ways to share with these many audiences—the teacher, one another, the interviewees, their family, or the public.

#### URL

<https://www.loc.gov/vets>

#### Work Cited

Kukan, Linda and Isabelle. L. Beck. 1997. Thinking Aloud and Reading Comprehension Research: Inquiry, Instruction, and Social Interaction. *Review of Educational Research*. 67.3: 271-99.