

To Interview or Not to Interview: Guidelines for Conducting Interviews for NHD Projects

Basics about Interviews for NHD Projects

- Interviews are not required for an NHD project. This is a myth and it is NOT true.
 - Interviews are not mentioned in the *Contest Rule Book*.
 - They will not give you an edge simply by being included.
 - If they are done well and used effectively, they may increase the quality of an entry.
- Interviews are not essential to the process of historical research.
 - Historians do not interview other historians.
 - When appropriate, historians conduct oral history interviews with primary sources.
- When interviews are appropriate, etiquette is important so that you make the best impression of yourself, your school, and National History Day®.
- Learning when and how to conduct and include an interview is as essential as using any other tool in the researcher's toolbox.

What is an Oral History Interview?

When a researcher finds a living primary source who likely has unique knowledge about a topic, an oral history is the best tool. Oral history is a recorded conversation in which the researcher asks the subject to verbally share his/her direct experiences. It can be a complete history of the subject's life, but more often, it is about a particular event or time. Oral histories recordings can be audio or audio-visual and are commonly transcribed, meaning that the conversation is typed into a document that is preserved along with the recording.

Oral histories have been done for decades. Recordings and transcripts (the written record) exist in libraries and archives around the world. As part of the research process, historians search existing holdings to see if an oral history already exists before approaching a person of interest. Sometimes oral history interviews are just called "interviews."

Key Steps to Determine Whether an Interview is Needed

1. Build knowledge of your topic's context through secondary sources.
 - a. Use your **school and local libraries first to learn the basic context** of your topic and to get a sense of what historians have already concluded. Like historians, before researching a question, you need to understand basic context and get a sense of how other historians have analyzed the topic.
 - b. **Look up facts and descriptions.**
 - c. Look for interpretations of your topic by historians. Often the databases in public libraries will hold scholarly articles where historians present their interpretations, or their views on history. Two different historians can look at the same topic and come to

different conclusions. For example, there are different opinions about the motives of the American industrialist Andrew Carnegie's philanthropic donations.

2. Keep a running list of things you want to know and cross them off as you go.
3. Build a list of primary sources you would like to examine.
 - a. Oral history interviews have been recorded and archived for decades. **Always seek to use existing archived interviews before seeking to conduct your own. When searching, try using "oral history" as key words as well as "interview."**
4. If you have unanswered questions on your list after you've done your research, consider whether you would like to talk with historians (experts) or primary sources (people who were present at the time of your topic).
 - a. Historians/secondary sources: After you've read what a historian has written and consulted the secondary literature, if you have specific unanswered questions about a topic, you could then follow up with a historian or the curator of a public history institution, such as a museum or archives.
 - b. Oral history/primary sources: If you've searched existing oral history holdings and still have specific unanswered questions or unrepresented perspectives, you could then reach out for an oral history interview. For example, if you really want to interview former President Jimmy Carter, you would first search for existing interviews that others have conducted with him. There are many and, after listening to/reading them, you might find the answers you were seeking. If not, then requesting an interview is your next step.

Etiquette Checklist for Requesting and Conducting Interviews

- Put your request in writing – either in the form of an email or regular postal mail. This extra step greatly increases the success rate of your request, which is just that: a request. Assume that your subject receives numerous requests for interviews, probably from other NHD students. If you want your request to be answered, take the time to write a thoughtful request.
- In your written request for an interview:
 - Use a formal address and tone, such as "Dear Dr./Mr./Ms. Jones:"
 - Use proper grammar, capitalization, punctuation and spelling.
 - Introduce yourself and state your reason for writing.
 - Demonstrate your depth of knowledge about the topic and about the subject's work. You want to convey that you've researched your topic's secondary sources and that you understand the context and the basics about your topic's significance in history.
 - Briefly explain about NHD, the yearly theme (if necessary) and the nature of your project.
 - State exactly why you are asking this particular person for an interview, what you hope to accomplish and what you intend to do with the content (e.g., quotes, an audio or video excerpt, paraphrasing into your own words, etc.).
 - Ask for dates that are at least one week in the future and a specific length of time as a maximum (suggestion: 20-30 minutes) and a phone number to call or place to meet, such as the subject's office or home or a neutral place. **Always plan to bring a trusted adult, such as a parent or teacher, with you and include that you will be doing so.** Determine in advance whether a difference in time zone exists between you and your subject and make your

request in your subject's time zone. Example: "I live in Seattle and I see that you're in St. Louis. Are you available between 3:30 and 5:30pm Central time?)"

- Proofread your email or letter. Ask your teacher or another adult to check it as well.
- If you receive a response, write back right away. If the answer is "no," thank the person for his/her time and consideration of your question. If it's "yes," then finalize a time and confirm it.
- Send a polite reminder confirmation a day or two before your scheduled interview.
- If you are meeting in person, research the directions and allow extra time for traffic, parking, security, and confusion.
- Call or arrive promptly at the scheduled time and end promptly when you said you would or earlier.
- At the end of the call or visit, thank the subject verbally. Offer to share your finished project after the contest.
- Write and send a written thank-you note within 24 hours.
- If the subject expressed interest in seeing your finished project, send it after the contest.

Sample Oral History Interview Request with a Primary Source

Dear Mr. Jones:

I hope this finds you well. My name is Sonya Student and I am in [your grade] grade in [your school] in [city], [state or country]. I am learning about _____ and, having read a lot about this, I found that you participated in/saw _____ and I am writing to request an interview with you.

I am creating a project for National History Day, which requires rigorous research about a topic that fits within an annual theme, which this year is Exploration, Encounter, Exchange in History. An NHD project can be done in one of several categories and I think I will do a [your category].

While an interview is not required for my project, I am interested in talking with you because I have some questions that I have not been able to find answers to through the reading that I have done so far. I understand that ...[what you have learned about your topic] but I am wondering about ...[what you want to understand better]. Given your unique perspective, I am hoping you would have a few minutes to tell me about your experience.

I want to be respectful of your time and am requesting a 20-minute [phone or in-person] conversation with you. If you are interested, are you available during any of these time blocks, in [the subject's time zone]: [offer several different days and times]? Please let me know if you have an opening within these options or if you would like to propose another time. Please also send a phone number where I may reach you [or instructions about finding your office]. My [parent/teacher/other adult] will accompany me [if in person].

I would like to record our conversation and use it in my project. [Explain whether you want audio, audio/video, text, etc. and how you hope to use it based on your category of choice.]

I appreciate your consideration of my request and hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Sonya

Sample Interview Request with an Expert (Historian or other Secondary Source)

Remember: ONLY request interviews with historians or other secondary sources AFTER you have done all of your research and found that you have specific questions for specific individuals.

Dear Dr. Jones:

I hope this finds you well. My name is Sonya Student and I am in [your grade] grade in [your school] in [city], [state or country]. I am learning about _____ and, having read your book [use the title of the book or article] about this, I am writing to request an interview with you.

I am creating a project for National History Day, which requires rigorous research about a topic that fits within an annual theme, which this year is Exploration, Encounter, Exchange in History. An NHD project can be done in one of several categories and I think I will do a [your category].

While an interview is not required for my project, I am interested in talking with you because I have some questions that I have not been able to find answers to through the reading that I have done so far. I understand that ...[what you have learned about your topic] but I am wondering about ...[what you want to understand better].

I want to be respectful of your time and am requesting a 20-minute [phone or in-person] conversation with you. If you are interested, are you available during any of these time blocks, in [the subject's time zone]: [offer several different days and times]? Please let me know if you have an opening within these options or if you would like to propose another time. Please also send a phone number where I may reach you [or instructions about finding your office]. My [parent/teacher/other adult] will accompany me [if in person].

I would like to record our conversation and use it in my project. [Explain whether you want audio, audio/video, text, etc. and how you hope to use it based on your category of choice.]

I appreciate your consideration of my request and hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Sonya

Sample Release Form

This sample is provided by The National World War II Museum.

Sample Release Form

Students should always obtain permission to use an oral history interview for a report, an exhibit, an archive, or any other use. A sample release form is presented here to show you what it should contain. Keep one for your records and give a copy to your interviewee:

ABC Middle School WWII Oral History Project
1234 St. Charles Ave.
New Orleans, LA

I hereby give and grant to the ABC Middle School WWII Oral History Project my recorded memoir as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Project shall determine. It is expressly understood that the full literary rights to this memoir pass to the ABC Middle School WWII Oral History Project and that no rights whatsoever are to vest in my heirs now or at my death.

Signature of Interviewee

Address of Interviewee

Signature of Interviewer

Date of Agreement

Subject of Tape(s)

Preparing for Your Interview

This checklist is provided by The National World War II Museum.

Once you've confirmed your upcoming interview, it's time to prepare. Here are some things to do:

- If you are using technology to communicate with your subject such as Skype or Google Hangout or any equipment to record audio, video or both, ensure that everything is in working order at least 30 minutes prior to the set time for the interview to begin. If you are bringing an additional person or persons to help you carry and set up your equipment (cameras, sound or lighting) make sure you include that information in your interview request.
- Have the questions you want to ask written out in advance. If your interview subject requests a copy of your questions in advance of the interview, please supply them. Also, make sure to consider the time allotted for the interview when writing down and organizing your questions – you don't want to run out of time in the interview leaving your most important questions unanswered.
- If communicating remotely or setting up an in-person interview with your subject in a neutral or public location, choose a space that is conducive to conducting an interview and that has a minimal amount of distractions and audible noise. If conducting an interview remotely during school hours, try and locate a quiet space, classroom or other area to use so that your subject can both hear you as well as be heard themselves.
- If communicating remotely or conducting an in-person interview, practice your questions beforehand so that you can be ready to interact with your subject and engage them with any follow-up questions. It's perfectly acceptable to bring a list of your questions along with you, but try to not simply read off the page as you would read a grocery list. Your interview subject has made this time available for you, make the most of it!

- If you are seeking direct quotes from your interview subject, make sure you have a way to record them. Avoid asking your interview subjects to repeat themselves or to talk slower. Never attempt to take down lengthy quotations in long-hand.
- Finally, know that your interview subject has made his/her time available because he/she is interested in your subject, but, more so, in you. Talking to experts or authorities in their field can be intimidating, but realize that your interview subject would not have accepted your request for an interview if he/she first did not want to help. Remember: you are acting as an informal representative of your school and your state NHD program. Do your very best!

NHD.org Research Resources

<http://www.nhd.org/entering-contest/#toggle-id-2>

Additional Resources – How to Prepare for and Conduct Interviews

Scholastic

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/how-conduct-interview>

Oral History Association

<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>

Library of Congress American Folklife Center

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/ed-classroom.html>

http://www.loc.gov/folklife/edresources/edcenter_files/interview-guide.pdf

Columbia Center for Oral History

<http://library.columbia.edu/locations/ccoh.html>

<http://library.columbia.edu/locations/ccoh/FAQ.html>

Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/research-and-tools/>

National World War II Museum

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/oral-history-guidelines.html>

Additional Resources – Existing Oral History Collections Available Online

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/online.html>

<http://www.archives.gov/legislative/research/special-collections/oral-history/>

<http://library.columbia.edu/find/oral-history-portal.html>

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/see-hear/collections/oral-histories/>

Find more by searching for “Oral history collections” or by using key words related to the individual(s) you want to research.