



STUDENT'S GUIDE TO CAPTURING STORIES OF A TOWN THROUGH INTERVIEWS

What's Past is Prologue

Learn more about your town's history to help you determine who might have great stories to tell. It will help if you can find a few people who are connectors in your town – connectors are people who know lots of other people and can give you tips about who to talk to. They will also have stories to tell!

Find Your Focus

Do you want to tell a general story of your town or are you looking for a tighter focus? For example, maybe you want to focus on the changing role of women in your town; or what life was like for kids growing up in your town over the generations; or how the economy of the town changed over the years; or how people survived the big ice storm, blizzard, hurricane, flood or other natural disaster.

Find Your Storytellers

Once you decide on your focus, determine who you are going to interview. What type of stories are you hoping to find? Who might be able to tell those stories?

When telling the general story of a town, you may be talking people who started businesses in town, artists and writers who make your town their home, people who lived through major events in your town, community leaders who have made an impact on your town, or just regular people who have great memories or stories to tell about life in your town.

If you have decided on a particular focus for your story, who can help you tell your story? If you are telling the story of women, for example, what groups or organizations might be able to connect you with storytellers? If you are telling the story of the town's changing economy, is there a business group that might help you get started? Think about the stories you hope to capture and then who might help you identify your potential storytellers.

Spread the Word!

Connect with people in town who can help you spread the word about your project. Some good places to start are your local newspaper, church and community organization leaders, retirement homes, local community art groups, bookstores, and message boards at local stores.

When you contact people you wish to interview, let them know exactly what your project is and what you are looking for. It's a good idea to have something in writing that you can give them outlining your project and even giving an example of a good story. Make sure you include your contact information, so they can get in touch with you.



Finding and Refining Stories

Lots of people you talk to will have more than one story. That's great, but you may want to ask them to focus on just one story. Some people may have a story about the same event, you will need to determine if you want more than one story about something, or if it is better to get a variety of stories.

Ask the people you plan to interview to spend some time thinking about their story. You might even ask them to write it down, not for you, but for them. This can sometimes help people remember details better and help them tell their story more comfortably when they are in front of the camera or microphone.

Do not have them read their story!!! Writing it down should just be an exercise for them to help them refine their story. If they do write their story down, ask them if they will share a copy with you. This can help you prepare for the interview. It can also help you get an early idea of how all of the interviews might work together to tell the story of your town.

Photographs and Memorabilia

Ask the people you are going to interview to bring you photographs, memorabilia, or objects that will help tell their story. Photographs are especially important in helping you tell their story. The standard rule of editing is you should change shots every 3-5 seconds. When recording an oral history, you have a little more latitude! You can use the "Ken Burns" method of drawing out a how long a shot of a photograph in on screen by slow panning; slow, slow zooms; slow (copyright cleared music under the photograph); and slow fades, but you will still need a good collection of images to help tell a story!

Some sources for images, aside from what your storyteller has, include:

- Your local historical society
- Your local library
- Your local newspaper
- Taking photographs or shooting video yourself
- Online image collections with public domain images or broad usage rights like:

Wikimedia Commons

commons.wikimedia.org

Library of Congress

loc.gov/pictures

National Archives

archives.gov/research/search/index.html

NY Public Library Digital Gallery

digitalgallery.nypl.org

Location, Location, Location

Decide where you are going to conduct your interview. You may decide to set up a location and have the storytellers come to you – the advantage of this are that you will have better control over the technical aspects of your interview.

You can set up lighting, camera angles, and audio to your liking. You can also save time by scheduling the people you will be interviewing to all come in on the same day! The downside is that the people you are interviewing might be more comfortable in a setting more familiar to them, like their home.

If they have memorabilia and photographs, they will not have to pack them up and take them to you, which they might not be comfortable with. If their story is about a particular location in your town, you might set the interview up at that location. That will allow you to capture B-roll before or after the interview.



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There is no right or wrong answer for the question of location. You will need to determine what will work best for you and the storyteller. If you are doing this during the school day, you may not be able to leave school to conduct an interview. The key is to determine the best location for your circumstances and then understand what the shortcomings might be and adjust!

Technology and Interview Setup

Practice with your equipment!!! Become comfortable with how it works, what the features are and what you need to make it work - extra batteries, cords, cables.

If you will be recording your interviews at school, set up the recording space. Choose a location where you won't be interrupted or bothered by outside sound. For example, you don't want to record next to the band room. You also want to check with the principal and custodial staff to make sure there are no planned fire drills, construction, or grass-mowing planned for the day you record. You will also want to make sure that school announcements and bells won't interrupt your taping.

Design an interesting background that will not detract from the interview. There's a reason the bookcases are often used as backgrounds for interviews – they look good!!!! But don't just slap a bookcase behind your subject! Put a plant on a shelf or a figurine. See if your school librarian and art teacher can help you design a great looking set! Remember to be aware of windows in the room! You do not want to be shooting into the light!

Find a comfy chair!!! You might see if a local furniture store will loan you a chair for the interview. Don't use anything on wheels or a folding chair.

If you can, use an external microphone. Good audio is more important than good video!

The Interview

Have the storyteller introduce themselves on tape. You will want them to tell you their name and what they will be talking about.

You should have an outline of what the storyteller will be talking about. Ask an open ended question to help them get started. Once they start talking, don't interrupt them! Sometimes the best parts of the story happen when the storyteller just lets their memories take over!

Listen carefully to what the subject says and make sure your facial expressions and body language is encouraging! Nod your head, smile, but don't make any sounds that could interrupt the story! If the subject stops talking, don't jump right in! Give them a few seconds to gather their thoughts. Most people will pick up their story where they left off or will add more details. Silence can be a powerful tool in helping to get the best out of your storyteller. Sometimes the best part of the story will come out when you let the storyteller fill in the silence.

You might also want to take brief notes while the subject is talking, especially if they say something you want them to elaborate on or talk about in more detail. Before the interview begins, you might want to let the subject know how you are going to conduct the interview. You might want to have someone else responsible for the technology, so you can give the subject your full attention.

Don't challenge the story the subject tells on factual accuracy. You can ask them to clarify after they finish, but remember, you are conducting oral history and capturing **their** memories.



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Permissions and Thank You's

Make sure you get a signed release form from the subject. If you will be posting the interview to social media or the web, make sure they know and that it is included in the release form.

Make sure you thank your storyteller when the interview is over! Shake their hand and express your gratitude for their time and their memories. Follow-up with a written, not emailed, thank you note.

Let them know what your timeline is for the project, and when you are done, give them a copy. If you will be showing the finished interview in a class or other venue, invite them to attend.

Question Tips

Have an outline of what topics you want the storyteller to talk about! Think about the types of details you might need to help tell the best story.

When you ask questions, make them open ended whenever possible. Some good openings to questions are:

What was it like...
Tell me about...
How did you...
Why...
What do you remember...

When probing for details:

Tell me more about...
Can you describe...
Can you explain...

Avoid Leading Questions

Leading questions are ones that suggest to the subject that you have already formed an opinion and are expecting a certain answer. For example:

Leading: Tell me how hard life was for women in the 1930s.

Neutral: Tell me what life was like for women in the 1930s.

Leading: Your family immigrated to town in the 1920s. Tell me about it.

Neutral: Why did your family move to town?

Leading: Tell me how your business improved the economy of the town.

Neutral: Tell me how your business impacted the town?

Ask for Clarification

If you want a subject to give you an answer again, clarify and answer, or expand on an answer, you can ask them a question using what they have already said.

For example:

You told me that (what they said here) can you tell me more about that?

I want to make sure I got this right. You said (what they said here) Is there anything you want to add?

You mentioned a ... in your story. Can you tell me a little bit more about what that is?

You talked about ... in your story. Can you explain a little bit more about it?

Last Question

Ask the subject if there is anything else they would like to add to their story!

