



6<sup>th</sup> grade  
Family History Project

# Sharing Your Family's Story

## TSRS StoryCorps



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### Interview an Extended Family Member - Due January 26<sup>th</sup>

Taken from: <http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/familyhistorytoolkit>

#### Tips for Oral History Interviews:

- Conducting an oral history interview is like listening to a choose-your-own adventure story about someone else's life. Every person you know has a unique story to tell, and you probably won't ever get to hear it—unless you ask. Oral history lets you ask questions to get the information you think is most interesting.
- Oral history also reminds us that every person is part of history, and your family member's story is part of your history. And when you interview your family member, you then helping preserve those important family stories that are part of who you are.

#### Steps to Collecting the Oral History:

- **Choose a "Narrator":** In a book, the person who tells the story is called the "narrator." In an oral history, the person you interview is also called the narrator because he or she is the one telling the story.
- **Deciding whom to interview** starts with thinking about what you want to know. Ask yourself: Which person in my extended family do I want to learn more about? Perhaps it is your mother, grandmother, or another family member who is the keeper of family memories, stories, and traditions.
- **Part of what's fun and memorable** about oral history is making a connection with another person, and usually that's easiest to do face-to-face. When that's not possible, technology gives us other options, like phone, email, and video. Figure out what you think will work best for you and your narrator.
- **The Questions:** Before you conduct the interview, make a list of things you want to know about your narrator. This should include key facts and information (names, dates, key events in her life, etc.) and questions you would like to ask. We have a few sets of interview questions or you can create your own.
- **Decide how to record the interview.** Do you have or can you borrow a video camera or audio recorder? You can also just take notes. Whatever you decide, make sure you assemble the necessary equipment in advance and know how to use

it. You might choose to only record part of the interview and just listen to the rest.

- **Sometimes it is a good idea to have the narrator bring along an object to talk about or show you.** This could be a favorite family photograph, an old toy, book, or keepsake. It could even be a piece of clothing or a birth certificate. Consider asking your narrator if he or she would like to share something. If they do, take a picture or scan it so you can have your own copy of it.
- **Make sure you have a good place to do your interview.** You'll want it to be quiet and fairly private so that you and your narrator will feel comfortable talking together. You may also want to consider having comfortable chairs, since you will be sitting for a while. And have some water on hand—your narrator might get thirsty from all that talking!

### **Tips & Techniques:**

- Here are a few things to remember while you are conducting the interview.

#### **Do**

- Start with easy questions about basic biographical information to help your narrator feel comfortable. Leave more difficult questions until later, when you have established a connection with your narrator, and she has become more comfortable speaking honestly with you.
- Follow up with additional questions that encourage your narrator to say more about her experience. If you are interested in hearing more about something s/he shares, just ask.
- Even though it is hard to wait, do allow long pauses or silences. Sometimes it takes a moment for the narrator to collect his/her thoughts.
- Do keep the focus on your narrator's story—try not to share your own experiences or feelings.

#### **Don't**

- Don't interrupt your narrator while s/he is in the middle of a story. Instead write other questions down so you can ask them later.
- Don't ask leading questions that make assumptions about what your narrator thinks or feels. Instead ask open questions to understand how she feels.
- Don't express encouragement with phrases like "uh huh" or "oh, wow," because they can interrupt the narration. Instead show your appreciation or understanding through eye contact, facial expressions, and other non-verbal signs.

### **Interview Location and Time**

- Conduct the interview at a time and place that are convenient for your narrator. The more comfortable the narrator feels, the more likely s/he will relax and enjoy the experience.

- Make sure that there is as little noise as possible. The sound of ringing phones, barking dogs, fans, air conditioners, refrigerators, or other electronic equipment can create background noise that will disrupt the interview.
- If possible, arrange the interview so that as few people as possible are present. The presence of others will change how the narrator answers some questions or how comfortable she feels sharing certain stories.
- Limit interview sessions to no more than one hour. It may be tiring for the narrator to remember so much and to talk for such a long time. You can always do several short interviews instead of one long one.
- Remember, the most important thing is to enjoy the chance to learn about the person you are interviewing. In other words, have fun!

### **Getting to the Questions:**

The key to getting a good story is asking good questions. If you don't know what you want to ask, you can get some ideas from our lists.

The following question-writing guidelines will help you collect an interesting oral history from your narrator.

### **Two Kinds of Questions**

Oral historians ask two kinds of questions when they are conducting interviews—closed questions and open questions.

1. Closed questions are important for finding out short pieces of factual information. Questions about dates, names, etc. are essential but they don't make for very rich or exciting stories.

Examples of closed questions include:

- What year were you born?
- What were your parents' names?
- When did your family come to this country?
- What high school did you attend?

2. Open questions, on the other hand, allow you to draw out your narrator's memories, opinions, and points of view. These questions make the narrator's story interesting and fun.

Open questions often begin with:

- Why?
- Can you describe...?
- Tell me about...
- What was that like?

- How did you feel when...?
- What were your expectations about...?
- What challenges did you face when...?
- The One-Two Punch Method

In order to record a well-balanced oral history, try using the one-two punch method. First you ask a closed question to learn a fact or get a specific answer. Then follow with an open-ended question to allow the narrator to say more about her response.

Here are some examples of pairs of closed questions and open-ended questions:

- *Closed:* What was your mother's name?
- *Open-ended:* Describe your relationship with your mother when you were growing up.
- *Closed:* When did you move to the new house?
- *Open-ended:* How did you feel about moving to a new house and a new neighborhood?
- *Closed:* When did you graduate from medical school?
- *Open-ended:* What it was like being one of only three women in your medical school class?

Once you come up with a list of questions, put them in an order that makes sense to you. Are there some things that you need to know before you can ask about others? Decide which questions are more important or interesting to you and make sure you put them at the top of the list in case you run out of time.

Suggestions for Interview Questions:

- Students will create a list in class, and this will be posted on our website
- Check out these websites for ideas:  
<http://mybatmitzvahstory.org/familyhistorytoolkit>  
<http://storycorps.org/great-questions/>  
[http://www.folklife.si.edu/education\\_exhibits/resources/guide/introduction.aspx](http://www.folklife.si.edu/education_exhibits/resources/guide/introduction.aspx)

**To Upload your Video:**

- First save your video to your own file storage.
- Then edit your video to a 2 - 3 minutes segment that you would like to share. Consider adding music, words, etc.
- Upload your video to a file sharing site (such as youtube)- PARENTS need to oversee this step! Be sure to follow the privacy directions.
- Send Mrs. Zimmerman the link to your video.