

MY ORAL HISTORY

Oral histories are a type of primary source that historians and others use to learn about events in the past. These first-hand accounts are recollections of people, experiences, emotions, and thoughts from a specific time or event in history. Oral histories have proved invaluable in understanding the history of lake sturgeon conservation in the Upper Midwest.

Pre-Interview

Listen to an oral history. (Also included in Activity 2 - Spearing Sources.)

1. "People of the Sturgeon" oral histories
go.wisc.edu/Octui9 or
2. "People of the Sturgeon" oral histories (abbreviated versions)
go.wisc.edu/j6i524

What techniques did the interviewer use that you may want to use in your interview?

Choosing a topic and someone to interview

Select your topic first or the person you want to interview (your interview subject) first– either is fine.

Your topic

What do you want to know? Ask yourself what type of historical information you would like to learn from your interview subject. You can ask about sturgeon, of course. Perhaps you want to ask your subject about any experiences with spearing lake sturgeon in Lake Winnebago or if they remember hearing about the lake sturgeon conservation story when they were growing up.

Or you could choose another topic related to the "Save Our Sturgeon" story. Some questions to explore in your oral history interview: Did you ever go ice fishing in winter or fishing in the summer? What sort of experiences do you have visiting lakes? Are you an artist? Tell me about the art you make and your inspirations.

Or they might have had an experience working on something where they wanted to make some sort of difference in the world – like the people involved in lake sturgeon conservation.

Your interview subject

Who do you want to interview? Do you want to know about their connection to one of the themes covered in the "Save Our Sturgeon" story or is there another reason you want to know more about their recollections?

Your interview subject should be someone you know (a friend, relative, or neighbor, for example).

Preparation for conducting an oral history interview

Before you start:

1. If your interview subject is a neighbor or someone outside your family, figure out how to address them. For example, Mr., Ms., Mrs., Dr., etc.
2. Research the background of the person you are interviewing, including their full name, year of birth, and occupation. If you don't do this ahead of time, this is a great way to start the interview.
3. Create a script that you will start the recorded interview with. You need to introduce yourself, your interview subject, the date, the place the interview is taking place, the purpose of the interview, and an explanation of the project.

Example: This is [your first, last name]. Today's date is [month, day, year]. I am interviewing [first, last name] about [theme/topic] for [class or project name]. The interview is taking place at [location, city, state]. Also with us is [first, last name] who is [job they are doing to help you or aid in the preservation of interview].

4. Write four open-ended questions that you think will provoke stories and narratives to assist in gathering information or details about the event, time period, or experience you are researching.
5. Write potential follow-up questions to clarify or expand on information from your subject, if needed.
6. Share your questions with your teacher and get any suggestions for reworking your questions.
7. Share your questions with your oral history interview subject before the interview so they can be comfortable answering (or declining to answer) specific questions.
8. Make an appointment and be on time.

Conducting the Interview

1. Be sure your subject knows what the project is about and why you are interested in learning more on the topic.
2. Let your subject know how their information will be used and disseminated.
3. Start the recorder and begin with your planned script. Be sure to start with date, time, person being interviewed, etc.).
4. Bring your prepared interview questions and other information along to guide the interview. When your subject strays from your theme or questions, gently bring the conversation back to your original theme or question.
5. If you are unclear about a response, repeat what you understood them to say in order to verify it.
6. Make sure you thank your subject for their time and express how appreciative you are of what they shared with you.

After the interview

1. Send a thank you letter upon your return home.
2. Use your notes and the recording to create a summary of the interview.
3. Share your draft oral history summary with your teacher.
4. Share your draft summary with your oral history interview subject.
5. Create your final draft oral history document.

These guidelines are adapted from guidelines originally created by the Wisconsin Historical Society.