

Understanding oral history: Why do it?

Oral history helps round out the story of the past.

Oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by augmenting the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries, and other historical materials. Eyewitnesses to events contribute various viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written record. Interviewers are able to ask questions left out of other records and to interview people whose stories have been untold or forgotten. At times, an interview may serve as the only source of information available about a certain place, event, or person.

Oral history helps us understand how individuals and communities experienced the forces of history.

Just think of the breadth and width of history that today's students have to learn! Traditional history courses in high school and college usually touch only on the major events of the past, covering the fundamentals of who, what, when, where, why, and so what. Oral history brings depth to our understanding of the past by carrying us into experience at an individual level. Thoughtful, personal answers to questions like What did *you* do in the war? reveal the ways decisions made by the movers and shakers of the day changed the lives of ordinary people and their families and communities.

Oral history teaches us what has changed and what has stayed the same over time.

Change is obvious to the eye, but oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change, from the simple things of life—wood stove to microwave, dial phone to cell phone, phonograph to I-Pod—to the more complex—Yellow Dog Democrat to Moral Majority, local production to global outsourcing, country living to suburban sprawl. During interviews, narrators may also reflect on ways their lives remained the same in spite of change, particularly in the area of values, traditions, and beliefs.

Oral history preserves for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past.

Inevitably, future generations will view—and judge—today's generation through the lens of their own experiences in their own time. The story of the past is continually revised in the light of new interpretations. Oral history enables people to share their stories in their own words, with their own voices, through their own understanding of what happened and why. With careful attention to preserving our sound recordings, the voices of our narrators will endure to speak for them when they are gone. By complicating the story with individual experience, oral histories will help future historians avoid sweeping generalizations that stereotype people, engender prejudice, and overlook important variables in the historical context.