

## APPENDIX 4

# Oral History Basics



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This handout was given to participants of the Teacher Training Workshop held August 29, 2011. It is a great starting point when developing an interview component for studying about the 1962 Seattle World's Fair.

### Jack Straw Productions: Gathering Stories: A Community Look at Our History

We learn about each other every day, often through casual conversation. Many of these details won't make it into a history book, but these conversations are built on our experiences and are part of our personal history. What do we like to do? What are we thinking about? What are we wearing? What are we eating? Tapping into students' natural tendency to communicate with each other is a simple way to encourage them to begin gathering stories. Jack Straw Productions works with elementary, middle, and high school students to use oral history interviews as the basis for a variety of different projects.

#### Things to do with collected stories:

- Original radio plays
- Radio feature
- Radio theater
- Audio tour
- Photos and stories for book, webpages, mural

#### Helpful Tips for a Good Oral History Interview Interview Questions

Brainstorming and research are key for coming up with an initial list of questions and being prepared for an interview.

Questions should:

- **Explore the story or topic.** What is the purpose of the story? What does the audience need to know? What will listeners be interested in knowing?
- **Add dimension to the obvious.** "Why" questions are important. They open up room for exploration and can delve into what is not obvious.
- **Paint the picture.** Questions that ask the interview subject for description are important. They help listeners "see" the story or message.
- **Don't be afraid** to ask the same thing in different ways until you get an answer you're satisfied with. It's better to get the full story.
- **Ensure the listeners are not left hanging.** Wrap-up questions close loose ends and answer anything that is still unclear.
- **Be simple and clear.** Questions should be short, simple and clear. Multi-layered questions should never be part of an interview. They confuse the interview subject and the listeners.

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Questions should follow a logical order. Consider these guidelines:

- **The first question** shouldn't be too deep, complex or broad because you run the risk of losing focus or control of the interview.
- **Core questions** do not necessarily have to follow the chronology of events. You won't have time to cover everything, so focus your questions according to the key issues you want to address.
- **Follow-up questions** are used when the interviewer wants the subject to elaborate.
  - **Magic question:**
    - “Why?”
  - **Opening up questions** might start with:
    - “Tell me more”
    - “Take me back to the first time you...”
    - “What was going through your mind when”
  - **Pinning down questions** might start with:
    - “What do you mean when you say...?”
    - “Let's be more specific. Are you saying?”
    - “To recap...do you mean that?”
  - **Closing questions** wrap up the interview.
    - Anything that I missed or that you'd like to add?

### Conducting an Interview

Keep these points in mind while you're in the studio:

- Think of the interview as the opportunity for an interesting conversation.
- Smile appropriately.
- Relax and breathe naturally.
- Speak at a natural pace, not too fast, not too slow and pause appropriately.

Use written questions to help stay focused and on track:

- **Ask open-ended questions**—beginning with how, what, why—to encourage an interview subject to open up. Avoid questions that require only a “yes/no” answer.
- Keep the questions **short and simple**. Never ask multi-layered questions that the interview subject struggles to understand.
- If there is **terminology** that requires explanation, **take time to make it clear** so that the information can be understood by anyone.
- Invite the interview subject to give **specific examples, experiences and stories**. For example, “Take us back to the first time you performed in public. What happened?”
- **Keep thinking of the listeners**. What would they want to ask?

During the interview:

- Show attention by using **eye contact and body language**. **But be careful not to give audible feedback—like “mmm” or “OK.”** They sound irritating on radio and they'll cause you problems later when you have to edit the interview.
- Remember to help the interview subject come alive as a person and tell her story. **An interviewer should be responsive but does not steal the spotlight** or use the interview to show how clever she is.
- **Let the interview subject know that it's OK to repeat things and start over.**
- If it is necessary to interrupt the interviewee, do it with a smile as she takes a breath. Try not to raise the volume—or pitch—of your voice. Do not talk over what she is saying. It sounds aggressive.
- Ask follow-up questions.

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### Seattle World Fair Oral History Sample Questions

With an oral history interview, you want to give cues to the speaker to get the facts, but also the personal experience. Try to ask sensory questions; things that will bring out the sounds, colors, and feel of the experience.

1. How were you involved at the fair? A visitor? A participant?
2. What do you remember about the general atmosphere?
3. What was a highlight for you?
4. Who did you go with?
5. Do you remember any music or sounds?
6. What food did they have?
7. What was the crowd like? People from around the world?
8. Was something really unique and new to you that you saw at the fair?
9. Were people excited in Seattle about hosting the fair?
10. How did the fair impact Seattle?

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