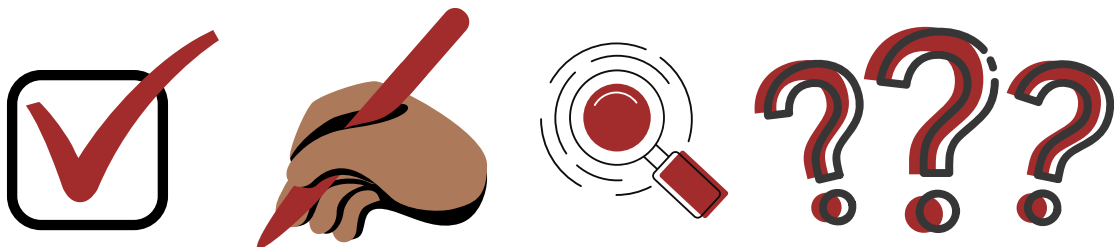




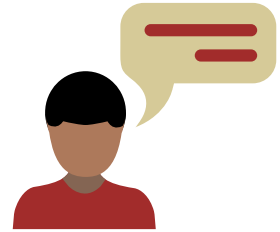
South African History Online
towards a people's history

History Skills Pack

Based on the CAPS curriculum



Oral History



Background

Oral History is a vital component of recording narratives and facts about the past. It has been a part of History since the beginning of history, being the oldest method of recording history. In fact, Herodotus (a Greek historian who is credited with being the first historian) wrote his work by travelling through Greece and collecting accounts of events from different people. He called his work “The Histories”, which is where the word and meaning of History comes from. Although the beginning of history could significantly be accredited to oral history, it is met with a lot of scepticism from some mainstream historians today. However, it is important to keep including oral history as a method of recording history as it gives historians the opportunity to record events or narratives that have not yet been recorded and to give history an extra layer. This article attempts to give the reader a better idea of the basis of Oral History and how to approach it.

What is oral history?

Oral History refers to a field of study within History that uses the method of gathering, organizing and interpreting the voices and memories of any person or community that was involved in a past event. Oral history is essentially composed out of two categories or methods:

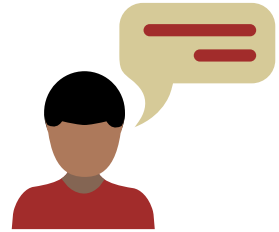
1. *Oral History*

Refers to interviewing someone with first-hand recollection of an event. For example, interviewing a survivor of Auschwitz (the name of a concentration camp in Poland during the Second World War) about their experience in the concentration camp.

2. *Oral Tradition*

Oral tradition is also called Orality. Refers to interviewing someone who relays events of the past that have been **passed down over several generations**. It gives historians an account of change over time with accounts of knowledge, art, ideas, traditions and culture. For example, interviewing a family-member and investigating an interesting or unique tradition or event.

Oral History



Oral Source Guideline

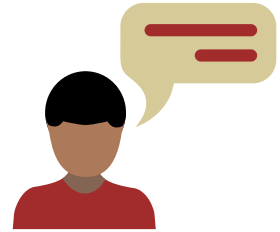
How to prepare for conducting and using interviews

Stage One: Pre-Interview

- Make a list of possible narrators who have lived experiences and knowledge they can share about the topic you are researching.
- Contact potential narrators via email and give them an outline of the purpose of the interview and an overview of the topics you want to discuss. This enables the narrators to remember their lived experiences and prepare answers.
- If a potential narrator is willing to answer your questions, set a date, time and place where you can meet the narrator. It is vital that the interview is also conducting in a quiet place, as the interview needs to be recorded. Loud noises can make it difficult to hear what is said on the audio-recording later.
- After securing an interview, conduct background research on the topic you want to discuss, and learn more about the person you are interviewing. This will enable you to ask informed questions.
- A historian needs to explain the rights of the narrator before the interview. This includes confidentiality agreements and stating how much the interviewer can edit what was said on the recording. You might be given a slip in class that needs to be signed by the narrator, consenting to the interview and allowing you to use the information for the task.



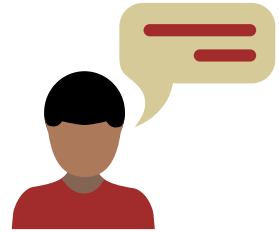
Oral History



Stage Two: The Interview

- **Equipment:** At the start of the interview make sure that the electronic equipment is on and recording the discussion.
- **Opening:** Open the interview with a “lead”, which includes stating the name of the narrator, the interviewer, the date, time, place and purpose of the interview.
- **Comfortability:** Do not start with a personal question. Let the narrator become comfortable answering questions first, before asking emotional or personal questions.
- **Open-Ended Question:** Ask open-ended questions, as this will extract long answers, with more detail and context than simple “yes or no” questions and answers. For example, rather than asking: “When did Nelson Mandela die?” ask questions such as: “How did you feel when Nelson Mandela passed away?”
- **Follow-up Questions:** Ask follow-up questions, which will expand the information the narrator has given you. For example: “You already explained what happened at the event, but you have not really touched on why the event occurred. Do you have any thoughts and what could have caused this?”
- **Timeline:** Do not expect the narrator to speak chronologically. While it is important to write the task in chronological order, narrators will tell their story from memory. These memories will most likely be achronological.
- **No Interruptions:** Do not interrupt a narrator while speaking unless they have deviated from the topic. Rather use non-verbal cues to show interest in what the narrator is saying. If they do deviate from the topic, kindly inform them that while it is important facts they are raising, you would really want them to answer a few specific questions first.

Oral History

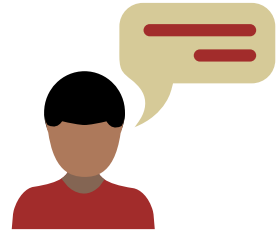


Stage Two: The Interview

- **Understanding:** It is important to focus on what the narrator says, while also focusing on what facts they are excluding. They might briefly mention negative aspects that they do not want to discuss. It is important that you keep in mind that the narrator might only be telling their side of the story. If you want a balanced view of the past, you can ask something like: “Other arguments I have heard about this topic disagrees with this view. How would you respond to such arguments?”
- **Ending the Interview:** If you are done with the interview, thank the narrator for their time. If there is any more information you need to acquire, ask the narrator if they are willing to do another interview later or answer a few questions via email.



Oral History



Stage Three: Post-Interview

- **Transcription:** After the interview is conducted and recorded the audio needs to be transcribed. Make sure you save at least two copies of the audio on your computer and phone.
- **Structure:** The transcription will read like a dialogue, with the names of the narrator and interviewer indicating the turns between the two speakers. One should also indicate when different speakers asked and answered questions, as well as their emotions and actions.

For example:

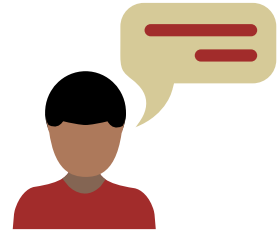
Helen: [06: 10] How did you feel when the bomb exploded?

Harry: [06: 35] I was shocked and scared. [Shaking head in disbelief]

-
- **Editing:** You can do minimal editing, such as excluding fillers like: “um”, “ahh” and “oh”. These changes will make the interview read fluently, while not changing the meaning of what is being said.
- **Exclusions:** Unnecessary responses of the interviewer, like: “I see” or “interesting” can be excluded from the transcription. Standardizing Structure: Standardize the layout and format of the transcription. Make sure the fonts, paragraphing, use of quotation marks and line spacing is consistent throughout the document.
- **Keep Audio:** After you have finished transcribing the interview, do not discard of the audio. The audio is still a primary source, which enables one to hear and identify the tones and emotions of the different speakers.



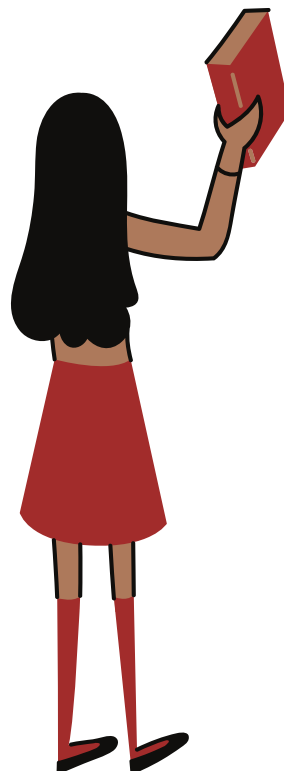
Oral History



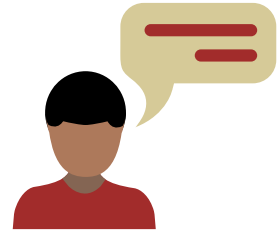
Evaluating an Oral Source

Strengths

1. **Accessibility:** It gives an historian the opportunity to gain access to resources that are not necessarily physically or visibly accessible. For example, in terms of physically; a historian could interview a person telephonically or over various video-call platforms. In terms of visibly; if there are no written accounts of an event, a historian would use oral tradition to write an account of an event.
2. **Added Layer:** Speaking and listening to what people have to say brings an extra layer to history in terms of adding a “quality of human relations”. For example, a historian is able to see or hear the emotion behind an event and would therefore, understand it better.
3. **Method of Democratizing History:** In other words, it gives people the opportunity to share their narrative that would otherwise not be able to share it. For example, many histories or people are excluded from history because they were not “traditionally” (by means of newspaper articles, reports etc.) recorded.



Oral History



Limitations

1. **Accuracy:** Accuracy remains a significant aspect of history. Therefore, oral sources are required to be verified by using other sources as well. For example, if a person gives an account of an event, it is important to hear other accounts and to make sure of the facts.
2. **Overidentification:** The person who interviews someone may experience a feeling of overidentification with the interviewee. This means that the interviewer may over-sympathise with the interviewee and not be able to stay objective. For example, if someone feels too much sympathy for their interviewee, one may not write the full truth (the good AND the bad), which indicates that a part (the bad part) of history is lost or missing.
3. **Depending on the Interviewee:** Using oral sources depends on the interviewee significantly. Therefore, factors such as memory, mental-health, reliability etc. are important to keep in mind. For example, if one speaks to an interviewee who was a first-hand witness of an event that occurred decades ago, memory may play a vital role in the accuracy of what is stated. This is also why it is important to cross-reference other sources and make sure of the accuracy of one's source.



TIP: It remains important to note that all sources (primary and secondary) have both strengths and limitations. When one understands the strengths and weaknesses of a source, one will be able to use resources more effectively. Therefore, it is important to consider using as many different types (newspapers, books, diaries, films, oral sources etc.) of sources as possible – this will ensure a fuller account of the past.

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