



# Creating Oral Histories Using Historic Photographs

## The Condensed Guide



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## **Goal**

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**By using historic images to create oral histories, participants will learn new methods of research and the importance of oral histories in preserving untold stories of the community.**

## What is Oral History?

Oral history is a record of someone's memories. They are gathered by interviewing an individual or sometimes a group of people about a specific topic, usually about a time period, historical event, or a specific person or place.

## Why is Oral History Important?

Oral histories continue to be important today because they can fill in gaps in the written historical record. Oral histories often tell the stories of minority communities and lower- to middle-class people, which are often left out of the history books. Because of this, oral histories provide a more well-rounded view of what life was like. Relaying these stories can help students create personal connections to history in a way that is often lacking in textbooks and articles, which has been proven to increase student learning.

## Using Photographs to Create Oral Histories

Photo elicitation is an oral history technique that involves showing the interviewee photographs and asking about what they see. According to education professor, Keith Barton, using photo elicitation can reveal “community values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as the meaning that participants attribute to aspects of the local setting” (Barton, 2015). It can also be used to find out more about local history and families.

## The Power of Photographs

Using photographs as part of an oral history interview can be a powerful tool. Photographs have been proven to trigger memories, sometimes very emotional ones. Even if the photograph doesn't include organizations or people directly tied to the interviewee, they can still spark memories about a time period, a topic (ex. nature, religion, childhood), and/or a place. This sharing of memories is reminiscent of flipping through a scrapbook or scrolling through images on a phone – common activities that can break down barriers between the interviewer and interviewee. This makes it easier to have a conversation and can put everyone involved more at ease.

## Finding Photographs

In addition to personal collections that family or friends might have, museums, libraries, and archives often hold hundreds or thousands of photographs that could be used for an oral history project. Some businesses, churches, and newspapers also maintain photo collections that might also be available for educational use.

The IU Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has more than 40,000 images that cover a range of topics including historic Bloomington buildings and Bloomington's black community. Please consider contacting IUMAA or your local museum or archive as you begin planning your project. You can find out more about IUMAA's photography collection at <https://iumaa.iu.edu/collections/ethnographic-collections/index.html>.



## Photo Elicitation Techniques

There are a variety of photo elicitation techniques. We will cover selected ones here, but more can be found in the articles referenced in the bibliography.

It is possible to conduct a photo elicitation interview with a single image, but we recommend using multiple images. This allows for deeper discussion opportunities and increases the possibility that the interviewee will connect to an images.

### Using Multiple Images in an Interview

If you don't know the person you are interviewing very well, there are a couple of techniques you can use to find images that are relevant to them as well as your topic.

1. You can ask them to bring their own images or send them to you ahead of time. For this to work it is important for you to tell them what topic(s) you want to cover in the interview.
2. Bring multiple images. There are several ways you can use them:
  - a. Flip through the images in a designated order until you reach one that is relevant to the interviewee. This can be good when you are trying to identify and gather stories about specific people or places, but make sure there is a strong chance they will be able to relate to many of the images.
  - b. Give all the images to the interviewee and ask them to sort the images. After they have been sorted, pick up the pile that is relevant to your research and choose an image to explore with them. Then move through the rest of the images in that pile.  
Some suggestions on how to ask them to sort the images:
    - i. Images they relate to and images they don't
    - ii. Places/people they recognize and ones they don't
    - iii. mages they feel an emotional connection to
  - c. Give them all the images and ask the interviewee to order them either by their interests, importance or in chronological order. This can help you choose which image to start with and get a richer story.



## A Caution about Oral Histories

One thing to remember is that oral history relies on a person's memory, and nobody remembers everything. So, as with all forms of research, it is important to double check the information you receive during an interview as much as possible.

# Conducting Photo Elicitation Interviews

There are many resources on how to conduct oral history interviews. Very few involve the use of photographs, but they do provide great advice on how to make the interviewee comfortable, what kinds of questions to ask, and other tips. If you still have questions about the process after reading the Pre-Interview Preparation section, we recommend checking out the longer version of this lesson or some of these resources:

- Oral History Society: <https://www.ohs.org.uk/for-beginners/>
- Baylor University The Institute for Oral History: <https://www.baylor.edu/library/index.php?id=974438>
- The American Folklife Center: <https://loc.gov/folklife/familyfolklife/oralhistory.html>

## Preparing for the Interview

### 1. Identify Goals

### 2. Choose images connected to your goal.

- a. If you are organizing a large group of young interviewees, we recommend having everyone use the same set of images. This keeps the picture choosing process simple and allows for discussions about different perspectives on the same image.

### 3. Research the topic you are studying.

- a. Researching the topic ahead of time helps you ask intelligent questions during the interview and can reduce nervousness. It also gives the researcher a heads-up about any potentially controversial topics.
- b. For kids interviewing grandparents about their childhood, they might ask their parents what they know about the grandparents. This lets them know what kind of topics might come up in the interview and help them craft their questions.

### 4. Create a list of questions, but be prepared to ask them out of order.

### 5. Ask to interview someone.

- a. Be sure to say what the interview is going to be about, how the interview will be used in the future (put into an archive, to create an exhibit, put on a website, etc), and about how long it will take (typically 30 min to 1 hour).

### 6. Gather Equipment and TEST IT!

- a. Use a smartphone app or Zoom/Facetime
- b. It is not recommended to rely on pen and paper, but have some handy in case you want to write down a question so you don't forget to ask it.
- c. Take extra batteries or a charger.

### 7. Print an oral history release form to have the interviewee sign.

### 8. Print your images.

- a. Don't trust technology to work at the interview locations. You may want to show images on an iPad, but it is good to have printed versions as backup.
- b. Make sure that the images are large and as clear and crisp as possible.

## During the Interview

1. Make sure the interviewee is comfortable and that you can see and hear each other.
2. Before you start recording, introduce yourself and chit chat a little bit to make everyone more comfortable.
  - a. You may also want to test your equipment at this time.
3. Have them sign the release form.
4. Tell the person you are going to start the recording and let it run for 3-5 seconds with no one talking.
5. Say who you are, the date, who you are with, and where you are.
6. Ask the person to introduce themselves.
7. Ask if you have permission to record this interview. **NEVER** record someone secretly!
8. Begin your interview.
9. When you are done with the interview (either out of questions or out of time) continue to record and thank them for sharing their memories and answering your questions.
  - a. Ask if there is anything they would like to add before you end the recording?
10. On the record tell them how the stories they shared are going to be used and have them give a verbal acknowledgement.
  - a. Let them know that you will give them a chance to review the final edit and make any changes to the release form.
11. Turn off recording and thank again.



## Tips and Tricks for Conducting an Oral History Interview

1. It is important to use active listening skills and be visibly engaged in the conversation.
2. Don't be afraid of silence and long pauses.
3. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification.
4. Ask only one question at a time and keep it simple.
5. Use a mix of open and closed questions to gather information about the larger picture and specific details.
6. Start with easy questions and work your way up to harder or more controversial questions after you have gained the interviewee's trust.
7. Don't interrupt or contradict what someone is saying even if they are wrong. Contradicting them can break trust and cause them to want to end the interview.

## **After the Interview**

- 1. Make a backup copy of the original. Use the backup to do all the editing.**
- 2. Listen to the audio clips and do any sound editing you need to.**
  - a. Audacity is a free audio editing software and there are YouTube videos on how to use it.
    - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkpzHJGE4Dk>
    - ii. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj7sbBng-T8>
  - b. You can also use Adobe Audition with YouTube tutorials:
    - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZsSWItYFGs>
    - ii. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbaJmref8GU>
- 3. Send the finished audio to the interviewee and allow them to review it.**
  - a. Ask them if there are any changes they want to make to their release form.
    - i. Sometimes embarrassing or deeply personal stories come out during the interview process. They may request that a portion of the interview not be used or only be used after their death. It is important to honor their wishes and make those notes on the release form so future researchers know as well.
- 4. Write a summary of the oral history that gives highlights and provides basic biographical information about who you interviewed.**



# Expansion Activities

## Present to the Group

Have each interviewer present about who they interviewed and key takeaways from the interview that help answer the research question. After everyone has presented, discuss results as a group. Bonus: You can ask students to write down their own thoughts/predictions before they conduct the interviews. After, you can discuss if they were right/wrong, if anything surprised them, and how the interview made them think differently about the topic.

## Research a Topic Further

Have students research a topic that came up during the interview. Have them write a paper or present their findings to the class.

## Write a Creative Story

Have students write a fictional story based on their interviews and research. It could be a day in the life of a kid in the 1950s, attending an event inspired by one of the outfits, or taking a walk through town in the past. Ask them to include as many details as possible. What would they see? Who would they be with? What would they be doing?

Alternatively, you could also have them imagine what they would tell their grandkids about their life. What is important for them to know? What would they leave out?

## Create a Mini Exhibit

Creating a mini-exhibit for your classroom, school, or community center can be a fun way to share your research with more people. Print out a short paragraph discussing an aspect of the interview, an image of the interviewee, and the photograph(s) used and hang them around the classroom, hallway, or on a tri-fold board. (See the longer version of this lesson for more detailed steps)

### Title: An Arts Hub

#### Subtitle: The Buskirk-Chumley Theatre

**William Jones**  
Retired Store Owner

**A meaningful quote here.** Example, when I was a kid, every weekend we would go to the square to pick up artifacts from the candy shop on the corner. We looked forward to it all week.

**Subtitle Here**

**Samantha Martin**  
Music Teacher


**A meaningful quote here.** Example, when I was a kid, every weekend we would go to the square to pick up artifacts from the candy shop on the corner. We looked forward to it all week.

**Subtitle Here**

**Susan Smith**  
Travel Agent

**A meaningful quote here.** Example, when I was a kid, every weekend we would go to the square to pick up artifacts from the candy shop on the corner. We looked forward to it all week.


**Subtitle Here**



**“A Cathcy Quote Here - We used to go here every Friday night”**

**Major Take-Aways**

- one
- two
- three
- four



**Jose Rodriguez**  
IU Professor

**A meaningful quote here.** Example, when I was a kid, every weekend we would go to the square to pick up artifacts from the candy shop on the corner. We looked forward to it all week.

**Subtitle Here**

**Melissa Oliver**  
Doctor

**A meaningful quote here.** Example, when I was a kid, every weekend we would go to the square to pick up artifacts from the candy shop on the corner. We looked forward to it all week.

**Subtitle Here**

**David Clark**  
Bank Teller

**A meaningful quote here.** Example, when I was a kid, every weekend we would go to the square to pick up artifacts from the candy shop on the corner. We looked forward to it all week.

**Subtitle Here**

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