



**BBC**

# HANDS ON HISTORY

## A guide to oral history

Oral history involves gaining an understanding of the past by talking to people to collect memories and personal experiences.

It's a great way to find out about the everyday lives of ordinary people and can help us understand how big events have affected people on a personal level.

### Get started

First you need to choose a subject or theme that interests you.

Oral history can be particularly useful for finding out more about your own family history, as often it's the personal stories which can really bring a family tree to life. You may find an interesting family photo you want to interview people about, or there may be a big family occasion you'd like to understand better, like a birth or wedding.

Oral history can also be a great way to understand an important national event from the recent past by finding out what it was like to experience the event first hand. So a subject from modern history will work well, such as the Queen's Coronation.

### Who to talk to

Who you choose to talk to will depend on your subject. If you are exploring local history, for example, you may want to visit shopkeepers in the area, people from places of worship or at local schools.

One easy way to start is to speak to a relative of the right age for your subject. You may also be able to speak to friends of relatives or visit local old people's homes.

You will often find that the person you want to interview will feel their life has been too ordinary to be interesting. However, by explaining the importance of their knowledge and memories you will often give the interviewee the confidence to take part.

But remember, do be careful to respect people's wishes if they decide they don't wish to take part.



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### Equipment

Choose some recording equipment for your interview. This could be a Dictaphone, a video camera or even a mobile phone, as many have recording tools.

Remember - always test your equipment before starting the interview!

### Where to go

It's best to find a quiet location where your interviewee is going to feel comfortable and where you can create an environment that feels like you are having a friendly chat.

Often it is a good idea to interview someone in their own home if possible as they will feel more comfortable and they may also have photographs or other evidence to show you.

### Interview questions

To help you write good interview questions it is useful to do some background research on your subject first, for example in a library or online. You will find more tips for researching on the Hands on History website.

Think about asking 'open questions'. For example, if you are preparing for an interview about the Queen's Coronation, a good first question would be 'Can you tell me how the day started for you?' This is an open question which should lead to a detailed answer.

If you asked a 'closed question' such as 'Do you remember the Coronation?' you may just get a one word answer and won't find out very much!

Remember to be flexible once the interview has started, as you may come across interesting stories and memories you didn't plan for and will need to adapt your questions as you go.

### Use prompts

If something of interest is mentioned, you can use prompts like 'Can you tell me a little more about that?' or 'How did that make you feel?' to help draw out more information.

Be careful to strike a balance between giving the interviewee the opportunity to expand and letting them go too far off the subject. Otherwise you may end up with hours of material that isn't useful to you.

### Be sensitive

Memories can be powerful things and, depending on your subject, it can be a good idea to bring tissues with you. Always be sensitive with your questions and be prepared to pause to give your interviewee a break, or continue at another time if things get too difficult.



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### After the interview

Take a close look at the information you have collected. The best way to start is by making a transcript, by listening back to your recording and writing down what was said. This will also act as a backup to your recording.

Look at the information you have collected and see what it can tell you about your initial questions.

Remember that one interview is just one person's point of view. It can be coloured by the passage of time or personal bias. Or you may find your interviewee is keen to tell you what they think you want to hear.

Use follow-up research to see how the interview is backed up (or not!) by other historical sources by referring to books, websites and other research material.

You may even want to undertake more interviews to gather different points of view and build up a broader understanding of the topic.

You'll find more information about interpreting historical evidence on the Hands on History website, as well as advice and useful places to go to undertake historical research.

### In summary:

- Identify a subject or theme
- Choose a location and recording equipment
- Prepare open interview questions
- Be sensitive, as the process can be emotional
- Remember an interview is just one person's opinion



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### Useful contacts and websites

#### **BBC History**

Explore history from the Egyptians to the present day, including an interactive timeline – useful for background research

[www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history)

#### **BBC History Trails**

More information and tips for undertaking an oral history project

[www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/htd\\_history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/htd_history)

#### **National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales**

Comprehensive collection of archive including sound recordings relating to Wales and the Welsh

<http://www.archif.com>

#### **The British Library Sound Archive**

Find details of the British Library's comprehensive collection of oral history

[www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/sound/ohist/oralhistory.html](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/sound/ohist/oralhistory.html)

#### **The Oral History Society**

Find tips and advice for undertaking some oral history. Also details of their regional network, including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

[www.oralhistory.org.uk/advice](http://www.oralhistory.org.uk/advice)

#### **The Scottish Oral History Centre**

Part of the Department of History at the University of Strathclyde. Mainly aimed at museums and archives, there are some useful tips on the website

[www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/research/history/sohc](http://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/research/history/sohc)

For useful places to go to undertake historical research, including libraries and archives, download the Hands on History 'Researching History' guide from the website.

[www.bbc.co.uk/handsonhistory](http://www.bbc.co.uk/handsonhistory)



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