

“The Vietnam War: An Oral History Project

Section 1: Why Conduct Oral Histories of the Vietnam Era

The Vietnam years were profoundly traumatic for millions of people and consequently for American society and culture, and the legacy of that wrenching period is still very much with us. Examining the impact of the war is key to understanding who we are today as individuals and moving forward as a society.

To do that we have to learn about what happened to individuals during that time and its impact on their lives today. This goal suggests some big questions you might investigate as you conduct your interview. How has your life today been affected by the Vietnam era? How are you different as a result? How has it affected your values, your relationships, your children or parents, your politics, your livelihood, your attitudes towards life and death, your philosophy of life? What would you want your children and descendants to know about how Vietnam affected you -- and therefore them?

Whether you interview a Vietnam Vet, someone who was active in the movement against the war, a refugee from Southeast Asia, or anyone else, keep in mind that the goal is to gather stories not just about experiences of that time, but **how those experiences have influenced people's lives since then.**

The Vietnam era is a particularly rich topic for exploration through oral history. Since there are millions of Americans with vivid memories of this period, it should be relatively easy to find someone to interview.

Yet oral history projects present special challenges. Sometimes we assume that first person testimony represents the absolute truth, "the way things really were." It is more helpful to approach oral history as a form of memory -- an individual's way of interpreting and narrating their experience of a particular event or period. Seen this way, oral memoirs can help us understand the crucial role of perspective and interpretation in history. This is particularly valuable in studying a controversial period such as the Vietnam era. Oral memoirs that present contrasting views of this period can help us explore the conflicts that divided the nation during these years -- and how issues raised then still shape our social and political discussions.

Section 2: Pre-Interview Tasks

Learning about the Vietnam Era:

Before doing an interview, you should familiarize yourself with the history of the Vietnam era. If you know little about the war or the social conflicts that surrounded it, you will have difficulty developing good questions, conducting good interviews, and placing oral memoirs into a meaningful context. Your interviews will improve if you are familiar with the chronology, themes, and key figures and issues of the period. Pre-interview reading and discussion will enrich the interviews and improve the overall value of the project – research textbooks, encyclopedias, videos, and websites.

Planning the Questions:

Once you or your group has chosen an individual and focus for your interview you must decide which questions to ask about your topic. What is it you want to learn through this interview?

Before the interview, you should prepare a list of questions you hope to ask; start with a list of ten. To get an interview moving, it is often a good idea to start with simple questions that ask for descriptive answers about the person's early life (i.e. "Where did you grow up?" "What are your earliest memories of the Vietnam War?"). Then, as the interview develops, your questions can go deeper. In general, open-ended questions work better than questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. For example, the second question will get better results than the first:

- Were you for or against the war in Vietnam?
- Tell me about why you either supported or opposed the war in Vietnam.

When your list of questions is complete, role play with your interview questions. Are the questions clear and easy to understand? Do the questions give you the answers you are looking for?

Asking Follow-up Questions:

Listen carefully while your subject is talking. Often, what a person says may suggest a follow-up question that will produce interesting information. For example, if your subject mentions the influence of his or her high school teacher, you might follow up by asking about the teacher -- Why did the teacher have a strong influence on the interview subject? What made the person a good teacher? Did you keep in contact with the teacher? and so on. Write down follow-up questions as your interview subject speaks. That way, you can ask the follow-up questions at a pause in the interview, without interrupting your interview subject's train of thought.

Section 3: Conducting the Interview

As you set up your interview, here are some issues to bear in mind:

Time & Setting: Interviews can be short or long. **For this project we will try to keep it short - plan for an interview that lasts between 20-30 minutes.** Setting is also important: it is best to find a quiet room, away from telephones, television, children, and other distractions. Restaurants are generally not good places for interviews, though a calm, quiet restaurant will do in a pinch. Often, the best place to interview someone is at their home--but this varies depending on the person. Most important is that the person being interviewed feel that they are in a safe place where they can concentrate on the discussion.

Setting the tone: Interview Manners

You can set a good tone for the interview in other ways as well. Explaining the purpose of your interview and what you plan to do with it can help the person feel comfortable, and help them think about what they want to say during the interview. (It is important that interviewees know if their oral memoir will become public, so they can shape what they say accordingly.) Sharing some sense of who you are can also be helpful, though you should always remember that you are there to listen, not to talk at length about yourself and your own views of Vietnam.

Here are some pointers for good interview manners:

- Be on time.
- Be prepared. Have your questions ready, your notebook out, and your equipment in good working order.
- Be polite. Say *please* and *thank you* and address people formally (using Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss, and so on).
- Provide time for the person to answer questions. Be patient when answers take a long time.
- Do not argue with or correct the subject. Oral histories are not always accurate. But they do provide important information about feelings and impressions.
- End your interview by thanking your subject.
- After the interview, send a thank you letter to the subject.

Getting Started

1. Introduce yourself. Give your name, age, the class and school you attend. Describe the research project your group has chosen.
2. Ask your interview subject if you can tape record the conversation. Have the subject sign a ["Release Form"](#) so you can share the information you collect with others.
3. Begin the interview by asking where and when the interview subject was born.
4. If your subject strays from the topic, try to refocus by asking one of your prepared questions.

During The Interview: The most important interviewing skill is listening carefully and responding to what you hear. If a person feels you are truly listening to them, they will often respond by telling you more, and in greater depth, than you could ever ask for. Listening well -- and showing the other person that you are listening -- is the key.

Props: It is sometimes helpful to bring memory props such as old photographs or newspaper clippings to the interview. Having someone examine these items can help start or deepen the conversation, so long as the item is relevant to the person's experience. Props can be used at any point in the interview.

Equipment: Most oral historians record their interviews on audio tape, so as to produce as accurate a document as possible. If tape recording is not feasible, you can take notes during the interview, but many interviewers find note-taking slow and demanding. Try to be as accurate as possible in recording the exact words used by the person you are interviewing. Make sure you have enough paper and pens to record the interview without interruption.

If you tape your interview, the sound quality will be improved by using good blank cassettes and a directional microphone (as opposed to the condenser microphone that is built into most tape recorders). Before the interview, practice using the tape recorder and make sure that it is functioning properly, so as to minimize the chance of equipment disasters.

Sensitivity: Interviewers need to remember that memories of the Vietnam era may bring up a range of difficult emotions, such as anger, fear, and grief. Remembering combat, losing a loved one, resisting the draft, or family conflict around the war can put the interviewee in touch with the powerful emotions they felt at the time. This isn't bad; it can make for a rich and moving interview. But you need to be able to recognize and deal with these painful moments with humanity and sensitivity. A thoughtful, caring approach can not only lead to an enriched interview; it can also make the interview a valuable learning experience for everyone involved.

Silences: Interviewers should not be afraid of occasional silences. Sometimes, when you ask a difficult question, the interviewee needs a minute or two to think over what they want to say. It is important to avoid the tendency to immediately fill every silence with another question. Some of the best responses take some time to formulate; don't silence your interviewee by filling every void.

Section 4: After the Interview

Completing the interview is only part of the work of an oral history project. Much of the hardest (and most educational) work comes after the interview is over. When planning your oral history project, be sure to plan substantial time after your interviews to complete the rest of your project.

Notes/Outlines: It is often worthwhile to review the interview tape and make a quick outline of the topics covered, taking note of key stories and discussions. This can facilitate transcribing and speed the completion of the project.

Transcribing (if the interview is recorded): If time is short, you may transcribe portions of the interview rather than the entire interview. This can speed the process considerably. Making complete transcripts of oral history interviews is slow (4-6 hours of transcribing for every hour of interviewing) and labor intensive, and can be the death of oral history projects. A transcribing machine with a footpedal is helpful; short of that, a tape recorder with a working "Pause" button will do.

Listening carefully when making a transcript will help you to capture the words of the interviewee as fully and as accurately as possible. In an ideal oral history project, interviewers will review a completed transcript as they listen to the tape, checking for accuracy. You should check key stories as well as sections that are difficult to understand.

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Creating a Public Document: The issues of transcribing become much more difficult if one is creating a public document. In such cases, it is most common to offer interviewees a chance to review a transcript, check for accuracy, and delete any section that they do not want to be made public.

Presenting the Interview: Analysis and Interpretation

Think about what you wanted to learn. Did your oral history interview help answer those questions? Write some tentative summaries of your questions. The final product will be an oral history written in the voice of the person you interviewed. The goal of this is provide your reader with a deeper understanding of how the war in Vietnam impacted the life of this individual and how this person viewed the war and this period of American history. Once completed these findings will be presented to the class as part of a concluding discussion of the war in Vietnam and Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried."

**“The Things They Carried” and the Vietnam War:
An Oral History Project**

Student Guide: Assignments, Notes, and Due Dates

Section 1: Why Conduct Oral Histories of the Vietnam Era

(Due _____)

Who are you interviewing? Why this person? What will be the focus of the interview? What do you hope to learn?

Planning the Questions:

List the questions you plan to ask during your interview. Start with a list of ten.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Section 3: Conducting the Interview

(Due _____ ; Transcript _____)

Time & Setting – Where and when will you be conducting the interview?

Setting the Tone – Be sure to read and review the pointers on good interview manners and getting the interview started.

Props – Will you bring any props to the interview? Is so, what will you bring and why?

Recording the Interview: Taking notes by hand or using a tape recorder

How will you record the interview? Explain your choice and why? If you are working describe the responsibilities of each member.
