

Doing Oral History

A Lesson on ‘Active Listening’ for Elementary and Middle School Students.

OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

This lesson can serve as an introduction to any oral history–focused project and be adapted for most age groups. (For ideas on how you can incorporate oral history into your curriculum, check out the “Project and Activity Ideas” section.) The primary purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to the art and method of oral history and to convey the importance of “active listening,” a practice that is at the root of every good oral history interview.

OBJECTIVES

1. To help students understand what oral history is, why we do it and how listening to people’s stories about their history helps us to form a more
2. complete picture of the past.
To give students clear, practical tips on how to formulate questions and
3. to conduct an oral history interview.
To provide students with an opportunity to reflect on and to practice active listening skills.
To encourage students to imagine themselves as historymakers whose individual and collective stories matter and to tell their own stories because, as we often say, “if you don’t, somebody else will... and they’re probably going to get it wrong!”

MATERIALS

- MCJC Slideshow, How to Do Oral History. (Review carefully before presenting.)
- Timer
- Cards or slips of paper for exit passes (optional).
- Open ears, open hearts!

ACTIVITY

1. Begin by sharing a story from your own past or a story you learned about from someone else by listening to them. Ask them what they thought about the story and share with them what the story means to you and how it felt to share it.
2. Share our slideshow, *How to Do Oral History*, with students. They may want to take notes as they watch and listen. You might also want to print out copies of slide 5 which explains the different types of questions to ask.
To illustrate the importance of 'active listening,' ask students to choose a partner or, better yet, pair them randomly or create pairs of students who might not know each other well. Tell them that this is an active listening exercise; they will be listening to each other and then summarizing what they heard their partner say.
3. Next, tell students they should take a few moments to think of a story to tell their partner. (You can tell them that the story can be about anything—something good or exciting that happened to them, something not so great, or even just what they did after school the day before.) Then let them know that they will each have exactly 30 seconds (you can also choose a longer period, but not more than 1 minute) to tell the story. They then should decide who goes first; begin the timer and say, stop, when time is up. Without waiting long, tell students to switch roles and start the clock. When the time is up, let students know that they will be taking turns telling the class what they learned about their partner.
When everyone has finished, ask students what they thought about the process. Did they listen well? Did they feel heard? (They can also write down their thoughts on an exit pass.)