



LESSON PLANS ON AGING ISSUES:
Creative Ways to Meet Social Studies Standards

U.S. History

**CAPTURING THE 1930s
THROUGH ORAL HISTORY**

Ithaca College Gerontology Institute
www.ithaca.edu/aging/schools

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Capturing the 1930s through Oral History

Introduction

This three-day lesson plan will engage students in an oral history activity. It is designed to be part of a larger unit on the 1930s and the Great Depression. Students will learn about the social history of the 1930s by reading oral history interviews that have been recorded by others and conducting their own interviews with people who lived during that time. As students become actively engaged in interviewing, the 1930s will come alive through an intergenerational exchange. Each of the three lessons is planned for a forty-minute class period. It is recommended that the first and second lessons occur near the beginning of a unit on the Great Depression in order to provide adequate time for students to schedule and conduct their interviews by the end of the unit.

Some students may not be able to identify a relative, neighbor, or family friend. These students can read and respond in writing to interviews recorded in books or on web sites. Students may need to conduct interviews on the telephone, via e-mail or written letters. The goal of this activity is for students to learn about the 1930s from stories about ordinary people's daily and work experiences.

Students will be able to make connections between the stories they collect and what they learn in class about the 1930s and the Great Depression. The sharing of stories from the oral history activity during the third lesson provides a meaningful way to close the unit.

This lesson plan was originally written for an 8th grade U.S. History class, but can be adapted for other grades. You may also want to explore our "Witnesses to History" lesson plan, designed for high school history.

Objectives

Students will:

- Become familiar with methods of social science research and documentation.
- Participate actively in learning activities.
- Deepen their knowledge of the issues and experiences of life during the 1930s.
- Develop a greater appreciation for social history by making connections between everyday experiences and historical topics and events.
- Practice skills in listening, reading, writing, and speaking.
- Develop the skill of writing effective interview questions.
- Recognize the value of ordinary people's life experiences.
- Recognize how interesting it can be to talk with older people.

Key Terms

oral history, social history, primary source, the Great Depression, the New Deal

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Materials

Students will need either access to computers during class or at home, or printed copies of excerpts from the Federal Writers Project Interviews from the web site:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohdir.html>

Resource: “Useful Web Sites: Oral History and the 1930s” are good sites for finding examples of interview transcripts and summaries. Additional sources include other web sites about oral history, documented oral history interviews, and *Hard Times* by Studs Terkel.

Handout: “Guidelines for Preparing for and Conducting the Interview”

Handout: “Practice Interviews”

Handout: “Questions for an Oral History Interview about the 1930s and the Great Depression”

Handout: “Student Reflection on the Oral History Experience”

Lesson One: Examples of Oral History from the 1930s

1. Discuss the different ways we can learn about the past. Create a brainstorm list on an overhead transparency.
2. Explain how the technique of oral history contributes to an understanding of the social history of a time period by recording the stories of everyday experiences.
3. Present examples of interview summaries from the 1930s such as those in the book *Hard Times* by Studs Terkel.
4. Describe the Federal Writers Project and how it used oral history to document personal experiences during the 1930s.
5. Take the class to a computer lab (or provide printed copies if computers are not available) to analyze oral histories from the Federal Writers Project. The web site, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohdir.html>, provides excerpts from interviews and questions to guide students thinking about the information in the interviews. Ask students to select one excerpt from each of the four categories presented and to write responses to the questions that follow each excerpt. (Finish as homework if necessary.)
6. Toward the end of the class period, ask students to identify some of the developments and challenges during the 1930s that were expressed in the interview excerpts.
7. For homework, ask the students to try their best to identify a relative, family friend, or neighbor who was alive during the 1930s and is willing to be interviewed by them. Let them know that documented interviews will be available for students who cannot find a person to interview. Everyone will be able to participate in the sharing and discussion about stories from the 1930s.

Lesson Two: Preparation for Conducting an Oral History Interview

1. Provide an overview of the tasks, responsibilities, and time line for the oral history activity.
2. Share examples of 1930s interview summaries from prior student work.
3. Discuss the development of interview questions and the strengths and limitations of open and closed questions. Identify different ways to collect personal stories, depending on the proximity of the interviewee.
4. Organize students into pairs to practice the interview process in class briefly. Provide students with some sample questions to ask each other, e.g., What is your earliest memory of your life in the 1930s? or What do you remember about starting middle school? (Students who will be interviewing somebody on the telephone may want to sit back to back in the practice interview.)
5. Distribute and review the handout, “Guidelines for Preparing for and Conducting the Interview.”
6. For homework, ask students to write at least ten interview questions, mostly open-ended, on the handout, “Questions for an Oral History Interview about the 1930s and the Great Depression.” In addition, students should write a summary of their interview and write responses to the questions on the handout, “Student Reflection on the Oral History Experience” for Lesson Three.

Lesson Three: Sharing the Stories

1. With a partner, ask each student to share something s/he found interesting or surprising in their interviews.
2. In a roundtable style, ask each student to share a one-minute summary of the highlights of the stories from the 1930s that were gathered during the interviews.
3. Discuss how the personal experiences shared during the interview provide insight into the developments and events during the 1930s and how life then was similar or different to life today.
4. Ask students to share their responses to the reflection questions about the oral history experience.
5. Collect the summaries of the interviews and reflection sheets.

Extension Activities

- Prepare an exhibit of the written summaries.

- Submit the interview summaries to a local historical society.
- Invite older members of the community to the school for students to interview during class or after school.
- Schedule a family event to share students' interviews.
- Create a booklet of the written summaries.
- Develop an interdisciplinary connection with the English classes, e.g. read non-fiction and historical fiction about the 1930s and select quotes to illustrate issues and events.
- Write an annotated review of web sites about oral history interviews from the 1930s.
- Analyze primary documents of the time: students identify from web sites or teacher provides a selected group of documents and gives each student one to analyze; together, the set should cover a range of issues; students write an extended response about specific questions to link the document to issues and experiences in the 1930s.
- Assign different selections from, *Firsthand History: The Great Depression*, from Greenhaven Press/Gale Group) to small groups to read and discuss in class.
- View and discuss documentary films which use interviewing to document life in the 1930s, e.g. *Union Maids* (the story of three women who were involved in the labor movement) and *The Uprising of '34* (the story of the General Textile strike of 1934).
- Complete a research project related to a topic or issue that was mentioned in an interview.

Useful Web Sites*

Oral History and the 1930s

American Memory, Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/>

“Voices from the Great Depression: Life Histories from the Federal Writer’s Project”, *WPA Life Histories*, Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/exhome.html>

“Using Oral History”, *The Learning Page*, Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/oralhist/ohhome.html>

“Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman’s Introduction to Field Techniques”, *American Folklife Center*, Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/>

U.S. National Archives & Records Administration

<http://www.nara.gov/>

“The New Deal Stage”, *Federal Theatre Project*, Library of Congress

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/fthome.html>

“American Life Histories”, *Federal Writers’ Project 1936-1940*, Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

The New Deal Network

<http://newdeal.feri.org/>

“Archives and Collections”, *The New Deal Network*

<http://newdeal.feri.org/classrm/c.htm>

“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime: Photographs from the Great Depression”, *The Learning Page*, Library of Congress

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/98/dime/photo.html>

“New Deal Cultural Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democracy”, *The World Wide Web Center*

<http://www.wxcd.org/policy/US/newdeal.html>

“20th Century History: Photographs of the Great Depression”, *About*

<http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blyindexdepression.htm>

*All web addresses current at the time of publication.

Handout

Guidelines for Preparing for and Conducting the Interview

1. Arrange a **meeting** time for the interview that is convenient for both you and the interviewee. Plan at least twenty to thirty minutes; interviews may take more or less time.
2. Consider the **age** of the interviewee during the 1930s when deciding what questions to ask. For example, if the person was young child or school-age at the time, you might want to ask about what s/he did for fun and her/his educational experiences. If the person was a young adult, you might want to ask about family or work experiences.
3. Before the interview, develop **open-ended questions** to encourage the person to describe experiences and share details about personal memories and **closed questions** to gather specific information such as age and name of place where the person lived during the 1930s. Write down your questions, leaving space to jot down notes about the person's response. Use this sheet during the interview.
4. Be **respectful** about what you ask. Some interviewees will be comfortable with personal questions while others may not be. If the person hesitates to respond to a question, move on to your next question.
5. Have a **note pad and pen** available to jot down briefly the person's response to each of the questions. The interview should be as much like a conversation as possible, so write quickly in your own shorthand. Maintain eye contact as much as possible. Also, complete the background information form provided in class. (After the interview, be sure to **read over your notes** on the day you conduct the interview so you can expand them and write down anything else you remember. If you have access to tape recorder, you could plan to tape the interview instead of taking notes; you will need to ask the person for permission to tape the interview.)
6. Before you start to ask questions, **introduce yourself**, if you don't know the interviewee, (e.g., name, age, and grade), and explain that this interview is part of a **school project** related to a unit about the 1930s in your U.S. History class. Thank the person for taking the time to speak with you.
7. During the entire interview, maintain **eye contact**, **listen attentively**, and maintain a **positive tone**.
8. Asking **follow-up questions** to learn more about things mentioned during the interview. This will make the conversation more relaxed and informative.
9. Be **flexible**. Sometimes an interviewee will go off on a tangent and spend time talking about a topic that is unrelated to your question or the 1930s. Be **patient**; you may learn something interesting that you hadn't expected. However, be aware of the time and how many questions you still want to ask. If after listening for a couple of minutes, the person continues to talk about something unrelated to the 1930s, or if you have additional questions you would like to ask, say something respectfully like, "thanks for telling me about that experience" or "I had another question I wanted to ask," and then ask your next question.
10. When you have asked all of your questions, ask the interviewee if there is anything else s/he would like to share with you. Then **thank** her/him for taking the time to meet with you.
11. Within a few days after the interview, send a written **thank you note** to the interviewee.

*These guidelines were written assuming you will be meeting in-person. With minor changes, the guidelines will be useful for telephone conversations too. If you use written communication (e.g., letters and e-mail) to learn about a person's experiences during the 1930s, consider the general purpose of the guidelines above and revise them as necessary. Through writing, you can also ask questions and respond to the person's answers, set a positive tone, and express appreciation for the time the person takes to write to you.

Handout

Practice Interview about the 1930s and the Great Depression

Practice Interviews

1. Choose a partner.
2. One person plays the role of the interviewer and the other person plays the role of the interviewee.
3. The interviewee selects one of the sets of questions below for the interview.
4. The interviewer asks the questions, keeping in mind some of the interview guidelines.
5. The interviewer jots down the interviewee's responses briefly and quickly.
6. Switch roles and repeat steps 2-5 above.

A. Early Childhood

1. Where were you born?
2. Where did you live before you were five years old?
3. Have you moved since then? If yes, to where have you moved?
4. What is the earliest memory you can think of from early childhood?
5. What kinds of things did you like to do as a young child?
6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your early childhood?

B. First Year in Middle School

1. What school did you attend in 6th grade?
2. If you attended Boynton, what was the name of your team?
3. What do you remember about your first days at middle school?
4. What did you like about starting middle school? What didn't you like?
5. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about starting middle school?

Handout

Questions for an Oral History Interview about the 1930s and the Great Depression

Student Name _____ Date of Interview _____

Interviewee Background Information

Interviewee Name _____ Relationship to you _____

Interviewee's date of birth or current age (if known): _____

Interviewee's address (for your thank you note):

Interview Questions (Think of questions that you would like to ask. The questions may vary depending on the age of the interviewee during the 1930s. Some ideas for general questions are on the reverse side.)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Possible questions:

1. Where were you living in the 1930s?
2. How old were you in the 1930s?
3. What do you remember most about the 1930s?
4. How did the Great Depression affect your family?
5. How was your life affected by the Great Depression?
6. What activities did you participate in during the 1930s?
7. Are there any particular stories or experiences from these years that you can tell me?
8. What was a typical day like for you?
9. How was your life in the 1930s different than life today?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your life in the 1930s?

Handout

Student Reflection on the Oral History Experience

Name: _____ **Due:** _____

Please respond in complete sentences to the following questions, and be prepared to share your thoughts during a class discussion.

1. What did you enjoy about conducting an oral history interview?
2. What did you find challenging about interviewing someone about life in the 1930s?
3. What did you learn about the 1930s and the Great Depression from the interview experience?
4. What suggestions do you have for improving this activity next time?