

# **THE SOUND OF HISTORY: CONDUCTING AN ORAL INTERVIEW**

Lloyd Soloman, Prince Edward Island

## **INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA**

Grades 10-12 History, Language Arts

## **INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES**

Students will:

- develop extensive interviewing skills;
- explore a historical period at an everyday level in which she or he is most familiar;
- build lasting relationships that will help bind the community together.
- complete a project that is skill-building but does not require literary skills.
- feel the accomplishment of doing an independent project while being closely monitored to ensure maximum success.
- learn about the people in their community and developing closer community relationships.

## **BACKGROUND**

This project could be included in a local history or local studies course, in a Canadian history or Canadian studies course. It would add reality and relevance to any course that includes non-political people as their major emphasis of study.

## **MATERIALS/RESOURCES**

- a cassette recorder
- a C-30 cassette tape
- a unidirectional external microphone
- an electric extension cord

## **ACTIVITIES – Student Instructions**

Preparation:

- Choose one of the 40 topics listed to do a ten-minute oral interview. These topics have been chosen because they can be completed in ten minutes. A preliminary inquiry is necessary in order to assess whether a potential interviewee is suitable for your purposes.
- Research your topic ahead of time by checking out newspaper clippings in the school library, phoning people, checking out diaries your teacher might have. Like any detective, gaining knowledge to ask the right questions is important. The reasons behind doing preliminary research are that you can obtain the greatest possible amount of knowledge. Your interview might be the only historical record ever collected on that topic.
- Here are some ideas on framing questions for your interview:
  - Remember this is an audio interview so be careful to frame your questions so that anyone listening can understand the question and

the answer. Example: weight, height, distance, colour and length must be “languaged” and you must not assume that a listener can “see” these things.

- Word your questions in short, clear sentences.
- Ask specific Who, What, When, Where and Why questions (5Ws).
- Avoid ambiguous questions like “around” and “about” at the beginnings of your questions.
- Avoid leading questions (e.g., have you stopped beating your wife?)
- Never ask questions that have a simple “yes” or “no” answer.
- Bring your written questions to the pre-interview session.

### **The Pre-Interview Session:**

- The purpose of the pre-interview is to determine whether the person you have chosen has anything worthwhile to say on your selected topic.
- Tell the person that you are thinking about doing an interview but leave the option open as to whether he or she will be the interviewee.
- Once you think the person will be suitable and will consent to do the interview, prod him or her about specific areas to get more information so you can frame a final list of questions for the true interview.
- Write up a final list of questions and give it to the interviewee so that she or he can be thinking about answers for a few days before the interview.
- Make a duplicate list to be passed in with your project.
- The actual questions that you ask during the interview will be slightly different because there will be some natural questions which will come out of your conversation with the interviewee.

### **Interviewing:**

- Meet the person at a prearranged time and location. Choose a quiet place away from noises and interruption (never pick the kitchen because your recorder will pick up the hums of the refrigerator and other appliances). The best place is the living room with the television and radio turned off.
- Place the microphone on the table between the two of you. When setting up, casually chat to relax the interviewee.
- Test the recorder and the microphone and test it. Rewind the tape to the beginning. Press the record button and allow five seconds to pass before you start with sound. You will not lose any of the interview this way.
- Start by gathering “identifying data,” that is, the date, the topic, the location, the interviewer and the interviewee. This factual information will be valuable to people using your tape in the future.
- Listen attentively because the interviewee is the main point of interest. Don’t spoil it by giving your opinion.
- If the interviewee confuses dates and events, write them down and include them at the end of you summary. Try to have the interviewee give you as many dates as possible as it will help listeners have a better idea of the chronological view of events.

- Rather than interrupt the interviewee when you wish to interject a question, arrange a signal with person, like raising your hand.
- Hearing “yes” and “uh-huh” repeatedly on your tape will be very distracting when you play your tape back.
- Remember to always keep control of the central theme because the interviewee may stray from the topic. It is necessary to bring the person back to the topic as politely as possible.
- Before you finish the interview session, be sure to thank the interviewee for his or her time and for the cooperation he or she has given you. You are making a friend and the interviewee admires your courage and fortitude.
- Rewind your tape and listen to it to make sure that it turned out the way you want it to. If it didn’t turn out to your satisfaction, “do it again, Sam.”
- Label your tape on the outside with the topic, date and names of the interviewer and the interviewee.

### **Outlining:**

After your interview is concluded, it is very important to make an outline of your tape. A tape without some type of outline is difficult to use. Listen to the tape and according to the tape footage, list the subject matter by headings and subheadings. A verbatim transcription is good to have if you can afford the time. Two copies should be made, one for the interviewee and one to accompany your project. The interviewee should then be requested to approve it and sign a consent form.

Be sure to send or hand-deliver a thank you note. It is part of the process of doing the assignment.

In the large brown envelope that will be handed you to you, please include the:

1. audio tape;
2. written summary;
3. mini-master sheets;
4. master sheet complete;
5. list of questions;
6. evaluation sheet;
7. pictures, written data or a small artifact related to your project.

### **EVALUATION**

I like to monitor the student closely to ensure that s/he is active and that progress is being made. I use a series of mini-master sheets for all projects in island history. It only takes a few minutes to monitor an entire class and to find potential problems before they grow too big. I ask the student to mark every effort they make that is related to the project so that I know whether they need help. If you do not have such a device, students will attempt to compress all the tasks into a short time period.

This sometimes overwhelms even the most aggressive students. I have them compile these mini-masters onto one master sheet that is handed in with project. I give each student an evaluation sheet when I give the assignment so that they can see exactly

how their project is marked. I ask them to include the sheet with their project submission. The more information the student has, the more careful he or she will be with his or her project.

The oral history assignment is one of the first assignments I give in local history. It helps me to get to know my students and it gives them an opportunity to succeed in a project that does not require literary skills.

### **About the Educator**

Lloyd Soloman teaches at Souris Regional High School in Prince Edward Island. He designed a senior high school course, the “History of PEI” to bridge a gap between community and school. He brought a “mini archives” to Souris that provided his students with primary sources to manipulate, investigate and interpret. Lloyd takes students from the formal classroom into non-traditional learning environments in the community such as the salt marshes and dykes of the Acadians, prehistoric Indian burial sites and farm dumps to investigate pioneer life. As a result of Lloyd’s efforts, Souris Regional High School acts as a central location for education in Eastern PEI.

# APPENDIX A

## Sample of Student Evaluation Sheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

This form will give you an indication of how your project was evaluated. Your mark will be based on a percentage.

Interview Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

### A. PRE-INTERVIEW

Provide evidence that you did some background research on your topic, including:

- the type of questions you ask /4
  - pre-interview sessions with interviewee /3
  - questions were given to interviewee in advance /2
  - sources you used to gain knowledge /2
- Subtotal: /11

The questions:

- pertain to the topic /8
  - are understandable /5
  - are in logical sequence /3
  - require more than yes or no answers /3
- Subtotal: /19

### B. THE INTERVIEW TAPE

- Is your tape labelled? /2
  - Is your tape rewound? /2
  - Do you have the five-second pause at the beginning? /3
  - Do you have a proper introduction?  
Include time, place, interviewer, interviewee and topic. /4
  - Have you picked a suitable location? /2
  - What is the technical quality of your topic? /15
  - Does your interview answer the questions—  
who, what, where, when and how? /5
  - How accurate are your audio descriptions? /10
  - How did you end your interview? /3
  - How did you handle interviewee straying from topic? /4
- Subtotal: /50

### C. POST INTERVIEW SUMMARY

How accurate was your summary /20

TOTAL PERCENTAGE: /100

TEACHER'S COMMENTS:

## APPENDIX B

### Sample of Mini Master Evaluation Sheet

This mini-master sheet is the property of \_\_\_\_\_  
(student's name)

The project title is \_\_\_\_\_

The mini-master is in the series of \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

The following time period is \_\_\_\_\_

Enter the activities, time spent on each activity, and the result.

Activity	Minutes	Date	Results
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
11.			
12.			
13.			
14.			
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18.			
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21.			
22.			
23.			