

PRESERVING FAMILY STORIES

GET INSPIRED

Oral history is a method of learning about the past through interviews with people who experienced it directly. They can be well-known people or people you know personally. The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress was created to “preserve and present American folklife,” and its archive includes many oral history collections and personal conversations.

The Library of Congress continues to collect oral histories related to military service through the [Veterans History Project](#) and also archives recordings of conversations through [StoryCorps](#), an organization dedicated to recording, preserving, and sharing the stories of Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs. But a recorded conversation with a family member can also be a way for you to learn more about your family and to preserve family history and family stories.

To begin, listening to an oral history from the Veterans History Project, [Civil Rights History Project](#), [Occupational Folklife Project](#), and StoryCorps from [this guide](#). Then talk about the following questions together:

1. What surprises you most about the story?
2. What did you learn from the clips that you might not have learned from reading a book?
3. What do you think later generations will find remarkable about this story?



Inside the StoryCorps booth, July 31, 2010. Flickr user [rochelle hartman](#) via Creative Commons.

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GET READY

Is there someone you know who has experienced a historical event who might be available for an interview? Or is there a family member whose life you'd like to know more about, or whose stories you want to preserve and share with others?



Decide whom to interview, then prepare a list of questions.



Try to keep questions short and avoid any that can be answered with “yes” or “no.”



If you are interviewing a family member, you can find suggested questions for a conversation [here](#).

✧ Here are a few examples for interviews with parents:

- How did you choose my name?
- What was I like as a baby?
- What were the hardest moments you had when I was growing up?
- What are your dreams for me?

✧ And questions for interviews with grandparents:

- What was Mom/Dad like growing up?
- Do you remember any songs that you used to sing to her/him? Can you sing them now?
- What were your parents like?
- How would you like to be remembered?



If your interviewee has served in the military, you can find tips and sample interview questions in the [Veterans History Project Field Kit](#). Examples include:

- ✧ Can you tell me about when you went into the military?
- ✧ How did your military service experiences affect your life?
- ✧ What would you like people to know or remember from your story?
- ✧ What do you wish more people knew about veterans?



Decide how you will record the interview, using a digital recorder, a mobile device, or other item, and test your equipment.



Father and daughter at a temporary oral history listening station in the Library Programs Lab, November 2019.”

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RECORD

Be sure to select a quiet location for recording, then:

- * Start with date and place of the interview, your name and the name of your interviewee, the topic
- * Ask your questions and encourage the interviewee without interrupting.
- * Take notes as you record if you can.

After your interview is complete, listen to your recording and talk as a family about the experience. Here are some questions to guide your thoughts:

- * What did you learn about your interviewee or your family that you did not know before? What did you learn about the historical events they experienced?
- * If someone were going to do an oral history interview of you, what events would you talk about? Is there anything in particular you would want later generations to know about your experiences?

EXPLORE MORE

If you are interested in formally recording your interview for historical purposes, the [Veterans History Project](#) (VHP) and [StoryCorps](#) are accepting submissions. Materials submitted to VHP must be at least 30 minutes for recorded interviews; 20 pages for original memoirs, diaries or journals; 10 items for original photographs, letters, maps, pieces of artwork, or military documents. Email vohp@loc.gov or visit the website for more information.

For formal interviews, keep the interview to 60–90 minutes, be sure to research the time period and major topics from the person’s life, and conducting a pre-interview may be helpful to both you and your interviewee. You can find more “Interviewing Tips” from the American Folklife Center [here](#).

To see how authors have used oral histories in their work:

- * [Watch this talk](#) by author and illustrator Kadir Nelson, who used interviews with family members to inspire his books and paintings:
- * [Check out this blog post](#) about Liza Mundy’s book, *Code Girls*, which uses oral history interviews from the Veterans History Project to tell the stories of women code breakers in World War II.