

## Reference Sheet C

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/stories/vietnam/curriculum.html>

### HOW TO DO AN ORAL HISTORY ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM ERA

by Bret Eynon

Here's how to do an oral history project on the impact of the Vietnam era and share the results with readers around the world through the website, **Regarding Vietnam: Stories Since the War**.

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**.

In recent years, many people have found oral history to be a valuable tool for exploring the past. Oral histories (also known as oral testimony and oral memoirs) convey a dramatic, first-hand view of history, with a storytelling approach and a sense of personal experience. Conducting interviews with family and community members illuminates the ways historic developments affect everyday life.

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. Oral testimony can provide powerful insight into the experiences of the women who served in the military in Vietnam, as well as the stories of Vietnamese families now living in the U.S. Social movements played crucial roles in shaping the Vietnam era, and oral testimony is an excellent tool for studying such movements. Oral memoirs can help us to move beyond easy slogans to see the complexity and the human drama of the Vietnam experience.

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 discourse.

Participants in this project must plan oral history projects carefully for another reason. Oral history projects are hard work. Conducting a good interview is not always easy; and doing the interview is only a small part of creating a good oral memoir. The tips offered here suggest some practical steps to consider as you work to create a meaningful oral history project, one that results in sound learning opportunities as well as testimony posted to this website. It is introductory, and far from comprehensive. You should feel free to adapt it to make it work for your own setting, age level, and project.

## **Pre-Interview Tasks**

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.

It is also worth taking time to familiarize yourself with interview techniques. Thinking and talking about what makes a good question and a good interview can improve your projects. Actually practicing is also helpful -- a student can interview a teacher, with other students observing and then discussing what they saw; or students can interview one other, followed by a debriefing session where you reflect on the experience, discuss what kinds of questions worked best, and identify strategies for improving the interview.

**Setting Up Interviews:** As you set up interviews, here are some issues to bear in mind:

**Time & Setting:** Interviews can be short or long. You should try to find an interview time of at least 45 minutes, scheduled at the interviewee's convenience. If the interview seems to be going longer than 90 minutes or 2 hours, consider stopping and finishing the interview at a second session. 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.

**Planning the Questions:** Before the interview, you should prepare a list of questions you hope to ask. 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. (See box for sample open-ended questions.) Questions about exact dates and chronologies often stump interviewees and break the flow of the conversation. Brainstorming good questions will help you prepare for the interview.

Your list of questions should not dominate the interview, however. The best questions often emerge during the interview, and therefore cannot be anticipated. Often, the most effective questions are simple interjections and follow-up questions: "Why?" "How?" "Can you tell me more about that?" "How did you feel when that happened?" It is crucial to listen carefully and respond to what you are hearing. You will want to sometimes refer back to your question list, but you should be very willing to follow the thread of interesting stories and issues you hadn't thought about prior to the interview.

**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.

**Permission form:** You should ask interviewees to sign a form granting permission to use the interview. Forms do not need to be overly complex; the key is to include clear language granting permission to use the interview for the intended purpose, to have space to identify the person and the date of the interview, and a place for the person to sign. Though some like to do it at the beginning of the interview, generally it is easiest to get permission forms signed at the end of 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. 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.

**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.

**Setting the tone:** 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.

**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.

**Equipment:** Prior to beginning the interview, make sure the tape recorder is running properly and that recording levels are set. During the interview, check to see that the tape is running and recording. But don't make a big deal out of checking the equipment, or your interviewee may be put off by your lack of attention to them.

**Second Interview:** If your interviewee tires or you run out of time before getting to key questions, ask if you can return for a second interview. Don't push them past their limits of time or energy. Better to find a new time, when the interviewee will be fresh. A few days between interviews also provides you with time to review the first part of the interview, think of new questions, and ensure that you're getting what you want.

**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 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.

Transcribing is intellectually challenging as well. Oral speech and written speech are almost two different languages; the transcribing process is akin in many ways to translation. Oral speech is a kind of shorthand, filled with broken sentences and a variety of "ums" and "ahs." It is interwoven with inaudible gestures and facial expressions, and sounds that are hard to represent in written form. Oral historians do not agree on how to handle the process of translating oral into written speech. My suggestion is to use common sense; preserve the specific qualities of the interviewee's conversation and speech patterns, but reduce the frequency of the tics and hitches. A modest amount of editing facilitates reading the transcript and respects the translation process embedded in going from spoken to written language.

**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.

**Interpretation -- Presenting the Interview:**

The Regarding Vietnam Web site offers you an opportunity to share the oral memoirs you help to create with interested people around the world. For the Web site, we are looking for 250-500 word excerpts that capture how your interviewee is different today as a result of the Vietnam era. Send the excerpts you have selected to share, preferably using email, which will allow us to most easily post your contribution to the web. Our address is [stories@pov.org](mailto:stories@pov.org). If email is not feasible, you can also fax us your contribution at 212 989-8230 or mail it to us at 220 West 19th St., 11th floor, New York, NY 10011.

When you send us your contribution, please be sure to provide background information -- the name and background of the interviewee (you can use pseudonyms, if your interviewee requests it); the date of the interview and the name and location of the person who conducted it; and a brief summary of the context of the excerpt(s) you have chosen.

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