

5 Writing Oral History

Interviewing someone who has experienced an historical event or era can provide students with an interesting first-hand account of the past. Older generations, whether they are parents, family friends, neighbors, or community members can often bring new and varied perspectives to students' understanding.

Instructions:

1. Students first learn about an event or era they are interested in. This means reading as much as possible to best understand the context of the time.
2. Next, students generate a variety of general and specific questions. General questions might include such phrases as:

"Tell me about your experience..."

"How did you feel about...?"

"What do you recall about...?"
3. Instructions for the students: When the subject of the interview is first contacted, the interviewee should be told the purpose of the interview and the topics to be discussed. Consider offering to send questions to the subject prior to the interview and also ask if the subject has any documentation, artifacts, or pictures that might assist with the research and interview. If the interview is to be recorded, permission should be obtained prior to the interview. Set a time, date, and place for the interview.
4. Remind students to be polite and listen carefully when conducting their interviews. They can ask for examples and stories as illustrations. If recording the interview, they need to take notes to help construct their interpretation while they listen to the recording.
5. Students should write a thank you note to the interviewee.
6. In writing the interview, students should first introduce the interviewee and provide background information to the readers including the setting, date, and place of the interview. They can organize the interview either as a continuous narrative describing events in chronological order or by subject, or in a question-answer format.
7. After the interview, students should write a paragraph reflecting on what they have learned from the interview, including what surprised or interested them the most.

(After Researching Joseph Stalin)

An Interview with Joseph Stalin

1. Can you tell us a little about your father?

I was born in 1878. I was his only child of four to survive infancy. He was a cobbler and tried to teach me but I did not want to be a cobbler. He was very aggressive and abusive. I hold a lot of resentment toward him. Although, he taught me how to not use emotion, which has helped me to become successful. My father died in 1890 from wounds he received in a fight.

2. Why did you give yourself the nickname Stalin?

My true name is Jughashvili but in my youth I received the nickname Koba. This was because of the Georgian outlaw I was compared to who sacrificed everything for the rights of the people. I changed my name to Stalin when I was 34 because of political reasons. I felt that Stalin went better in writing after Lenin. I also thought the meaning fit, as it means Man of Steel. I wanted people to think of me as strong and unbendable.

3. What happened to cause your arm to be crippled?

When I was young I got various sicknesses like smallpox and septicemia. Being run over by a horse and carriage messed up the growth in my left arm causing it to be 2 inches shorter than the right. All along my mother was there to nurse me through my illnesses and was the one who sent me into training for the priesthood in 1888. This was the job that she thought would give me a good education and let me rise to a higher station than our current poor condition.

4. What happened in 1899 with the seminary?

I was expelled in 1899 right before I was about to graduate. In 1901, I abandoned the clerical job knowing I was going to be arrested. I rejected my church training after a while and worked on the revolution serving first in Tiflis and then in Batun where I could organize strikes and demonstrations.

5. When were you arrested?

I was arrested on April 18, 1902. I was later exiled to Siberia in 1903. I escaped prison exile several times and was released by general amnesty after the February Revolution in 1917.

6. Who was your main competition in taking over the Soviet Unions' government?

Trotsky, he was more of an intellectual man. But he left the Soviet Union for good in 1929. He died shortly after and many of my opponents backed down. Without Trotsky it was easy for me to take over. Most of the people did not want to stand against me anymore and those who did were murdered.

7. What did you do right after you gained control of the Soviet Union?

I believed that the Soviet Union was 100s of years behind the west in agriculture and industry so I started a "command economy" to catch up quickly. Farmers and industry had to modernize. Collective farming seemed to be the fastest way I could get agriculture and industry to grow.

8. What were collective farms?

That is where peasants had to pool their machinery and livestock on large farms that were controlled by the state. There were some side effects because the peasants tried to fight against the plan and many peasants were sadly murdered or starved to death. They did not want to accept the payments that we gave them for their products and many were so selfish that they burned their crops and killed their animals so the government could not take them. This act killed millions of people.

Some people believe you had your wife killed. What do you say about that?

I did not kill my first wife whom I married in 1904. She died in 1907 leaving me a son named Yakov that I abandoned. I married my second wife in 1919. Her name was Nadezhda and she was 16 years old at the time. She bore me a son and a daughter. In the last few days of her life she began to rebel against me. Unexpectedly, one morning we found her dead.