

Part One: Planning Your Project

World War II

A Videotape Oral History Project
The History Channel

A Workbook for Students

by Michael Gatto

Why do some students hate to study history?

Part 1: Planning Your Project

History too often seems like the study of long lists of names, events and dates. Students seldom get the chance to act as historians who record and interpret history for themselves and for others. Historians often act like detectives who are trying to solve intriguing puzzles. They search for information and collect it, but most important, they draw conclusions from facts.

Students can write their own histories of an important place, event or person. They can examine documents, letters, diaries, photographs, maps and folk songs to get closer to people and events of the past. Explaining and understanding the past connects us to our families, communities and country. We probably can never really fully understand those who lived before us, but the effort helps us understand our society, and perhaps finally, ourselves.

Connecting With the Past

Many people have a hard time understanding events that they, themselves, have not experienced. Students, especially, must learn that they are part of a country that has a truly special

history. Americans share a culture and history that makes them often admired, and sometimes hated. Americans share a positive record of hard work, sacrifice, and faith that colors their thoughts and hopes even today.

Too often, young people miss out on a golden opportunity to learn about America's past, because they seem to be cut off from their elders. Our project will suggest an opportunity for students to reach out to the older generations in their own families and communities, in order to learn more about the past.

What were the experiences of average Americans in World War Two?

To many individuals, "The War" represents a defining moment of shared purpose and sacrifice. Many older Americans are happy to tell their individual stories in a conscious effort to connect their lives to the generations that will follow.

This is an important project that will be remembered by both the students and interview subjects long after it is completed in class.

Instructions for Students

Picking Someone to Interview

Who remembers?

Most adults today were born after the end of World War II . In order to have any detailed memories of the war your subject probably should have been at least in his or her early teen years when the United States entered the war in late 1941. Most interview subjects should have been born before 1930, making them at least seventy years old today. Do not throw up your hands in shock. Older people are all around you. They are your relatives, neighbors and family friends. In many cases they think that no one cares about their experiences, which are over fifty years in the past. If treated with respect, most older people will go out of their way to make the interview an experience that you will not forget.

1938 1939 1940 1941 1942 1943 1944 1945 1946

Who should you choose to interview?

- relative
- friend
- neighbor
- member of a veterans organization
- retired teacher or administrator
- member of a senior citizens group
- resident of assisted living facility

Names of Three Possible Interview Subjects:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who is your final choice for your interview?

Name _____

Address _____

Town/City _____

ZipCode _____

Telephone number: () _____

Email: _____

Directions to interview site:

Make an Interview Appointment:

Circle Day:

Monday - Tuesday - Wednesday - Thursday - Friday - Saturday -
Sunday

Date: ___/___/___

Time: _____ a.m./p.m.

Remember that the interview is probably an important event to your subject. Set up a special time and date so that both of you can prepare for the meeting and so that you will have time to review your final product. It may be helpful, when you speak with your subject on the phone, to ask him or her what he/she would like to talk about. Ask what wartime experiences the person would like to share. This will help you prepare your questions for the interview.

Post Card Confirmation:

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to an interview on videotape for my History Channel Oral History Project.

I will meet you:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

I would like to ask some questions about the topic of:

_____.

I would enjoy seeing and hearing about any photographs, letters, or other keepsakes that you would be willing to share with others.

Yours truly, _____ Telephone Number _____

Picking an Interview Topic

World War Two is a very big subject for an oral history interview. You should select a topic that you want to learn more about, drawing upon something that you have heard or read about, or seen in the movies. By narrowing your topic, you will give your interview a focus and will encourage your interview subject to give details and put a personal stamp on the interview. *Some possible focus topics are:* The Rise of Fascism; Pearl Harbor; Military Action; The Home Front; Survivors of the Holocaust; D-Day Participants; Fighting in the Pacific Theater; Hiroshima; Peace.

Preparing for the Interview

Background Reading: What have you found out about your interview topic?

"Just the Facts": Taking Notes

After doing some background reading, one of the best ways to begin sorting through the information that you have just learned about your focus topic is to fill in answers for the five "w's:" who, what, when, where and why. Start by writing your focus topic in the title box at the top of the page. Then, write, in your own words, quick notes that answer the five "w" questions listed down the side of the page. Most likely, you will find a lot of information about your focus topic in books, movies, and on the Internet. It is up to you to sift through the information and choose those facts that will help you the most to prepare for your interview. Remember that the goal of this exercise is to

help you come up with the most useful questions to ask your interview subject.

Note-taking Example:

Title: D-Day

Who? The United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Germany

What? The Allied Powers' invasion of France during World War II

When? June 6, 1944

Where? The Normandy Coast of France, across the English Channel from Great Britain

Why? To liberate France, which had been occupied by the Germans since 1940

Writing Interview Questions

Memory Questions:

After you have decided on a focus topic and done some background reading, you should carefully consider and write down the questions that you plan to use in your interview, using your own worksheet or the one provided with this manual. Your interview should begin with several memory questions. First, memory questions should help relax your subject and get them in a mood to reminisce. Second, these questions will help you gather information about your subject's experiences in the war.

Students should politely discourage attempts by their interview subjects to recite a text book version of the events of World War Two. Your own research and class work in social studies will provide you with a general understanding of the war. You want your interviewee to provide personal stories, sad and funny memories that you will not find in the standard school books.

Your Job is to Record and Interpret History

- Write and ask good questions.
- Get good stories that are told in an interesting way.
- Examine and understand the different beliefs, interests, hopes and fears in follow up questions.
- Evaluate your evidence to make conclusions.

Possible Questions for Focus Topics:

You may want to pick a focus topic and use some of the memory questions from the following list. **Note** that your topic and questions will be shaped by the subject(s) you choose to interview. A woman working in a U.S. war plant, for example, will not be able to tell you much about life in Germany during the war years. You will get the best answers if you ask your interview subject to talk about his or her *own* experiences.

Choose One:

Rise of Fascism

Memory Questions:

When did you first take serious notice of the fascists?

How did you react to news about the violations of civil rights by fascists in Germany and elsewhere in Europe?

In what ways did people suffer at the hands of the fascists?

Pearl Harbor

Memory Questions:

How did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

Where were you when it happened?

What was your reaction?

How did other people react?

What happened in the days that followed?

Military Action

Memory Questions:

- Under what circumstances did you join the armed forces?
- What kind of training did you receive?
- What part did you take in the fighting?
- What was your job?
- What are some incidents that stand out in your memory?

The Home Front

Memory Questions:

- How did you participate in the war effort?
- How did Americans show their willingness to sacrifice for the war effort?
- Were all Americans supportive of the war effort? Why or why not?
- How did rationing work?
- How did people react to war shortages?
- What were some happy or sad incidents?
- What songs or films were popular at home?

Survivors of the Holocaust

Memory Questions:

- How did you first learn about the concentration camps?
- How you were brought to the concentration camp?
- What were some of your experiences in the camps?
- How did you survive?/How did others survive?
- Which family members and friends were murdered in the Holocaust?
- What did you do after you were freed by the Allies?

D-Day Participants

Memory Questions:

- How were you trained for the invasion?
- How did you get to the Normandy beaches?
- What was your job on D-Day?
- What were your experiences in the first hours of the invasion?
- How did your unit achieve its objective?
- What is your vivid memory of the invasion?

Fighting in the Pacific Theater



Memory Questions:

What kind of training did you receive in the armed forces?

What was your job in the armed forces?

What was the most difficult part of your job?

What was the most important (or dangerous) few hours of the time you spent in the Pacific?

What sounds do you remember?

Hiroshima



Memory Questions:

How did you hear about Hiroshima?

How did you react to the news?

How did the people around you react to the news?

Peace



Memory Questions:

How did you find out about the surrender of Japan?

What did you do on V-J Day?

What happened on the day you (or a loved one) came home?

What were the holidays like in 1945?

What were your hopes for the future?

Writing Additional Questions

In order to learn as much as possible from the interview experience you should write several questions that will encourage your subject to expand and explain their feelings and ideas. The second stage of questions should encourage your subject to dig deeper into the stories to explain why things happened and how they relate to other events.

Below are some basic questions to help you get started. Use your own worksheet, or the one provided, to write your own complete questions.

Explanation Questions

- What caused this event...?
- Why did this happen...?
- What happened next...?
- Can you describe the scene in one word...?
- Can you compare two events...?
- Explain the reason for...?
- What conclusion can you draw...?
- What is your point of view about...?
- Can you describe the scene...?
- Can you explain a photograph...?

Judgment Questions

The last group of questions should offer your subject a chance to talk about the "big picture" by telling about what was good or bad, important or less important. These questions should be asked last because they allow the interview subject a chance to sum up

and make conclusions. Remember that this is your subject's opportunity to give his or her own opinion—you may or may not agree with the conclusions.

Judgment Questions

- What was the happiest (funniest or saddest) memory?
- What was your biggest accomplishment?
- What actions would you change if you had a chance to re-live those years again?
- What mistakes did people make in World War Two?
- What should people today remember about World War Two?

**MEMORY + EXPLANATION + JUDGMENT =
SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW**

Even with your best efforts some people may need some extra questions to encourage them to tell the full story.

Don't be afraid to ask for details or explanations.

Back up Questions:

Why was this important?

How did the story begin or end?

What else do you want to tell me about this?

What important question did I forget to ask you?