

ACTIVITY PLAN

How to record a witness life-story interview

**OVERVIEW**

Preparing pupils and students to meet a witness, introduction to the fundamentals of leading a life-story interview

**PARTICIPANTS' AGE/LEVEL**

Pupils and students aged 12 to 15

**GROUP SIZE**

The workshop is designed for school groups consisting of 2 to 30 students.

**TIME**

The workshop is divided into two parts: a theoretical introduction (45 minutes) and a practical part (90 minutes). The theoretical introduction can be skipped to allow the full allotment of time for the practical part of the workshop. If this approach is chosen, we recommend giving the children homework according to section 1.4. (below) a week before the workshop takes place.

**KEYWORDS**

eyewitness of the past, life-story interview, oral history, truly informed consent, period photographs, historical records, Memory of Nations Archive, historical context, opening questions, follow-up questions

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

The aim of the workshop is to prepare children to meet a witness and have them learn the basic principles of conducting a life-story interview. The workshop develops critical thinking.

**MATERIALS**

Blackboard/flipchart, voice-recorder/smartphone

1 THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION (45 MIN.)

1. Expectations and concerns (10 min.)

Pupils begin by individually writing down their expectations and concerns about meeting the witness and recording the interview.

Write their ideas on the blackboard.

After this “conceptual” phase, we discuss the individual expectations and concerns with the children, and together we try to find a way how to avoid their fears being realized. It is good if the teacher also shares their own expectations and concerns.

Aim of the activity: To show the pupils that we regard them as partners, that we want to hear their opinions and attitudes, and to motivate them to take their meeting with the witness seriously. Explain to the children that it is good to know ahead of time what one actually expects from the project and, when this is formulated in advance, that it is easier to assess the results afterwards. To find out their expectations and concerns, to tune in to the group.

2. Who is a witness and how to find one (10 min.)

Brainstorming: Who is a witness and how can you tell one from a non-witness? At Post Bellum, we consider a witness to be a person whose life was fundamentally affected by some totalitarian power (big history), regardless of whether they participated actively (e.g. resistance fighter) or passively (e.g. Holocaust witness), or were eyewitnesses of important historical events.

Exposition: The method of narrated history and how it differs from classic historiography and history. Narrated history (also oral history) is a picture of the human past preserved by memory and told in words. The main focus of this method is not the gathering of facts but the actual subject of the interview and their personal statement, their experiences, the decisions they made in difficult and banal situations, or their personal motivation. We explain to the children the difference between the direct actors of big historical events (those can be found in textbooks), people living ordinary lives not being affected by history, and people whose ordinary life is disrupted by history.

Where to find a witness: One of the main sources are relatives and family friends of the pupils. It is good to ask at a local expat association or cultural institution. Other good sources are organisations for the elderly and religious communities.

3. Visiting the witness and preparing for the interview (20 min.)

Exposition with discussion:

Location of the interview: How do the children imagine their visit to the witness, where is the best place for it to take place? Ideally, they should visit the witness in their home environment. The witness feels the most secure there, and the social roles of guest and host are clearly delineated (politeness is required when visiting). A classroom is not suitable acoustically (with loud noises making things even worse). Public spaces rarely offer the necessary peace and quiet.

Preparing for the interview:

- it is important to obtain truly informed consent
- take photos of the witness at the start (if time allows, show pupils some good and some bad portrait photos)
- it is good to ask the witness for period photographs and historical records
- it helps to divide up the roles in a team (technician, interviewer, note taker – has a list of questions and makes a note of what the witness has already answered, marks down what follow-up questions to ask)

4. Homework and question time (5 min.)

The first, theoretical block is followed up with homework:

Use your phone to record your parents, grandparents or anyone at least a generation older than you.

We give the children more exact instructions: for instance, they can ask the person how they met their spouse, or what a specific historic event meant to them (e.g. the terrorist attacks on 9/11). The recommended length of the recording is 5-20 minutes. The recording is not played to anyone afterwards, but the children are tasked with listening to it again a few days later and considering what they did well and what could have been done better (e.g. they can highlight one thing they did well in the interview and one they would do differently now). Working with the recording will prepare the children for the second part of the workshop, which comes a week or two later.

2 PRACTICAL PART (90 MIN.)

The children have already completed their first recording, which has given them the relevant position and arguments for the following activities. The teacher is no longer the presenter of banal and obvious facts (“you have to listen to what the witness is saying”, “make sure your recording device is on”). The children have now personally experienced that the most obvious facts can be easily forgotten “in the heat of things” and that things that seem clear in the classroom are much more confusing when struggling with “stage fright” during the interview.

1. Feedback on the recording of their parents (10 min.)

Discussion and sharing experience: We find out who did their homework and whom they recorded. We get impressions and first remarks from the pupils by asking the broadest of all opening questions: “How was it?”. We then focus on two specific queries:

- “What did you do well and will do the same when interviewing the witness?”
- “What didn’t work out, what will you do differently, what will you watch out for?”

Write down the pupils’ responses on the blackboard.

2. Brainstorming: What all can go wrong during the interview? (10 min.)

Equipment:

- they forgot how to start the recorder (try it out the evening before)
- they didn’t test the voice recorder, which doesn’t work
- dead batteries (take spares)
- they did not set the microphone sensitivity with earphones (the witness is too quiet, or the excessive sensitivity damages the sound)
- they switched off the recorder midway through the interview (say, when the witness went to the toilet) and forgot to switch it on again
- they didn’t start the recording and only set the mic sensitivity
- they didn’t switch their phones off
- they didn’t back up the data (backup recording on their phone)

Circumstances:

- noise from outside
- animals
- relatives
- acoustics of the room
- noisy things in the room

The witness:

- is not a narrator – they don't have to be (prepare questions)
- has hearing problems, speech impediments, or some bad habit – no solution here
- talks about history, well-known facts – politely return to the topic of their personal life story (we are interested in the personal experience of the witness, not a history lesson, which we can read in a textbook)

The interviewer:

- asks too many questions
- doesn't ask any questions
- isn't listening, isn't focused
- shows how bored they are
- debates with the witness or explains how it "really was"

3. Preparing to meet the witness (20 min.)**Leading a life-story interview**

- Visiting a witness usually takes about 90 minutes, but it can last from half an hour to several hours. It depends on how talkative the witness is and how quickly they tire.
- It is good to hold the interview in a **place where we will not be disturbed**; ideally the witness's home or some other quiet place where the witness feels at ease.
- How to begin? Ordinary chat to loosen up the mood; remember that we are visitors and should behave accordingly (e.g. bring a small present – some flowers, coffee ...).
- Before starting the interview, thoroughly explain our intention to the witness – that is, to make an audio recording of their story to pass on to future generations, thus helping to expand and popularize our understanding of modern history.
- You may ask the witness to **sign their consent** to having the recording of the interview stored in the Memory of Nations archive at www.memoryofnations.eu.
- Before the recording, take a **photo portrait of the witness and a group photo of the children's team with the witness** – if the lighting is suitable and the witness is not tired. People often forget to take photos after the recording.
- **Start the recording** – start by stating the date and place of recording, and let the witness say their **full name and date and place of birth**. For example, the interview can be started like this: *"Today is April 15th, 2022, and we are in the flat of Mr Novak in Prague, the Czech Republic. Mr Novak, can you tell us your full name and when and where you were born?"*
- After the witness has introduced themselves, follow up with opening questions about **their childhood and youth**.
- It is best when the witness narrates on their own; there is no need to interrupt with questions. Choose simple **follow-up questions** which the witness cannot answer with yes/no. We ask questions one at a time, not several at once.
- We end the narration by asking the witness for a **message or motto** that they would like to pass on to future generations.

Photography method (10 minutes)**Document the whole course of the interview, photograph the witness, and scan period documents**

- The interview must be **photographically documented** regularly during each phase. Designate a member of the team to be in charge of the camera.
- Before starting the interview, ask the witness to let you take a portrait photo of them. Rather than a "snapshot" from the interview, it is better to spend some time with the portrait and arrange the witness for the picture. The portrait photo is optional.

- Do not use flash if at all possible; avoid direct sunlight or any other direct light source (e.g. a lamp).
- The witness can stand by a window, which is a good source of natural light (not with their back to the window but shot from the side).
- The portrait should show the witness from the chest up with a small space above the head; use portrait/vertical orientation.
- There should be no light source in the background (computer display, TV screen ...), which would detract from the witness's face.
- The higher the resolution of the photo, the better (use a high-quality resolution).
- Rephotograph any documents or period photographs that the witness shows us without flash or scan them using a freeware application. (e.g. PhotoScan by Google Photos). Any glare would make the document illegible; the same goes for any direct source of light above the document or period photo.

4. Using a voice recorder (10 min.)

Introduce the pupils to a voice recorder and explain how it works. Emphasize that during the recording, the recorder's **microphone must point towards the witness**, as close to their lips as possible. A good tip is to place the recorder on a stack of books placed on a table in front of the witness.

The pupils should certainly get their hands on the recorder. Let them work out themselves how to change the battery (and which type it needs), where the SD card is, where to plug in the earphones.

Let each child try out the recorder, switching it on and off, and explain that it has a "pause" function and not to panic if they switch it on by mistake.

Also tell them how to set the microphone sensitivity and let them listen to how the sensitivity changes in the earphones.

It is possible to use a smartphone if there is no voice recorder available.

5. Preparing questions and topics (30 min.)

Let the pupils, either separately or in pairs, prepare topics or actual questions that they would like to ask the witness.

Our goal is to **record the whole life of the witness**. At the beginning of the interview, we ask about parents, siblings, and **childhood**. This is because this is usually a pleasant part of life that people like to remember and are sure to have already told someone about, which helps start up a natural conversation and diffuse the nervous atmosphere. It also helps the pupils understand the witness as a person and empathize with them better.

We are mainly interested in the witness's life and how they experienced it, thought about it. We do not want a history lesson but a personal story.

It is necessary for the pupils to **familiarize themselves with the topics** that the witness will talk about (**historical context**) and for them to prepare questions or topics to be discussed.

It can happen that the children, nervous about this novel situation, keep solely to the prepared questions and do not listen to the interview itself. This can lead (and in our experience often does) to the child asking questions about things that the witness has just told them. The pupils should realize that they really have to focus on the witness and what they are saying, even if it is not especially interesting at the given moment.

The most able communicator of the team is tasked with leading the interview. It will be their job to focus on ensuring that the witness narrates their whole life story. If the witness gets off track too much or starts lecturing on history, the interviewer politely **leads them back to their own memories and experiences**.

The next member of the team has the role of listener. They have a notepad and pencil on hand, together with a list of topics that should be mentioned. They follow the interview and check the topics that have been covered; they write down **follow-up questions** that occur to them during the interview, and also make sure that **all of the witness's stories or anecdotes are told in full** (people often jump from one situation to the next when telling their life story, saying "I'll tell you about that later", but often forget to do so).

The story only starts to come to life when we know the details – how they felt, their emotions, what they considered doing. Did they falter or doubt? You have to ask!

It is best to plan two sessions – in the first one, the witness tells their life story, and in the second (after carefully listening through the first recording) follow-up questions are asked. An interesting technique can be to record while looking at old photos and talking about who is on the photo.

If the witness mentions some relatives or other people, ask them for their **full names** and ideally when and where they were born, especially if they play an **interesting role in "big history"** and it would be possible to find out more about them in the archives. Otherwise, it can happen that the witness tells you a gripping story about their parents and, when going through the recording, you discover that you have no knowledge of their names because throughout the narration they were just mum and dad.

To wrap up, you can ask the witness if they have some **message for future generations** or a **personal motto**.

Possible topics for the interview

History: Key historical moments, how the witness experienced them, what they meant to them. Do not be afraid to ask critical questions.

A practical aid the pupils can use is a timeline, on which they place events from both "big history" and from the personal story of the witness. It is useful both when preparing to meet the witness and when placing the witness's story in a historical context.

Private life: You can ask about a number of areas, including childhood, school, work (what did the witness want to do as a child, what job did they end up doing and why), also relationships or marriage, how they met their spouse (this tends to be a good talking point and one that the witness knows how to narrate). You can ask about friends and hobbies. We usually end the interview with a question about their personal philosophy or faith in God. Consider what questions are suitable in the specific context, and avoid being inappropriate.

General questions: What are you proud of in your life? When were you the most afraid? What do you have doubts about, what would you like to have done differently? What gave you courage in your life? Did you ever do something that you are ashamed of now? What is your focus nowadays? Are you interested in current affairs and society? How should society change, in your opinion? What do you think we can do to help with that?

Author: Post Bellum Educational Team

Project: Uprooted – (Hi)Stories of Stolen Children during World War II, www.uprootedchildren.eu

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