



Under the direction of Georgia Wier, folklorist for the City of Greeley Museums and Colorado Council on the Arts, students at Lone Star School students in Washington County prepare for their upcoming interview with Lila Hahn, batik artist from Yuma. Photo by Tory Read, 1999.

The Art of Interviewing

- Description:** Students learn to conduct interviews with one another, write a three-paragraph essay, plan an oral presentation, and interview a guest.
- Grades:** 4 – 12
- Author:** Georgia Wier
- Materials Included:** Work Sheets. Student Interview Form. Guide for advanced secondary or college students, or adults.
- Materials Needed:** A Community Consultant to Interview
- Standards:** This activity can be used to address the following Colorado Model Content Standards
Reading and Writing: 2, 4
- Notes:** History, geography, foreign language and the arts can also be addressed through selected interview topics.

Contents

Activity 1: Open and Closed Questions

Instructions

Closed Questions Worksheet

Open Questions Worksheet

Activity 2: Classroom Interviewing

General Information

Instructions

Activity 3: Writing an Essay from an Interview

The Three-Paragraph Interview

Activity 4: Planning an Oral Presentation from an Interview

Introduction

Setting the Stage

Biographical Information

Consultant's Development

Detail or Goal

Closing

Activity 5: Holding an All-Class Interview with a Guest

Background Information

Classroom Preparation

The Interview Session

Student Interview Form for Classroom Interview

Activity 6: Oral History for Advanced Students

Steps Toward a Successful Oral History Interview

Activity 1: Open and Closed Questions**Instructions**

1. Using the following worksheets ask students to develop open and closed questions for classroom interviewing.
2. Divide the class into two teams.
3. Play the Question Game! Team members take turns asking members of the other team questions they have written on the worksheets.

Which team wins? Both win! As long as they keep the following in mind!

Everyone should be respectful of each other throughout the game.

Students should not pry into their consultants' lives or try to get them to talk about any topic they choose not to discuss.

Activity 1: Open and Closed Questions

Activity 1: Open and Closed Questions

Closed Questions Worksheet

We ask **Closed Questions** to find out basic facts about people's lives and to learn details about the topic being discussed.

The following are examples of closed questions:

- What is your name?
- When were you born?
- What is your occupation?
- What is your favorite kind of bait? (This is a question for someone who goes fishing.)

Think of a closed question that you could ask someone in this class. It could be about sports, childhood, hair, or clothing. Write the question:

Open Questions Worksheet

We ask **Open Questions** to give our consultants (the people being interviewed) a chance to express their ideas or opinions more fully than they do when they answer closed questions. Open questions often begin with one of the following phrases:

- "Tell me about ..."
- "What was it like when ...?"
- "How did you ...?"
- "What do you think about ...?"
- "Why do you...?"

Think of an open question about sports, games, or food to ask someone in this class. Begin the question with one of the phrases listed above and write the question below:

Activity 2: Classroom Interviewing**General Information**

After playing the “Question Game,” divide your students into pairs and have them conduct 15 or 20-minute interviews with each other. For this occasion, the person being interviewed may be considered the “consultant”; the one conducting the interview is the “interviewer” or “fieldworker.” These classroom interviews may be recorded if enough tape recorders are available. Otherwise, student interviewers must take careful notes on their consultants’ answers.

Instructions**15-Minute Interview Process:**

1. To begin with, interviewers may gather basic information about their consultants, including the following:

- Where the student was born.
- What states, cities or towns the student has lived in.
- Their favorite places so far.
- The student’s brothers and sisters.
- The student’s pets.

2. Next, interviewers should ask several questions focusing on one topic in their consultants’ lives. That topic may consist of a sport, a favorite activity, pets or farm animals the consultant is involved with, or any volunteer or paid work. Ask three or more questions about that topic. The student fieldworkers should try to make their consultants feel comfortable with their interviews—so comfortable that they actually volunteer information.

3. The interviewer can next move to the last topic: an adult who is important in the consultant’s life. That adult may even serve as a role model for the consultant. Why does the consultant choose that particular person? What are special qualities that the person has? Use “follow-up questions” to get the consultant to elaborate on something that he or she has already mentioned about the adult.

4. Meet together as a class and hold a discussion on the interview experiences. What went well in the interviews? What were the challenges? What would the students do differently next time they conducted an interview?

5. Hold a classroom discussion on the importance of learning about the lives of “everyday people” (those who may not appear in history books). Mention that historians, folklorists, and other fieldworkers conduct “oral history interviews” to find out about the lives of such people. Ask students to think about an older person they know (possibly the one they mentioned in the classroom interview). It may be a family member, a neighbor, or a friend. How much do they know about that person’s life? Do they think they could learn more from this person by conducting an oral history interview with him or her?

6. Read the essay on Northeastern Colorado Cultures to find out how Colorado folklorists have used the oral history process to find out about folk artists in the state.

Activity 3: Writing an Essay from an Interview

The Three-Paragraph Interview

This is a suggested way of using the information from an interview (it can be the classroom interview described above) to write an essay. You may make changes in the order of the topics, add more sentences to each paragraph, or add more paragraphs to personalize your essay. Use the first person ("I") to write this essay. You may use the essays about the artists in the Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists, 1986-1990 catalog (See Resources section for ordering information.)

First Paragraph—Three Sentences

- Tell who was interviewed (called the "consultant"), who conducted the interview, and the date and place of the interview.
- Give some basic biographical information about your consultant (address, place and/or date of birth, parents, spouse, and/or children).

Second Paragraph—Four or More Sentences

- Identify your consultant's work or art form (the main topic of your essay).
- Tell how your consultant learned to perform this activity.
- Describe one specific aspect of the person's work. Provide a direct quotation from your consultant.

Third Paragraph—Three to Five Sentences

- Tell the reason or reasons your consultant does his or her work or art form.
- Provide another direct quotation that shows how your consultant feels about his or her work or art form. Summarize your experience in conducting the interview.

'I'm leaving something behind for my children to appreciate. Long after I'm dead, they can say, "Hey, my dad carved that! It's part of my heritage.'" Rubel Jaramillo, Santero Woodcarving, San Luis Valley. Quotation from Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists 1986-1990.

Activity 4: Planning an Oral Presentation from an Interview

Introduction

Ask a question or make a statement about a surprising or interesting thing you learned during the interview. For instance, start with a comment such as, "I never would have guessed that..." or "Did you know that...?"

Setting the Stage

Tell who you are, who you interviewed, and how you set up the interview. Also mention how you located your "consultant" (the person you interviewed). Explain what you have in common with this person (interests or goals). Tell the main subject you discussed during your interview.

Biographical Information

Give basic biographical information about your consultant. Include such things as where he or she was born or has lived; names of his or her parents, spouse if married, and children if any; and the schools and colleges attended.

Consultant's Development

Describe how your consultant became interested in the activity you discussed. Tell how he or she learned this activity and any important influences in his or her development of the skills needed. Describe special skills or interest areas your consultant mentioned. You may use a direct quotation from your consultant.

Detail or Goal

Choose one of these two topics from your interview to describe:

- 1) a particular incident your consultant related to you, or
- 2) goals your consultant mentioned. You may use a direct quote for this part of your presentation.

Closing

Tell what your consultant revealed about why he or she pursues this activity. Also tell how you profited by conducting the interview.

Optional high-tech addition to oral presentation activity

The creative Media Specialist at Lone Star School in Otis assigned her high school seniors a PowerPoint presentation using their interviews and the above outline. When the time arrived for them to make their presentations, students dressed in business attire and were videotaped. Those students must have had impressive resumes!

Activity 5: Holding an All-Class Interview with a Guest

Background Information

This activity will require several days spread over a two to four week period.

It's great for kids to be able to interview family members or other adults at home after school. If your students have the maturity and the home support to do this interviewing, do assign such an interview. You'll find lots of helpful information about students interviewing grandparents, etc., on the Websites and other resources listed in the Resources Section.

If you need to develop activities for classes that always need a lot of structure, or if your students don't have the home help available to set up interviews, consider inviting a community member for an in-school interview. You may want to interview someone who has been part of an event tied to one of your curriculum topics. When I worked in a school in a community that had once been flooded, we invited people who had gone through that flood to come to be interviewed by the students in the sixth and seventh grades. Lots of preparation is necessary to make these classroom interviews successful experiences.

(In listing procedures below, I'll assume that your special topic is a community flood; it could, of course, be one of any world or community events, including World War II, integration of schools, a tornado, or a large increase in population.)

Classroom Preparation

1. Assign reading or Internet research on floods in general and on the specific flood in your community. (This may be part of your science curriculum.)
2. Hold classroom discussion on floods and their possible aftermaths.
3. A step you, the teacher, must take: After brainstorming with other teachers and people in the community, contact someone to find out whether they would be willing to serve as a "community consultant" on the flood. This person will not only need to have experienced the flood but should be willing and able to discuss it (and many other unrelated topics) with a whole classroom of eager students!
4. After you have found your classroom consultant and that person has accepted the invitation informally, ask students to write a formal letter of request.
 - During a classroom session, write the letter first on the blackboard.
 - Be sure to include in the letter of request: the time, place, reason for the interview, and (if desired) a request to videotape or audio tape the interview. Also, let the person know how to reach the teacher to reply or to ask questions about the process.
 - Ask students each to hand write the letter or to type it into a computer. Choose one copy to send; address and mail the letter.

5. During another all-class session, create a list of questions to ask the community consultant. Tape a large roll of paper to the board. One by one, students suggest questions that they think they should ask their guest. They then use markers to write that question in large letters. Students write their names beside the questions they contribute.

- 1/2 of the questions should be the person's background (where born, parents, schools, work, places lived, children.)
- 1/2 can be questions related to the person's experience during and after the flood.
- The class must agree that each question is an appropriate one before the student writes it on the board.
- 60 questions is a good number to prepare for this classroom interview (in a class of 30, you may give each student a chance to come to the board twice.)
- Now, with students' help, arrange the questions chronologically. Physically cut them apart and re-arrange them in their chosen order.
- Type the questions in order, numbering them. Include the contributing student's name with each question.

6. See whether a student, a student's parent, or a media teacher in your school can help by setting up a video camera for the interview session. The camera should be placed on a tripod, but the owner or an experienced person should operate it at all times. One advantage of videotaping the interview session is that students are generally on their best behavior when they know that they are being taped!

The Interview Session

1. Set up your video camera or tape recorder well ahead of time.
2. When your community guest arrives, provide a comfortable chair for him or her on one side of the front of the classroom.
3. One by one, according to the determined order of the questions, ask students to come up and, clearly and audibly, ask the consultant his or her question.
4. After all prepared questions have been asked, allow students to volunteer to ask questions following up the consultant's answers. They may stand in line with their follow-up questions.
5. At the end of the interview period, everyone thanks the guest with applause or in another way.

After the Interview

1. Write an all-class thank you letter to your guest.
2. Replay the videotape of the interview, having the students listen carefully in preparation for answering questions or writing an essay about the interview.
3. Prepare a form similar to the one below to help students to listen carefully to the recorded interview. Add lines or spaces as needed.
4. Finally, students write an essay about the interview.

Activity 6: Oral History for Advanced Students in Middle or High School

Below is an outline of steps for conducting successful oral history interviews. This guide is appropriate for advanced secondary school or college students (or adults)! You may use the information yourself to help with the activities outlined above. For more information about advanced oral history and fieldwork techniques, see the Library of Congress "Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Guide to Field Techniques." It includes sample "release forms" and other helpful resources.

Steps Toward a Successful Oral History Interview

1. Initial Contact

- In general, use a letter to make your first contact with the person you hope to interview. Explain your general oral history project and request permission to conduct an interview with him or her.
- Give consultant idea of subjects which might come up during the interview.
- Mention that the consultant will be asked to sign a "gift of personal statement" form so that interview can be archived and used for research. (For instance, someone writing a book about farming traditions in Colorado might want to cite your interview.) Explain how and where the interview will be archived. Include explanation of usage on the Internet, if that is intended.
- Arrange time and place. Expect to spend at least two hours during interview session. Choose a quiet place for the interview, without distracting background noise and where the consultant is comfortable.
- Send consultant note stating time and place of interview and/or call again to remind consultant of appointment.

- (Optional): Send consultant biographical data sheet to fill out basic life facts.

2. Preparations

- Jot down for yourself topics you hope to cover (not specific questions).
 - Review biographical data sheet.
 - Practice using your tape recording equipment (including microphone) until you feel entirely comfortable with it.
 - Label recording tape and storage box with consultant's name, your name, date, location, and name of project.
 - If using analog tape, let it run one minute before beginning to record ("leader" on tape does not record sound).
 - Record introductory material (same information used for labeling tape).
- ##### 3. Getting Started
- Arrive at interview site in time to carefully and calmly set up recording equipment.
 - Test recorder and make sure that you remember everything about it.
 - Listen for any noise that might be picked up by the tape recorder. If necessary, close doors to the room. Ask permission to close doors and turn off noisy machinery (televisions, radios, stereos, space heaters, fans, air conditioners).

- Greet consultant and explain again the purpose for the project. Mention that the interview tape will be collected by the (list archival facility) and that it will be made available for students and other researchers. If the interview is desired for use on the Internet, explain that use as well.
 - Show the “gift of personal statement” form. Ask for signature. Record introductions and brief conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee, to test the recording level. (The recording level should be kept at the correct level for the best sound.) Listen to the brief conversation before proceeding with the interview.
 - Two good strategies for beginning interview:
 - a) Ask consultant to repeat a family or personal life story which he or she is very comfortable in telling.
 - b) Gather biographical information for your data sheet, asking for spellings of names.
- #### 4. During the interview
- Proceed with interview according to your own and your consultant’s style and comfort level.
 - Ask questions to lead your consultant toward topics needing coverage.
 - While tape recorder is running, go through biographical data sheet verbally. Ask consultant for spelling of names and write them down if not already done.
 - Try to touch on each major time period of your consultant’s life (childhood, young adulthood, middle age, etc.), varying questions according to age of consultant.
- Work to gather information about:
 - a) Home life.
 - b) Formal education and other types of training.
 - c) Work experiences.
 - d) Religious, club, or other organizational affiliations.
 - e) Special talents, interests, or accomplishments.
 - Ask questions to discover person’s activities or experiences connected with national events or social movements such as the Depression, wars or military conflicts, changing relationships among different ethnic and cultural groups, and changing women’s roles.
 - Ask about creative aspects of everyday life including cooking, holiday celebrations, hobbies, music or dance, metal or leather crafts, quilting, or any other art or craft activity.
 - Try to use lots of “open” questions.
 - If the consultant shows great interest in a particular topic, stay on that topic instead of forcing interview to go in a direction which does not interest your consultant.
 - If you wish to focus on a particular part of your consultant’s life experiences, lead him or her gradually to that topic.

5. Technical Concerns

- Watch your recording signals to make sure that your recorder is continually operating. Each time you insert a new tape or flip one to the other side, check to make sure that all is functioning properly. Use headphones to monitor the recording. Periodically during the interview, check the recording level; it may need slight adjusting.
- Make sure to flip the cassette tape to the other side when it has come to the end of Side A (or even before).

6. Stopping

- Before closing the interview, ask a question such as, "Is there anything else which you would like to cover before we end our session?"
- In general, stop interview at end of an hour (or earlier if consultant has begun to tire). Take breaks if your interview lasts longer than an hour.
- After finishing interview, punch tabs on top of the cassette so that the tape cannot be erased.
- If it seems necessary, consider coming back a second time to conduct a follow-up interview.
- Thank consultant and make sure that all paperwork is completed before leaving.
- Take care of any equipment problems immediately after returning home to make sure that your next interview goes without problems.

7. After the interview

- Write to thank the consultant for his or her valuable contribution to the project and the historic record of the region and the state.
- Make two duplicate copies of the tape (that will make three copies including the "master"). Give one to your consultant; use one for listening purposes (to create tape log or transcript and for researchers); save one for archival purposes only.
- Transcribe the interview or create a "tape log" by noting the topics covered every three to five minutes. Fill out other information needed on form with tape log.
- Fill out remaining information needed for "biographical data sheet."

8. Oral History Definitions

- "Interviewer"--that's you, the one with the tape recorder.
- "Consultant" or "informant" or "interviewee"--the person who is interviewed.
- "Closed question"--type of question which can be answered with a single word like "yes," a person's name, a place, or another short answer.
- "Open question"--question which is likely to lead consultant to explain or offer details about a subject.

This page left intentionally blank.