



## THE NEW AMERICANS



## Immigration Oral History

**Subject:** U.S. History, Language Arts, and Humanities.

**Overview:** First-person narratives about immigration experiences are enlightening, providing, personal and poignant insight into individual immigrant stories.

**Standards:** This lesson addresses the following national content standards established at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>

### Objectives

Students will:

- Conduct interviews to gather first-hand stories about immigrant experiences
- Gather first-hand stories about immigrant experiences
- Determine new immigrants' common experiences

### Materials Needed

- Sample immigrant oral histories and/or other immigrant first-person narratives
- Computers with Internet access
- List of community organizations that serve immigrants
- Immigration Oral History Assignment
- Guiding Questions for Oral History Interview
- Oral History: Q&A Sample and Passage

**Teacher Note:** Allow students three to four hours of class time and seven to eight hours of homework time to conduct and write up the oral history. Students will need time to identify their interviewees, create appropriate questions, undertake relevant research, etc. It might be helpful to provide a tentative timeline for students—what they can expect to do over the next few weeks. Be sure to build into your teaching schedule troubleshooting time—helping students with their individual projects.

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## Procedure

1. Read students the following (or distribute as a handout):

They also questioned people on literacy. My uncle called me aside, when he came to take us off. He said, "Your mother doesn't know how to read." I said, "That's all right." For the reading you faced what they called the commissioners, like judges on a bench. I was surrounded by my aunt and uncle and another uncle, who's a pharmacist. My mother was in the center. They said she would have to take a test for reading. So one man said, "She can't speak English." Another man said, "We know that. We will give her a *siddur*." You know what a *siddur* is? It's a Jewish book. The night they said this, I knew that she couldn't do that and we would be in trouble. Well, they opened the *siddur*. There was a certain passage they had you read. I looked at it and I saw right away what it was. I quickly studied it—I knew the whole paragraph. Then I got underneath the two of them there—I was very small—and I told her the words in Yiddish very softly. I had memorized the lines and I said them quietly and she said them louder so the commissioner could hear it. She looked at it and it sounded as if she was reading it, but I was doing the talking underneath. I was Charlie McCarthy! —*Arnold Weiss, Russian, at Ellis Island in 1921, age 13*

**Source:** [Their Stories: Stories from the Past](http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Past.html)  
<http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Past.html>

When I came to United States for the first time it was very hard for me to cross the border. I spent two weeks in Tijuana trying to cross the border. The INS caught me and put me in jail for one month. My family thought I had died. They were very sad. When I left, I promised I had to cross the border and that's why I'm here. I never got back until I got my resident card and I want to get my citizenship soon. When I was in Mexico before I came to United States, I enjoyed the holidays in my Rancho. The fair was fantastic and the food was very good. I recommend the beaches the sand and the beautiful ocean water isn't that cold and you can ride motorboats. The restaurants sell good seafood especially fresh fish and shrimps. Now my life is very good. I have a job and I'm studying to get a better job to support my family and help my children with their homework. My goal in the future is to be a welder and make good money and to buy my own house. —*Remigio*

**Source:** [Their Stories: Stories from the Present](http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Present.html)  
<http://library.thinkquest.org/20619/Present.html>



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2. Have students discuss these passages. What do they have in common? What elements of immigration do they express? How were these quotes acquired? What historic values do these passages present?
3. Provide students with background on the oral history, particularly its historic value as a primary source document. The following provides a basic overview:

An oral history, loosely defined, is the personal story of a person's life. It can be autobiographical, a person telling their own life history, or biographical, telling the story of another person. Cultures around the world use oral histories to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next. Our culture is no exception and many academic fields, such as History, English, Anthropology, Sociology, Education and even Psychotherapy use oral histories to provide intimate, vivid pictures of people's lives from their point of view in order to gain better insight for their respective fields.

Oral histories are a great way to collect information about a person, a period in time or a particular topic depending on the interest of the writer. If you are interested in doing an oral history on a family member, someone you know or someone you don't know but respect and admire, you will find that this form of writing and recording will bring you much closer to the interviewee. If you are writing about a particular time in space or a specific topic, you will find that oral history can provide social and cultural information that otherwise would not be possible to get. Historical records and documents often lack the everyday experiences of people, how they felt about a particular topic, why they made certain decisions in their lives, and how historical events impacted their personal lives. For all these reasons oral histories are useful to many scholars in different disciplines, providing a rich context in which to continue their particular interests.

**Source:** Oral Histories

[http://newcitywriting.org/html/oral\\_history.html](http://newcitywriting.org/html/oral_history.html)

4. Invite students to read other oral histories, or excerpts, thereof. They can also refer to *The New Americans* personal stories in the Meet the New Americans section of the companion Web site. <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/newamericans.html>. Instruct them to list the questions interviewers probably asked their oral history subjects or generic questions that would be the basis of an oral history.
5. Tell students that they will be conducting oral histories with first- or second-generation immigrants. The first step is to select an interviewee. Brainstorm with students several ways to find such individuals (through their immediate family,



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friends, neighbors, English as a Second Language classes, churches, immigrant relief organizations, etc.) Provide students with lists of local agencies serving community immigrants.

6. For homework, ask students to find and approach a potential interviewee (this may take several days). **Note:** *Students will likely need to find an English-speaking person, unless they can speak the language of the interviewee. Or, students might find an interpreter.* Should the person consent, have the student write a brief paragraph about the individual, for example: name, where he or she is from, how long she or he has been in the United States, why the person came here, etc.

7. Divide students into pairs. Have students exchange their interviewee descriptions and brainstorm possible interview questions for each person. Note that open-ended questions are most appropriate for eliciting informative personal narrative. As a guide, students can review Guiding Questions for Oral History Interview. For homework, students should finalize their list of questions.

8. Provide students with in-class research time to learn more about their interviewees' homelands and other background information relevant to their interviewees' stories (perhaps briefly addressed in the introductory paragraph created in Step 6). Have students add questions that evolve from this research.

9. Share with students the Oral History Q&A Sample and Passage to model how questions are posed and responses synthesized to create engaging narrative. Discuss the value of keeping some words from the first language if the interview is conducted in a language other than English.

10. Discuss with students the best approaches and tools to use during the interviews. For example, what will they need to document the narrative? How should they pose their questions? Refer to Oral History in the Classroom: Getting Started <http://www.edheritage.org/tools/oralhis2.htm> for some of this information.

11. Let students get started on their oral history projects. Be sure to give them sufficient time to conduct and synthesize their interviews.

12. A few days before the final oral histories are due, conduct a writer's workshop that enables students to share initial drafts with their peers, who can provide constructive feedback and ask clarifying questions.

13. Invite students to share their oral histories over several classroom sessions. Students can decide on the presentation format. After each presentation, the class should jot down their reactions. Some prompts include:



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- What I heard that surprised me was...
- One thing that shocked me was...
- Something I learned from the oral histories was...
- One thing I thought was important from the interviews was...
- From what I heard read, I have a question or would like to know more about...

14. After the presentations have been completed, students can refer to their written reactions to discuss the oral histories overall...what stuck out for them, what they learned about immigration, what the differences and similarities were among the interviewees, what the common challenges were, what the shared expectations of living in America were, how these stories have influenced their perceptions of immigrants, etc.

15. Students can compile and publish these oral histories in book form, and host an evening to which interviewees are invited to hear the oral histories read aloud.

**Assessment**

Have each student each write a brief thank you letter to his or her to the interviewee. The letter should incorporate student understanding of broad immigration issues that correlate to the interviewee's particular experience.

Assess student oral histories using the scoring card (or rubric):



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- introduction is concise, effective, original and appropriate
- significant editing is demonstrated between text and Q/A, early drafts
- text retains strong voice of interviewee
- text focuses on topic; doesn't ramble
- text details significance as well as concrete details
- text meets word guidelines
- writing is flawless; no typos, spelling, mechanical, grammar errors

4

- introduction is concise, effective and appropriate
- significant editing is demonstrated between text and Q/A, early drafts
- text retains distinct voice of interviewee
- text focuses on topic; generally doesn't ramble
- text details some significance as well as concrete details
- text meets word guidelines
- writing is nearly flawless; virtually no typos, spelling, mechanical, grammar errors

3

- introduction provides adequate lead-in to text
- some editing is demonstrated between text and Q/A, early drafts
- text retains some voice of interviewee
- text focuses on topic; generally doesn't ramble
- text details some significance as well as concrete details
- text meets word guidelines
- writing is nearly flawless; virtually no typos, spelling, mechanical, grammar errors

2

- introduction provides adequate lead-in to text
- some editing is demonstrated between text and Q/A, early drafts
- text retains little voice of interviewee
- text may not focus well on topic; may ramble
- text details little significance; mostly concrete details
- text may meet word guidelines
- writing contains some flaws; some typos, spelling, mechanical, grammar errors

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- ineffective or inappropriate introduction
- little editing is demonstrated between text and Q/A, early drafts
- text retains little voice of interviewee
- text may not focus well on topic; may ramble
- text details little significance; mostly concrete details
- text does not meet word guidelines
- writing contains many flaws; many typos, spelling, mechanical, grammar errors



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Assess student cooperative learning group participation, determining whether the student worked well with teammates, contribute to team effort, and shouldered work equally.

Students can self-assess, honestly answering the following questions:

- Did you do your best?
- Did you work hard, enjoy the project, and feel good about what you completed?
- Did you contribute to the group's project?
- Did you finish your work on time?
- If you had to do it again, would you do anything differently?

### Extension

Students can publish the oral histories on an existing website or one they design. Students should be sure to acquire proper permission to publish. For oral history examples from one high school, see the [Clark Magnet H.S. Humanities](http://www.clarkhumanities.org) <http://www.clarkhumanities.org>; click on "Oral Histories."



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## Related Resources

### **Meet the New Americans**

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/newamericans.html>

### **Oral History Links**

[http://www.k12.hi.us/~keaukaha/oral\\_hist.proj/links.html](http://www.k12.hi.us/~keaukaha/oral_hist.proj/links.html)

### **Sources of Oral History**

<http://www.doingoralhistory.org/sources/>

### **The Immigrant Experience**

<http://www.sonic.net/~kjuarez/immigration/oralhist.html>

### **Oral History Unit Overview**

[http://www.youthsource.ab.ca/teacher\\_resources/oral\\_overview.html](http://www.youthsource.ab.ca/teacher_resources/oral_overview.html)

### **America: The Great Melting Pot**

[http://www.thinkquest.org/library/site\\_sum.html?tname=20619&url=20619/index.html](http://www.thinkquest.org/library/site_sum.html?tname=20619&url=20619/index.html)

### **Oral History, Film & Video**

<http://www.chicagohs.org/collections/film.html>

### **Gathering the Forgotten Voices: An Approach to Oral History**

<http://www.tulane.edu/~so-inst/oralhistory.html>

### **The Institute for Oral History at Baylor University**

[http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral\\_History/](http://www3.baylor.edu/Oral_History/)

### **Books by Studs Terkel:**

*Dreams: Lost and Found* (1999)

*Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (1970)

*Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* (1974)

*"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (1984)

*Race: How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession* (1992)



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Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

**History**

- Understands changes in the workplace and the economy in contemporary America (e.g., the effects of a sharp increase in labor force participation of women and new immigrants; the shift of the labor force from manufacturing to service industries)
- Understands demographic shifts and the influences on recent immigration patterns (e.g., the flow from cities to suburbs, reasons for internal migrations from the "Rustbelt" to the "Sunbelt" and its impact on politics, implications of the shifting age structure of the population)
- Understands various influences on American culture (e.g., the desegregation of education and its role in the creation of private white academies; the influence of the media on contemporary American culture; how ethnic art, food, music, and clothing are incorporated into mainstream culture and society)
- Understands how recent immigration and migration patterns impacted social and political issues (e.g., major issues that affect immigrants and resulting conflicts; changes in the size and composition of the traditional American family; demographic and residential mobility since 1970)
- Understands major contemporary social issues and the groups involved (e.g., continuing debates over multiculturalism, bilingual education)
- Knows how diversity encourages cultural creativity
- Knows a variety of forms of diversity in American society (e.g., regional, linguistic, socioeconomic)

**Civics**

- Knows how diversity encourages cultural creativity
- Knows a variety of forms of diversity in American society (e.g., regional, linguistic, socioeconomic)
- Language Arts
- Uses a variety of resource materials to gather information for research topics (e.g., magazines, newspapers, dictionaries, schedules, journals, phone directories, globes, atlases, almanacs)
- Organizes information and ideas from multiple sources in systematic ways (e.g., time lines, outlines, notes, graphic representations)

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A PLACE WHERE  
EVERYONE BELONGS

## Immigration Oral History Assignment

“Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing things historians usually record, while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, and write poetry... The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river.”

—Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*

**Introduction:** Much of what we study in history is what is considered “traditional” history; that is, it is the history of major political figures, important historical events, and significant historical trends. Now it’s your turn to help create the history that occurs on the banks of the river—the story of everyday people, the story of immigrants.

### What is an Oral History?

Oral histories are created when one person (the interviewer) interviews another person (the interviewee) about a specific time period in the interviewee’s life or a specific topic they can recall. The interviewer takes the interviewee’s responses and creates a text of the interviewee’s words told through the point of view of the interviewee. This is not an exact transcript of what the interviewee says. The interviewer must edit the transcript—moving parts around, taking parts out, and even adding words here and there (with the interviewee’s permission). The final piece of writing should capture the voice and spirit of the interviewee.

### Requirements for Immigration Oral History

- Text must be 750-1000 words
- An introduction is included
- Your introduction should show some knowledge/understanding of the person’s country of origin
- The person may be first or second generation

### Steps to Completing the Oral History

- Select a person you wish to interview.
- Obtain their permission.
- Set up an interview time and location; set aside an hour or so.
- Do some research on the country of their origin.
- Create questions to guide your interview.
- If possible, record the interview; take notes on interviewee’s mannerisms, etc.
- Transcribe the interview into Q/A format, word for word.
- Edit the Q/A into the final oral history.



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A PLACE OF OPPORTUNITY**Guiding Questions for Oral History Interview**

- What country are you originally from?
- Why did you leave this country?
- When did you leave? How old were at that time?
- What were the conditions in the country when you left?
- How did you prepare for your trip here?
- Who came with you when you emigrated? Who did you leave behind? What did you leave behind?
- How did you get here? Did you stay somewhere else before arriving here?
- Why did you choose the United States? Why not some other country?
- Who decided you would come here? Did you want to leave?
- How did others in your home country treat you when they knew you were leaving?
- What changes in lifestyle did you make when you came here?
- What was your first impression of the United States? Has this initial impression changed over time?
- What are some of the differences/similarities you've noticed in the cultures here and in your home country?
- What were your hopes for yourself (and/or your family) when you came here? Have you realized these hopes?
- How were you treated when you first arrived in the United States? How are you treated now?
- Were your expectations of America met? Was your idea of America the same as the reality?



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A PLACE  
OF OPPORTUNITY**Oral History: Q&A Sample and Passage**

Q: So you really weren't that excited to be coming here?

A: Well, no, not really. I mean, think about it. Would you be? I mean, you live in one place your whole life and then suddenly your parents tell you, "Look, we've decided it's best for all of us to move to America. Your father has a better job and we'll be much happier there."

Q: Why didn't you want to come here?

A: Well, all of my friends were in Taipei. They were all that mattered to me. I mean you spend most of your younger years in school, so it only makes sense that you'd miss your friends when you have to move away so far. Uh, I guess I might've been somewhat selfish. I mean my father did get a better job when he got here, but for the rest of us in my family it really was difficult. I think I was 12 at the time . . . yeah, 12. I started in middle school here, yeah, and it was a pretty awful experience. It's not like middle school is normally a great time in your life anyway, is it? But coming here at that time and not knowing English all that well, well that certainly didn't make it any easier for me. I was lonely here.

Q: Why were you lonely?

A. Uh, it took me a long time to get to know people. In my school I really didn't know anyone else who was from Taiwan. Most everyone else had either grown up here or they were from Mexico, yeah mostly they spoke Spanish or English. But no one spoke Cantonese—that was the only language I knew then.



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A PLACE WHERE  
DREAMS COME TRUE**Interview Transformed into an Oral History**

No, I wasn't all that excited to be coming here. I mean, think about it. Would you be? I mean, you live in one place your whole life and then suddenly your parents tell you, "Look, we've decided it's best for all of us to move to America. Your father has a better job and we'll be much happier there." At that time, all of my friends were in Taipei. They were all that mattered to me. You spend most of your younger years in school, so it only makes sense that you'd miss your friends when you have to move away so far. I guess I might've been somewhat selfish. My father did get a better job when he got here, but for the rest of us in my family it really was difficult.

I think I was 12 at the time . . . yeah, 12. I started in middle school here and it was a pretty awful experience. It's not like middle school is normally a great time in your life anyway, is it? But coming here at that time and not knowing English all that well certainly didn't make it any easier for me. I was lonely here. It took me a long time to get to know people. In my school I really didn't know anyone else who was from Taiwan. Most everyone else had either grown up here or they were from Mexico, and mostly they spoke Spanish or English. But no one spoke Cantonese—that was the only language I knew then.