

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SANKOFA: ORAL HISTORY EXERCISES FOR ADULT LEARNERS



SANKOFA LEARNING COMPANION
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Steeped in traditions from the griots of countries such as Ghana and indigenous people around the world, oral communication through storytelling is critical to preserving and learning about the past. Today, “neo griots” have a tremendous responsibility in capturing stories of old and contemporary communities to preserve historic events.

Oral histories are essential to both supplement and challenge narratives developed by scholars who often exclude the voices of those who are marginalized or simply unheard. For novice oral historians, the responsibilities that come with collecting oral histories are great. Exercises in this section will enhance the skill set of the novice oral historian and stress the importance of preserving the oral histories collected.

Exercise One: Exploring family lineage

Migration is a part of every family’s lineage, whether forced or planned migration.

Oral histories can give clues to migratory patterns, growth of communities and the expansion of neighborhoods, cities and counties. The collection of oral histories in this exercise focuses heavily on older generations and in some cases, new immigrants.

The definition of family has always had many meanings. A family can contain multiple people, multiple generations, people related through birth and others related through marriage or friendship. Learners can define family in whatever way they choose as they participate in this activity.

Not every family has a long or known story of their arrival in the United States, or even a clear understanding of who their direct ancestors are; this is not a reason to feel discouraged but instead to embrace the opportunity to learn more about your loved ones, whether blood relatives or another kind of family.





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Through primary and secondary sources from family archives, the learner will:

- Identify narrators within the family to ask questions about the perceived origins of their lineage.
- Share and preserve the oral histories collected with a preservation plan and sharing opportunity with loved ones.

The end result of this project is to:

- Create an oral history collection within a family that focuses on their lineage.
- Use the oral histories collected to create a short social media product to discuss the work done within the family to encourage others to take on similar projects.

Part 1: Prepare

Speak with a knowledgeable household member or consult your family tree, brainstorm possible family members or loved ones to interview about your family's past and, if relevant, its migration story.

Draft a list of questions about what you'd like to know about their life or your family's or loved ones' past. Some of these might include:

- Where did you grow up and move throughout your life?
- Where were your parents or grandparents born? Did they ever live anywhere else?
- What do you know about when, where and how our family arrived in the United States?

Part 2: Interview

Each interview should be at least 30 minutes long. There's no need to rush, but keep an eye on the clock so that you can ask all of your most important questions. If you have time left over, you can ask the person you are interviewing if there are other significant parts of their life story they want to talk about, or ask for suggestions on how to learn more about your family's lineage.





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Part III: Transcribe

Create a written version of the oral history interview you just conducted. A transcription is more accessible to some people than an audio or video recording. Creating transcriptions can be time-consuming, but doing so is an important step to preserving the oral history you recorded and makes you a stronger expert on your family's story, like a griot.

Even if a full transcription is not possible, creating a written outline of the interview, that includes at what timestamp you asked each question, can be a valuable guide. Even transcribing the most interesting parts of the interview is better than nothing.

Part III: Preserve & Share

Distributing copies within your family is important, but with your interviewees' permission, you can also distribute the files more widely. Consider donating a copy of the interview or the transcription to the local or state historical society in places where your interviewee lived the longest. You can often find these by searching the name of the town or county + "historical society" on the web, and simply share the files by email; don't forget to include a copy of the release form.

Instead of simply sending copies of the oral history you collected to your relatives or loved ones, you can host a family history sharing event, where you watch or listen to the recordings together. If they live far away, you could share during a virtual meeting, or create a social media post sharing some of what you learned and tagging your family members or loved ones.





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Activity Two for Adults: Family history through foodways

Family recipes and oral histories are synonymous. Undoubtedly, most family recipes are passed down orally — though some families have decided to write them down for preservation. If one were to ask their grandmother for a recipe, a conversation on where the recipe came from is bound to ensue, sometimes full of plot twists about its origins.

The purpose of this exercise is to:

- Use foodways as a way to identify family history
- Learn to interpret family relations and history through recipes
- Document family recipes and the adjoining narratives

Aim to interview at least 3 people. The narrators (interviewees) can be the same person, however, a mix of narrators is suggested.

Part 1: Collect the recipes

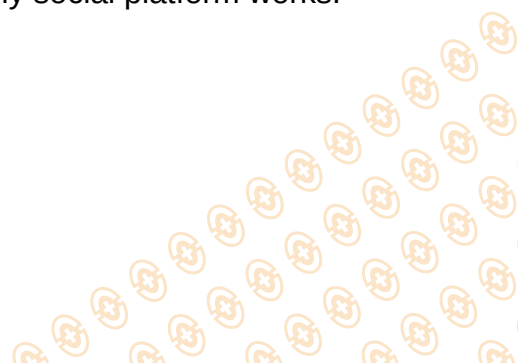
In each of the interviews, the novice oral historian will:

- Identify individual long-standing family recipes
- Ask questions about the origins of the recipe and when the recipe is usually prepared
- Question who the recipe is generally passed to and why
- Ask about stories surrounding times the recipes were prepared

Part 2: Share

Narrators in this case only need be of cooking age and be able to answer questions about the lineage of the recipe.

- Pair the recorded oral history of the recipe with a written recipe.
- Post both the written recipe and a portion of the recorded interview online. Ideas for posting include platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. Any social platform works!
- Share your post with family members and others online.





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Reflection questions:

- Is there someone you know (or have seen on television) who knows how to tell a good story? What makes their stories interesting or engaging?
- How does capturing the oral history of someone contribute to society beyond your own family or neighborhood?
- What could be done in your community to ensure its history is not forgotten?

Lesson By:



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