

HI/WS 311: American Women Oral History Project

In order to better understand not only the history of women, but also the work of historians in uncovering women's histories, your end-of-semester assignment for this class will be an oral history project. Oral history, in general, is the collecting and analysis of historical information that is based on interviews. Thus, oral history is often used as a method to gather information about ordinary (and sometimes extraordinary) people and it provides us with great insight into historical events from the perspective of eyewitnesses. For this project, you will have to interview a woman who is at least 50 years old (and who, preferably, has lived in the United States for much of her life). The purpose of this assignment, therefore, is to introduce you to one of the tools of historians, increase your understanding of the limitations and strengths of historical methodologies, help you to better understand the world that you live in, and to enhance your understanding of the important themes of women's history in the 20th and 21st centuries. You should focus your interview and the paper that follows around a particular theme or historical event. You **must** record your interview and include it with your paper.

Part I: The Proposal, 50 points

Due Monday October 19 by 10:00am (On Canvas)

Before you begin conducting your interview and writing your paper, you must first identify the person that you are going to interview as well as create a set of questions to guide your discussion. Remember that your subject **must be a woman who is at least 50 years old that you can meet with in person**. Your proposal should be roughly 1 double-spaced page plus a list of interview questions.

- **Narrative:**
 - In your proposal you should identify the individual and give a brief description of her life and circumstances. Why have you chosen this particular person? What do you hope to learn in this interview? Are there particular topics that you are interested in that this person can provide insight into? Is there a particular event that you want to learn more about from this person (the Vietnam War, 9/11, Civil Rights Movement, 2nd wave feminism, etc.)? Are there any specific themes that you plan to focus on (things like marriage, sexuality, childhood, dating, motherhood, work, etc.)? What sources might be useful in your project?
 - In your proposal you must also indicate the way in which you plan on recording the interview. If you do not know how to do this, if you don't have access to any recording equipment (most of you can probably record the interview on your computers, phones, or tablets), or if you have another question please let me know so that I can assist you. This proposal should help you to narrow your questions and your focus in the interview.
- **Interview Questions:** Along with your narrative, you must include a set of **at least 8 questions** that will guide your interview. Think about the themes that we've discussed throughout the class and be creative with your questions. Since this is a class on women's history, you should ask your interviewee about being a woman. For example, you might want to learn more about what her life was like when she was

growing up so you could ask things like: does she remember any difference between her childhood experiences as a girl and those of boys that she knew? What were the best and worst things about being a little girl? What could boys do that she couldn't and vice versa? If she grew up within a religious tradition, ask how that influenced her as a woman. You might ask about dating customs--what was the woman's role, and has she seen any changes? Ask her what career options she thought were open to her as a woman. Did she face much pressure to get married? Did she face pressure to have children? Was she ever aware of special treatment because of her sex, and if so, was that good or bad? Was she ever aware of discrimination? In addition to these kinds of general questions about her life experiences, you might also ask her about specific events. For example, you might ask her about her experiences during Vietnam on the home-front? Did she know men who went off to war? How did the war affect her life as a woman? These questions should demonstrate not only your skills as an interviewer but also your knowledge of the period and your ability to think about women's roles in history. **Make sure that your questions prompt more than a simple yes or no answer and are as open-ended as possible.**

Part II: The Interview

You will conduct the interview on your own time. It **must be recorded** (a sound only recording is fine, it doesn't have to be video) and at least 20 minutes long, but ideally it should be at least 30 minutes. You must include a copy of this recording with your paper. It can be in a variety of forms (tape, DVD, CD, website link, etc.). You should focus as much of the interview as possible around one topic or theme, because in the paper you will be asked to discuss how your interview subject fits in with an important issue or theme from the time period. Therefore, you should familiarize yourself with the period that you are going to discuss with her, because you want the interview to provide new insights about things with which you are already familiar, not to introduce you to completely unfamiliar topics. Finally, while it is important that you come to the interview prepared with a set of questions, you must also be willing to be flexible and allow your interview to go in directions that you might not have expected. You **must** provide me with a copy of your interview either before turning in your final paper, or when you turn it in.

Part III: The Presentation, 50 points

During the last week of the semester

The last week of our class will be devoted to the presentation of your research. Your presentation should be around **8-9 minutes** in length (I will cut you off after 10 minutes and it will affect your presentation grade!). It should detail the topics that you discussed with your interview subject, the insights that you gained, and the connections to women's experience that you made. It is important that you prepare for this presentation and have a well-thought out plan. You may feel free to play clips from your interview or present sections of it, but just make sure that you do not simply fill 5 minutes by playing a recording.

Part IV: The Paper Itself. 200 points.

Due Thursday December 17 by 5:00pm (On Canvas)

After conducting your interview you will write an **1800-2500 word essay** that draws from it as well as other scholarly works. In your paper you will connect your interview to some of the themes and topics that we have discussed. So, you should focus on placing her within the

historical context of her life and offer comparisons between her experiences and the experiences of women from other time periods. For example, if your interviewee discussed the Fall of the Berlin Wall and its impact on her life, then in your paper you would discuss what she said about it as well as how her version of events compares to general consensus. Is what she remembers accurate? Why was this event important to her as an individual and to society in general? Then you might connect her experiences to relevant examples for the course readings. If your interviewee spends much of her interview discussing the issue of motherhood and child-rearing, then your paper would discuss how what she revealed relates to the time period. What were the expectations for mothers at the time? Does her experience deviate from the norm or represent it? How was her experience similar to or different from women in other time periods? Because your task is to connect your interviewee to the time-period, you will want to rely on scholarly sources (you may use sources from the class as well as outside sources). In the previous example about motherhood and child-rearing, you might use some of the articles from *Women's America*, but you would also want to locate some outside sources (as many or as few as you need) to help you have a better understanding of the time period and women's place within it. If your paper focuses on the Vietnam War, for example, you should consult a scholarly book about the war to provide you with the necessary background that you might need to be able to evaluate your interview subject in her historical context.

- Papers should be clearly and concisely written, well organized, and presented in your own words with minimal long quotes. This essay should have an introduction, thesis, a main body, as well as a conclusion that sums up what you have said and assesses its significance.
- Your paper should be a minimum of 1800 words
- Papers are due by 5:00pm on Thursday Dec. 17 and should be uploaded to Canvas
 - Late papers will not be accepted without prior approval.
- Proofread carefully. Sloppy papers with misspellings, typographical errors, and grammatical problems will weaken your argument and lower your grade
- This is a formal paper. Do NOT use slang, abbreviations, clichés, or colloquialisms.
- Use a consistent verb tense, most likely the past tense.
- All historical data and information that is not common knowledge **MUST BE CITED in the text.**
 - Your in-text citations must include page numbers whenever necessary.
 - You MUST include a Works Cited page even if you are only referencing materials from the course.
 - You may use an accepted citation style of your choice, but please be consistent. If you need assistance with citations or citation styles, please let me know.

Interview hints:

- Your recorded interview (whether video or audio) must be clear enough that I can understand it. I cannot grade something that I am unable to comprehend. If you find that your recording is difficult to understand (even in just a few places) then you should provide a written transcript. When you are deciding when and where to conduct the interview, be sure to choose a spot that is relatively free of background noise and distractions.
- Make sure that your recording equipment works before you conduct the interview.
- At the beginning of your recording please state your name, the name of your interview subject, the location, and the date and time of your interview. For example “This is Kelly Watson interviewing Condeleeza Rice at her home in Washington, DC on Monday April 12th, 2013.”
- Have your interview subject sign a release form stating that she will allow you to use this interview for a class assignment. You can create your own or use the sample that I have included with this assignment sheet.
- It is ok to spend a few minutes at the beginning of the interview (with the understanding that this doesn’t count for your required time) to get comfortable and chat about things not related to the interview (the weather, news, etc.).
- Take notes as you go (and/or when you listen to the tape again) and write down anything that you want to follow up on and that you need clarification of.
- Bring your interview questions with you, but don’t hesitate to ask a question that you didn’t anticipate or ask your subject to elaborate on something or clarify it. Try to make sure that your questions are as open ended as possible. In other words asking you interviewee “Did you grow up in Detroit?” is not nearly as useful as asking “What was it like growing up in Detroit?”
- Never correct or contradict a historical fact or piece of information that your subject tells you, even if you are certain that they are wrong.
- Make sure that your interviewee stays focused on her own life as much as possible instead of talking about people that she knew. You want first-hand information, not second- or third-hand.
- Allow your interview to go on as long as you feel that the information is useful and your subject is still engaged (assuming that you’ve met the minimum length requirement, obviously).
- Don’t forget to send a thank you (written & mailed, or emailed) to the person that you interviewed.
- Whether or not you show your interview subject your paper when you are finished is up to your discretion.