

Lesson 4: Using and Creating Oral Histories

Big Ideas

1. “Doing history” includes creating a visual or written record through photographs and telling stories. Students are part of making history today.
2. Connecting to what is happening locally also connects us to what is happening in other localities and on a national scale.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Interpret and discuss oral histories.
2. Formulate best practices for collecting and sharing oral histories.
3. Apply the Hear-Think-Wonder framework to an oral history.
4. Construct questions to ask an interviewee during an oral history interview.

Teacher Preparation

1. Find an oral history from your state or community using a state historical or library website. Choose a three-minute excerpt that feels most relevant to your community today.
2. Research the background on the individual whose oral history excerpt you chose.
3. Display the preamble from Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* while completing activity one. The text for the preamble can be found below at the beginning of activity one.
 - a. If you have a poem in your existing curriculum that aligns with the themes of storytelling and history, please feel free to substitute it.
4. Have the **printed portraits** used during **lesson two** handy.
5. Review the Project Zero [See-Think-Wonder](#) thinking routine. Both See-Think-Wonder and its Hear-Think-Wonder variation will be used in this lesson.
6. Review techniques for active listening:
 - a. [Cultivating a Listening Practice video](#)
 - b. [Cultivating a Listening Practice I Cultivating Learning](#)
7. Review and print copies of the [My Community History Project](#) booklet for each student in your class.

Lesson Structure (45 minutes):

Warm Up

Frame the lesson: Storytelling and the sharing of memories is part of doing history. We're going to explore two ways of passing history along, then practice asking questions that would help inspire others to tell their stories.

Activities

Background: *Ceremony* was published in 1977 and centers on the importance of keeping and sharing stories, especially as a way to find alternative meaning and lifeways.

In this novel, Tayo, the protagonist finds meaning and healing in re-learning the local history and traditions of his community and his family in the aftermath of service in WWII. Both he and his community find healing in the storytelling, in the ceremonies, of the Laguna and Pueblo people after his service in the Army and their community's exposure to radiation during nuclear testing on Laguna and Navajo land.

In re-learning where he is from and becoming reconnected to his community, he can slowly start working through his PTSD.

Frame the activity: Leslie Marmon Silko is a Laguna Pueblo writer who started her novel *Ceremony* with this preamble:

You don't have anything if you don't have the stories

...so they try and destroy the stories

let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

they would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then.

He rubbed his belly.

I keep them here

[he said]

Here, put your hand on it.

See, it is moving.

There is life here

for the people.

Take a minute to read this over and write down a sentence, phrase, or word that seems most important to you.

1. Share and Discuss:

After students have reviewed the preamble, have students work in groups to share selections and ask questions. Then have them share as a whole group.

Please share your selections with a partner. After your partner has shared, ask them one follow up question.

Based on this preamble, what is one power of story? Of history?

Frame the activity: In this section, we are going to connect storytelling to the work we have done with [portraiture](#) and [visual analysis](#) to add another dimension to our community portraits.

2. Gathering Stories:

Let's start with some ideas about gathering other people's stories:

- If someone asked you to record the stories of your life or community, what questions would you have for them before you shared your stories?
- What answers would make you feel more comfortable telling their stories?

Some of the ways that the National Museum of American History tries to make telling history more just or fair are:

- Thinking carefully about getting consent before taking down stories;
- Making sure the storyteller gets something in return;
- Building a foundation for those who make history to write history, especially people whose histories might have been overlooked in the past.

Why might these practices be valuable to you? Our community? The world?

3. Using the Hear-Think-Wonder thinking routine:

By conducting oral histories, taking photographs, and doing archival research, the historical record becomes more three-dimensional and complete.

Play the oral history excerpt that you chose before the lesson, pausing at each speaking break, to give students a chance to do the thinking routine, [Hear-Think-Wonder](#), and take notes.

As we hear the excerpt, we are going to do a thinking routine, *Hear-Think-Wonder*:

- What do you hear? Make a list of words, phrases, or background sounds. You might even sketch.

- What do you think about what you hear? What themes came through in oral history? What questions do you think the interviewer asked?
- What questions do you have based on what you heard? What other questions would you like to ask of the speaker?

Share a bit of background information on the speaker's community, town, or state at the time of the oral history. Then share some biographical details about the speaker.

After listening and making your own observations without hearing biographical information about the speaker:

Do you think your observations would have been different, if you would have known the biographical information before listening to the speaker's words?

4. Practice formulating questions:

Oral history can enrich portraiture and photography. Let's turn back to what we have done already with photographs and from our community.

Select a photograph from the set of **community portraits** used during **lesson two**.

Working in a small group, discuss then document:

- What do you wonder?
- What questions would you ask of the people in the image?
- Why would their answers matter to you? Our community? The world?

Let's hear what you've come up with.

How would answers to these questions connect our community's past and present?

Why would the answers of the people in the images matter to the world?

Wrap Up and Assessment

Building a toolkit to collect community portraits:

In continuing to build our toolkit for the Creating Portraits of Community project, we'll take a minute to review the [My Community History Project](#) booklet to see how to collect and document oral histories.

Please look over the *My Community History Project* booklet. Read it over, take notes, and reflect.

Who are some people you might want to interview about your community history?

What locations might give you a bridge to the past? To communities across the U.S.?

Optional lesson add-on: Interview Practice

Using the provided [script](#), have students interview the person they are seated next to in the classroom. Then have students switch partners after they have finished asking each other the questions from the script. Switch partners three times.

Have students remember to practice active listening and think about the environment they are in while they are interviewing their classmate.

What's Next?

After completing all four lessons, students will have thought deeply about the communities around them and built a toolbox of creative ways to document that community. It's time to put those tools into use! Assign your students a project to create a portrait of someone in their community using photography and oral history.

This [pre-made assignment](#) includes step-by-step instructions to guide students on creating their community portrait, including steps such as learning more about their subject, gaining consent from their subject, and scheduling an interview with their subject.

Alternatively, you may wish to design your own assignment for your students that incorporates the concepts explored in the lessons combined with themes more specific to your curriculum. Who inspires them, and how can they capture their story?

Teachers are invited to submit community portraits created by students ages 13 and up to be displayed in the [Creating Portraits of Community digital gallery](#). Submission guidelines can be found [here](#).