

Oral History: A Guide for Schools

What is oral history?

History is all around us. We only have to ask our own families and communities. They can tell us enough stories to fill a library of books. This kind of history is called ORAL HISTORY.

Documents and books often concentrate on famous people and big events. But many people's experiences and voices have been hidden from history. Oral history fills in the gaps and gives us history which includes everyone.

With digital technology, anyone can preserve oral histories and share them with others. It is a wonderful way of developing digital and interviewing skills while learning about history. It can build the confidence of young people and respect between generations.

What is this oral history guide?

This guide is based on the [Oral History Society online guide for schools and youth groups](#). It offers helpful advice on getting started with a small scale project. It has been created in partnership by the Oral History Society and People's Collection Wales.

People's Collection Wales (PCW) invites you to publish your oral history project online. PCW is a website all about the history, culture and people of Wales. Creating an account and publishing on PCW is easy and we have created step-by-step guides to help you.

Digital technology has to be used responsibly. This guide will also help you understand the legal and ethical issues arising from recording people's testimonies.

Curriculum links

Progression Steps 3, 4 and 5 – History, Literacy skills, Digital Competence Framework (Citizenship, Interacting and collaborating, Producing).

Oral history also links with many other curriculum subjects depending on the topic of your project and what you go on to do with the material you gather. It can be a rich source of creative inspiration and spark interest in knowing about many things. Click here for more info on [what young people gain from recording memories of older people](#).



Planning your project

What will your project be about?

Choose a topic related to what you are teaching, a current event or something that's relevant to your school, pupils or local area.

What is your end goal?

What is the scope and scale of your project? A small number of interviews, or a larger project including a website, artwork or performance? Have a look at some [Inspiring Ideas](#).

What experience and resources do you have?

If you haven't done any oral history before, speak to someone who has. Do staff members and IT teachers have knowledge, skills and equipment you can use? Contact an [OHS adviser](#) or someone from your local Record Office/Archives/Museum. Will you record audio or video? You will need recording equipment and software to edit your recordings. See the **Equipment** section below.

Who and where will you interview?

A good place to start in your search for good interviewees is the wider school community (staff, pupils, relatives, governors, community links). Remember that the people you want to talk to might be elderly and not very mobile. Where will you interview them? Will you need to take your pupils to where your interviewees are? Choose a quiet place. Recording in a care home or public space can be complicated and noisy.

Do you need permission to use recordings?

The short answer is yes. You should gain written permission from the interviewees AND the interviewers (your pupils). See the **Rights, ethics and agreements** section below.

How long will your project take?

A generalisation would be that it always takes longer than you think! You will probably have the following phases: research, training, practice interviews, the actual interviews, reviewing/listening back to interviews, editing recordings, and sharing the material.

Images and objects

Encourage interviewees to bring old photos or relevant objects; tools, clothes, newspaper cuttings, documents. You can talk about these things in the interview. Also take photos of every step of your project. You can publish all this content on PCW to create a really engaging multimedia collection.

Safety and child protection issues

This should be taken seriously but should not be a barrier to interviewing. Follow your own child protection procedures, and see the **Rights, ethics and agreements** section below for some extra guidance.

What will you do with the interviews long term?

People's Collection Wales is a perfect place to publish your recordings! Your project will become part of the digital history of Wales and can be viewed by people all over the world. To preserve the original recordings for future generations, [get in touch with an archive](#) or museum.

Will you hold a final event?

Bringing everyone together to share and celebrate what you have discovered during your project is highly recommended and lots of fun for the pupils!

PCW or Archive – What's the difference?

[PCW](#) is a digital platform for sharing your images and stories with others. We aim to make this process as accessible as possible, so we use smaller file sizes that most people can access on their computer/tablet/smart phone. To publish audio and video on PCW you will need to convert .WAV and .MOV files to MP3 and MP4. These formats give good resolution with a low file size.

However, sharing your content on PCW is not the same as archiving. Archives are responsible for preserving documents and recordings for the future. In order to be able to do this, recordings need to be in an uncompressed format that will be of the best quality possible and stand the test of time. Sound archivists advise that the best format for this is .WAV.

So, to put it simply, if you want your *audio* interviews preserved for future generations, record them in .WAV format. For making those recordings accessible to everyone on PCW, convert them to .MP3. Archiving *video* is not so straight forward, see the [OHS information](#) on this, or talk to your local archive. You can search for your local archive [here](#).

Equipment

You should use the best quality recorders you can afford – or borrow. Try your local college or university, archives, museum or local history society.

PCW offers free fixed-term equipment loans to help you make the best recordings for your project. These include good quality digital recording machines and lapel mics. Transcription kits and software are also available to loan. For more info contact PCW: peoplecollection@llgc.org.uk or 01970 632500.

Many schools have run successful projects using equipment they already have e.g. tablets or smart phones. If you go down this route, bear in mind:

- .WAV files and video files are large – you need plenty of storage space on your phone/tablet
- Limited battery life – your device may need to be connected to a power supply while filming
- Difficulties of getting access to interviews recorded on students' phones in order to listen back to them
- Difficulties of uploading/transferring files to a computer
- Playback volume not loud enough for class to hear – you may need speakers

Tips for using tablets or smart phones:

- Download and use a recording app to adjust recording levels
- Make sure fully charged
- Check storage capacity
- Switch phone to flight mode & turn off notifications
- Locate where microphone is – usually at bottom near charging port – and make sure it's not covered by hand or case
- Video - get as close to interviewee as possible
- Audio only - Point mic towards interviewee & hold around 15cm from mouth
- Do test recording and practice transferring files
- Consider using an external mic made specifically for smart phone
- Consider using a tripod for a steady picture

For more info about filming on tablets and smart phones, see the [OHS Equipment guide](#), or [BBC Filming with a smart phone](#)

Costs and funding

It *is* possible to do a small-scale oral history project with no budget. You may have equipment already or be able to borrow some (see **Equipment** section above). However there could still be some project costs such as travel or teaching cover. If you need to buy equipment, see the [OHS Costs and Funding guide](#) for advice.

Training

Interviews are at the heart of oral history, so give pupils plenty of time to practice interviewing and using recording equipment. If you have a budget, get an external trainer involved:

<http://www.ohs.org.uk/training/>.



Courtesy of St. John's CE School, Sparkhill

The OHS **Oral History Lesson Plan**, available as part of this teaching resource, covers planning, preparation, basic interview skills, suggested questions, and exercises to help pupils practice and gain confidence. Click the link on the PCW [Teaching Resource page](#) to download.

People's Collection Wales work within the community to support people of all ages in publishing content on our website. For more info contact PCW: peoplecollection@llgc.org.uk or 01970 632500.

Helpful Video tutorials and podcasts:

- BBC Teach [How to interview people](#). KS2.
- BBC Hands on History [How to undertake your own oral history interview](#). KS3 & 4.
- BBC Teach [Filming Our Greatest Generation](#). KS2.
- Minnesota History Society [Oral History Guides](#). KS3 & 4.

Rights, ethics and agreements

Considerations when working with children

Follow your school's child protection policy throughout the project. Be aware that when interviewing each other, children sometimes reveal personal things that their families might not want shared. For example, during one inner-city project on crime, several children revealed they had family members in prison. It's worth telling the children that oral history is very personal and that they don't have to answer any questions they don't want to. Explain that they must treat each other's experiences with respect and not gossip about them.

Considerations when interviewing adults

Adults can also be unguarded in what they say, because being asked to talk about yourself without interruption is unusual and triggers all kinds of memories. Be clear about the purpose of the project and how the recording will be used. Just before recording starts remind them to only share memories that they're happy to be made public.



When people have shared very personal memories, they can feel vulnerable. It's a good idea to reassure them immediately after the interview and write a thank you – or get the children to do so – as soon as possible. The letter can remind them how the interview will be used. Some groups of adults, such as the elderly, may not fully understand what they are agreeing to or where you plan to share their recordings. Take time to explain things carefully, in plain and simple language, to ensure they understand.

People often talk about others when they are being interviewed. As a creator of digital content you have a legal and ethical responsibility to ALL the people that feature in the recording. This is governed by Data Protection Law and breaches could lead to fines for your school. It's not OK to publish (on PCW or anywhere else):

- Anything that hasn't been agreed with the interviewee (see **Getting permission** section below)
- Any part of a recording that reveals personal information about someone else or might cause them distress or harm

So to be safe:

- Don't publish large unedited recordings on PCW
- Listen carefully to your recordings before you publish. Are other people mentioned? Are they living and identifiable? Could the content be interpreted as offensive or defamatory (damaging to the persons reputation)?
- Select unproblematic extracts to upload to the website
- Write summaries of your recordings, with timecodes that make it easy to know where problematic sections occur. This will help any archive that takes long term care of your recordings

Getting permission

You must always gain written permission from the people that you are interviewing, in order to record them and then use the recording. Before the interview, explain what your project is about and what you plan to do with your recordings. Ask the interviewee to sign a **participation agreement** to show they are happy to take part. After the interview, the interviewee will know what they have said in the recording and can decide if they want to share it. Ask them to sign a **recording agreement** to show they are happy for it to be made public. In the agreement you can ask them to assign copyright to your school or project, this will allow you to use the interview for a website, exhibition, publication, app – or whatever medium may be invented in future! If the person does not want to transfer copyright, then you will need to ask their permission every time you use the recording in public.

Did you know that you should also get written permission from your pupils' parent/guardian too? Any pupil that features in the recording also has legal rights as to how it is used. If they are visible in the film, or if their voice can be heard asking questions, you should get written permission. If the interviewee has brought along photos and is allowing you to copy them, you should get a written agreement for that too.

Examples of simple agreement forms can be found at the end of this guide:

- **Participation Agreement**
- **Recording Agreement**

As a school you must keep the agreement forms securely, to show that you have complied with Copyright and Data Protection Law. For more detailed information about GDPR see the [OHS GDPR Guidance](#) and the [ICO website](#).

Copyright and PCW

If you plan to publish your recordings on PCW, explain this to your interviewees. You must also add the following information to the forms you use:

People's Collection Wales. *As part of this project, your interview will be published on People's Collection Wales; a Welsh Government funded website all about the history, culture and people of Wales. It will be published under the Creative Archive License and will be available for the public to see and use. This license means that people will be able to copy and re-use the recording for education and non-commercial purposes. They must be respectful (no defamation) and must not use it for promotion/endorsement. They must credit the creator of the work.*

All these ethical and legal considerations are great things to discuss with your class and link directly to the Citizenship strand of the DCF. Why not take this opportunity to explain copyright to your class and fulfil the DCF requirements? This [Copyright - know your digital rights](#) teaching resource for KS2 can help you.

Publishing your project on PCW

We would love you to publish your oral history project on PCW. You can publish your recordings, a description of your project and photographs you have taken to create a really engaging multimedia collection. The first step is to register an account. Read our easy to follow [How To guides](#) to learn how to register, upload and publish.

The skills developed when creating an account and uploading items to PCW fulfil many of the requirements of the DCF. Visit our [Teaching Toolbox](#) to see how pupils can publish content and improve their digital skills. In addition, PCW have created a series of Teaching Resources called [Copyright and metadata made easy](#). Why not take this opportunity to explain metadata to your class? The [Metadata Teaching Resource](#) for KS2 can help you.

KS2: Pupils can complete the Metadata template, part of the [Metadata Teaching Resource](#), to give you all the info you will need to upload content for your class.

KS3 & 4: Pupils can upload content themselves. The resources above will help you teach them how.

Take a look at some other oral history projects that schools have published for inspiration:

- Model CIW School – [Project description](#) and [Interview](#)
- Ysgol Maesydderwen – [Short animated films](#)
- Ysgol Gynradd Llanfyllin – [Video short stories](#)
- Swansea Windrush Intergenerational Project – [Case study](#)

Top tips for publishing on PCW

- **Short and sweet.** If it is long, consider editing your interview into smaller parts, perhaps on different topics. Once published, you can bring all the separate parts together as a [Collection](#)
- **What kind of files?** The high quality .WAV files of the original recordings need to be made smaller for publishing on PCW. Please publish audio as MP3, and video as MP4; these give you the best resolution with the lowest file size. Remember to keep your original recordings safe! If you want to preserve your oral histories in an archive you will need the .WAV files (see the **PCW or Archive – What’s the difference?** section above)
- **Converting files:** You can find free **software** online to convert .WAV and .MOV files to MP3 and MP4. For audio editing, the OHS gives this advice: *Audacity is free and is adequate for basic speech editing. Wavelab Elements or Sound Forge Audio Studio 12 are low-cost and highly-recommended alternatives.* Some editing software is also available within PCW’s free equipment loans (see **Equipment** section above)
- The **maximum file size** for PCW is **100MB**. Be mindful of this limit when uploading however there are ways around this if you have larger files; you could compress your files or...
- **Publish on PCW by linking through YouTube:** Publish your files on YouTube or Sketchfab then embed your link on our PCW upload page. Remember to tell your interviewees where you plan to publish when they sign the agreement form
- **Good to know:** We have a **‘take down’ policy**, so if anyone you interview is unhappy with what you publish please let us know. We can unpublish content while you resolve any issues
- We are here to help at PCW. For advice on issues such as file compression and equipment loans, contact peoplecollection@llgc.org.uk or 01970 632500

(ADD YOUR PROJECT NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS AS A HEADING)

Oral History Participation Agreement

You have been invited to take part in the *(name of project)* about *(brief description of project)*.

Pupils from this school will record an interview with you. If you agree, the school will use parts of this interview in the classroom and edited extracts will be made available to the public through *(specify e.g. exhibition/website/People's Collection Wales/YouTube)*.

We would like to make sure that the stories you share in the interview are kept for future generations. Because of this, we would like the complete recording to be stored permanently in *(name of library or archive)* where the public can ask to listen to it. This will only be done with your agreement. If you wish, you can restrict the way the recording is used in a recording agreement after the interview.

The personal information you provide on this form will not be shared with anyone, unless we have to for legal reasons. You can read our privacy policy here: *(website address)*. You can ask for a copy of the personal data we hold about you at any time.



This Agreement is made between *(name of school/organisation/project)* and you, the Interviewee.

Your name:

Your address:

.....

I agree to take part in an interview for *(name of school/organisation/project)* and I understand that the interview will be publicly available, unless I ask to restrict the way it is used after I've done the interview.

Signed:

Print name:

Date:

(ADD YOUR PROJECT NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS AS A HEADING)

Oral History Recording Agreement

Recording people's memories is an important part of understanding history.

The purpose of this form is to make sure that your recording is used by our (*school/organisation/project*), stored for future generations and shared with the public in the way that you want.

Your recording, or extracts from it, could be used by our (*school/organisation/project*) for (*specify e.g. exhibition/school website/People's Collection Wales/YouTube*).

This agreement is between (*name of school/organisation/project*) and you, the interviewee.

Your name:

Your address:

.....

In regard to the recorded interview which took place on.....

Declaration: I, the Interviewee, confirm that I agreed to take part in the recording and assign to the (*school/organisation/project*) all copyright in my contribution for use in (*specify e.g. exhibition/website/People's Collection Wales/YouTube*).

If you don't want our (*school/organisation/project*) to use and share your recording, or you want to limit its use, please say so here:

.....

.....

Signed (by the interviewee):

Print name:

Date:

Signed on behalf of (*school/organisation/project*):

Print name:

Date: