

## IMMIGRATION AND URBANIZATION

**Enrichment****Oral History**

When a historian interviews a person who was a witness to or a participant in an historical event, that interview is called an oral history. Oral histories can provide interesting perspectives and details about events that happened long ago. When conducting an oral history interview, historians usually record the session. They also follow certain steps that help the interview proceed smoothly.

**Your assignment:** Look at the photograph below. It shows recently arrived immigrants at Ellis Island. Choose one of the people in the photograph, and work with a partner to create an oral history of the immigrant experience. One of you should create questions to be asked during an interview. Be sure to think like a historian as you create your questions. The other should answer the questions in the role of one of the people in the photograph, years or even decades after the picture was taken. You might choose to take on the role of the woman in the photograph or one of the children. Use library resources and school-approved websites to learn more about the Ellis Island experience.



Immigrants of Ellis Island, The Granger Collection, New York

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*Use the steps below as you write the questions for your oral history interview.*

**Tips for creating oral history interview questions:**

1. Begin the interview by finding out basic personal information about the interviewee, such as name, date and place of birth, and current place of residence.
2. Keep your questions short and simple.
3. Avoid asking questions that can be answered with "Yes" or "No." Instead, use questions that begin with phrases such as "Tell me about . . ."
4. Use questions that begin with "Why" and "How" to encourage the interviewee to offer impressions and opinions. You can also ask your subject to offer his or her point of view or to describe the scene.
5. Encourage interviewees to talk about their own experiences, rather than those of others they may have heard about but not experienced for themselves. You might jog their memory by asking them to describe the happiest/saddest/most disturbing part of this experience.
6. Use follow-up questions to delve more deeply into a topic the subject has touched on. Jot these questions down as the interviewee is talking.
7. At the end of the interview, ask the interview subject whether there is anything else he or she would like to share about this particular event in history.

On a separate sheet of paper, write out your interview questions. Then, as a pair, conduct the oral history interview, recording the interview with a tape recorder or a digital recorder or on paper in a notebook. Then present the interview as an oral history, being sure to use direct quotes from the person in the role of an immigrant at Ellis Island.