

Oral History Teaching Tips

Muslims in Brooklyn

Brooklyn Historical Society's Collection

Begun in 1973, Brooklyn Historical Society's oral history collections include over 1,200 interviews. The collections provide a wealth of historical evidence about the lives of 20th - and 21st -century Brooklyn residents, and reveal how diverse individuals and communities have sought to preserve vital social, political, religious, and cultural traditions as Brooklynites, New Yorkers, and Americans. The collections contain interviews conducted in English, Spanish, Cantonese, and Mandarin, with narrators born as early as 1880. Recording the voices of today's and yesterday's Brooklynites is just one of the ways that BHS fulfills its mission to make the vibrant history of Brooklyn tangible, relevant, and meaningful for today's diverse communities, and for generations to come.

What is an oral history? How do oral histories contribute to historical records?

Historians use direct evidence of eyewitness accounts — primary sources — diaries, newspapers, public records, photographs, drawings, maps, physical remains, and oral histories to interpret past events. Oral histories, in audio, written and now digital formats, rely on the memories, views, and opinions of a narrator and serve to amplify the kinds of information provided by other primary sources. They offer first-person perspectives of living through major events and deepen our sense of how these events impacted individuals. Every oral history relies on the memories, views, and opinions of the narrator. Oral histories are intimate conversations between and among people who have generously agreed to share their recorded memories, views, and opinions with archivists and researchers.

Why teach with oral histories?

Teaching with oral histories awakens students' emotional connection to and personal investment in the history that surrounds them. Through listening closely to first-person accounts of the past, students learn how catalytic events reshaped lives.

But, when students listen to oral histories, they do more than learn about the past. They are empowered by understanding the valuable role they can play in interpreting and creating historical knowledge. By practicing tools for respectfully interpreting the different subjective points of view inherent in primary-source records, students discover that they, too, are an integral part of the continuum of history.

Who created this oral history?

The recorded oral history interview is co-created by the narrator and the interviewer. Without the interviewer, the narrator of an oral history might never have recorded their memories. The interviewer provides a frame and structure for the narrator to describe their memories; they create questions, and listen to the responses.

The Etiquette of Listening

Oral histories are intimate conversations between and among people who have generously agreed to share these recordings with BHS's archives and researchers. Because of the personal nature of oral history, listeners may find some viewpoints or language of the recorded participants to be objectionable. In keeping with its mission of preservation and unfettered access whenever possible, BHS presents these views as recorded.

The narrators convey personal stories that may provoke unexpected reactions. When listening to the oral histories, students should display full respect to the narrator and imagine that he or she is present. Ideally, the students should listen to each clip independently, but this may not be practical for your classroom. Some classes may find it easier to have one device shared among two or more students. While you should anticipate that students will approach these narrations from different perspectives, it's important for the students not to let their reactions influence how other students respond to the clip.

Oral History vs. Oral History Clips

Oral histories in this collection run over ninety-minutes long. To facilitate teaching, we have created clips from the full-length oral histories. Stories that get told on an oral history aren't always linear; to make it easier to listen to, we've also used an audio engineer to link portions of an oral history together. This editing has never changed the meaning of the oral history, however.

Oral history clips are provided to integrate into lessons that you already teach. They are provided here in alphabetical order by their clip title. See the **Listening as a Creative Act** lesson for more support on using oral history in your classroom.

Guidelines for Using Transcripts

The audio recording should be considered the primary source for each interview. Transcripts commissioned by BHS are nearly verbatim copies of the recorded interview, and as such may contain the natural false starts, verbal stumbles, misspeaks, and repetitions that are common in conversation. The decision for their inclusion was made because BHS gives primacy to the audible voice and because some researchers do find useful information in these verbal patterns. Unless these verbal patterns are germane to one's scholarly work, when quoting from this material researchers are encouraged to correct the grammar and make other modifications maintaining the flavor of the narrator's speech while editing the material for the standards of print.

BHS asks that users please listen in the spirit with which these were shared. BHS abides by the [General Principles & Best Practices for Oral History as agreed upon by the Oral Historical Association](#) and expects that use of this material will be done with respect for these professional ethics.