

ENERGY TRANSITIONS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Activity Guide



Activity Time

15 to 45 minutes

Subjects

Social Studies, Science

Grade Level

Elementary, Middle School, High School,
Nonformal

Topics

Oral history, Interviewing Skills, Renewable
Energy, Climate Change



University Archives
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



Wisconsin Energy Institute
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OVERVIEW

We are in the middle of a global energy transition. Create your own oral history to capture eyewitness accounts of these changes by interviewing (and recording) a person of your choice.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is oral history?

- A field of study and a method of gathering and preserving the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is based on storytelling and listening (Kathy Walbert, Duke University).
- The words “oral history” can also refer to the audio recording of an interview.

Why is oral history important, interesting, or exciting?

We often learn about history through secondary sources, such as textbooks or articles that summarize and analyze events. Oral history gives everyone a platform to share their experiences and accounts. We each are the expert of our own story. Oral history democratizes history, lifting up voices and experiences that might otherwise be forgotten.

Why should we conduct an oral history about energy?

The ways we make and use energy are changing. Renewable energy projects are being built across Wisconsin and the world as the economics of energy change and as people become increasingly aware of the impacts and realities of climate change. By recording an oral history you are capturing voices and experiences of this fast-changing time and creating a primary source for this moment in history. You can listen to previous student’s interviews at the UW–Madison Library [website](https://search.library.wisc.edu/search/digital?page=2&q=Grandparents+University+AND+Oral+History+Program) (<https://search.library.wisc.edu/search/digital?page=2&q=Grandparents+University+AND+Oral+History+Program>).

What sort of questions are good for an oral history interview?

Open-ended questions that don’t lead the narrator to a certain answer are best. Try to stay away from yes or no questions.

MATERIALS

- Questions list
- Writing utensil to take notes
- Device to call and/or record your narrator
- [Interview release form](http://go.wisc.edu/energyinterviewsform) (<http://go.wisc.edu/energyinterviewsform>)

ACTIVITY

Before the interview

1. Choose who you will interview. In oral history, we call this person the narrator. Pick someone whose experiences and perspectives you would like to learn about, perhaps an older relative or family friend.
2. Ask permission from your parent (if under 18) and your narrator to conduct an interview. Plan a date and time for your interview and talk about what platform you'll use.
3. An important part of oral history is preserving it for people to look back upon. Consider how best you could capture your conversation. Using your phone to record in a quiet room works well if you're in person. If you decide to record your interview over the internet, practice recording with whatever tool (Skype, Facetime, Zoom, or Google Meet all make recording pretty easy) you use. If you decide to use the phone, then contact us by emailing troy.reeves@wisc.edu. We'll give you a number that you and your narrator will call into that will produce a good-quality recording. If you decide not to record a web or traditional call, then please take careful notes.
4. Consider how you could capture your conversation, whether that's by recording your call (Skype and Facetime are two examples of apps that make this pretty easy) or by taking careful notes.
5. Decide with your narrator if you'd like to publish your interview with the UW–Madison Archives. By doing so, you'll preserve your first-person account for future historians. Don't worry about whether or not your story is "interesting" enough; your perspective is valuable. To share with the Archives, you'll need to fill out the attached release form. Be sure to share a copy of this with your narrator.
6. Review your interview questions. Think about what you know about how we use energy, and add questions to the list that make you curious.

During the interview

1. Find a quiet place to conduct your interview.
2. Start off by getting permission if you're hoping to record the interview.
3. Ask your questions and listen carefully to your narrator. Remember that it's okay to go "off-script." Ask open-ended follow-up questions and encourage your narrator to expand upon their answers. Give your narrator time to think about their answers; silence is okay!
4. At the end of your interview thank your narrator for their time and their stories.

After the interview

1. Review your notes.
2. Save your notes and the recording if you made one. Give your files a clear title. It's helpful to write a brief summary of what you talked about and select a few keywords.
3. If you'd like to add your interview to the UW–Madison Archives collection, upload your recording and completed release form to this [Google Form](http://go.wisc.edu/energyinterviews) (<http://go.wisc.edu/energyinterviews>). The Wisconsin Energy Institute and the UW Library Archives staff will work to get your interview added to the online collections.

INTERVIEW QUESTION LIST

1. Start by stating the date, your location, and your name. Then, ask your narrator(s) to state their name, age, and where they grew up and are living now.
2. Growing up, did you know where the energy you used for heat, electricity, or fuel came from?
 - . What did your parents tell you about energy?
 - . What did you tell your kid(s)?
3. How have you seen the way we make and use energy change since your childhood?
 - . What are the biggest reasons for those changes?
4. What do you remember about the 1970's energy embargo or why it happened? (If you lived through the increase in gas prices in the 1970's)
 - . Did you have to make any changes to how you were living?
5. When did you first hear about renewable sources of energy?
 - . What do you remember thinking about renewable energy when you first heard about it?
6. What are your thoughts about renewable sources of energy now?
7. When was the first time you heard about climate change?
 - . How has your understanding about climate change changed since then?
8. What have you noticed about how COVID-19 is impacting our energy use, whether electricity or fuel? What do you think we should prioritize about as we come out of this time of social distancing?
9. What are your hopes for my generation and how we make and use energy?
10. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[StoryCorps](http://storycorps.org) (<http://storycorps.org>), is an organization that works to preserve and share stories in order to build connections between people. They have an app to help you record stories for the Library of Congress, hundreds of animated stories to listen to, and lesson plans for teachers.

[UW Archives Oral History Program](http://library.wisc.edu/archives/archives/oral-history-program) (<http://library.wisc.edu/archives/archives/oral-history-program>). The Oral History Program's collection, held at the UW-Madison Archives, currently encompasses over 1,500 interviews touching on all aspects of the University's history. They support oral history projects and collaborations.



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[uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/
uwcampusvoices](http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/uwcampusvoices)



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energy.wisc.edu/education



GREAT LAKES BIOENERGY
RESEARCH CENTER

glbrc.org/outreach

2020

The Wisconsin Energy Institute is working on one of the most critical challenges of our time – the transition toward new, clean energy systems and solutions.

The Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center supports research for creating biofuels and bioproducts that are economically viable and environmentally sustainable