

# Oral History and September 11

## Objectives:

**Students will:** Explore the human dimension of the September 11 attacks by conducting an interview.

Consider the benefits and limitations of using oral history to learn about the past.

Assess their own views on September 11.

**Note:** This lesson is designed to be completed over the course of two class periods—one day to prepare for the interviews, and one day for students to share what they learned from their interviews and debrief as a class. Encourage students to film or record their interviews if possible.

## Handouts:

“Remembering September 11”

“Considering Oral Histories” one for each group

## Part 1: Interview Preparation

**1. Considering Oral History**—Begin class with a brief discussion of oral history. What is oral history? Why is it important? What can we learn about a moment in history by asking questions of people who lived through it?

Ask students what they know about the attacks of September 11, 2001. What happened? Why are the attacks significant? How did people around the world react to the attacks? What might students learn from people who remember the attacks? For example, what different information could students learn about September 11 from: a firefighter who worked at Ground Zero in the days and weeks after the attacks? The husband of a person who lost their life in the attacks? An airline security official who was working at the time of the attacks? A security advisor to President George W. Bush? A teacher in the Middle East who watched the attacks on TV? A police officer in Scranton, PA?

**2. Preparing for an Interview**—Tell students that they will be interviewing someone they know about September 11. Distribute “Remembering September 11” and tell students to read the instructions and questions. Give students a few minutes to think about whom they would like to interview. Encourage them to think about the kind of information they could learn from the experiences and views of the person they’re interviewing. Ask students to brainstorm three additional questions they want to ask. Students should write these questions on the handout.

## Homework:

Students should conduct their interview and complete “Remembering September 11.”

## Part 2: Interview Debrief

**1. Forming Small Groups**—Divide the class into groups of three or four and distribute “Considering Oral Histories.” Instruct students to share with their group what they learned from their interview and what their interviewee’s experiences and memories of September 11 were. Each group should record their answers to the questions on the handout. Encourage students that filmed or recorded their interviews to share a few minutes of the recordings with their group.

**2. Sharing Conclusions**—Gather the class together and call on students to discuss their group’s interviews. Did the interview subjects share any common memories, experiences, or attitudes? How did people’s experiences and views differ? Did students learn anything new about September 11 from conducting these interviews? Ten years ago, September 11 was a highly emotional topic for people across the country. Do students think that’s still true today? Do students think that the fear of terrorism that emerged in the United States after September 11 shaped public opinion and policy making at the time (for example, the decision to embark on wars in Iraq and Af-

ghanistan)? If so, how? If not, why not? Does that fear still exist today?

Do students think that conducting interviews about individuals' experiences is a valuable way to learn about history? What are the benefits of oral history? What are its limitations?

**3. Reassessing Student Views**—Ask students to reflect on their own views about September 11. Do students have memories of the attacks? How have their attitudes toward the attacks changed over time? Have students' opinions and perspectives on September 11 changed since hearing about someone else's personal experience?

### **Extra Challenge:**

Ask students what other stories would be important to hear to gain a fuller understanding of September 11. Tell students that there are many written accounts and audio interviews available online in which people share their memories of and reflections on September 11. For example, StoryCorps provides a compilation of audio interviews of people who were directly affected by the attacks: <<http://www.911memorial.org/StoryCorps>>. "Portraits of Grief" by *The New York Times* is based on interviews with friends and families of victims: <<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/us/portraits-of-grief.html>>. Challenge students to explore accounts of September 11 and reflect on how they change students' understanding of the event.