**How to write about your Oral History**

Your topic is to place the individual’s experiences and/or perspective within a larger historical or social context

*What should you say about the interviewee’s comments?*

Analyze the responses to your questions and what they illustrate about their historical or social context. You might consider how your interviewee’s identity (his or her class, gender, and ethnicity, for instance) relates to the nature of the interviewee’s experience or perspective. For this kind of essay, you’ll need an analytical thesis statement (see our handout on thesis statements), a plan for how to organize the subtopics that demonstrate your thesis, analysis/interpretation of the interviewee’s comments, and a conclusion that draws your analysis together.

*How should you structure your essay?*

Your introduction should contain and explain a thesis statement that makes a claim about the nature of the historical or social context. Organizing the body paragraphs by topic may be an effective way of explaining how the individual’s experiences fit into the broader historical or social context.

*How should you present quotes and use paraphrases?*

You’ll provide framing phrases as in the previous case, but you’ll also need to include your explanation of the significance of the quotes. A good general guideline is to include at least as much explanation of the quote as the quote is long. Paraphrases are helpful when you need just the content of the comment to make your point—that is, when the language the interviewee uses is not the primary issue. If you’re writing an analytical or argumentative essay, a mixture of paraphrases and quotes will probably serve your purpose best.

*Should you read and/or incorporate secondary sources?*

Whether or not you need to use secondary sources is partially a matter of what the assignment calls for. But if the assignment doesn’t specify, you’ll probably need to read and perhaps refer explicitly to some secondary sources so that you will have the necessary evidence to create a picture of the broader historical or social context.

**Example**

Here is an example of how you might handle one of your interviewee’s comments within the body of the essay. Suppose that your paper is for a women’s studies project in which your instructor has asked you to interview a female family member; you have chosen to interview your grandmother, Lucretia. Suppose that you asked the following question: “How free did you feel in terms of choosing your jobs? If you felt limited, why do you think that might have been?”

If your assignment asks you to place the responses in their social context, you will need to integrate the quotes into text, paired with either the questions themselves or paraphrases, along with some analysis of how the individual’s experiences fit into his or her social context. You may even include some references to secondary sources, depending on the assignment and your own sense of whether they would strengthen your analysis:

*Lucretia describes feeling limited in terms of her occupational life: “I have always been good at organizing things and getting along with people, so that made it easy for me to find receptionist jobs. But in those times, you didn’t see women executives. That was just how things were; people simply didn’t consider women for those jobs.” Her account reveals a sense of how fixed gender roles were in the workplace and seems fairly typical for the time and place, as feminist historian Tammy Ixplox’s scholarship suggests (Ixplox 39).*