

“Doing History”: The COVID-19 Pandemic

cThumanities

What is “doing history”?

“Doing history” means **actively participating** in understanding the past.

It’s more than just memorizing facts; it involves **asking questions** and carefully **looking at different sources of information** to piece together a story.

Primary Sources

- **Primary sources**—original records like letters, photographs, government documents, and oral histories* —help us understand what really happened in the past.
- **Oral history** = a method of gathering information about the past through recorded interviews with people who have personal knowledge of past events. It captures the voices and emotions that textbooks often miss.

Many Perspectives

Sometimes two sources say conflicting things, or don't provide all the information we need on their own. Different groups of people can have very different perspectives on the same event.

Historians don't ignore these differences, they embrace them!
By looking at many perspectives, we get a **more complete and honest picture** of the past than any single list of facts could ever provide.

You are part of the process!

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, is not just a recent memory—it is a major historical event that will be studied for centuries. Because you lived through it, your experiences, your family's stories, and even your old school schedules are the primary sources that future historians will use to understand this era.

Turn and Talk

1. In your own words, what does it mean to “do history”? How is this process different from just memorizing facts?
2. Why is it important for historians to look at multiple perspectives, rather than just one side of a story?
3. Think about your own life during the pandemic. What is one “primary source” from your own experience (an object, a photo, a text message) that could help a historian in the year 2126 understand what life was like for you?

Oral History: The Interview

1. Choose a friend, relative, or community member to interview.
2. Explain the project to them, secure their informal agreement (informed consent), and discuss what to expect.
3. Ask your interviewee for permission to record the interview. This way you can verify your notes as well as preserve their story for the future.
4. Plan to spend at least 20-30 minutes asking them your questions.
5. Take notes and record their answers on the provided worksheet.
6. Don't forget to thank them for their time!

Interview Tips

- Conduct the interview in a **quiet location** with minimal background noise and distractions.
- **Listen actively:** Don't just wait for your turn to speak. Follow up on interesting details.
- **Be patient:** Some memories might be difficult or emotional to recall.
- **Respect the narrative:** There are no wrong answers in an oral history; you are recording their truth.

Sentence Starters

- **Use these phrases to help the conversation flow if you feel stuck:**
 - “That is very interesting. Could you tell me more about...”
 - “How did that make you feel at the time?”
 - “In other words, you are saying that...”
 - “I noticed that you mentioned [X]; how did that connect to [Y]?”
 - “Thank you for sharing that. My next question is...”
- Why might open-ended questions be more useful than yes/no questions?

Exit Ticket/Next Class

- Write down:
 1. Who you plan to interview
 2. One open-ended question you want to ask them about their pandemic experience
- For next class:
 1. Complete your interview using the Interview Notes worksheet.
 2. Reflect on your different experiences with the Comparing Perspectives worksheet.