

**Telling Stories, Writing Lives: A Guide to Using Folklore, Oral History and  
Ethnography**

**Prepared for the Open Society Institute**

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## Introduction

The folklorist, oral historian, and ethnographer are fascinated by that part of culture that lies hidden and submerged behind the shadow of official civilization. As a scholarly activity, these individuals collect tales, traditions, proverbs, and reminisces of community members to gain an understanding of contemporary society and culture. The fieldwork techniques of the Folklorist allow an individual to access the collective memories of communities. These techniques can be used by the literacy educator to develop exciting reading writing opportunities for young people. The combination of the study of Folklore, the practice of oral history and writing is powerful. By making common experience the center of the curriculum, it gives students in virtually any setting a variety of interesting opportunities to achieve personal as well as community involvement in their learning. The very nature of the work promotes and encourages a high degree of cultural awareness and multi-cultural interaction among students. As students study their own cultures and traditions; make presentation to their classmates; listen to the life stories of community members, analyze material that they have collected they are automatically engaged in cross-cultural exchanges.

This guide is designed primarily for teachers interested in using folklore, oral history and ethnography in a school or community center setting. The guide is not aimed at a particular age group. Rather, we believe that this type of work cuts across grade and ability levels. This approach is equally effective with young children as it is with high school students and adults. This guide is meant to be as practical as possible. Therefore we have written it in a conversational style as if you, the reader, were part of one of our workshops.

The guide is divided into three sections. The first section, *Getting Started*, serves as an introduction to the field. It contains definitions, examples of the various genres of Folklore. The second section, *Oral Histories*, will help you learn the techniques and skills necessary to do an oral history project as well as offer some suggestions for projects. The third section *Writing It Up*, is devoted to the writing workshop process. We have included several appendices at the end of the guide that give you additional exercises; ideas for lesson plans, and materials. It is our intent, that this guide will give you enough information so that you and your students would be able to carry out a project of your choosing.

## **Section One: - Getting Started: identifying and finding folklore**

*Objectives:*

*To gain a basic understanding of the theoretical background underpinning the discipline of Folklore and the practice of Oral History, and Ethnography*

*To begin to explore the connection between the study of folklore and promoting literacy*

*To practice the first steps in collecting folklore material*

### **Introduction:**

The general hypothesis that supports the study of folklore is that folklore is universal to the human condition and that by studying it we gain new perspectives on our culture and society. As Elizabeth Simons (1990) suggests, “to know our folklore—the folklore of our country, our ethnicity, our family, our childhood, our age group, our communities is to learn to know ourselves in new ways. Viewing ourselves through our folklore is akin to looking at our lives through another lens, which focuses on aspects of life often overlooked or undervalued. “There is not a single social group that does not have folklore as part of the cultural fabric that governs daily life, beliefs and behaviors. It is central to the human experience, and as such becomes a powerful way to teach young people how to think about themselves and their world. The process of collecting folklore provides intensive practice in basic as well as higher level skills of reading and writing. The process of analyzing folklore provides equally intensive practice in critical thinking.

From an academic standpoint, there are many solid reasons to incorporate the study of folklore into any literacy curriculum. Probably the most important reason is that by allowing students to study their own communities, families and cultures they bring an automatic level of expertise to the educational enterprise that is not possible in other more traditional situations. This is particularly important for students who have not had much academic success or who belong to a marginalized group. One of the central hypotheses that underlies this approach is that in order for students to learn to be fluent readers and writers; they need material that is interesting, and they need a great deal of it. Using the community and the lives of the students themselves as the basis of study provides just such material and in almost limitless amounts.

The study and use of folklore, and by extension doing oral histories, is a positive and supportive way to celebrate and understand similarities and differences across ethnic and social lines as well as among seemingly homogeneous groups. For example, participants in a workshop in Brashov, Romania were surprised to find the wide variations of how individuals within a single group celebrated Easter. The similarities lay in the general

celebration of the holiday, and the differences appeared as participants from one geographic area compared notes with participants from other parts of the country. Hence, even a group that looks homogeneous on the surface can be deceptive. Once student start to study folklore and do the work of oral historians, a surprising degree of diversity emerges.

For students who belong to a minority, the study of folklore and oral histories gives visibility to their own cultural group and also the opportunity to share their experiences with others. When this happens some interesting discoveries can be made. For example, in a workshop in Timisoara participants, all of whom were from different ethnic, cultural, and geographic groups, were working on proverbs. Much to everyone's surprise there was a good deal of similarity in proverbs as well as some exciting differences. Participants enjoyed lively conversations and discussions comparing and swapping sayings and the stories associated with them. The author was equally surprised to find a proverb common to Romanians that is also common to fishermen on the coast of Maine in North America. The message of the proverb is that if you treat someone badly you can expect misfortune to befall you eventually. The proverb from Maine is, "What goes around comes around", and the proverb from the Romania is, "he who digs a hole for others will fall in it himself". This represents a living example of the kinds of cross-cultural educational exchanges that can occur in the study of folklore.

Students studying folklore and carrying our oral history projects can often see connections between their own lives and history, and between the personal and seemingly impersonal world beyond them. For example, in a recent workshop in Sinia, a young talented history teacher designed a project where his students would interview family and community members about how they experienced the final year of communism in Romania. One of the goals of the project is to create a "living history" of what is actually studied in the history textbooks. By having students interviewing their grandparents and village elders about how they spent this astonishing year, students suddenly learn first-hand about hardship and heroism. Hence, the dry dates of a political event or the dispassionate material found in textbooks gains a face and a life which brings new meaning to what had been only an abstraction. The student can also be a witness to great acts of suffering, perseverance, courage, and success through listening and recording the stories of his or her elders. Many of these stories would vanish without this kind of careful documentation.

Finally, research supports the idea that literacy acquisition (reading and writing) happens best, at least initially, when it is embedded in the context of the reader's and writer's life rather than in contexts outside the person's experience. For example: it is hard for children and adults to understand a snowstorm without ever having experienced one. A story set in a rural farming village is more easily accessible to children who have grown up in a rural community than in a city. Regardless of the setting, all people have stories, beliefs, traditions, and artifacts that can become the focal point of discussions and the subject of reading and writing material. It is just a question of what these stories are and how to capture this material and turn it into text.

The basic idea behind this approach is to teach students how to do field work, which will allow them to collect material from their own communities that is pertinent to their lives. As teachers, it is important to remember that the students are actually going out and getting information from their communities, friends, and family. That material is then collected and brought back to the classroom where the teacher and students together can analyze it and use it. This is a fundamental shift in responsibility and organization from a more traditional approach, which is textbook-and teacher-centered. As students and teachers become familiar with this process, the classroom extends into the community. Parents, relatives, community leaders, all become part of the educational enterprise. It is a collective endeavor that blurs the edges of school, home, and community.

### **Definitions:**

For the purposes of discussion and later fieldwork, it is helpful to become familiar with the terminology that accompanies Folklore, Oral History, and Ethnography. Although each of these terms has a specific definition, in practice they overlap and are intertwined. The folklorist does oral histories, the oral historian collects folklore, and the ethnographer includes elements of both in his or her research. From the student standpoint of actual practice, i.e. what can be accomplished, the two concepts of Folklore and Oral Histories are probably the most realistic, accessible, and useful.

Ethnography is a term from Anthropology. The word stems from the Greek *ethnos*, which means people, and *graphein*, which means to write. Hence ethnography is essentially writing about people. However, in the field of anthropology, ethnography has come to mean the description of a community or group that focuses on social systems and cultural heritage. At one time, ethnographies were reserved for the study of primitive societies. In current practice, the word has developed a much broader base, and ethnographies now include community studies of contemporary places and people. The method of research, however, remains generally the same. The researcher, very often not a member of the group, spends time living in a community doing in-depth interviews, reading and researching primary source material, and observing the lives of the people he or she wishes to study. Eventually the researcher compiles all this information and analysis in a body of work that often takes the form of a book. Ethnographies generally read well and are written in lively and often dramatic style. The purpose of the work is to bring a full picture of whatever group is under study. Part of that picture is not only reporting what people do and say but some analysis that tells us about the social structure and world view of the group. There have been many interesting ethnographies published in recent times about contemporary populations and communities; examples are *Bury Me Standing: the gypsies and their journey* by Isabel Fonseca, and *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* by Lila Abu-Lughod.

Oral Histories are the recounting or remembering of historical events by a single person. Information is usually gathered through taped interviews and then transcribed. The interviewer then sifts through the interviews and writes the story from them. The oral

history represents a compilation and synthesis of the interviews rather than simply a collection of transcriptions. The key to good oral history work is the interview. The focus topic for the interviews can be practically anything. People have been interviewed about their childhood experiences, memories of particular events such as invasions and nature disasters, and also contemporary events. For example, in the United States there are many oral histories about the lives of African Americans during the Civil Rights movement. These histories highlight the particular lives and experiences of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. They include not only background about the person's life, but personal philosophies, what the person did, and who those experiences affected her life.

Folklore is to people as water is to a fish. It is so prevalent and so much a part of our lives that it is virtually invisible. Alan Dundis, a noted scholar at the University of California at Berkeley, describes folklore as "a kind of popular pulse, ever indicating what is on a people's heart" Roger Abrahams defines folklore as encompassing all the "traditional cultural forms that entertain, instruct, and serve other diverse functions." One of the best ways to describe folklore more exactly is to describe some of the common myths about folklore and then propose some general characteristics common to all genres of folklore.

### **Myths about folklore**

1. Folklore is neither true nor false by nature. Whether it is in harmony or incongruent with science or history is irrelevant. The significance of folklore is its *presence and influence in people's lives*. For example, many people around the world believe that a black cat crossing one's path is a sign of bad luck, or that breaking a mirror will bring seven years of bad luck. It is irrelevant that these beliefs are not based in fact. What is relevant is how much these beliefs govern the everyday lives of people who practice them.
1. The printed text of a song or a story alone is not folklore. It only represents the record of someone singing the song or telling the story. In other words, folklore is both the behavior and the product, both of which vary according to the population. For example, in Romania and Hungary many people do hand embroidery and crocheting. In this case the behavior is the process of making the tablecloth, or table runner etc. That behavior includes all the social aspects of the work, such as the group getting together, the ideas for patterns, learning how to crochet or embroider. (The list can go on and on.) The product is the handwork itself, which varies with the geographical area and the group.
3. Folklore is not restricted to by-gone traditions or stories, such as soap making or fairy tales; it includes contemporary practices and traditions, such as hanging plastic eggs on an "Easter Tree" or responding to chain letters. Even though the word tradition is associated with the term folklore, it has less to do with the age of the particular practice than with how it is transmitted. Folklore is generally transmitted by speech or

word of mouth. For instance, the embroidery techniques of Central Europe are transmitted by one person showing another how to do it, rather than an individual sitting down and reading a book. Another example would be a grandmother explaining and showing a grandchild how to make jam or pickles or preserves. Generally these techniques and family recipes have escaped the printed recipe book and are passed along from family member to family member.

4. Folklore is not time-bound, nor is it confined to a particular geographic setting or restricted to a population. Almost everyone participates in some form of folkloric activity, regardless of class or socio-economic status. Throwing salt over your shoulder, saying “God Bless you” when people sneeze, not stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, spitting into the wind, not walking under ladders, are all examples of common folk beliefs. Making quilts, jams or playing a fine country tune on a fiddle are all examples of common folk practices.

### **Characteristics of folklore**

As has been pointed out, folklore exists all around us every day, no matter where or how we live. Just as the myths about folklore help us to recognize it when we see it, so do some of the characteristics of folklore that are common to all genres.

Folklore is very often anonymous in origin, generally passed along by word or mouth, and changes over time and situation. As an example, there are a series of stories that exist all over the world that include a ghostly hitchhiker. Usually a young man is driving down the road when he spies a young woman all alone by the roadside. He gives her a lift and drops her off at her house. When he returns the next day and talks to her parents, he discovers that the girl had been killed some years before. This story can be found from Edinburgh to Singapore. Its author is unknown but it is retold with variations that reflect the circumstances of the teller.

Folklore is formalistic; by that we mean that it has a definite recognizable structure. It also has an aesthetic or artistic quality that sets it apart from ordinary conversation. For example, we can distinguish a folk tale from a newspaper article by the way the story is constructed. Folk tales often start out with a predictable beginning, such as once-upon-a-time or “did you hear the one about”. We also know that someone is telling a joke or a story because there are recognizable patterns in behavior and language. Even proverbs are patterned to transmit maximum information and wisdom using minimum but memorable language. Home remedies, weather sayings, ghost stories, proverbs, as well as quilts, handwork, gardening techniques, lullabies, are representative of the kind of structures and patterns that are found in folklore.

Finally, folklore is endlessly flexible and adapts to the needs, demands, and standards of the particular group rather than the population as a whole. The major reason for this flexibility and variation is that interaction with a group is how the material is transmitted and formed. This face-to-face interaction is a key element in folklore. Hence, a group of

fiddlers in one part of Romania may not play the same fiddle tunes in the same way as those in another part of the country. Yet there are similarities in the basic patterns of the music. Unlike a Mozart concerto that is carefully transcribed in sheet music and can be recognized no matter what orchestra plays it; a fiddle tune evolves with the fiddler and changes according to the needs of the group. The same thing can be said about story telling, quilting, jokes, children's games and rhymes, and even wedding traditions.

### **Folklore, Popular Culture and Elite Culture:**

Another way of looking at folklore is to place it in the context of culture as a whole. This is often important for students, since there is a tendency to get folklore mixed up with popular culture, particularly with the film characters produced by Disney. Barbara Allen (1985) defines popular culture as "the expressions aimed at a broad, general audience, which are promulgated through media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television and film". The key to popular culture is sameness, whereas the key to folk culture is variation. For example, through the popularity of his films, Walt Disney has created an easily recognizable character in Mickey Mouse. Mickey looks the same and says the same things no matter where he is portrayed. Star Wars is another example of popular culture. Popular culture often generates paraphernalia such as T-shirts, dolls and toys that are available commercially. In the case of Disney and Star Wars, these items can be found from Singapore to Moscow and they all look alike. Folk culture, on the other hand, depends on the interaction of a specific group, and as a result has unique characteristics that set it apart from the mainstream.

Elite culture is the original product of an artist or artistic group. It is also the heart of the fine and performing arts. Elite culture can be influenced by folk culture, such as a folk tune forming the basis of a Mozart concerto, but it is not created by group interaction. From student's perspective, elite culture is most easily recognizable by examples, such as Mozart, Renoir, and Degas.

### **Collecting Verbal Folklore:**

Verbal folklore includes personal stories, jokes, proverbs, riddles games, rhymes, and sayings, as well as legends, place names, rituals, ballads, and songs. The list can go on. Suffice it to say that verbal folklore represents all those genres that deal primarily in text, as opposed to a product such as a quilt or a carving.

As students begin to think about setting up a folklore project, it is best to begin with such verbal genres as proverbs, songs, and stories. It is also easiest to begin with examples that are short and can be found in the general population. Not everyone knows a long story that she can tell readily, but most people know a riddle, joke, or saying. The other reason to begin with short pieces is that, from a reading and writing standpoint, the process is not overwhelming. Students of any age may need to work up to collecting long myths and legends. Collecting short works gives everyone a chance to experience all

aspects of the process without any one part becoming burdensome. Regardless of where one starts, any form of collecting becomes an instant opportunity for reading and writing.

Below are some examples. As you read through these, try to think up at least four or five of your own. These examples can be used as a starting point for work with students in almost any age group. The list is by no means definitive and is meant only as a beginning. It would be worthwhile to add some ideas of your own to this list.

### **Proverbs:**

Proverbs are particularly useful because they are very short, can be easily illustrated and can provide an opportunity for discussion. Proverbs generally represent the collective wisdom of a social group and as such provide a window for the reader into the value system of the group. They can be used by all ages, and they provide an excellent opportunity for younger children to gather information from their elders because they are not so long as to be cumbersome.

Examples:

Time and tide wait for no man.

A fool and his money are soon parted.

Here is an example of kind of additional writing students can do with proverbs. Students answered the following three questions: What does the proverb mean? Where does the proverb come from?, Who might use it?

*A penny saved is a penny earned (a penny is equal to once cent and is the smallest denomination of coin)*

This proverb extols the virtues of saving money and being thrifty. It is a very common proverb in parts of North America. A nice project for students regardless of grade level is to make a book of collected proverbs. Art students can illustrate the book.

### **Weather sayings**

Weather sayings are those pieces of local knowledge that help us predict the weather without the benefit of a commercial weather forecast. These saying were particularly useful when an individual's occupation and livelihood were weather dependent; this would include farmers, ranchers, sailors and fishermen. Weather sayings are also common and fairly easy for students to collect.

Examples:

Red sky at night, sailor's delight, red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.

Ring around the moon, rain is coming soon. (Also, many people believe that if there is a ring around the moon, one can count how many stars are inside the ring and this is how many days the rain is away.)

Cows down before seven rain before eleven.

If potatoes grow deep in the ground, cold weather is coming.

### **Riddles:**

Riddles come in all shapes and sizes and are indigenous to all cultures. They appear in places as diverse as the Bible and fairy tales. A riddle, by its very nature, requires the reader or listener to think in order to solve the puzzle. It is a perfect way to teach basic reading and writing skills. Collecting riddles is also an interesting and entertaining project that can involve almost everyone in a family or community. Riddle books are popular with children; hence a book that is “locally” produced is even more interesting.

Examples:

Riddle me! Riddle me! What is that: over your head and under your hat? (your hair)

As round as an apple, as deep as a cup,  
And all the king’s horses can’t pull it up (a well)

It should also be noted that riddles most often rhyme and therefore are particularly appropriate to promote reading and writing in younger children.

### **Good and Bad Luck:**

Just as riddles are an integral part of most groups, so are beliefs about good and bad luck. These kinds of beliefs usually appear as short phrases and lend themselves to being put together as lists. Again, they are easy to collect since most people know them. An interesting project for students would be to collect these sayings and also research their origins.

Examples:

Put a horseshoe over your door to keep away bad luck.

If you find a four-leaf clover, you will have good luck.

If you make a wish on a falling star, it will come true.

A black cat crossing your path is bad luck.

Breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck.

### **Predictions:**

Predictions are people's way of trying to foretell the future. They are common and easy to collect but will vary from culture to culture as well as from family to family.

Examples:

If you drop a fork, company is coming.

If your nose is itching, someone is coming to visit you.

Whatever you start on Friday make sure you finish it that same day, or it will never be finished.

You will have a headache if a bird builds a nest with hair from your head.

### **Cures:**

Almost all groups have "home remedies" for common illnesses. In fact, there was a time in the not-so distant past when home remedies were the most prevalent forms of medicine available to the general population. Interviewing elderly people in the community or family most easily attains this kind of information. One group of elementary students put together a booklet entitled *Nana's Book of Home Remedies*.

Examples:

Putting onions on your chest will help cure a cold.

Put tobacco on a bee sting to stop pain and swelling.

Holding your breath and counting to ten will cure the hiccups.

### **Names:**

The names of people and places can serve as sources of stories that are interesting and worthwhile to collect. How family members got their names and what those names mean is a good starting point. Towns, rivers, village squares, to name just a few possibilities, all have special names that students could use for research. There are also interesting names in different cultures for natural occurrences. For example, in the Native American culture each phase of the moon has a different name: September is the harvest moon, February is the sap moon, etc.

### **Ballads and Songs:**

Ballads and songs are another almost limitless source of folk material that students can collect. The key to collecting songs and ballads, however, is that they are traditional in

nature and not part of the popular or elite culture. We have included an example of a traditional song that is about the universal theme of love and relationships. The possibilities for discussion and presentation using such material are endless.

**(I know where I am going)**

I know where I'm going,  
I know who's going with me,  
I know who I love,  
But the dear knows who I'll marry.

I'll have stockings of silk,  
Shoes of fine green leather,  
Combs to buckle my braid,  
and a ring for every finger

Feather beds are soft,  
Painted rooms are bonney;  
But I will leave them all  
To go with my love Johnny

Some say he is dark,  
I say he is bonny.  
He's the flower of them all,  
My handsome coaxing Johnny.

I know where I'm going,  
I know who's going with me,  
I know who I love  
But the dear knows who I'll marry.

**Rituals:**

Rituals are the basis for social order. Almost every culture has weddings, funerals, and baptisms. These rituals involve certain rights of passage that make them unique and special. All of these events are sources of folk material and stories. The best approach with students is to begin the conversation with the question, "How do you celebrate....(fill in the blank) and then take it from there. It should also be noted that most families have memorable stories relating to these events. These stories, provide yet another opportunity to collect material.

**Collecting material folklore: artifacts, products, crafts, and special skills**

The second large area of folklore is often referred to as folklife, which has come to mean a collection of the artifacts that are hand-made and part of the daily or cultural life of the group. Material folk culture can represent domestic life, farm life, or artisans. This provides two opportunities for collecting material; one is the artifact itself, and the other is the story of how the artifact is made. This area of folklore can be divided into the *person or artisan, the group that artisan belongs, the product and the process.*

Examples:

Quilters represent the artisan and also the group that quilts. Generally artisans work collectively, or at the very least associate with other artisans who do the same kind of work. Each of these groups has specific and interesting material that students can collect.

The quilt itself represents the product. Generally a product is unique in that it is individually made, but it also has a particular structure or pattern that sets it apart from others that are like it. For example, quilts have special patterns that mean different things, such as the wedding ring pattern, or the log cabin pattern.

Quilting, for instance, is the process of making the quilt that includes the stitches, putting the pieces together, selecting the fabric etc. Almost all parts of the material folk culture have a process which ensures that the product will come out well and that the method of making the product will be passed along from one group to the next. This is true of just about everything, from handwork to wine making to cabinet making.

These same definitions can be made for a large variety of products and artisans, such as cabinetmakers, violin makers, carvers, blacksmiths, embroiders.

A helpful activity for students is to make a list of all the possible folklife products they can think of and then identify who in their community makes those products. This is an excellent way to move to the more complex skill of doing oral histories.

### **The process used by Folklorists**

Before moving on to the next section of the guide, which is oral history, we found it helpful for teachers to spend just a few minutes on the “process” that most folklorists use when doing a field project. We will walk you through the process, and along the way give specific examples of how it can be used.

Regardless of what you or your students choose to do as a project, the *process* that all folklorists use is the same. This process can be broken down into three basic steps: select the topic, collect the material using interviews and observation techniques, and perform some type of analysis. At each stage of the process, teachers have the opportunity to incorporate various skills from the curriculum.

For the purposes of an example that is accessible to almost everyone, let us say that your class has chose to examine the folklore of names. There are a number of reasons that this is a good topic. Names are always interesting to students because:

- a) They are highly personal (everyone has one).
- b) There is usually a good story connected with them.
- c) They often have meanings beyond the name itself, for example, children who are named after saints.
- d) They can be reflective of larger concepts found in cultural organizations.

e) The folklore of names lends itself to some interesting possibilities for analysis.

Step two is collecting information. Collecting the “folklore of names” can be as much fun as it is interesting. I usually start a class by offering my own name up as an example because it is unusual. I write on the board *Bushnell Bird Beck Stasz* and then ask students to think of questions that would elicit information from me about my name. I usually tell them the story of how I got my name, and that it is representative of a New England tradition whereby the first born is named after a grandparent. In my case, since I was to be an only child, my parents did not want any one side of the family to feel left out so they named me after everyone they could think of. As a consequence, I have a series of last names, all of which represent different branches of the family and are common to specific geographic areas of New England. When I got married, I took my husband’s last name, which is Polish. Finally, I entertain my students with what it is like to go through life with a name like Bird, which is the name that I choose to use most of the time

Students at this point all begin to do what a good folklorist does, which is to design questions and collect information. Students ask questions of each other to learn more about their names. They can go home and ask their parents about the story of their name as well as the story of how their parents or grandparents got their names. How this project unfolds from here is up to you. The goal is to have students collect as much information as they can about names. Keep in mind that family stories can be indicative of larger contexts such as religious affiliation, cultural and ethnic traditions etc.

Once you have collected the material, which in this case is the stories and meanings relating to the names of students in the class and their families, you are ready for step three, which is analysis. Analysis requires students to look for patterns in the information they have collected and also answers the basic question “so what?”. By that we mean, what does this information tell us about who we are, where we are from, and what we believe. For example, in a recent workshop in Sinia, Romania, we did a short version of the “folklore of names”. Participants discovered that their names can be “sorted” by geography, religious affiliation, family traditions, ethnicity, and nicknames. The stories of how individuals got their names also illuminate the uniqueness of family life. Some of the stories gave us insights into who people felt were important, as in the examples of people named after famous soldiers or politicians. Religious affiliation also played a big part in the folklore of names. For those people named after Saints, it was interesting to analyze the different kinds of Saints, their stories and what they represent in the greater context of society. The names could also be analyzed by trends. For example, there are names that seemed common to a period of history or a particular decade. The possibilities for analysis are endless.

Obviously the depth and breath of analysis that students do depends a great deal on their age and development. High school students and adults will do a much more sophisticated job of analysis than a child of six. The point to remember is that analysis is crucial to this process and that all participants in a project should and can do it. It is in the analysis that the project takes on a depth of sophistication and intellectual value and it is this analysis

that forms the basis for writing. Analysis is also the part that can be the most insightful and rewarding for students and teachers.

## **Section Two: Oral Histories**

*Objectives:*

*To learn the basic techniques and tools necessary to do an oral history project*

*To learn what types of topics can be used for oral histories and to begin a list of possible topics*

*To understand the process and practice the techniques that would be appropriate for students as well as teachers to do oral history projects*

### **Introduction**

Now that students have had a little practice thinking about folklore and folklife, as well as learning how to collect short bits of information, it is time to move on to the more extensive task of doing oral histories. As we said in section one, oral histories are generally the memories and reminiscences of a single individual. However, it is possible to do multiple oral histories on the same topic. For example, I am doing a series of interviews with very elderly woman between the ages of 75 and 99 about their views on a variety of subjects from child-rearing to community responsibility.

Collecting information for oral histories is most effectively done through observation, photographs, and the taped and transcribed interview. Once the interview is completed and transcribed, the student must “write it up”. We will devote a separate section of this booklet to the process of writing up the interviews and turning them into a polished and finished piece of work.

### **How to get started and decide on a topic**

The very first problem to solve is to answer the question, “What kind of oral history do you wish to write?” Generally, if you want to write a full-length biography about a single person, we recommend you that you choose someone old enough to be interesting but not so old that it makes the project impossible. For a very elderly person we suggest that you do an oral history about a particular part of that person’s life as opposed to the whole thing. How you define that part is up to you; however, one way to think about this is from a historical perspective. For example, how the person spent World War II or a particular political event such as the last year of communism in Romania. Natural and man-made disasters are also a good historical source of oral histories. Stories of how individuals survived such events as earthquakes, floods and hurricanes always make for good beginnings of oral histories. As you think about what kind of history you want to write, you will need to do some background research in order to have enough information to come up with pertinent questions.

Below are some suggestions to help students narrow their topics. Again, this is not a definitive list. Rather, it is intended to help people start thinking about projects.

Who do you find interesting and why?

What are you interested in finding out?

Do you know anyone who might tell you his or her story?

What are some significant events of the recent past that can serve as sources of oral histories? For example, *How did you spend the war?* is the title of an oral history project done by high school students. You can think about wars or conflicts people in your family or community may have participated in. Natural disasters are also a great source of oral history material. For example, in the small community of Hilo, Hawaii, almost everyone over a certain age can tell you about their experiences during the great tidal wave of 1962. Along these same lines, “Where were you when the (fill in the blank) occurred?” is always a good way to structure an oral history project. For example, where were you when you heard about the death of Princess Diana? For many Americans who are old enough, where they were when they heard about the assassination of President Kennedy has become the topic of several oral history projects done by high school students.

Is there a project or craft that you are interested in finding out more about? If so, what is it and who does it that you could interview? Some students became very interested in how log cabins were built by hand, so they interviewed the men who built them. Another student became interested in a man who was a beekeeper and produced honey as a source of income. Drawing on your ideas from the folklife list you put together in section one, make a project list that will give you ideas.

Is there a particular profession you find interesting. If so, is there someone you would like to interview? Is there a profession that has almost died out? In our town the very last real cobbler retired at age 85. He came from Italy as a young man and set up a shop where he made and repaired shoes. His story was the topic of an oral history project by local school children.

What stories have you heard from your own family that you would like to know more about? How your parents or grandparents met is a good possibility. A group of students wanted to do life histories of their grandmothers in order to learn how they grew up and how their childhoods were different from those of the students.

Children make good sources for oral histories. Most of us do not think of children as being good subjects for oral history, but they are as full of stories and interesting ideas as anyone else. They can be interviewed on all kinds of subjects, from games to their views of school and how they see the world.

### **Family Stories:**

There is a poignant and idiomatic expression in English that “families travel light”. What that means is that families are like travelers embarking on a long journey who can not take along a lot of things. Just as the traveler carries only a small suitcase, the average family remembers only a fraction of all that has happened from generation to generation. As the greater part of our experience as a family slips away, we gather together only a handful of stories, expressions, photographs, and customs out of all that is possible in the memory of a lifetime. Hence, family stories are an excellent place for students to begin doing oral history. The same is true of community stories. A cautionary word to the beginner: oral histories are best when they are about the lives or ordinary people doing extraordinary things. The purpose of a good oral history is to illuminate that part of human experience that is usually left out of the history books.

### **Gaining Access:**

Once you have decided on a project, the next problem is to locate the person and have him or her agree to an interview. This is often much easier when the person is a family member or a close family friend. However, since not all oral history projects involve people we know, it is important that we spend a little time on “gaining access”.

The easiest way to find an appropriate informant is to use your own network. Ask around among people you know who they think would be good candidates for an interview. It is much easier to encourage a stranger to sit for an interview if you have an acquaintance in common. There are many ways to gain an interview of someone you don't know; however, we have found the following two-step process to be most successful.

The first step is to contact the person by letter. The second is to follow up with a phone call. In your letter, you want to be clear what your project is about and why you want to interview that person. You will also need to tell the person what you plan to do with the interview. Is this for a school project, a book, a newspaper article? You must also be careful to explain that you will be tape recording the interview and to ask permission to take photographs. The letter should also include any additional information, such as when you plan to contact the person by phone and when you might want the interview to take place.

As a word of advice, if an elderly person is the primary subject for the oral history, it is important to give her plenty of time to think about the interview request. It is very disquieting to an elderly person to be contacted by a stranger; hence timely follow-through is very important. Furthermore, it is a nice gesture to bring a little gift to the person when the interview takes place. This is especially true if you or your students will need more than one interview.

Below is an example of a letter that I used to contact Mrs. Peabody. Mrs. Peabody is in her middle 90's and has been very active in volunteer work.

July 17, 1997

Mrs. Frances Peabody  
4 Walker Street  
Portland, Maine 04102-3313

Dear Mrs. Peabody:

I am writing to you as a result of my own research on volunteerism in New England. Your work in the area of AIDS awareness and prevention is virtually legendary in the State of Maine. I am hopeful that you would agree to an interview as part of a research project that has a working title of "Women of Service". This is an ethnographic/oral history project that focuses on women in your generation in the North East that have devoted a large part of their lives to community service. The project is a joint effort between Peter Hocking, director of the Howard Swearer Center at Brown University, and myself. I currently teach at Wells College; however I am an old New Englander myself and know the State of Maine well. I treasure my time there and have owned a small cottage in South Bristol for thirty years. We also have a mutual friend in Corinne Greene.

The purpose of the project is to build a portrait of community service from a regional and generational perspective. In that regard, we have interviewed women from all walks of life and interests. The "stories" are proving to be rich and profound. The interview itself only lasts about an hour. The topics are general and include such things as a bit about background, educational interests, community projects and the interviewee's perspectives and philosophy on service and civic responsibility. With your permission, I would like to tape-record the interview.

I am on my way to Maine at the end of next week for a short stay and am hopeful that you will be interested in participating in this project and that we can schedule a time for an interview sometime in the last week of July. I will call you by the end of next week to see if these arrangements are possible.

Again, thank you for your time and I am looking forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,  
Bird Beck Stasz

### **Equipment:**

To prepare a good oral history you will need a tape recorder, a good small camera (the disposable ones are fine) and a note pad. Recorders come in all shapes and sizes. We have succeeded best using a small cassette recorder that takes a standard size tape and has a small built-in microphone. The micro-cassettes, although smaller and lighter, are not as reliable, and the tapes are hard to transcribe since they need a special expensive transcriber. Regardless of the recorder, make sure whoever is doing the interview knows how to run it before going out in the field. Practice using the equipment, making sure the recorder has new batteries and that the microphone works properly. There is nothing worse than starting an interview and realizing that the tape recorder does not work correctly. The process of interviewing, especially a stranger, is unsettling enough without making it more so because of faulty equipment.

We are very aware that tape recorders are not always a possibility for you and your students. Since the price and availability of tape recorders varies worldwide, they are

often a luxury and difficult to obtain. If that is the case in your school, then we recommend you use the most traditional method of all, which is note taking. If you choose note-taking, then we highly recommend you send students out in teams of two. One person asks the questions and carries out the interview, and the other person takes the notes on what is said. The team approach is essential especially if students are unfamiliar with the interviewing process. It is very difficult, at least initially, to ask questions carefully, listen well enough to ask good follow-up questions, and take notes all at the same time. The likelihood of mistakes and misrepresentation is large if just one person is trying to do the whole process. Having two people listening to the same interview reduces the numbers of mistakes that can be made and provides a built-in check and balance system. We also recommend that you give students time immediately after the interview to talk to each other and work on their notes. A complete set of notes is essential since much information will be forgotten as time passes. This collaborative time for the team will also give them a chance to fill in the places where information may be missing as well as the chance to correct mistakes.

### **Observing and Interviewing:**

Oral histories rely on two specific skills, observation and interviewing. The technique of observation has been best described as “making the familiar strange”. Observation is the ability of the researcher to pay close attention to the details of another person’s life. This includes the surroundings as well as the physical appearance of the individual. For an oral history to be rich, we need to know more than just what he or she says. We need to understand the context of his or her life. Details that make that context real are gathered through observation and subsequent note taking. The best way to learn how to do this is simply to do it. We encourage students to find an outdoor cafe or market and spend time “people watching” and taking notes. Becoming a good observer is similar to becoming a good detective. We can take some advice from the great Sherlock Holmes when he said; “it is all in the details, my dear Watson, all in the details”. Observation is about exactly that, the details.

The key to a good observation is not taking anything for granted. As you take notes about a person or place, try to include as much of the detail as you can. Be as complete and specific as possible. For example, if the person is elderly, how elderly? If the person is funny, what makes them so? Where exactly does the person live? If you are in a studio or workshop, what does it look like? Is it tidy? If so, what makes it tidy? Questions such as these force us to pay attention to the details, and that in turn enables us to round out the portrait of the person and the event. Below is an edited version of the introduction to a set of notes I wrote about an interview with the elderly woman, Mrs. Peabody, whom I had written to. Note the specific details.

#### Getting to Know Franny

The day of the interview came as one of those breathlessly beautiful Maine mornings where the sky is crystal clear and the air smells faintly of salt and sea lavender. I arrived exactly on time and discovered that Franny’s front door was open. When I rang the bell a tiny tiny woman barely five feet tall literally sped out

to greet me. Frances Peabody in person is even more impressive than Frances Peabody in print. She was wearing a yellow floral skirt, a crisp red and white blouse and blazer and a pair of matching red shoes. She had a red ribbon pinned to her lapel in support of the AIDS project that she founded. Franny greeted me warmly and asked that I wait just a minute while she finished up making phone calls. She has a visiting “secretary” who looks in on her two or three times a week and helps her with phone, etc. Franny is 95 years old although you would never know it. She is slightly bent over but dashes around her house with the energy of a much younger woman. Her only outward concession to her age is a hearing aid, which she immediately called attention to. “I am just a little deaf dear so we need to sit together.” Franny has white hair that sticks out all around her head like a halo. Her face is lined and full of creases most of which appear to come from smiling and laughing. She has blue eyes that are a little watery but crinkle and sparkle and are full of life. Franny’s voice is strong and her handshake is firm. There is nothing tentative about this woman. She is sure of herself, comfortable in her house, and eager to show it off. I find it hard to believe that she was born in 1903!

### Observation exercises

1. The process of doing good observations is actually more difficult than it looks and therefore we are including some exercises to help students practice. Part of the reason that observations are so hard to do is that we are so immersed in our own cultures that standing outside of them is difficult. For example, put a list such as the one below on the chalkboard and ask students what the phrases mean specifically.

She is a beautiful woman.

He is a handsome man.

The town was quaint.

The performer was good.

What generally happens in this exercise is that everyone in the room has a different definition of beautiful, handsome, quaint and so on. These words are all culture-bound and are relative. To be good observers, students need to learn how to abandon this kind of language and focus on how the person actually looks or how the room is organized. Ask students to find a partner and pick a place to spend about ten minutes observing and taking notes. They may not talk to each other while they are observing and they may not talk to anyone else. We recommend that you let students go outside to a cafe or a park. It is best to choose a place where there are people and activity. At the end of ten minutes have the students return; then without discussing what they have seen with their partners, write down as much of a description as they are able in twenty minutes. Then they should compare the descriptions. As you discuss what students have written, look for words that are culture-bound such as beautiful, handsome, etc. As the partners compare their observations, they should be searching for similarities and differences. Once the pairs have had the chance to talk to each other and in small groups, bring the class together as a whole.

This is a perfect opportunity to discuss how our own biases and interests influence what we see and what we don’t. For example, if one student is an avid football fan and the other is interested in flowers, an observation of the same park experience may focus on entirely different things. One person may notice in great detail the group of children

playing a soccer game while the other focuses on the landscaping. It is also an opportunity to have students discuss how the observation process felt and what they thought about it. It has been our experience in our workshops that students often find the observations process tiring, since paying attention at that level of detail and language use is something quite new for them.

3. A third exercise in observation can be done with photographs. In our workshops we have sets of photos of people, children in fact, doing all kinds of different activities. We also have a series of postcards, which work as well as the photos. The content of the pictures is important. You want to make sure that it is ordinary people doing fairly ordinary things rather than famous people and spectacular scenery. The object of this exercise is to let students practice observing for very short periods of time. Pass out the photos or postcards face down. Again make sure everyone has a partner and that the no talking rule is in place. At the count of three everyone turns over their picture and looks at it for two minutes. At this point that photos are turned face down once again and students write what they saw in as much detail as possible, paying close attention to language. We usually let students write for about three to four minutes. At the end of the writing period have students turn the photos over again but this time for only 40 seconds. Once again, students should quickly write down anything that they might have missed. When they are finished, ask students to turn the pictures over for the last time and compare what they wrote. They need to look again at the pictures and see if they missed any details and reconsider how they described what they saw. We have found that this exercise can lead to a lively discussion of language, attention to detail, and how our biases affect what we see.

As students practice observation techniques and writing skills, they will be building an excellent foundation for the final stage of oral history work, which is analysis and writing it up. Once students have a sense of the observation process, they can move on to the interview.

### **Conducting an Interview:**

Conducting an interview is the next crucial part of doing an oral history. Interviews are about asking good questions and listening carefully. Your goal is to construct a situation that encourages the person to tell his or her story in as much detail as possible. Open-ended questions are the most conducive to drawing out personal stories. For instance, “What were the times like when you were a child?”, “How did your family live?”, “What types of things did you do as a child?”, “Tell me about your family growing up”, all give the person room to tell you the story. As you listen, ask follow-up questions that elicit more details. Responses such as “Can you give me an example?”, “Can you tell me more about that?”, “Can you describe how you felt?”, encourage the person you are interviewing to fill in more details. Try to stay away from yes or no questions unless the one word answer is what you want. Background questions pertaining to age, place of birth, marital status can be asked specifically.

A final note on question preparation. It is important that your questions make sense to the listener and that they indicate you have done your “homework”. Doing research before you go out into the field will contribute to your success in the field. Background research will help you ask the right questions and follow-up questions. This research can take many forms and can include such things as newspaper articles, old photographs, and asking around the neighborhood. If you are interviewing someone about a particular historical event, then you will need to do background research on the times and the event itself so you will be knowledgeable when you get to the interview.

Listening carefully is exhausting work. You will need to pay close attention to the speaker and encourage her or him to keep telling you the story. We recommend that you do not exceed an hour for an interview. An hour of tape recording will be plenty of information for you to transcribe and work with at one time. By the same token, a full hour of notes taken without a tape recorder combined with another hour of rewriting to fill in missing details will give enough information.

Below is a short excerpt from an interview so that you can see how it proceeds. B is the interviewer. R is the woman being interviewed. She is 85 and has been very active in the conservation and environmental movement in the United States. The first questions are about her family and her background. As you can see, the interviewer is trying to ask questions that will encourage the speaker to tell as much of her story as possible.

B: How many children do you have?

R: I had two, and my daughter died of cystic fibrosis when she was only 40 years old. She had a marvelous life. She was a singer in New York City, in nightclubs. She was wonderful. She had a great career. And then she met this man who didn't like New York. He liked wind surfing. So they started wind surfing from Antiqua for four years which was marvelous. We used to go down there and see her. It finally did get to her, but she was only really ill the last month of her life. She had a wonderful marvelous life. There's her picture. (Anne points to a photo of a beautiful young woman)

B: Oh, she's beautiful!

R: Yes, she is a lovely looking girl. We really miss her, but we were so fortunate to have her. She had the type of cystic fibrosis that didn't really make her really violently ill all the time. She'd never missed school. She was probably better than half the people she knew, physically. But she had things she had to do, medication she had to take, procedures she had to go through. My husband liked to fish. We had lots of friends. A nice house. Good children.

B: Your husband is no longer living?

R: No, he died of cancer about 15 years ago. But we had a marvelous life together. A good marriage. How many people can say that today?

B: Actually, Ann, very few.

R: So I was lucky. Well, so anyway, there I was with a business and then somehow somebody got me into a garden club, and that was the biggest mistake I ever made. I joined this garden club because I got into conservation and got very interested in that. And I've given a tremendous amount of time to preserving open space.

B: Tell me about your conservation interests.

R: Well, you know, we even go down to Washington and lobby our representatives and all those people. Go down for four days and go visit them in their offices, you know. And talk with them. It's a great thing. It really is. And then we have them come, all kinds of speakers in Washington, and talk to us and tell us what's going on.

B: Tell me more about this. You're my very first conservation person! Please tell me more about the organization that you were involved in-the garden club.

R: Well, this is the Garden Club of America-GCA. And I happen to think that they do a very good job as far as conservation goes. They get us to get into our town and influence people. If there's something going in along one of our roads that shouldn't be, they get us to do something about it. Influence our legislators and town officials and all that kind of thing. Mostly I brought speakers in to the community. I brought Jim Fowler, he's the animal man. We had him come and do sort of an endangered species evening, and he showed all kinds of birds, etc. that have been brought back from extinction and that kind of thing. He was fun. You know I think if you can give people ideas in sort of a sugar-coated pill it's good. Because I think to some people the word "conservationist" has gotten to be sort of a bad word. Don't you think so-a little bit? And I think the reason is that the whole movement came in too belligerently. You've got to consider both sides. You can't just step over people and their interests. You've got to give both sides a chance to speak and come to an agreement that is a compromise. And I think that's the sort of thing the GCA is dedicated to-bringing people together and getting them to realize that we do have to maintain our environment or else we're all going to be going down the drain. One of the most important things that you can do these days is work for a safe, better environment.

### **Photographs:**

Oral histories of all kinds lend themselves to the use of photographs. There are basically three ways photos can be used. The first is using the photos belonging to the person you are interviewing as a kind of interviewing guide. Looking through photo albums can help him or her tell the story and are a wonderful way to encourage the person to talk. It also gives you places to naturally ask more questions.

The second use of photos is when you take them to use as illustrations with whatever you are writing. It is important that the photos enhance the story you are writing and are fairly self-explanatory. For instance, a portrait of the person you are interviewing would enhance your written article.

The third use of photographs is part of the background research process. By studying old photos of a particular event, place, or family we can gain a better understanding of some of the subtleties of the situation. Photos by their very nature help us to understand what people take for granted and what they think is important. This is especially true if you are

working on something that occurred in the past. Information about such things as clothing, houses, transportation, life style and people who have passed on, are often best captured in a photograph. In all probability, this kind of information would not emerge in an interview, and by studying old photos you are better able to ask appropriate questions.

### **Transcribing:**

Once you have your interviews on tape there are several things that you can do with them. The option you choose should be based on your decision as to what kind of writing project you want to do. Most people doing oral histories transcribe the taped interview. This is the most time-consuming and can be the most tedious, but it does give you the maximum amount of flexibility in using the information you have collected. As a general rule, one hour of tape equals about 10 typed pages of text. It is important that when you transcribe the tape you stay true to what the person is actually saying. Even if the person uses poor grammar or makes mistakes you need to transcribe it exactly without editing. This method is most appropriate when you are working on large projects or planning to write long and fairly complicated articles or a booklet. You will need to be able to study the interviews to do a good analysis, and the transcriptions will allow you do that.

Another option is to listen to the tapes several times and select the “gems”. On the surface this seems to be an easier process than transcribing the whole tape. The big disadvantage is that you often miss important subtleties that could be useful to your project. This method is particularly appropriate, however, when you are writing short articles and are in need only of direct quotes to illustrate a particular point, situation, or event.

Once you have the transcripts finished, regardless of which method you choose, you will need to organize and edit them. Your goals at this stage are to find a focus that emerges from the material; to make the material easier to work with; and to capture those bits of information that will be most useful to you. There are many ways to do this. For instance, you can organize the material by topic, chronologically, or by event. Many people like to look for themes or recurring phrases and highlight them with a pen or marker. As you read and re-read your transcripts, keep looking for a particular focus that appeals to you. This is a very messy and organic process because there is not one perfect way to do it. The best way to think about this stage of the process is “playing with the material”. This process is crucial, since it sets the stage for the writing phase. The more you “play” with the material, the easier the writing phase will be.

### **Data checklist:**

Before we move on to the third section “Writing it up,” it is helpful to have a checklist of the possible kinds of material you could have for a project.

- taped interviews, either completely transcribed or mined for “gems”
- observations and notes
- background research

- photos

## Section Three: Writing It Up

*Objectives:*

*To gain an understanding of how to write oral histories and how to use them as a source of material for writing instruction*

*To gain an understanding of the writing workshop process*

*To practice the writing workshop*

### **Introduction: deciding what to write**

In many ways, the writing phase of any project can simultaneously be the most fun and the most painful. There is almost nothing more daunting in the world than piles of notes, photos, transcripts, artifacts and a blank sheet of paper. There are some very simple steps you can follow, however, that will make this task less intimidating and more enjoyable.

The first thing you need to do is decide what kind of article you want to write. Cynthia Stokes Brown in her book *Like it was*, suggests several types of short articles. They are as follows: (Again, this is not meant as a definitive list but just as a way for you to start thinking about the kinds of articles that you or your students might like to write.)

**A how-to-article** is often the easiest to write. How-to-articles explain how to do something, such as build a boat, make preserves, or raise a garden. In section one we talked a lot about material artifacts from folklore. How those artifacts are created would be good sources for how-to articles.

**A personality story** features a single person or a small group of people such as a single family. In these kinds of articles you need to let the person or people you are writing about tell their own story. As a result, your article will be filled with actual quotes from the interviews.

**A how-it-used-to-be** is an article that focuses on past events. It uses the descriptive pieces of the interviews to convey how life used to be, and it can best be described as a reminiscence or memoir.

**Feature article** is about any particular event, activity, or festivity that currently goes on or used to go on in the community. The story can be organized chronologically or around the traditions involved.

There are many other kinds of writing that you can do using your interviews and materials as a base. Essays, short booklets, ethnographies, children's texts are just some of the many opportunities that are available to you. The point to remember is rather than forcing the material into a specific format let it "tell" you what to write.

**Audience and voice:**

Once you have a sense of the kind of article or work that you want to create, the next step is to decide on audience and voice. In this case audience answers the question “who is this for?” Try to imagine who is going to read your article and write accordingly. The next decision is to decide on voice. Who is telling the story? If it is a biographical piece, you will want the subject to speak as much as possible. If you are writing about a person or an event, then you can act as a kind of third-person invisible narrator. Another option is to take an approach more like that of a novelist or creative writer. By mixing description and analysis with quotes and first-hand material from your transcripts, you can weave together an appealing and readable story. Regardless of what you choose to do; the process of writing and rewriting will help you produce a polished and finished piece of work that you can be proud of.

**Drafts:**

The good news is that there is no such thing as a good first draft. In our writing workshops we have found that the best way to get started is simply to write. Peter Elbow calls this process “free writing”. Free writing occurs when the writer sits down and begins to write about whatever comes to mind on the topic. In free writing, grammar, spelling and syntax are not important. What is important are ideas, descriptive pieces, phrases that you like, and snippets of language that sound particularly good. Free writing will help you warm up and give you and your material a chance to see what will emerge. Once you have had an opportunity to simply write, the next step is to work on a first draft.

As you read back over your free writing, take note of the parts of it that you like. You may have a wonderful descriptive phrase, or you may see the focus of your writing more clearly. The first draft should be an attempt to get down on paper in an organized fashion what you want to say about the material you have collected.

No matter what you are writing, there are some basic rules to keep in mind as you construct your first draft. You must first assume that your reader knows nothing; therefore spend time introducing her to your material. Who and what are you writing about?, Where is this taking place? What are we about to experience? By answering most of these questions in the beginning, you will have a nice introduction that will help the reader ease into the rest of the material. As you continue to let the story unfold, be particularly careful to keep the reader informed. Don’t be afraid to use dialogue, description and lively language to hold the reader’s attention. Finally, as you conclude your work, think about how you want it to end. Do you want the narrator to have the last word? Would it be more effective to describe how you felt on “that hot and dusty day in mid-May as you drove out of town?” Endings are important, so spend some time thinking and working on them.

Once you have a first draft that you are reasonably pleased with, you can begin the process of editing and revising. We like to do the revision process in a workshop setting. What follows is an example of editing workshop for a story written in a Romanian oral history workshop. This story is from an interview that was done in a small rural village.

## TEXT FROM ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOP, ROMANIA

### Difficult life journey of Stamescu Coriolana

The village where Stamescu lives is tiny and simple, with Roma people living there, the village has some special hue.

You can feel nostalgia for the free life in the past and the tough contemporary life and fight for living. Stamescu is a small sinewy man with hard callous hands revealing hard work. Though he has been living for 63 years, his memory returns back to the period of the second world war. He was 10 at that time and he lived in a family with his three brothers. He remembers those difficult times of war, when his family ran out of food and lived with no almost no heating.

This time seems to be strange for people to imagine how the whole family had to share one corn cake. "Our mother in order to give us something to eat had to sweep the roads every day and we-the children-had to beg," say Stamescu and continues his nostalgic memories. His elder brothers helped a lot to overcome the difficult obstacles of life and they were often forced to work for mean peasants, just to get a piece of bread. "At that time we were happy just to get some shabby cloth and we had to fight with cold and fear every day. My destiny was even more tough because I had not seen my three brothers since I was 15 and God knows what happened with them" "Even though I have 3 children, I am alone now" says Stamescu.

"My children were blown abroad to find a better life there and my wife is sick in a hospital. Well the feeling that my children live under better conditions makes me happy, but still the loneliness hurts me and I know that I am not able to change it, but I would love all of them to be with me. Anyway, it is good here, we people get along well and there is no one to persecute us. My life was hard and the line of destiny not straight, but I am happy that I am still alive. I enjoy good health, my children and my wife, even though I was really examined in my life for several times. Now I live quite a peaceful life," add at end Stamescu.

Stamescu in his simplicity embodies the destiny on one generation, able to survive and symbolize an inconspicuous tree in the lap of beautiful nature.

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### **Workshopping A Text:**

Teachers of creative writing often prefer to teach what they call a "workshop", where members of a writing group discuss and make comments about each other's work. All members of the group try to be helpful and constructive by being careful and honest; they treat the writing they are reading or listening to seriously and respectfully, the way they want their own writing treated. In a successful workshop, everyone has something to contribute; that is, the person whose work is being discussed can learn from all the different things that other members of the workshop say about it.

## One Basic Rule:

Teachers of creative writing usually begin workshops by stressing one basic rule: “Show, don’t tell.” What this means is that writers should try to present their material through specific, concrete details so that what they are writing about can be *experienced* directly by the reader. Through the use of vivid, precise details and images, writers appeal to the reader’s senses: they make the reader *see* what a place or person looks like, *hear* what a character actually sounds like, sometimes they can almost make the reader *touch, taste, and smell* what is being described.

### Difficult life journey of Stamescu Coriolana

The village where Stamescu lives is tiny and simple, Roma people living there, the village has some special hue.

*[What is the name of the village, and what part of Romania is it in? How “tiny” is it, and about how many Roma people live there? What does the author mean by saying it “has some special hue”? Is there a way to describe this village and what is distinctive or unique about it so that the reader can know what the author means by its having “some special hue”?]*

You can feel nostalgia for the free life in the past and the tough contemporary life and fight for living.

*[In what ways does village life reflect the past; that is, what are its living traditions, its rituals, the ways in which people are still connected with “the free life in the past”? What do people do now, and how does that illustrate that contemporary life is “tough” and what people there must “fight” in order to live?]*

Stamescu is a small sinewy man with hard callous hands revealing hard work. Though he has been living for 63 years, his memory returns back to the period of the Second World War.

*[Here the author uses good specific details: “small sinew man” and “hard callused hands” helps us to visualize Stamescu. But we want more such details. Does he have sharp features? What color are his eyes? What color is his hair? Is his skin wrinkled? What “hard work” does he do?” It’s helpful to know his age, but is there an interesting way to tell us how his memory dwells on the period of World War II? For example, does he always turn the conversation around to something that happened then? Is there a particular incident or even that he frequently dwells on?]*

He was 10 at the time and he lived in a family with his three brothers. He remembers those difficult times of war, when their family ran out of food and lived with almost none heating. This time seems to be strange for people to imagine how the whole family had to share one corn cake.

*[The author could let Stamescu begin speaking here, instead of summarizing what he would say. It is very important to try to capture the sound of his actual speech: the expressions he uses, the rhythm, the repetitions, the pacing. In other words, one should try to get Stamescu's individual, living voice down on paper. That way, we would experience him directly, just as if he were right in front of us talking and telling his story. The writer wants to dramatize a character, not stand between the character and the reader.]*

Many of the details in the remaining part of the story are very effective: the mother sweeping the roads, the elder brothers forced to work just to get a piece of bread from mean peasants. Stamescu speaks movingly about his loneliness. It is clear how much he misses his children, even though he knows they are better off elsewhere, and how troubled he is by his wife's sickness, though he is determined to make the most of his lot and be as positive as he can about it.

We get a strong sense of what his life has been like because we hear him talking about it *directly* through *dialogue*. The more accurately and precisely and writer can present a real person like Stamescu, the more believable that person becomes, and the more we as readers understand and care about him and what he is telling us. That is what is meant by writers-showing-rather than merely-telling-and explaining. The person and the person's life are handed over to us, as if we were right there with him ourselves.

This is just one small example of what a writer's workshop can look like. We recommend that you workshop pieces of writing more than once. As the process unfolds on multiple occasions, each writer will have the opportunity to get comments and suggestions that not only will help polish that specific work, but improve his or her writing skills generally. From the standpoint of a teacher, the writing workshop is an opportunity to teach writing anchored in the work of the students rather than in the abstract.

This process fits particularly well with the kind of writing that naturally comes out of doing oral histories and folklore projects. This kind of writing represents a borderland between the formality in-school writing and the informality of the popular press. Hence students can learn some of the techniques familiar to creative writers and story-tellers as well as the analytical and formal techniques used by academics.

This next piece of writing comes also from an oral history project in Timisoara, Romania. We are including it along with some of our workshop suggestions as another opportunity for you to practice and model the process. Notice the use of voice and audience. We are also including a second draft of the first lines of the first paragraph so that you can see what can result from the workshop process.

### **Wedding In Romania Text**

One lovely May evening-May which means love, we took part in a wedding in Timisoria.

In front of the house of the bridegroom, we were welcomed by many Roma people and their typical music. We were offered bread and salt and delicious drink.

At the head of the wedding was a young man holding a stick, full of colored scarves. All this parade went to the bride's house-various Roma customs were held there. The bride's good-bye to her parents, asking for the bride and other Roma customs. After that all the parade went back to the bridegroom's house, where the wedding continued with other Roma customs as the dance for the bride, the old women's dance, the plate dance with money collection as a gift for the bride, and bonneting the bride.

At the wedding we were served traditional Roma means that were regarded as very delicious by the wedding guests.

We were mostly captured by the symbol of connecting the couple. This custom is very old and typical for Roma people living in Romania and it means that the couple is regarded to be legally married. The hand of the bride and the bridegroom are connected with a decorated towel. The towel has magic power which symbolizes the stability of the cord of marriage and will protect the couple against the vicissitudes of life.  
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### **Wedding in Romania - workshop**

One lovely May evening-May which means love, we took part in a wedding Timisoara. *[What makes this evening lovely specifically? What are the sounds and sights? Here is a chance to describe the setting to the reader so that he gets the full flavor of the experience. We can not always assume that the reader is familiar with Timisoara or why May is the month of love]*

In front of the house of the bridegroom we were welcomed by many Roma people and their typical music. We were offered bread and salt and delicious drink.

*[Here is another place to pull material from the writer's notes to tell us more about the setting. What does the bridegroom's house look like?, What does the bridegroom look like? Is he young and handsome? What is he wearing and what are the people at the wedding wearing? What is the atmosphere? What is typical Roma music and what does it sound like? Details from the writer's notes will help the reader share the actual experience of being there and thus enter into the festivities of this wedding!]*

At the head of the wedding there was a young man holding a decorated stick full of colored scarves.

*[The writer is giving us the beginning of some wonderful "pictures" but we need more details to bring the setting alive for those who are not already familiar with it.]*  
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Now that you see how the process works, what follows is a second draft of these same first few lines. Notice the difference that occurs when you add just a few of the details. Feel free to work on the rest of the text as a way of practicing the process.

One lovely May evening we took part in a Roma wedding in Timisoara, Romania. The weather was perfect. It was warm and the setting sun washed the streets with gold light

of early evening. It is said by those who live here, that May is the month for love and this evening and this wedding were a perfect example of what they mean. The air was filled with the laughter of children and the sounds of the musicians playing lively music.

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### **Final thoughts on “writing it up”**

One of the hardest questions we have to answer in our workshops is “How do I know when I am finished?” or “When is this good enough?”. The revision process can go on and on as we tinker with words and phrases trying to make each line just a little better and the whole more clear or poetic or exciting to read. Eventually though, even the best and most meticulous of writers decides that this is “as good as it gets”. Where and when that occurs is an individual matter, as well as perhaps a matter of available time.

In folklore three is a magic number and so it seems to be in writing. In our workshops we encourage students to do at least three revisions on a single piece of work. After three revisions most students have focused their writing, paid attention to details, worked out the rough spots and are frankly ready to move on to something new.

As your students finish up their projects there are all kinds of things that you can do with them. We have put together booklets, displays, anthologies, and magazines. Some of our students have turned these projects into reading and writing materials for young children. Also, they have used photos or drawing to “illustrate” the text. Some have used their work as part of community newsletters or as a way to chronicle the lives of family members. Whatever you choose to do, we hope that you will find the process exciting and enjoyable as you “tell stories and write lives”.

### **A Final Thought**

Writing things down in an accurate way is a means of preserving them, both for ourselves and for those who come after us. Not only can we get satisfaction and pleasure from this experience; we can gain knowledge and even wisdom. Learning to observe carefully and then to record what we observe enables us not simply to see, but to remember.