

**Lesson Title:**

Chronicles of Courage: Interviewing veterans

**Subjects:**

U.S. History, U.S. Government, Civics, Economics

**Suggested Time:**

Three 50-minute class periods:

- One 50-minute class period to prepare for the interview
- One 50-minute class period to gain background information about a particular war/conflict
- One 50-minute class period to for the interview

Homework to “write up” the interview

**Grade Levels:**

7-12

**Essential Questions:**

What can we learn from war?

How can a person’s decisions and actions change his/her life?

**Learning Targets:**

- Students will learn about war from an eyewitness account by interviewing a veteran about his/her key experiences and insights.
- Students will be able to engage in the interview process, including forming open-ended questions, asking follow-up questions, engaging the interviewee, and writing up findings to add new insight into an individual in American history.

**Overview:**

This lesson explores war veterans in students’ lives, and allows experiences learned from war/conflict to be highlighted and honored. It begins by considering the skills needed for interviewing someone, and identifying someone to interview. The interview process will allow for in-depth learning about war, and better understanding of a person, the war in which they fought, and the context surrounding that time period of American history.

Student-led interviews are excellent for developing a deeper understanding of a particular time period, as well as reiterating that history is made up of stories from everyday people. Another lesson module offered by the Flying Heritage & Combat Armor Museum emphasizes writing biographies about war veterans - biographies about veterans students will not meet. This current module (Chronicles of Courage: Interviewing Veterans) creates face-to-face or email interactions so students are able to gather insights and information from someone who tells about their life. War, causes of conflict, and ideas about how decisions and actions change our lives becomes deeply personal. For both the written biographies, and this interview approach, the lesson is a powerful strategy for teaching writing, reading, history, geography, and cooperation skills while learning about a person and a time period.

## **Procedures:**

### *Teacher Preparation:*

The Library of Congress (LOC) has an excellent and useful resource for interviewing war veterans. The procedures for interviewing veterans will follow the LOC approach, as it is a proven approach. The general site for the LOC guidelines is:

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/questions.html>

The veterans interviewed for this lesson will have fought in wars during the last 70 years. Very likely, students will interview grandparents, uncles, relatives, friends who have served in the military after WWII. No veterans from WWI are still alive, and it is estimated that only about 600,000 WWII veterans were alive in 2016; survivors are in their late 80's and early 90's.<sup>1</sup> If students have access to these men/women, it would make an important contribution and record of a fading oral history.

A potentially challenging part of this lesson is locating veterans. The following is helpful for identifying who to interview:

- 1) **Family members** are easy to access, and often allow for a new appreciation of their life and accomplishments. If you decide to keep the interview only with family members, and the numbers of veterans is low, then you may want to place students in "interview teams," so that two or three students work together and interview one veteran; ideally the relative of one of the students in the small group.
- 2) **Members from a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)** post are accessible by contacting the VFW in your area. Caution should always prevail when inviting someone into your classroom, and inviting veterans should be no different. Any meetings with students should take place in a fully supervised classroom; your school/district policies may also require a background check. As with family members, determine if students will interview veterans as a group.
- 3) **Word of mouth** about veterans in your area is also a great idea for making contacts. Sometimes simply asking students for names of family members or friends will result in a list of men/women who can then suggest others.

The structure of this lesson follows six "interview segments," as recommended by the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project. Segments are in a specific order to help the interview gather relevant information and encourage memory. The six segments described below are titled as follows:

- 1) For the record
- 2) Jogging memory
- 3) Experiences
- 4) Life
- 5) After service
- 6) Later years and closing<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This statistic comes from the National World War II Museum. This link provides interesting statistics and graphics about the number of WWII vets who are still alive:

<http://www.nationalww2museum.org/honor/wwii-veterans-statistics.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/vets/questions.html>

Hopefully, the questions will allow students to learn from the life experiences of the veterans, allow the veterans to recall their service to the nation, and reveal how the veteran's service influenced his or her postwar life.

*Warm up: practice interviews:*

In pairs, have students practice interviewing each other. To keep them focused, have these interviews be about 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and have them ask the following questions:

- What school did you go to?  
Who was your teacher?
- What was a favorite activity during recess?
- What was difficult about 5<sup>th</sup> grade?
- What was something new that you learned in 5<sup>th</sup> grade that you think of today?

One student will turn on an audio recorder (a tape recorder or cell phone works well for this), ask the questions, practice writing down the answer, and practice asking a follow-up question when needed. The other student will answer honestly and from their memory. After the four questions are asked, the student that was interviewed provides two areas that went well during the interview, and two areas needing improvement. Students switch roles.

*Step 1: Preparing for the interview:*

- A) Gather background information: Help students find out from the veteran about the war(s) in which they were involved, their role(s), rank, length and location of service, and if there are any areas that they do not want to discuss. This can be done ahead of time, and is often best when done with a form or through email. This information will help students shape questions, avoid uncomfortable questions, and identify what background information they need to learn prior to the interview.
- B) Learn before the interview: Set time for students to prepare for the interview by reading about the war(s) the veteran served in and by reviewing maps and atlases. For example, if the veteran served in Vietnam during 1968, then students can read about that phase of American involvement in Vietnam. Similarly, if the veteran was on a ship in the South Pacific during WWII, then the focus of learning about that war can be on the Navy and the Pacific theater. The main role for the teacher is to guide students to this background information. The younger the students, the more guidance they will need to help learn about a particular war or setting.
- C) Prepare the interviewee: Provide a few general questions with the veteran before the interview. This will make everyone more comfortable, because they know type of questions that will be asked. Also, if a question is too personal, feedback can be provided to help revise the line of questioning.

Finally, a decision should be made whether the interviews will be recorded. Video recordings are excellent for helping remember the event and watching body language, but they come with some privacy concerns. Audio recordings help the interview feel more like a conversation, because the need to take notes is reduced. No recording may make the veteran feel most comfortable, but puts a lot of pressure on the student to record the information accurately. This often creates extended/awkward pauses during the interview, and can break up the natural flow of a conversation. For this lesson, the interview directions will assume that an audio recording will be

made. A recorder or phone will be needed. Additionally, if two or three students are interviewing one veteran, then they need to plan who will ask each question.

*Step 2: Interview Segments* (in total the interview should take about 30 minutes)

Segment 1: For the Record:

Students make an introductory announcement at the start of each audio recording about the following:

- the date and place of the interview;
- the name of the person being interviewed;
- his or her birth date;
- the names of the people attending the interview, including the interviewer

Ask the veteran:

- “What war(s) and branch of service did you serve in, what was your highest rank, and where did you served?”

Segment 2: Jogging Memory:

The following questions are good for getting the interview (and ideally, the conversation) started. Students should not plan on asking all of these questions, just the ones that seem most relevant for the interview:

- Were you drafted or did you enlist?
- Where were you living at the time?
- Why did you join?
- Why did you pick the service branch you joined?
- Do you recall your first days in service?
- What did it feel like?
- Tell me about your boot camp/training experience(s).
- Do you remember your instructors?
- How did you get through this training?

Segment 3: Experiences:

During this segment, the interview moves to the specific conflict:

- Which war(s) did you serve in (WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf)?
- Where exactly did you go?
- Do you remember arriving and what it was like?
- What was your job/assignment?
- Did you see combat?
- Were there many casualties in your unit?
- Tell me about a couple of your most memorable experiences.
- Were you a prisoner of war?
- Tell me about your experiences in captivity and when freed.
- Were you awarded any medals or citations?
  - How did you get them?

- Higher ranks may be asked about battle planning. Those who sustained injuries may be asked about those circumstances.

#### Segment 4: Life:

This segment is an important transition for students, in that they are now focusing on the impact of war on people. Causes of conflicts are important to explore, but “effects” of conflict are necessary to understand:

- Ask questions about life in the service and/or at the front or under fire.
- How did you stay in touch with your family?
- What was the food like?
- Did you have plenty of supplies?
- Did you feel pressure or stress?
- Was there something special you did for "good luck"?
- How did people entertain themselves?
- Were there entertainers?
- What did you do when on leave?
- Where did you travel while in the service?
- Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual events?
- What were some of the pranks that you or others would pull?
- Do you have photographs?
- Who are the people in the photographs?
- What did you think of officers or fellow soldiers?
- Did you keep a personal diary?

#### Segment 5: After Service:

This segment moves the questions to “life after” a war or conflict. It will show ways that the veteran came back into civilian life.

- Appropriateness of questions will vary if the veteran had a military career.
- Do you recall the day your service ended?
- Where were you?
- What did you do in the days and weeks afterward?
- Did you work or go back to school?
- Was your education supported by the G.I. Bill?
- Did you make any close friendships while in the service?
- Did you continue any of those relationships? For how long?
- Did you join a veteran’s organization?

#### Segment 6: Later Years and Closing:

This final segment of the interview may be redundant with the previous series of questions. It is slightly different in that it probes about life more recently, and/or more removed from the service. If these questions are answered earlier, they can be eliminated.

- What did you go on to do as a career after the war?
- Did your military experience influence your thinking about war or about the military in general?
- If in a veteran’s organization, what kinds of activities does your post or association have?

- Do you attend reunions?
- How did your service and experiences affect your life?
- Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered in this interview?

Tell the students to be sure to express sincere thanks and appreciation to the veteran for taking the time and effort to share his or her recollections.

*Step 3: Writing it up:*

After the interview is completed, students should listen to the recording, and take notes. Have them identify two or three answers that exemplify the veteran’s time in the service, two answers about the impact of war on their life, and two answers about general life after serving. Prompt the students to use these answers to respond to this prompt:

In two pages, tell a story about the person you interviewed. In these pages help us understand his or her experiences, and how those experiences have shaped his or her life today.

*Acknowledgments*

The questions above were developed by the Veterans History Project team working in consultation with the American Folklife Center and the Oral History Association. Special acknowledgment is extended to Donald A. Ritchie, associate historian, United States Senate, and author of *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

**Extension Activity:** If the students want to publish their interviews, they can follow stricter guidelines put forward by the Library of Congress’s Veterans History Project. Full details are available at this website: <https://www.loc.gov/vets/vets-home.html>

**Extension Activity #2:** During the visit to the Flying Heritage & Combat Armor Museum’s (FHCAM) “Why War: Causes of Conflict” exhibit, students can assess the biographies in that area of the exhibit. Having just interviewed and written about a local veteran person, students have some expertise and can provide feedback to the FHCAM staff about what is well represented, and what could be done to improve the biographies.

**Language Support:**

To aid those with limited English proficiency or others who need help with academic language, place them in groups with at least one student who speaks English as a first language. The handout on risk factors can also be given to ELLs the day before this activity, and ELLs should be told which risk factor they will examine.

## **Standards:**

### **Washington Standards (EALRs/GLEs)**

#### **8th Grade Social Studies**

**NOTE: The skills of analysis and interpretation apply, but the time periods are not appropriate because no veteran who was born in 2900 is alive).**

##### **EALR GLE GLE Description**

- History 4.3.1 Analyzes and interprets historical materials from a variety of perspectives in U.S. history (1776—1900).
- 4.3.2 Analyzes multiple causal factors to create positions on major events in U.S. history (1776 – 1900).

#### **9th and 10th Grade Social Studies**

##### **EALR GLE GLE Description**

- Civics 1.3.1 Analyzes the relationships and tensions between national interests and international issues in the world in the past or present.
- History 4.2.1 Analyzes how individuals and movements have shaped world history (1450—present).
- 4.2.3 Analyzes and evaluates how technology and ideas have shaped world history (1450—present).
- 4.3.2 Analyzes the multiple causal factors of conflicts in world history (1450 – present).
- 4.4.1 Analyzes how an understanding of world history can help us prevent problems today.

#### **11th Grade Social Studies**

##### **EALR GLE GLE Description**

- History 4.2.3 Analyzes and evaluates how technology and ideas have shaped U.S. history (1890— present).
- 4.3.1 Analyzes differing interpretations of events in U.S. history (1890—present).
- 4.3.2 Analyzes multiple causes of events in U.S. history, distinguishing between proximate and long-term causal factors (1890—present).
- 4.4.1 Analyzes how an understanding of United States history can help us prevent problems today.
- Skills 5.1.1 Analyzes the underlying assumptions of positions on an issue or event.

#### **12 Grade Social Studies**

##### **EALR GLE GLE Description**

- History 4.2.1 Evaluates how individuals and movements have shaped contemporary world issues.
- 4.2.2 Analyzes how cultural identity can promote unity and division.

**Common Core State Standards:**

**Build Social Studies Literacy through Reading and Writing Common Core State Standard for ELA & Literacy in Social Studies Grades 9-10**

Edies » Grade 9-10

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/9-10/>

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.5

Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7

Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8

Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

**Build Social Studies Literacy through Reading and Writing Common Core State Standard for ELA & Literacy in Social Studies Grades 11-12**

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5

Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6

Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.10

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

**NCSS C3 Framework (College, Career, and Civic Life)**

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools

Dimension 3: Argument Writing

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action