

History Mysteries

Recording and retelling the history of Oklahoma 4-H and its people through stories – Part 1 of 2



Writing a story – especially a history story – is like a treasure hunt. As you start preparing for your story, you find as many clues as possible. Clues may include information from a book, newspaper clippings about your topic or your notes from an interview. These clues lead you to the final result: A treasure of good quotes, good notes and information to write a great story.

Stories exist everywhere. The neighbor down the street or across the pasture may have ten stories or ten thousand stories. Your task as a storywriter is finding unique bits of information to tell the tale of Oklahoma 4-H and its people.

As a participant in the Oklahoma 4-H Centennial celebration, it is our responsibility to preserve, record and retell the stories before they are forgotten. Each 4-H member, volunteer, educator and alum has a treasure waiting to be discovered or a mystery to be solved.

Beginning your treasure hunt

Your first task as a history mystery treasure hunter is to decide what you want to write about and whom you want to interview. Using an outline may be helpful in this process. Perhaps someone's grandmother participated in 4-H, or you would like to chronicle the events of a 4-H Extension educator's life. Everyone has a story, so don't be afraid to ask people if they are available for an interview. Most are flattered that you want to tell their story (Graham).

Once you have decided on your story, it's time to begin your treasure hunt. Before you call or visit with the people you plan to interview, your treasure hunt begins with researching what local, state and national events may have taken place during the time period about which you are writing. For instance, if a grandmother was a 4-H'er during World War II or Vietnam, you may want to ask her what happened in 4-H during that time. Having this familiarity not only helps you when asking questions during your interviews, but also it shows you've done your homework, and your interviewee may provide more details and information (Sumner, Miller).

Once you have done your preliminary treasure hunt and have some clues, you're ready to develop your interview questions. Your questions should be open ended, so your source cannot just answer "yes" or "no." Questions asking "why?" or "how?" usually accomplish this (Sumner, Miller). You can also ask your source to explain more. Even the best-prepared lists of interview questions do not cover everything your source may talk about. Always be prepared to ask questions that are not on your list (Graham). Quick thinking and asking more questions almost always gets an additional, unique piece of information for your story.

When the interview is over, always thank your source. It's even better if you take note of his or her name and mailing address so you may send a note thanking your source.

Ensure you have a way to contact him or her in case you have additional questions after you begin working on your story.

The Drover's Outline

Outlines are a useful tool in preparing for your story. But before you begin using Roman numerals and the alphabet, try the Drover's outline, which answers three questions:

- The story I am writing is
- The reason I am writing this story is
- My three key points are

It may also be helpful to include your sources and a description of your audience – those who will be reading your story – to keep you focused.

Source: Greg Henderson, Drover's Magazine

The History Treasure Hunter's Kit:

- Notebook paper
- Pens or pencils
- List of interview questions
- A recorder, if available

Interviewing tips (Source: Sumner and Miller)

- Good interviews originate with trust. Convey yourself as a trustworthy individual and your sources may tell you things they've never told anyone else.
- Look for clues. Find out what was happening when your sources were participating in 4-H. Ask how those events affected your sources and Oklahoma 4-H.
- Ask "how" and "why" questions to encourage your sources to offer feelings and opinions.
- Look at your source's surroundings. What is on the wall? What are they wearing? Details make the difference, and they can also spark new questions.
- Start your interviews with simple questions and progress to more complicated questions later.
- Try to engage in conversation instead of having a strict question and answer session.
- Always ask at the end of the interview if your source has anything else to add.

Writing your history mystery

You've conducted your interviews and you have clues and treasures scattered on notes, recorders, and in your mind. Now it is time to organize your treasures.

If you wrote a Drover's (or similar) outline, it's a good idea to take that out again to refresh yourself on the goal of your story and your key points. These can help guide you on how to organize your information. If your sources gave you enough information to fill a book, consider yourself lucky, but remember you also have the challenge of deciding what facts, quotes and details you want to include in your story.

Everyone has their own way of beginning a story, and what may work for some may be a catastrophe for you. Whether you decide to handwrite your story on a piece of notebook paper or type it on the computer, consider your "first draft" not as a draft, but as a map of how your story might travel. Don't worry about punctuation, grammar, or whether sentences are structured properly. Sometimes writing or typing your quotes out in a list format is helpful in identifying where in your story they best fit. Always look over your notes soon after you conducted your interview to ensure you have everything.

References:

Graham, B. Magazine Article Writing. Thomson Custom Publishing, 2002. ISBN 0-534-97004-4

Sumner, D and Miller, H. Feature & Magazine Writing – Action, Angle and Anecdotes. Blackwell Publishing, 2005. ISBN 978-0-8138-0519-1

Wilber, R. Magazine Feature Writing. St. Martin's Press. 1995. ISBN 0-312-07262-7

Other Related Centennial Fair Exhibit

Project Materials:

- 4H•HLTH•402 Collectables
- 4H•HLTH•403 Preserving Vintage Clothing and Textile Products – Part 1
- 4H•HLTH•404 Preserving Vintage Clothing and Textile Products – Part 2
- 4H•HLTH•405 Storage and Display of Heirloom Textiles in the Home
- 4H•HLTH•406 Preserving Photographs, Books and Paper Documents
- 4H•HLTH•407 Preserving Metal, Wood and Plastic Collectibles (not available)
- 4H•HLTH•408 Preserving Memorabilia
- 4H•HLTH•409 History Mysteries Part 1– Recording and retelling the history of 4-H and its people through stories

- 4H•HLTH•410 History Mysteries Part 2– Writing the Story – your treasures - from Clues
- 4H•HLTH•411 Documenting and Cataloging Collectibles (not available)
- 4H•HLTH•412 Displaying Collections and Collectibles (not available)
- 4H•PDL•111 Personal Development – Documenting our Heritage
- 4H•HLTH•413 Authentication Card

Additional writing tips

(Source: Sumner and Miller)

- Begin writing before you look at your notes. What is most memorable from the interview is usually what is most interesting.
- Read magazine stories for examples and ideas.
- When writing sentences, simple and short is key.
- If you can't start at the beginning, try writing the middle. Often your introduction – the "lead" – is easier to write last instead of first.
- If you're having trouble with a conclusion, try tying it back to your lead – the introduction.