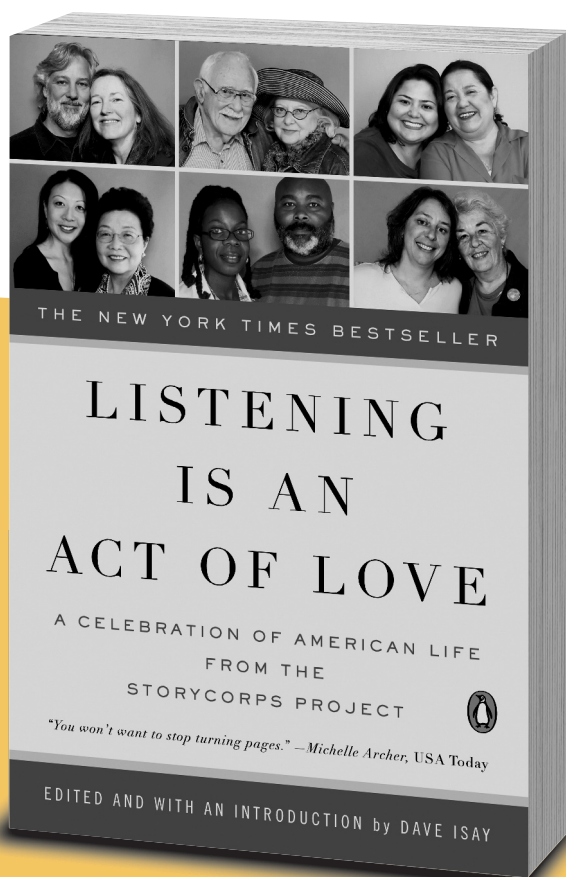


PENGUIN GROUP (USA)



A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO  
**Listening Is An Act of Love**

EDITED BY DAVE ISAY, FOUNDER OF STORYCORPS



by **LISA WINKLER**

## FROM DAVE ISAY



I began StoryCorps in 2003, with the goal of helping Americans record the stories of their loved ones and friends. I also wanted to compile an oral history of our nation told by everyday people. I had many sources of inspiration, but one of the most profound came from my friend who proved to me just how much can come from the simple question: Tell me about your life.

In 1993, my friend Diana Halperin interviewed her father, Bernie, over Thanksgiving weekend. She used a simple tape recorder and microphone and recorded their conversation in her living room. Her father told her stories from his time serving in World War II, about his family and the legacy of love he hoped to leave behind him. Six years after making the recording, he passed away. She used the recording to play at his funeral, intertwining it with his favorite music.

Diana's recording showed me that interviewing isn't just the domain of journalists and academics. Anybody can make a great interviewer, especially with a few tips and the simple interest in listening to a person tell the stories of her life. And anybody makes a great interviewee—not just the people who matter most to us and those we see everyday, but those we don't know much about—the guy you get your morning coffee from or your postal carrier.

In West African tradition, a "griot" is the local storyteller—a highly respected member of the community who acts as a living repository of births, deaths, marriages and significant events. Griots are responsible not only for transmitting oral history through the generations, but also for ensuring that people find meaning in their own lives. The truth is, there are griots all around us. They don't have to spin the best tales or be more articulate than anyone else. Studs Terkel, the great oral historian, used to say that interviewing people is discovering people, and one of the biggest thrills you can get is discovering that "somebody who sounds boring isn't boring at all."

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY GUIDE

*Listening Is an Act of Love* presents a bounty of ideas for classroom use across all ages and abilities. This book celebrates communication skills—speaking and listening—that are often overshadowed by the emphasis on reading and writing. Talking, often considered out of place in a classroom, is channeled into interviewing. Writing interview questions, taping and transcribing oral histories, or just recording as someone speaks, then editing for clarity and interest, can lead to purposeful, authentic assessments and unique classroom collaborations. Students see that everyone has stories to tell.

This book can be used in its entirety, as an example of oral histories, or it can be broken up, to complement thematic and interdisciplinary units. Many entries are short, allowing them to be read in a class period. Divided by themes, any section can be used to complement a curriculum unit—for example, a unit about families, about journeys, work, or survival. Reading an entry can prompt writing as students make connections to the stories.



The book can be used in elementary classrooms; even the youngest children can think of questions they might want to ask a friend, a relative, or a neighbor. In middle and high school classes, the book can be used in literature, history, sociology and journalism classes. Older students can examine the entries and compare questions asked. By examining the various passages, students can determine what comprises an effective interview, analyze why are some more effective than others, and suggest what more should be added. Students can interview their families. They can create histories of their schools and communities by interviewing school staff, local government and business owners.





## GETTING STARTED

The first step is to identify who students will interview. The focus could be on peers, families, within school or the community. Next, ask students to brainstorm 5-10 questions. Try to focus the questions and make them specific, not so broad and general that the interviews become dull. Questions should be asked in a way so as to elicit a response beyond a “yes” or “no” answer. Remind students that interviews will be edited and that not everything someone says will be included in the final draft. While the StoryCorps project limits the interview time to 40 minutes, as school assignments the interviews can go longer or include follow-up through phone calls and/or email. You might want to also consider whether or not students will use tape recorders and/or video cameras.

Below are some topics that might help students write their questions for interviews. Types of questions will vary depending on the purpose of your interviews, and the age of the interviewers and subjects.

### **General Interview Questions**

- Where did you grow up? Can you describe it?
- What was your favorite food growing up?
- What special recipe do you remember from childhood? Who made this?
- Did you have any pets?
- Did you get along with your siblings?
- What did you do for fun?

- What did you wear? To school? For fun?
- Did you ever get in trouble? What did you do? What happened?
- Did you ever have an experience with prejudice, bullying, or injustice?
- What chores did you do at home?
- What was your first job? What do you remember about it?
- What were your neighbors like?
- Did you have any pets?
- What were the holiday traditions that you remember from your childhood?
- How do you celebrate special occasions ? Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays?
- What songs did you sing? Can you sing one for me now?
- What were your favorite movies and music?
- What was the role of books in your life? Did you have a favorite author?
- Have your tastes changed as you've gotten older?
- What was the greatest gift you ever received?
- Have you traveled? Did you have any adventures?
- What was your first car?
- What is your favorite place?
- When did you first fall in love?
- What are you most proud of?
- What was the happiest moment of your life?  
The saddest?
- Do you have any regrets?
- What advice do you have for young people?
- What do you see as the greatest challenge for the next generation?
- Is there something about yourself that you think no one knows?
- How would you like to be remembered?
- What are some of the most important lessons you have learned in life?
- What does your future hold?

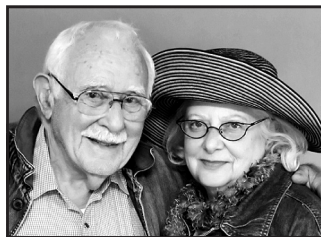


## HOME & FAMILY

This section celebrates the universal subject of family. No matter who people are, where they're from, what their customs and languages are, everyone has some sort of family. This section provides plenty of ideas for classroom use, including stories of an immigrant family, a son who finds his birth mother, an interracial marriage, and favorite relatives. When prodded, many older relatives can remember an amusing anecdote from their school days or growing up. Many are immigrants who have fascinating stories to tell about their arrival to the United States. For young students, interviewing family will be the most natural and easy place to start building their skills. Ask families to provide a photo, and use the interviews for a bulletin board display or copy and create a classroom book.

Here are some basic questions to get started:

- How did you get to this country?
- What was your first job?
- Where did you live?
- How did you learn English?
- Who helped you along the way?
- What were your neighbors like?
- What was a typical family meal like?
- What are your favorite foods?
- How did you get along with your family?
- Where did you meet (mother, father, etc.)?
- What are your first memories of (the interviewer, another relative, etc.)?



## WORK & DEDICATION

Interviews from this section extend beyond family. Students can interview school staff, community leaders and business owners, anyone whose career paths interest them. The selection about steel (60) could be used as part of a unit about how things are made. Also, farmer interviews record a quickly disappearing feature of the American landscape. Depending on where you live in the nation, are there some jobs or industries specific to your region to prompt students to write about? These interviews would help illustrate a setting and create interest in local community's resources. A collection of these interviews about the industries in the community could become a classroom book, or be given to the school or town library.



The interview with a bus driver (86) illuminates an often unnoticed person in peoples' lives. Direct students to list the people they see but don't know, who are part of their daily lives. School janitors, nurses, secretaries, crossing guards, and store clerks would be excellent subjects. The passage (91) about the couple that met while working at an elementary school might prompt students to take an interest in their school's support staff.

Here are some basic questions to get started:

- How did you decide on this job?
- What was the training necessary?
- Who did you work with? What were they like?
- Would you do the same thing if you had to start again?
- What advice do you have for young people interested in this career?
- What's your favorite part of your job?

## JOURNEYS

This section includes stories of personal journeys people undergo to survive. Students can see that a journey isn't always a trip, but often a time people face difficult challenges. Through interviews between siblings, spouses, parents and children, and friends, the reader hears about illnesses, accidents, alcoholism, drug abuse, incarceration, self-mutilation, homosexuality, and more. Many entries can be linked to a nonfiction unit about the issues discussed.

Here are some questions to get started:

- What was the most difficult part of your journey?
- What was the turning point in your journey when you knew you would survive?
- What did you learn from your experiences?
- Who helped you along the way?

## HISTORY & STRUGGLE

This section brings to life areas of American history and how people survived through different eras. Select a passage relevant to the social studies or history curriculum to supplement other class readings. Reading these selections shows how sometimes discussing painful memories is difficult and how people can be reluctant to remember. Developing interviewing skills to make subjects comfortable would be challenging for students.

The first selection, an interview between a mother and daughter, illuminates the Depression, told mostly through memories of smells (165). A unit on World War II and Holocaust studies could use the passage where a woman recalls how she learned about her father's experiences in Auschwitz (174). It shows how some memories are too painful to share, and to what lengths people go to block out memories. The struggle for Civil Rights in the United States is also portrayed in a few passages.

With these, readers see how some people never recover from injustice. An interview between a husband and wife recalls the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (190). These indelible days in history become strong memories that students can investigate in interviews.

Here are some questions to get started:

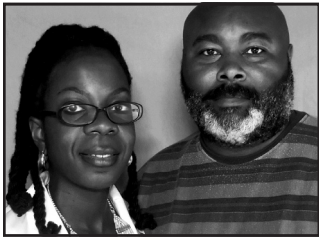
- What smells do you associate with a place?
- What smells remind you of different people?
- What smells remind you of an event or activity?
- What do you remember from being in the war?
- Who or what helped you survive?
- How old were you when you heard the news that JFK or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated? Where were you? How did people around you react?
- What memory stays with you the most?





## FIRE & WATER

The final chapter focuses on two catastrophes of the 21st century: September 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina of 2005. These survival stories include that of a man recalling the death of his fiancé on 9/11 (207); and a man watching his wife and daughter drown in New Orleans (234). These stories are sad but they also leave readers with a sense of hope, demonstrating both the strength of the human spirit and the will to live.



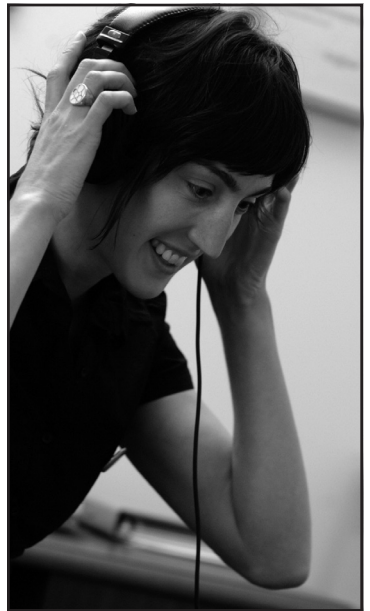
Here are some questions to get started:

- What do you remember most?
- Who helped you survive?
- What was happening around you?
- What were your first thoughts?
- What did you do after the crisis subsided?

## EXTENDING THE INTERVIEWS

In addition to conducting interviews, writing and compiling them, you can extend the experience in several ways:

1. Using information gathered in the interview, write a letter or essay to persuade someone that the subject of the interview should receive an award or be put on a postage stamp.
2. Collect photographs and create a bulletin board display with the photos and essays.
3. Younger students can illustrate a part of an interview.





# StoryCorps®

## Listening Is an Act of Love: The Power of Storytelling in Education

At StoryCorps, we have a saying that defines the core of our work: “Listening Is an Act of Love.” It may seem soft at first, but anyone who spends time with the stories of everyday Americans grasps quickly that the simple act of sitting down with friends or family members, asking them sincerely about their lives, and listening deeply to their responses is powerful and sometimes even life-changing for the storyteller and the questioner alike.

The heart of StoryCorps is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America, or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary. Over time, we began to realize the potential of our work in the classroom. This has led to a fruitful relationship with select schools including ACORN Community High School in Brooklyn, NY.

During the spring semesters of 2006 and 2007, eighty students from the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program at ACORN took part in workshops conducted by StoryCorps and then participated in interviews at StoryCorps’ soundproof “StoryBooths” in New York City.

Each and every ACORN interview represents a genuine moment, shared between young confidants—from the reflections of Hasiyna Prince, who is learning to come to terms with scoliosis, to the memories of Tia Williams,

who recalls the strength of her mother after her father left the family when she was two-years old. “My mother would have to hop the turnstile to go to work, and she would have no money to get back,” says Tia. (To listen, please visit: <http://www.storycorps.net/listen/tia-williams-and-lekeisha-williams>).

The feedback that best sums up the power of storytelling in the classroom comes from an ACORN teacher, “Every student was enriched by completing an interview. For a project to affect every student at every level—whether it be a developmental level or a learning level—is rare indeed.”

Regardless of the level of your students, I’d like to offer some tips for bringing storytelling into your classroom.

### 1. Laying the Foundation

You may want to start off by asking students to tell you a fact about a celebrity. Nearly every young person in America today can do this effortlessly. This will allow you an opportunity to talk about how we consume information about famous people all the time, but it is us, everyday people, who make the fabric of American history, not just the rich and famous.

Discussing efforts to capture the voices of Americans can lead to new understandings of history and how it is collected. For instance, stories recorded through StoryCorps are archived at the American Folklife Center at

the Library of Congress, alongside of one of the most important records of American history—2,300 interviews of former slaves who were interviewed in the mid-1930s as part of the WPA's Federal Writers Project.

You can take the conversation into the realm of the personal by asking students if they've had a meaningful conversation with anyone over 30 minutes in length in the past month. Was it a face to face talk, or over the phone? Did it happen without a TV or radio in the background, or while you were doing another task at the same time? How might these factors affect a conversation between two people?

## 2. Planning an Interview

Next comes the real fun—helping students decide whom to interview and what they might ask them. One way to elicit an answer is to ask, “What are stereotypes you want to break? Who do you know who bucks the stereotypes?” Or simply, “Who are the people in your family, community, life, who should be telling their story?”

Once they have selected a storyteller, they are ready to develop questions. You may ask, “What are 3 questions you would want to ask someone?”, “What are 3 questions you would want someone to ask you?”

## 3. Recording their Stories

Often times, we get requests for technical advice about recording equipment. StoryCorps interviews are conducted on broadcast-quality equipment in sound-proof booths, but you don't need to have state-of-the-art devices to

record audio with impact. Whether you borrow, buy (many recorders on the market cost less than \$100) or use equipment you already have, you will want your students to get comfortable with it in advance. That way they'll be able to devote their full attention to the person they are interviewing.

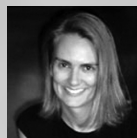
Pointers for using interview equipment and selecting an ideal interview location can be found in the “Do It Yourself Guide” on our website.

## 4. Illustrating Lesson Plans Through Storytelling

Many teachers have found that playing sample interviews to complement a teaching unit is a good way to make history and current events come alive. We've tried to make this very easy on the StoryCorps website ([www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net)), where you can select from hundreds of past stories. The archive is searchable, so you can find interviews that pertain to a certain subject or issue relevant to your students. (ESL teachers also find that playing a variety of interviews with different dialects and accents helps their students develop a comprehension for the wide range of voices in our country.)

With some creative adaptation, we hope you find these tips useful in your classrooms, as they have been for us.

**Barbara Becker,**  
**Senior Adviser StoryCorps**



# HELPING STUDENTS CONDUCT SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS

*(Adapted from DIY Guide, available at [www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net))*

## 1. Choose an Interview Location

Pick the quietest place possible. A carpeted room is best. Be sure to turn the volume off on any TV, radio, or stereo. Try to minimize any distractions.

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## 2. Set Up and Test the Equipment

Set up and test the equipment. If students are running the equipment, be sure they are familiar with how it works. Have them run a short test before beginning the interview. A good way to do this is to record a few “throwaway” questions, such as, “Tell me what you had for breakfast.” Stop, rewind, and listen to the sample recording to determine if everything is working. Be sure to press RECORD again when you begin the actual interview.

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## 3. Begin the Conversation

Start the interview by stating your name, your age, the date, and the location of the interview. For example, “My name is Marissa Martinez. I’m 14 years old. The date is November 28, 2008, and I’m sitting with my grandfather, Frank Jackson, in his living room in Hamilton, Missouri.” Then ask your storyteller to do the same.

Encourage students to say: “Tell me more.” Sometimes your storyteller may need to know that it’s okay to talk about a certain topic.

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## 4. Keep the Conversation Flowing

Students need to listen closely and maintain eye contact with their subject. This will take practice! The more interviews they do, the more comfortable they’ll become conducting them. Asking emotional questions, like “how does this make you feel?” makes the interview more meaningful. At the same time, students must respect their subjects and not persist on asking questions about topics their subjects don’t want to discuss.

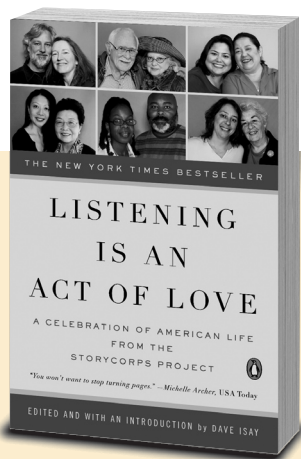
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## 5. Wrap Up

Before turning off the recorder, students should ask the storyteller if there is anything he or she wants to talk about or add. Students should thank the person for sharing his or her stories, and his or her time. A personal note would be appreciated and could be another part of the assignment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

Lisa K. Winkler holds a Master's of Education from New Jersey City University and a BA from Vassar College. Her master's thesis focused on censorship in public schools. She's taught middle school Language Arts for more than 10 years and serves as a master teacher in the Newark, NJ public schools under the federal Striving Readers grant of No Child Left Behind legislation. She's an instructor in the literacy education department at NJCU. She's interviewed authors and reviewed books for professional journals. Her study guides for Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* were recently published.



## **Listening Is An Act of Love** *A Celebration of American Life from the StoryCorps Project*

**EDITED BY DAVE ISAY,  
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Penguin • 304 pp. • 978-0-14-311434-5

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