

Folklorist Fieldwork Notebook



Smithsonian
Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage



Are you ready for Folklore Fieldwork?

Fieldwork is not the work that folklorists do in their gardens! Fieldwork is the primary form of research that folklorists use. It is called “going out in the field” because the folklorists leave their own homes or offices to interview and observe the tradition bearers where they live or work. The folklorist documents (records, takes photos and videos) the interview, artifacts, tools and other items around the tradition bearer.

A **TRADITION BEARER** is someone who "carries" different types of folklore (crafts, music, cooking, storytelling and other forms) to the next generation.

Tradition bearers keep these folklore traditions in their hearts and minds and teach them to other people — usually younger — in their communities.

These traditions may change owing to modern tools, new ideas and new ways of living. Fortunately, tradition bearers who share their skills help make sure that these traditions continue to have a meaningful place in the present and future, in addition to reflecting a rich

Use this notebook as you prepare for and
do your fieldwork.

Explore Folklore in Your Community

Folklore is all about the skills, knowledge and stories (traditions) that people learn from one another and pass on to the next generation. Some of the categories of folklore include crafts, games, dances, customs, celebrations and foods that are special to your community.

Use this space to brainstorm traditions you already may have observed in your community and those about which you want to learn more.

EVERYDAY TRADITIONS

What is a day like in your community? Does a typical day bring any folklore to mind (preparing and eating a typical meal, playing during school recess, practicing music or dance)?

SPECIAL DAYS

What holidays do your family and community celebrate? Are there special festivals that take place in your local area? If so, what sorts of folklore do they include (food, music, crafts)?

AROUND THE SEASONS

What folklore activities do the different seasons bring to your community? How does the weather affect what your community wears, eats, or does each day?

WORKING LIFE

Are there occupations that are particular to your community because of its natural resources, land formation or transportation opportunities (mountains, good farmland, bodies of water, tourist attractions)?

Focus Your Cultural Research

Decide what type of cultural tradition you wish to research and share. Think about the things you listed on the previous page and who you might interview to learn more about traditions in your community. Use this space and the categories at the right to begin forming ideas for your project.

MOVING

Who practices and teaches forms of traditional physical activity, such as dance, games, sports or martial arts, that are important to your community?

CREATING

Who has mastered a form of traditional art in your community, such as making handicrafts, cooking special dishes or composing music?

PERFORMING

Who performs creative activities, such as playing music, singing, dancing or storytelling, in your community?

WORKING

Who works jobs or has occupational skills distinctive to your community or region?

CELEBRATING

Who practices the making and presenting of traditional holiday meals, crafts, rites of passage or performances in your community?

Choose a Community Tradition Bearer to Interview

For your project, you will be interviewing a tradition bearer in one of the categories you explored on the previous page. List your top three choices for tradition bearers to interview for your project, and find their contact information. Circle the tradition bearer who agrees to an interview. Schedule a time for your interview.

TRADITION BEARERS come from your community or family and have great knowledge about folklore.

Tradition bearers share their information when you ask questions and when you watch them demonstrate or perform their skills.

HOW DO YOU FIND A TRADITION BEARER? A tradition bearer may be a family member or a neighbor. You may also ask your teacher, a librarian, a newspaper editor or other community member who may know many people in your town, city or region. They may know the right person to approach for an interview and can introduce you to that person.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE:

Name: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Place: _____

Address: _____

Form Interview Questions

Good questions are the key to a good interview. Below, list the questions you wish to ask the tradition bearer. Go over these questions with a friend or family member to see if he/she has any additional ideas. To develop good questions, you may need to do some background research at a library or on the Internet about the tradition you are interested in.

Remember, your goal is to find out as much about the tradition you have chosen to research from the tradition bearer. You should document **HOW** he/she makes or performs the tradition, **WHY** he/she decided to carry on this tradition, and **WHAT** the stories and beliefs behind the tradition are.

Planning a list of questions is important. It is also important to **LISTEN CAREFULLY** during the interview and see if there may be other questions you would like to ask.

To share the tradition bearer's story with the world, you must get his/her permission on a signed release form. Keep this signed form in a safe place. Record here where you are storing your form:

Prepare Your Documentation Tools

You have chosen a topic and located a tradition bearer. Now do an “equipment check” to make sure you have the tools you need for your interview! List the tools you have on hand to record the tradition bearer’s voice, setting and demonstrations or performances.

What will you need to do?

- Take notes?
- Record a voice?
- Record visuals of the tradition bearer, the interview setting and, possibly, a demonstration or performance of his/her skills?
- Record visuals and sound at the same time?
- Keep your electronic equipment fully charged and operational?
- Carry everything?

Before going on your interview, practice with your equipment. Try recording the voice of a friend or family member and taking some photos or video. Be comfortable with your equipment!

Conduct Your Interview

Now that you have prepared your questions and gathered your equipment, you are ready to interview the tradition bearer. Here are some important points to remember.

1. Before the interview, confirm the date, time and place with the tradition bearer.
2. Make sure you have all of your equipment for documentation.
3. Ask the tradition bearer if he/she is ready to start.
4. Begin the interview like a folklorist by recording an introduction.

My name is _____ and I am interviewing
_____ about _____. Today's date is
_____.

5. Listen carefully and be respectful while the tradition bearer is speaking.
6. Give the tradition bearer time to answer each question. Wait until he/she is finished answering a question before asking another question.
7. Ask the tradition bearer how you can follow up and contact him/her with additional questions.
8. When you have completed the interview, thank the tradition bearer for his/her time. Let the tradition bearer know that you will have him/her review your work before you share it with others. Send a thank you note when you get home.

Carefully note the setting in which the tradition bearer practices his/her tradition. Take notes to describe the space. What makes the space helpful to the tradition bearer? Note the furniture, tools and materials and how they are organized to support the tradition bearer.

INTERVIEW LOG

Date _____ Place _____

Date _____ Place _____

Date _____ Place _____

Document

Location(s): _____

[illegible]

Reflect on Your Interview

Congratulations! You have completed your interview and observations of the tradition bearer's skills. It's time to review all the documentation you gathered. Sort through your information and identify the themes that the tradition bearer shared with you. Determine which theme that interests you also would appeal to or interest others.

THINK ABOUT . . .

- What were the most interesting things the tradition bearer told or showed you?
- How can you create a story around the information you documented?

WHAT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION DO YOU NEED TO TELL THE STORY?

HINT: You can always do additional research at the library or on the Internet, but the best way to get any missing information would be to visit the tradition bearer again or clarify anything confusing over the phone or by email.

Shape the Story

Now that you have mapped out the story you want to tell and have all the information you need, how will you best share it with others? Use this space to further craft your story with words and sketches.

How will visuals and voice work together in the story?

SOME IDEAS:

- Create a short **VIDEO**.
- Build a **SLIDE SHOW** that combines visuals with voice and/or video clips.
- Put together voice clips from the tradition bearer and possibly a narration to make an **AUDIO PODCAST RADIO PROGRAM**.

Remember, you are telling a story with a clear beginning, middle and end. Be sure to include the tradition bearer's thoughts about his/her tradition and why it is important to carry it on.

Share the Story

Share your draft presentation with the tradition bearer. Use his/her feedback to improve your presentation.

Feedback Notes

Share your draft presentation with other friends or family members for feedback.

Who Reviewed

Comments, Questions and Suggestions

Present the Story

Folklorists present their work in many places including festivals, museum exhibitions and websites.

Where will you present your work?