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**BRIDGING THE GENERATIONS:  
FIFTH GRADERS  
INTERVIEWING SENIOR CITIZENS**

**Eleanor L. Wollett**

As a young child I often visited my grandparents and great aunts and uncles. I enjoyed talking with them, and I learned from them. As a teacher I could see that because of broken homes and a transient society, many of my fifth-grade students were not receiving this opportunity. Therefore, in order to provide my sixty-plus language arts students with just such an experience, I began my senior citizen project. During the project the students create an interview form, interview their subjects, draft a written report, present it to the class, and write thank-you letters. The entire assignment takes approximately six weeks.

It is my hope that through this project the students will gain a better understanding of and respect for senior citizens and, therefore, help bridge the generations. Also, the project increases the students' motivation and commitment by providing them with a real-life purpose and audience as they use their language arts skills. Although I developed the project for use with fifth graders, I feel it could be easily adapted to almost any grade level.

Over the years I have found two successful methods for the pre-writing stage of the project. The first begins by having students write their own definitions of a senior citizen. They then form small groups to discuss and share their ideas, eventually coming to a consensus and writing one definition to present to the class. These may be presented orally or written on transparencies.

An alternative opening activity is to have a whole class brainstorming session in which the students volunteer their ideas of a definition for a senior citizen. All ideas are accepted and written on the board. Examples of student ideas will include such items as:

They meet places  
They're retirees  
They live in homes  
They get discounts.

Whichever way I choose to start the discussion, I usually follow it up with an activity which seems to be one of the highlights of the project. We open our classroom door and invite passers-by to come in and give us their definitions of a senior citizen. In the past we've questioned principals, aides, teachers, foster grandparents, custodians, and sixth grade students who had completed the project the previous year. We add these definitions to our pool, and then the students and I come up with a class definition.

After composing our class definition we return to our original definitions and conclude that the majority of the ideas listed are true for some senior citizens, but not all. Usually a senior citizen is identified as anyone age 55 or older. Although the age people feel they are senior citizens varies, I use 55 rather than 60 or 65 because it gives the students a larger population from which they may conduct interviews. Following the opening activity, I inform the students that each of them will be interviewing a senior citizen and that they should be thinking about possible questions they might ask their interview subjects.

I have handled the next step in two different ways, both of which work equally well. Both begin by brainstorming ideas for questions and writing all suggestions on the board. Then, after all questions have been listed, I do one of the following:

1. Use student questions to create a senior citizen interview form for the entire class (an example of which is included at the end of this article).
2. Instruct students to use questions from the board and their own ideas to create their own individual forms.

If students choose to use class forms, I encourage them to add a couple of questions of their own. Also, I inform them that they may choose to skip over one or two questions if they feel uncomfortable asking them.

The third step of the project may come the following day or several days later depending on how long it takes for them to prepare their interview forms. During this session we discuss the actual interview procedure. I invite in a senior citizen (for example a foster grandparent) or use a student volunteer and model the interviewing process. While doing this I use an overhead of the class interview form or an example I have created so that the students are able to observe me actually questioning my interview subject and recording the answers given to me. At this time I stress the importance of asking their senior citizens the correct spelling of their names and addresses for the thank-you letters we will be writing as a closing activity.

After modeling the interviewing process and going over the assignment with the students, I send a letter home to parents explaining the project to them. In this letter I explain that my purpose for this project is two-fold. First, the project aims to help the students have a better understanding and respect for senior citizens. Second, they will be using and developing all their communication skills as they plan the project, interview their senior citizens, write a report on the results, and, finally, write thank-you letters to their interview subjects. I also explain to parents the exact requirements, due date, and interview option. At this time I request that each student bring in either a stamped envelope or twenty-five cents to use when writing thank-you letters.

The students are given two weeks (three weekends) to locate and interview their senior citizens. I suggest to them that grandparents or other relatives, neighbors, friends of the family, church members, and nursing home residents make good interview subjects. I stress that they need to seek their parents' permission before interviewing anyone. I always leave the option open that if, after asking their families for assistance, students cannot find a senior citizen to interview, they are to bring a note from their parents stating this and giving me permission to schedule an interview for them. I need to receive this note by the end of the first week so that I'll have time to contact local senior citizen groups, who are usually more than happy to help.

After two weeks we begin drafting the interview report. Once again, I begin by modeling the process. Using the information gleaned from my sample interview, I draft a report on the overhead projector. The students are then provided with in-class time to draft. I've discovered that it is important to inform students that it is not necessary to report information

in the exact order as it is found on the forms, especially when using class forms. Otherwise the majority of reports sound very much alike. I also invite them to be creative and include their own feelings and opinions in the report.

Following drafting, students hold small group conferences with their peers. The purpose of these conferences is for them to give each other feedback on content. They answer such questions as:

What did you like best about my report?  
Did my report make sense to you?  
What else would you like to know?

The students are then encouraged to edit and revise their own papers based on the peer-group responses they received.

Next, students proofread their papers for capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. They then pair up with a classmate for an proofreading conference before meeting with me for a final conference. During my conference with the students, they read their reports to me, after which we concentrate on one or two skills which will help them improve their pieces. For example, if a paper is lacking punctuation, I have the student first notice where he or she pauses when reading and then decide on appropriate punctuation.

We publish the reports, or biographies, in several ways. To begin, all students present their reports orally to the class; after each report we discuss what we remember most about the subject. Sometimes I have students in the audience write one-sentence responses on half-sheets of paper that tell the reporter what they remember most about the senior citizen in the report. The reporting student must receive a response from each classmate; this encourages students to be attentive while others are reporting. As part of this in-class "publication" of results, we also hold class discussions comparing and contrasting senior citizens with each other and with the students themselves. We look for similarities and differences; they are oftentimes surprised when their senior citizens like the same foods or TV programs they do.

Another way we publish the results of the interviews is by posting the reports in the hall so that others in the building may read them. Also, some of the students choose to send copies of their reports to accompany their required thank-you letters to their interviewees, thus giving the reports an even wider audience.

After publishing their reports, each student drafts a thank-you letter to his/her senior. Again, I begin by modeling on the overhead. Students draft, share, revise, edit, and prepare final copies of their letters. In these letters, students are requested to include what they remember most or what they enjoyed the most about their interviews. Each student brings in twenty-five cents or a stamped envelope. I give a mini-lesson to model the correct way to address the envelopes. The letters are all mailed directly from the school; this way I know that the assignment has been completed and each senior citizen is assured of receiving a letter.

Although the writing process is obviously at the center of the project, all the communication arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening) are included, along with viewing and thinking. As we go through the process, I have discovered that it is especially important for me, as the teacher, to model each step for the students. In this way they get a good idea of what is required of them and feel more comfortable both as interviewers and writers.

The benefits of this project have been terrific! Students are provided with a real life experience using non-fiction writing. They learn that senior citizens are people too, having favorite foods, TV shows, sports, and hobbies just as they do. Some students who do not have grandparents or other senior citizens for role models close at hand begin to overcome some of their fears of seniors. Several even plan return visits, and a few have acquired part-time jobs helping their seniors.

The senior citizens gain as well. Since we do the project in February or March, they receive company during a lonely time of year—plus they receive an extra letter from the mailman. Last year one senior citizen, Simon Sleutelberg, came in to see Jenny Reuter, his student interviewer, the classroom, and his biography posted in the hall. He brought along his granddaughter, and Jenny introduced them to the class. That day was the highlight of our project, for we were able to experience first-hand the enjoyment and real-life benefits of bridging the generations in our classroom.

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## SENIOR CITIZEN INTERVIEW

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
2. Address \_\_\_\_\_
3. City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_
4. Birthdate    Month \_\_\_\_\_    Day \_\_\_\_\_    Year \_\_\_\_\_  
Where born \_\_\_\_\_
5. Family-Husband/Wife \_\_\_\_\_  
When married \_\_\_\_\_  
Children \_\_\_\_\_  
Grandchildren \_\_\_\_\_  
Great-grandchildren \_\_\_\_\_
6. Work—How many years? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do? \_\_\_\_\_  
Retired? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Education \_\_\_\_\_
8. What liked to do when little? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Hobbies \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What is your favorite:  
Food \_\_\_\_\_  
Song \_\_\_\_\_  
Game \_\_\_\_\_  
Sport \_\_\_\_\_  
TV Show \_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you ever feel lonely? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do you do to keep from being lonely? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Do you read very much? \_\_\_\_\_  
What? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you have any pets? \_\_\_\_\_ What kind? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. What type of exercise do you do? \_\_\_\_\_
15. Were you ever in a war? \_\_\_\_\_ What war? \_\_\_\_\_
16. What do you like about being a senior citizen? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
17. Do you feel embarrassed when you make a mistake? \_\_\_\_\_
18. Do people think different of you because you are a senior citizen? \_\_\_\_\_
19. Can you still do everything you could when you weren't a senior citizen?  
\_\_\_\_\_
20. What are some of the problems that senior citizens have?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
21. What laws would you like to see passed that would help senior citizens?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_