

Recording a Life Story

These are suggestions for recording, in two sections of thirty minutes to one hour each, a life story of someone you know well. For each session you will need a tape recorder, an extension cord, several tapes, and a pen and notebook. The notebook will help you to keep an outline of the life story as it unfolds. Choose a quiet location for the interview where your subject is comfortable and the two of you will not be disturbed. Introduce the tape with your name, the date and location of the interview, and the respondent's name and age.

The First Session

The following questions are provided as guidelines only and are not meant to be rigidly followed.

- What was your full birth name? Where were you born and what was happening at that time in history?
- Were you raised by your parents? What were your mother & father like?
- What did you like to do with each parent? Were you closer to one than to the other? Any reason why? What about each do you admire?
- What was your place in the family (oldest, youngest, etc.)? Did you have brothers and sisters? If so, how many of each and how did you relate to each of them years ago and how do you regard them now?
- Did your parents have different ideas for boys and girls?
- Do any family celebrations, rituals, nicknames, or favorite sayings that stand out in your mind?
- What was the religious affiliation and activity level of your family?
- Does your family have any special background or traditions?
- What did (do) you enjoy doing most as a family?

- What do you remember about your grandparents? What stories have you heard about them?
- What did your mother & father tell you about her or his childhood? Did either have any distinguishing hobbies, talents or social contributions?

- What was the occupation of each of your parents? Did they have financial security?
- Did you live in different homes? What was each home like? What objects do you remember in some of the rooms?
- Make a time line listing each of the places you have lived. How did you feel about the neighborhoods you lived in?
- Was your family different from your neighbors in any way?
- Who were your companions as a child and what activities did you do with them?

- What chores or responsibilities did you have as a child?
- Did you have any favorite stories?
- What were your happiest times as a child? What were your saddest times?
- What was your education? Do you have a memorable school experience? What subjects did you like?
- Describe the school(s) you went to.
- Were your classmates from the same background as you?
- Were boys and girls treated alike?

- What did you do most of your life?
- How and when did you get your first job? What did the work involve?
- What was the best job you ever had? The worst?
- If you had your choice of all the jobs in the world, looking back, what would you have chosen?

- Did you date? Who was your first girlfriend (boyfriend)? What was she or he like?
- What sort of activities were fun for you with your friends?
- How did you meet your husband (wife)? What do you remember about your family around the time when you were married?

- How many children do you have? When and where were they born? What is each child like?
- Can you recall certain things that you insisted your children know or believe?
- Do you have grandchildren? How often do you see them? Describe each of them.

After you have completed the interview, review the questions and jot down any impressions. If possible, allow a week between the two sessions to give your subject a chance to rummage through memorabilia and evoke deeper memories. This will also give you time to listen to the interview, make more detailed notes, and think of questions that are pertinent to the particular experiences of your subject.

The Second Session

At the beginning of the second session, ask whether any additional experiences came to mind between sessions. You might also ask some of the questions you thought of when listening to the recording of the first session or just continue where you left off. Sometimes going through a photo album is a good occasion for bringing up questions of this type. Near the end of your interview is the time to ask life review questions. These questions will differ, of course, for someone in mid-life and someone who is near the end of life.

- Describe what you are like. What are your outstanding characteristics?
 - What was the most exciting part of your life?
 - What was the most important historical event you witnessed or were in?
 - Do you remember reading something, seeing a movie, or meeting someone who influenced your life dramatically?

 - What did you daydream about becoming when you grew up?
 - If you could relive any part of your life, what would it be? Any parts of your life that you regret or years you felt were wasted?
 - What has been your main goal in life?
 - What makes you happy? What makes you sad?
 - If you had three wishes, what would they be?
 - What hardships have you overcome?

 - Are you like the person you were twenty years ago? Ten years ago?
 - Looking over your entire life, when was it darkest? brightest?
 - Is your life getting darker or brighter now?
 - Who has been affected by your life?
 - What are some of the things you have learned about life?
 - In what way would your son or daughter (grandson or granddaughter) benefit by living through your experiences? What parts would you want him or her to avoid?
 - What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

 - How do you show your belief in God?
 - When others see you what do you think is their impression?
 - Explain some of the things you like and dislike about your appearance and personality, describing how you regard (feel about) your hair, eyes, complexion, height and attitudes. Why do you feel as you do about these things?
 - Explain about any special talents that you have.
 - Whenever you die, what are the things you would like to be remembered for?
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When asking a relative to help by sharing what they know with you, call them and then immediately send pedigree and family group sheets right away. Whether a personal interview or by letter, the forms will jog the relative's memory and encourage corrections or additions to data. A few days after you think the forms have arrived, follow up with a phone call. This will show you are serious about their review and also that you are willing to offer support. Ask the relative for any leads about locating birth, marriage, and death certificates, family photographs, diaries, obituaries, deeds, wills or other records. When you have researched a fact, recontact the relative and have them confirm the conclusions that you have reached.

When corresponding by mail, include a SASE (Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope) to communicate your desire to receive a reply. Be sure to communicate your willingness to share your information.

When conducting interviews or asking questions, ask open-ended questions instead of ones that will provide short answers. Use 60 or 90 minute cassettes since the thinner the tape, the more likely it will stretch or break. When done with the interview, label the cassette and break the tab on the end to keep from taping over the interview. Bring extra batteries. If possible, use photos, letters and other documents to encourage the subject's memories.