

# Simple Steps to Recording Great Life Stories

The  
Cheerful Word

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*“Everyone’s life is a story worth telling!”™*

## Simple Steps to Recording Great Life Stories

Many of you have asked me how to get your parents or grandparents to share their cherished memories and life experiences. Here are my simple steps on how to interview and preserve great life stories that will be treasures for generations!

### Before the interview

- Choose an overall theme for each interview. A whole life is hard to distill into just a few hours! Consider what kinds of stories you’re most interested in gathering. This will lead you to a theme that fits best. For instance, if your father served in the military, perhaps a whole interview (1 -1.5 hours) could be themed around what it was like to live during wartime, both in and out of active service. You might include where your mother was at the time and what life was like at home. Or you could choose to highlight travels or celebrations through the years. See the list of possible themes at the end of this document. This is your project, have fun with it!
- In keeping with one theme for each interview, write down your questions ahead of time. It’s easy to get side-tracked when you’re hearing new stories for the first time! This is a great discussion to have with your parents and your siblings. Having questions at the ready will help keep you both on track as you conduct the interviews.
- Ideally, you should interview one person at a time. In most partnerships, one individual usually dominates the storytelling or conversation. Interviewing both at once can often result in one person constantly correcting the memories of the other. Honor each parent by talking to each one separately. In some instances, it might be a lot of fun to hear their familiar banter on some topics. You know their tendencies; plan accordingly to obtain the stories you and they would be proud of for years to come.
- Choose your recording device. Whether it’s a high-tech video recorder or a digital recorder, make sure you have enough batteries or a cord and extension to maintain power for an uninterrupted interview process. Breaking the flow and emotion of the moment can really be a bummer as it’s difficult to bring back.

Before the interview, practice using your recording device. Many an interview was inadvertently erased or the video or audio wasn't working. If you can, test it in the environment in which you plan to conduct the interviews.

If using a digital recorder, buy one that has a USB port so you can easily upload the interviews to your computer. Those without a USB or firewire port cannot be transferred for preserving or archiving or sharing. It's stuck on the device until you re-record it to another device, in which case you lose significant audio quality.

- Consider the recording environment. Make sure your device is not located near a heating or air conditioning unit. The air flow can drown out a human voice. Check for other distracting background noise or movement. If using a video recorder, ensure good lighting. Shadows can make a person look terrible if there's not enough light or if the light is too harsh and in their eyes. Again, a quick test will tell you what you need to know.
- Be sure your main character is in his or her favorite chair with a favorite beverage. Keep your parent comfortable and hydrated to encourage great storytelling. My mother preferred wine for most of her interviews. Tissues might come in handy too. You never know what tender memories will come bubbling up to overflowing.
- Gather photos and other memorabilia. Recipes, newspaper clippings, collectibles, etc. are great prompts for a rusty memory.

## During the interview

Relax and enjoy the process of listening to the stories pour forth. Go into each interview session with joy and a positive, calm demeanor. Putting your parents at ease allows them to reflect and enjoy sharing these intimate moments with you.

There's no such thing as the perfect interview! Follow your intuition. If your loved one seems stuck on a particular question or appears uncomfortable, just ask if they'd prefer if you moved on to the next one. Give yourself and your parent permission to let it go. Even if it creates more questions in the end. You may revisit the topic later, or you may have to abandon it altogether. Remember to honor their wishes. This process is intended to encourage them.

It's best to turn on the recorder at the beginning of the interview and leave it on until you're finished. Every now and then, check to see if the little red light is on indicating active recording mode. Most modern digital recorders will hold up to 4 hours of audio.

IMPORTANT: Ask your loved one a question and then wait. Give her uninterrupted time to remember events and to finish telling her story. This is not a family chat you're having, this is a personal history interview and requires an adjustment on your part to turn up the patience. Remember that she may have to take time (10 seconds or longer) to recall the experience in question. Follow her cues: if she looks confused, ask if she understands the question. If she's simply working to remember, give her unhurried space in which to adequately build the story in her mind before beginning to tell you.

ALSO IMPORTANT: Did I mention that patience is a virtue? If your parent looks off into the distance or seems to be searching for something by looking up, around, or to the floor, this usually indicates they have remembered something new or related to what you have asked. You may suddenly have hit the jackpot of really awesome memories long forgotten—cool experiences buried under decades of inactivity.

Though you will generally follow your list of questions, allow your parent to go off on a tangent if she feels the need. Remember, this is a process to honor her and her memories, not to rush through her life to gather all you can greedily. You'll be thrilled to capture these precious and spontaneous moments!

Above all, enjoy your time together; after all, this project is another cherished memory in the making.

## Themes and questions to wet your whistle

Get started today to capture the best stories *ever* from your parents!

### Theme ideas

- Travel and adventure
- Military
- Birthday or Anniversary
- Family History
- Retirement or Career
- Caregiving/Hospice
- Adoption Story
- Life Together
- Commemorative/Tribute

## Questions to get you started

- 1 Interviewer, state your full name, date and location where the interview is taking place.
- 2 What is your full name?
- 3 Why did your parents select this name for you?
- 4 Did you have a nickname?
- 5 On what date and where were you born?
- 6 How did your family come to live there?
- 7 Were there other family members in the area? Who?
- 8 What was your house (apartment, farm, etc.) like?
- 9 What smells immediately bring you back to the house you grew up in?
- 10 Were there any places or items in your house that were special to you?
- 11 What is your earliest childhood memory?
- 12 What were your father and mother's names? Name any siblings you have.
- 13 Describe the personalities of your family members.
- 14 What kind of games did you play growing up?
- 15 What was your favorite toy?
- 16 What was your favorite thing to do for fun (movies, beach, etc.)?
- 17 Did you have chores? What were they? Which was your least favorite?
- 18 Did you receive an allowance? How much? Did you save your money or spend it?
- 19 Where did you go to grade school and what was it like?
- 20 Where did you go to high school and what was it like?
- 21 What school activities and sports did you participate in?
- 22 Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?
- 23 Where did you go to college and what was it like?
- 24 What were your favorite songs and music?
- 25 How is the world different today than when you were growing up?
- 26 How did you meet the love of your life?
- 27 What was the proposal like?

28. Where and on what date did you marry?

1. Describe the day of the wedding and how you felt.
2. Where did you honeymoon?
3. How did you choose your children's names?
4. What was your profession and how did you choose it?
5. If you had all the time and money in the world, what would you do?
6. What is your proudest personal accomplishment?

35. What story comes to mind that still embarrasses you to this day?

36. Who had the biggest influence on your life?

1. What lessons did that person teach you?
2. What words of wisdom do you want others to always remember?
3. Describe an experience in your life that you consider sacred.
4. What are your hopes and dreams for the future?
5. Do you have any regrets?
6. What is your one, fundamental truth about life?
7. Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?
8. Where did you go to college and what was it like? What were your favorite songs and music?
9. How is the world different today than when you were growing up?
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Add your own questions and thoughts here. I wish you many happy memories as you strive to preserve the legacy lived by your parents. Enjoy every little minute!

I'd love to share in your joy and celebration as you honor and encourage your parents and create an inspirational legacy for generations to come. Email me your good news or lessons learned any time at [sam@cheerfulword.com](mailto:sam@cheerfulword.com).

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