

Documenting a Life: A Guide

This list of questions is intended to spark your imagination when you're interviewing a loved one or yourself. This abbreviated list does not cover all parts of a life but is intended to provide structure and guidance along the way.

Make space for the silence. Don't rush toward the next question. Ask specific follow-up questions. See where the conversation wanders – you might even go off script.

Childhood

What is your full name and what's the story of your name?

Did you have a nickname growing up?

How did you feel about your name?

What did your parents do for work? Did it impact the work that you did in life?

Choose 3 words to describe your mother. If someone said you could only tell one story to describe her to someone else at a dinner party, what story would you tell?

Choose 3 words to describe your father. If someone said you could only tell one story to describe him to someone else at a dinner party, what story would you tell?

What lessons did you learn from your parents' marriage?

What do you recall about your grandparents? Did you see them often, and if, so what did you usually do together?

Did you have another favorite family member?

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Were you close to anyone in your family as a child? Were you close to someone outside your family?

Who in your family are you most like? Who are you most different from?

What is your birth story? Did anything out of the ordinary happen?

How many children were in your family and what are their full names? Why were those names chosen?

What are the earliest memories about your first home? What about other homes and places you lived?

What do you remember most about your childhood?

Where did you grow up? What was your neighborhood like?

Did your family have any pets? If so, did you have a favorite? Why?

Did you move as a child or stay in one place?

What did your family do for fun?

Did you go on trips as a family? If so, where? And did you like it?

What were your favorite toys as a kid? What games did you play? Favorite TV shows?

Did you like to read? If so, what did you read?

What did you collect as a kid?

Did you ever run away from home?

What comes to mind when you think of the word home?

What's the most memorable lesson your parents taught you?

What is your most memorable lesson you learned as a child?

Did you have any memorable family holiday traditions, or traditions at other parts of the year?

What was the most memorable meal you ate together as a family?

What was discussed around the dinner table?

Did your family have any sort of unofficial motto or way of life? What were the values as a family?

Where did you go to elementary school, high school, and college or trade/technical school?

Who was your best friend as a child? Are you still friends with them today?

Who was your best friend in high school? Are you still friends with them today?

Were you a rebel or a rule follower?

What was your first job? How much money did you make?

Did you work during high school? How many jobs have you had?

How did you decide on a career?

Did you and your friends have a special place to hang out? Tell me about that.

How would people who knew you in high school describe you? Would you agree?

Were there any subjects or teachers you particularly liked or disliked? Why?

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Were you involved in any school sports or clubs? Did you have a particular talent that you were recognized for?

What did you wear to school?

What did you want to be when you grew up? Did that change or shift over time? If so, why?

What was your first car? What did you pay for it? How did you pay for it?

Who taught you how to drive? What was that experience like?

Love & Partnership

Who was your first date?

How many times have you been in love?

Tell me about the first time you told someone you loved them. Tell me about the first time someone told you they loved you.

How did you meet my mom/dad/grandmother/grandfather [fill in the blank]? Tell us about that, and what memories stand out from that time.

How long did you date? What was that like?

When did you know they were “the one”?

What was the first thing you fought about?

If there was a proposal, where and when did it happen?

Did you have a wedding or ceremony that marked the beginning of your partnership?

How many people attended? Tell me about the ceremony. Do you remember your vows, if you made them?

If you had a partner, did you take their name when you got married? Why or why not?

Did you have a honeymoon, or a way to celebrate the partnership? Where did you go and what memories does it bring forth?

What was your favorite thing about having a partner in life? What was the hardest thing?

What advice would you give to someone embarking upon a lifelong partnership?

Family Life

Did you have children? Why or why not?

What was your experience of being pregnant? Or, if you had children by other means, what was the experience of anticipating their arrival?

What was your experience of birth?

What was most rewarding thing about being a parent?

What was the hardest thing about being a parent?

If you're an aunt or uncle, what did you learn from having that role for the kids in your family?

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Are you called Auntie or Uncle by other kids in your life, even if you're not biologically related?
Tell me about the joys and challenges of those special relationships.

Did you want more/fewer children than you were able to have?

Were you strict or lenient as a parent?

What advice would you give to parents in your life, or those who have a parental role?

Adulthood

Did you have a personal or professional mentor?

Do you remember your grandparents describing their lives? What did they say?

Has anyone ever saved your life, literally or metaphorically?

Did you serve in the Armed Forces? Which branch? When? Where? What rank?

What do you think are the great inventions in your lifetime?

What did you expect from adulthood, and how has it differed from or matched your expectations?

Do you think about politics, and if so, how does it show up in your life?

How did you react to world events such as September 11th? The covid-19 pandemic?

Who are your closest friends to this day?

Who is your oldest friend?

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What were the hardest choices you ever had to make?

Was there an event that really changed the course of your life?

What about your life has been surprising?

What makes you feel most alive?

Who do you confide in?

What is your biggest regret?

Was there a person who really impacted the course of your life?

What was the most stressful experience you ever lived through?

What was the scariest thing that ever happened to you?

What makes you feel loved?

When and where did your parents pass away? What do you remember about that? How did they pass?

Do you have any hobbies as an adult?

What are some out of the ordinary things that have happened to you? How would you describe out of the ordinary?

Do you believe in luck? Karma? Fate? Astrology? Aliens?

Who did you look up to or admire as an adult? Has it changed over time?

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Did you have a spiritual journey in your life? Do you believe in a higher power, and has this changed throughout your life?

Did you attend church/synagogue/temple/mosque/friends meeting as a child? As an adult?

How do you define spirituality? Has this definition changed?

What was the saddest period of your life?

What was the loneliest period of your life?

What has been the most fulfilling part of your life?

Do you think there's a meaning to life? If so, what?

As an adult, have you been a member of any organizations or groups? What was that experience like?

Have you won any special awards or prizes as an adult? What were they for?

What is your most cherished possession?

Do you have your own life motto as an adult?

What is the most beautiful place you have ever visited and what was it like?

What's the best trip you ever went on?

Which states have you visited? Which countries have you visited? Are there places you'd still like to go? And why? Places you never made it to? Why?

Do you like to travel? Why or why not?

Have you had pets as an adult? Tell me about them.

Is there anything you have always wanted to do but haven't?

Are you someone who is motivated by goals? If not, what motivates you, and why?

What makes you feel powerful?

Favorites

What are your favorites And, more importantly – why?

- Animal
- Athlete
- Writer
- Board game
- Book
- Sweet treat
- Card game
- Blog/news site to browse
- Color
- Beverage
- Flavor of ice cream
- Movie
- Musical instrument
- Restaurant
- Season
- Singer

- Song
- Flower
- Holiday
- Meal
- Public figure

What is your favorite thing about yourself?

Miscellaneous

What or who are you most thankful for?

Do you have any photos, movies, videos or audio recordings of older family members?

What are your favorite family recipes? How do you get them and where are they now? What memories come to the forefront when you think about eating or making these recipes?

What charities, organizations or causes do you support? Why?

What do you think happens when we die?

What would you like people to know about you that they might not know?

What 3 words would you use to describe yourself?

Tell me about a time when you felt misunderstood.

What was your favorite outfit of all time, the one that made you feel like the best version of yourself?

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What's your favorite or most cherished accessory? (Watch, necklace, handbag, etc)

Tell me about an object you haven't been able to throw away.

Tell me about something you regret giving away.

Tell me about something that was passed on from another family member (a watch, a piece of jewelry, etc). What does it mean to you, and why?

Tell me about a piece of art (a book, a TV show, a song) that made you feel understood.

What's your favorite body part? Why?

Tell me about a time you told a lie.

What is a promise you kept? What's a promise you couldn't keep?

Tell me about a time that someone didn't believe you.

What makes you jealous?

What gives you hope?

What scares you?

What delights you?

How has your life been different than what you imagined?