

Interviewing Family Members for Family History

In less than 10 years, one in five Americans will be over 65 years old. As our parents and grandparents age, we grow one day closer to losing the opportunity to learn their life stories. The good news is that with the various recording options available, you don't have to be an award-winning filmmaker or videographer to preserve your loved one's history.(1)

Interviewing family members gives you a chance to spend time together and ask questions. It is not always easy, but it can be extremely rewarding. You can connect with relatives in the present moment while preserving valuable stories and memories for future generations. Older family members can relive past experiences and accomplishments, and younger family members can learn new things about themselves, their heritage, and even their place in history.(3)

Getting Started

First, don't assume that your subject will agree to be interviewed. Last year the author of the article, Lisa Kanarek asked her mom to let her record her life story. Her response? "No. I don't have anything to say." It turns out that her attitude is common.(1)

Audio recordings create added depth to your family history and can become valuable heirlooms. Imagine being able to hear the voice of a grandparent you never had the chance to meet, and in their own words, hear them telling their own story.

These recordings can help make your genealogy more personal and add color to stories in a way that can't be replicated. (2)

A big part of optimizing your time is being prepared. Ensuring that you have the proper equipment and batteries as well as a good location and time are all important. But one of the most important ways you can prepare yourself is to write a list of questions.(2)

Ten Getting Started Suggestions from American Ancestors/New England Historic Genealogical Society (3)

- 1) Decide who you are going to interview. What is your relationship to them? It can be a relative, a friend, or anyone you consider family.

FamilyTree suggests that it's usually best practice to start with your oldest family members (grandparents, great aunts and uncles, parents, etc. (4). Or start with yourself for practice. (1)

- 2) Will you talk to one person, or will you do a group interview with multiple people at once?
- 3) How will you connect with them?

In person

Phone

Video chat

- 4) Brainstorm a list of questions to ask. What do you want to learn? Think of questions that will encourage them to tell stories and share memories of the past.
- 5) Schedule a convenient time to talk with your family member. Consider you may be in different time zones.
- 6) Send your list of questions to them in advance. If you don't know your relative very well, this can help them prepare answers and open up. Explain your goals and why you want to connect with them.
- 7) Determine how you will save their answers. It is important to preserve memories for future generations. Use a phone or some sort of recording device. At the very least write down their answers.
- 8) When you talk to them, have your list of questions in front of you. Make sure to record their answers.
- 9) Ask them if they have any objects or photographs (these can help to spark memories) to show you from their past. Do they have any documents, such as a birth certificate, marriage license, or old yearbook? Do you have a family tree?
- 10) When you are finished, think of another family member to interview. You can ask questions based on answers you receive from each family member. Eventually you can gather information about the entire family!

Expert Tips for Interviewing Family Members

- The length of an interview does not need a set time of 30 minutes or 1 hour; consider the health and stamina of your family member and how tired they may get
- Do not limit yourself to your list of questions; ask follow-up questions to foster a discussion
- If they interject with a story try not to interrupt; let them finish their answer, and only interject at the end to get clarification
- Past events and people can be difficult to remember; be patient and allow for pauses
- Photographs and objects may help trigger memories
- Some questions may be sensitive; know when to move on and skip certain things
- Be sensitive with veterans; do not push to get war stories; you may simply say, "Were you in any battles? But please only tell me what you feel comfortable with?"
- Ask questions that have more than simple "yes" or "no" answers; ask open-ended questions that require meaningful answers. (An example of an open-ended question is "What is your favorite memory from childhood?")

Expert Tip! Contact them in advance and let them know what you are planning to do. Perhaps they can generate questions to ask in return. You can interview each other!

The list of questions should be thought-provoking and open-ended. Be cautious, however, that you don't get too attached to your questions. Let the conversation ebb and flow as naturally as possible.(2)

20 Questions from FamilySearch to give you a jumpstart compiling your own list of questions: (2)

What do you know about the day you were born?

What was it like living where you grew up?

What weekly rituals or traditions did your family have?

What chores, if any, did you have around the home growing up?

What was your schooling like?

What would you and your friends do to have fun?

What was dating like when you were young?

What was it like living (where your relative lived) during (historic events, such as war, 9/11/2001, a specific political event, a natural disaster, and so on)?

How did your family resolve familial conflicts?

Were you ever involved in any accidents? What happened?

Where was your first job, and what did you do?

What were your hobbies? Is there anything you picked up when you were young that you still enjoy today?

Did your family have any pets? What kind? How many? What were their names?

How and when did you meet your significant other?

What was your wedding day like?

Do you remember any weird or crazy or wonderful gifts you received at your wedding?

When did you know you wanted to have kids?

How did you find out from or tell your significant other that you were going to be parents?

What was early married life like? What struggles did you face?

Have you been on any memorable vacations? Where did you go? What made them so memorable?

See below in the sources section for more suggestions for Interview Questions.

Expert Tip to Organize Questions from American Ancestors:

Try beginning your interview by saying, “Today we will talk about your earliest memories.” Then begin with their childhood and progress to different stages of their life. (3)

Childhood Years

When and where were you born?

Who were you named after?

Where did you live? How did your family come to live there?

Who did you grow up with? What was it like?

What older relatives do you remember, and what do you remember about them?

Did you have a hobby? Did you collect anything?

Did you have a favorite movie?

Did you have a favorite type of food? What was your least favorite food?

Teenage Years

What did you and your friends do for fun? Did you have a favorite “hangout” spot?

Did you ever get in trouble?

Did you have any jobs?

What goals did you have as a teenager?

Who was your hero growing up?

School Years

What do you remember about attending school?

What schools did you attend, and which grades were you there for?

What were your favorite subjects in school and why?

Who were your favorite teachers and why?

Did you go to college? Where did you go and what did you study?

Family Relations

Do you know the origins of our family and where they lived?

What family stories have you heard about your parents, grandparents, and distant relatives?

Who was the earliest relative you remember? Can you share a story or a memory about them?

How did you celebrate holidays and birthdays?

Did you marry? How did you meet? Where did you propose? Where was your honeymoon?

What traits do you think are common in our family?

Later in Life

What was one of the happiest moments in your life?

What challenges in your life have made you stronger?

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

Where is the most amazing place you visited? Where do you hope to visit someday?

Did you enlist or get drafted into the military? Where did you serve?

Do you remember any important events or eras in history? (JFK assassination, Civil Rights Movement, Moon landing, 9/11)

Do you remember when I was born? What do you remember about that day?

Recording, Saving, and Sharing the Interviews

5 Voice-Recorder Apps for Oral History Interviews, from Familytree magazine. (5)

Rev – Android and iOS – free

Smart Recorder – Android – free

TapeACall – Android and iOS – yearly subscription is \$59.99

Voice Memos – iOS – free

Voice Recorder – Android – free

You can record audio directly within ancestral profiles in the [FamilySearch](#) and [MyHeritage](#) apps. (6)

Use free audio-editing tools such as [Audacity](#) to polish your recording. (6)

[FamilySearch](#) is free and files can be uploaded and saved in the following formats: .jpg, .tif, .bmp, .png, .pdf, .mp3, .m4a, and .wav, up to 15MB.

(I think FamilySearch is the best option for saving and sharing family memories and interviews. The site is also a good option for researching your family tree, but it is not the best option for saving your tree, because it is one tree shared with everyone and because of that there are many errors. My recommendation is to check all sources and save your tree where it cannot be edited or changed by anyone else).

Sources

1. How to Use Tech to Capture Your Family History, <https://www.wired.com/story/how-to-use-tech-capture-family-history/>
2. Interviewing Your Relatives, a Question Starter Pack, <https://www.familysearch.org/en/blog/questions-to-ask-when-interviewing-your-elders>
3. Conducting a Family History Interview, <https://www.americanancestors.org/conducting-family-history-interview>
4. How to Plan and Host a Successful Family History Interview, <https://familytreemagazine.com/storytelling/interviewing/interview-questions/>
5. 5 Voice-Recorder Apps for Oral History Interviews, <https://familytreemagazine.com/resources/apps/voice-recorder-apps/>
6. How to Record an Interview on Your Smartphone, <https://familytreemagazine.com/resources/apps/how-to-record-family-history-interview-smartphone/>

More Suggestions for Questions:

- #52Stories: Writing Your Life Story Has Never Been Easier, from FamilySearch (52 Questions/52 Weeks), <https://www.familysearch.org/en/blog/52-questions-in-52-weeks-writing-your-life-story-has-never-been-easier>
- 117 Interview Questions to Ask Your Family, from MyHeritage, <https://blog.myheritage.com/2017/03/questions-to-ask-your-family/>
- Questions for Interviewing Family Members, from Ancestry, https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/Questions-for-Interviewing-Family-Members?language=en_US
- 300 Questions to Ask Your Parents Before It's Too Late (Book), <https://www.amazon.com/Questions-Your-Parents-Before-Late/dp/0882909789/>

For more information about our Kalloch Family Reunion Association, visit our website at <http://kalloch.org>

Our Kalloch Family Reunion Association is on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/KallochFamily>

Anyone interested in our Kalloch family history and genealogy is welcome to join our Descendants of Finley Kelloch Family Genealogy Group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/671122400025392>

2024 Kalloch Family Reunion Presentation, by Ken Kalloch