



Family Story Project

Have you ever thought about preserving your family stories? What stories do you want to tell your children and grandchildren? A legacy recording is an interview with a loved one from whom you want to capture life stories for future generations to enjoy. Below are some introductory tips for collecting and preserving family stories.

Preparation

How do I record the interview?

- You might choose to take notes, record audio, or film the interview. If your loved one lives far away, consider using a video conferencing app. Whichever decision you make, take some time to get to know your equipment before the interview and test it out.
- Record the interview on a format that is widely used. This will make saving and accessing the interview easier over a longer period of time.
- Consider how much storage space your device has, the battery life, and the lighting if you are recording video.
- On the day of the interview, do a short test run. This helps both you and the person you are interviewing feel more comfortable once the interview starts and ensures your equipment is ready to go.

How long should the interview be?

- People often have enough stories to fill a library. Think about what you want to ask and which stories you want to record.
- Start with a single session and keep it short, about 30-60 minutes. Shorter sessions help to keep both of you from getting too tired, and your family member will have a better memory for details.
- You may complete your interview in one session, or your interviewee may surprise you and have enough stories for multiple sessions. There is no limit to how many sessions you can do.

What do I ask them?

- Museums and archives usually have specific topics to ask their interviewees about. They typically focus on a person's personal experiences and perspectives as they relate to a specific historic period or event. For family interviews, you have the option of exploring many more topics. Outline some topics you might want to ask about in the interview. These may include autobiographical information, local or global events the person lived through or participated in, reflections on how their thoughts and opinions have changed over the years, and advice they have.

- Share this outline with your family member before the interview. It may spark their memories and often helps them feel more comfortable during the interview.
- Ask them to add to the outline if there is something they want to share that you may have overlooked.
- This outline will not be a complete list of questions for your interview, but it will help you to guide the conversation.
- Does your family member have any personal objects they would like to talk about in the interview, such as a medal of service or a family heirloom?

The Interview

Are there any tips for getting interesting stories?

- Use open-ended questions. After establishing all the essential facts (their name, date of birth, etc.), use open-ended questions to help the narrator expand on their answers. Try: “Tell me about your family and growing up.” “Describe your mother. What was she like?” “What do you remember about your first job?” These kinds of questions promote description and richer detail that may also help spark your loved one’s memory.
- It’s absolutely okay to go off-script. While you may have outlined topics to cover or specific questions to ask, allow your loved one some room to expand on these topics. Some of the best stories are triggered by other, loosely related memories. Allow your family member to get a little side tracked if it gets them chatting.

What if I forget something?

- Take notes. You may hear something in a story that you want to go back and ask about later.
- Ask follow up questions during your next session. Remember, you can always edit the interview later if you want to keep certain stories together.

Is there anything I should be aware of during the interview?

- Clear the interview space of distractions, silence phones, and avoid noisy locations if you are recording. If something does interrupt the interview, simply pause, take a moment, and continue once the disruption has passed.
- Some stories might not be fun or easy for your loved one to talk about or for you to hear. It is okay to take a break from recording if needed.
- It’s okay to have moments of silence. It may take your loved one a moment to collect their thoughts. Allow space for some silence before jumping into a new question or trying to clarify a statement.
- Listen. Give your full attention to the person telling the story. This engagement will help keep up the energy of the interview.

After the Interview

I did the interview, now what?

- Allow your family member to review their answers and edit or remove parts that they may not want to include in the final copy.

- If you make any edits to the interview, allow them to review it again for approval.

How do I save the interview?

- Some people choose to transcribe their interviews. This process creates a searchable document, which is helpful later if you are trying to locate a particular story. As a bonus, the transcript also acts as another form of backup.
- Store physical documents or media in a cardboard box. Plastic containers can hold moisture in, which can lead to mold.
- Once you have your interviews boxed up place them in a dark, cool, dry location, away from direct sunlight, such as a closet or under a bed. Avoid storing your interview in damp areas or places that might experience extreme differences in temperatures or are subject to pests like garages, attics, or basements.
- You can also choose to save digital files to cloud-based services.
- Make a plan to revisit your interviews every five years or so. You can check on their quality and decide whether you want to transfer them to a new technology for storage. It also is a lovely way to keep your loved one's stories alive; perhaps you will have new family members to share them with.

How do I share the interview?

- Incorporate the interview into a family history website, build a digital scrapbook, or write a family biography. Perhaps you can edit multiple family interviews into a documentary for a family reunion. There are many creative ways to preserve your family's stories; the choices are endless!

Did you use this document to start a family story project? We'd love to hear about it! Email us at education@sunnylands.org