

How to Get Started Interviewing Family Members and Writing Down Their Stories

“Tell the story of the mountain you climbed. Your words could become a page in someone else’s survival guide.” ~ Morgan Harper Nichols

1. BENEFITS OF WRITING A LIFE STORY:

- A. Leaving your legacy in your own words
- B. Creating a connection to younger generations and future generations
- C. Self discovery / Healing
- D. Reflection on the events of your life - making sense of them

2. PRELIMINARY STEPS:

- A. Make sure the storyteller is on board with the project
- B. Have a framework in mind before you begin - it will focus your interview questions and determine who all you want to interview
 - > Autobiography?
 - > Memoir?
 - > Family History?
- C. Familiarize yourself with as much information about the storyteller and historical times as possible - this allows the interview/conversation to flow smoothly
 - > Journal entries / Diaries
 - > Current events
 - > News articles

3. INTERVIEWING THE STORYTELLER:

- A. Record your interviews and transcribe those interviews afterwards
- B. Some Topics / Questions to address when interviewing for a life story:
 - > What is your middle name and who were you named after?
 - > Ask about their parents - in addition to names and careers, etc. ask if the storyteller shares any traits with either of them
 - > Childhood friends
 - > Career - did it suit you?
 - > Hobbies / Forms of Relaxation - what do you enjoy about them?
 - > Happy memories
 - > Sad memories
 - > Lessons learned - what is the toughest lesson you ever learned? How did you learn it?
 - > What were some experiences that shaped your life?
 - > What is the best piece of advice you would give someone? Why?
 - > Share photographs and genealogy records with the storyteller to refresh recollections, stir memories, and bring clarity

- C. Other questions to consider asking in an interview:
 - > Do you have a life philosophy?
 - > Who in your life has left a lasting impression on you? Why? > Who do you admire? Why?
 - > What periods of your life did you enjoy the most?

- D. Goals to Keep in mind when interviewing someone:
 - > Get good stories!
 - > You want the storyteller's personality to shine through > Highlight their perspectives

4. INTERVIEW ENVIRONMENT:

- A. Comfortable, Relaxed, Trusting
- B. Honor the storyteller's requests - if they don't want something published
- C. Follow the heat of their answers

5. NON-TALKERS:

- A. Don't be intimidated! Build trust and rapport
- B. Focus on **conversing** rather than a strict Q&A approach

6. RECOLLECTIONS MAY VARY:

- A. It may be impossible to reconcile every story into one agreed-upon version B.
Different versions from different storytellers reveal points of view - incorporating all versions can be very telling and even entertaining

7. WRITING / COMPILING STORIES INTO A LIFE STORY BOOK:

- A. Look for patterns, common threads, repetitive behavior
- B. Consider asking about the storyteller's favorite books, authors, poems, songs, hobbies, etc.
 - > It may reveal their life perspectives
 - > Can serve as chapter titles, or the structure of the life-story book

8. NUTS and BOLTS of ORGANIZING and WRITING SOMEONE'S LIFE STORY (after interviews and transcription are completed):

- A. Create a sample Table of Contents and sample chapter for review B.
Write the First Draft
- C. Revisions
- D. Final document content approval

- E. Editing and Proofreading
- F. Adding in photos, genealogy records, and other memorabilia
- G. Book design and Layout
- H. Printing and Binding

9. DETAILS:

A. Creating a sample Table of Contents and sample chapter for review and approval:

Sample Table of Contents - keep it general - it will likely change as you begin to write

Sample Chapter - purpose is to capture the storyteller's voice and show your writing style

B. First Draft:

Make it a very polished first draft

C. Revisions:

This process gives the storyteller an opportunity to add, delete, or correct any information or further explain for clarity

D. Final Document content approval:

Always make sure the storyteller is in agreement with each stage of the process, especially the final version of the content.

E. Editing and Proofreading:

I suggest you hire someone to do these phases of the project. Sometimes when you live with a project for soooooo long you may miss something!

Types of Editors:

(a) Developmental (or Structural) Editor: This level of editing is typically sought out at the beginning of your writing project and stays with it until its conclusion. A developmental editor structures and organizes your story. They help you to shape your narrative or message throughout the entire process and they ensure that your writing connects with your readers. They show you how to strengthen the general tone and style of your project.

(b) Line (or Style) Editor: This level of editing focuses on style, flow, tone, and clarity of your book, paragraph by paragraph, line by line. A line editor flags things like over-used words or run-on sentences.

(c) Copy Editor: This level of editing is like a "fine tooth comb" type of review, concentrating on punctuation, grammar, spelling, typos, etc. They will ensure consistency throughout the book - like your usage of numbers ("4" or "four") or titles, ("Esq." or "Esquire")

etc. The copy editor makes sure the information is delivered to the reader clearly and consistently throughout.

Proofreader:

The proofreader is the final set of eyes on the book before it goes to publication. They are the last "reader" to see the book before it reaches its intended audience. The proofreader makes sure there is nothing else technical in the draft that will distract the reader.

F. Adding in Photographs and Genealogy Records:

Photo Restoration Specialists

G. Book Design and Layout:

Show the storyteller how the final version will look

H. Printing and Binding:

There are many options to choose from which will determine the price. For example:

Number of pages of the book

Number of photos/memorabilia you wish to include

Number of copies you want to order

Type of paper you choose

Type of binding you prefer (leather, hardbound, soft cover, etc.)

10). TIPS to BEGIN WRITING YOUR OWN LIFE STORY:

- A. Write out periods of time, or roles in your life
- B. Download/brainstorm information about each one - don't edit, just free write C.
- Add in historical/current events of those times
- D. Fill in more concrete details - names, dates, specifics
- E. Focus on your perspectives, influences, experiences that changed you, important people in your life and the roles they played

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