
Interview Family at Your Summer Reunion

by Denis Ledoux



When it comes down to it, people love to tell their stories.

Following a few basic steps, anyone can succeed at writing interesting and meaningful lifestories. Gathering information from relatives—interviewing—is one of these basic steps you can master.

As a lifewriter, you must always doublecheck the information you already have, and seek new material to flesh out your stories. Reunions rate well on both of these tasks: scattered relatives, each of whom has a piece of the family history to share, are in one place at one time. It's an opportunity not to be missed.

When it comes down to it, people *love* to tell their stories. The family historian's job is to ask the right questions to get to the heart of the story.

Here are five simple guidelines, extracted from both *Turning Memories Into Memoirs* and *The Photo Scribe*. They will streamline the process for would-be lifewriters:

1. Determine ahead of time what questions to ask. Make two lists. One of everything you know and need to doublecheck about your subject and the other of everything you don't know but need to. Your lists will help keep reminiscing on track. Before ending, check your lists to see if you have asked all your questions.

2. Ask your questions of the right person. Not everyone at your reunion is equally knowledgeable or insightful. Aunt Louise, for instance, talks endlessly and never gets to the point. Instead, interview Aunt Beth who has a sharp memory and carries on an insightful conversation. Don't dismiss anyone too quickly either. An articulate in-law, for instance, can have experiences similar to your family's and provide background information that fills in the gaps. Interviews can include more than one relative, too. Why not contact your subjects before the reunion so they can be thinking about their stories. Ask them to bring photos to talk about.

3. During the interview, use a tape recorder and take clear and comprehensive notes. It is frustrating to lose important details because you can't remember them. Keep in mind, however, that all mechanical devices are subject to failure so write down everything. Note taking also keeps you active—the passivity of taping can dull your focus.

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Silence is often the sound of a person thinking, sorting out memories, or arriving at new definitions of his experience.

Taping can intimidate people who see it as somehow "official." Here is a strategy you can use with people you know to be friendly and supportive of you. Start by saying you are testing. Tape two minutes of chitchat. If it works, reset the machine and continue chitchatting. Then quietly flow the conversation into the interview. Your relative nervous about "sounding foolish" (or some such thing) will remain at ease and be grateful when you say the taping is done. Most people are pleased that you have saved them from worry.

4. Don't rush the information gathering. Silence is often the sound of a person thinking, sorting out memories, or arriving at new definitions of his experience. Allow for thinking time. If your relative seems blocked, repeat the last words spoken as a question. Uncle Bob says, "Those were difficult times." You ask, "Why were those difficult times?" Silence on your part, even an awkwardly-long silence, can make the subject feel he ought to say more—and so he does.

5. Write a first draft of your lifestories as soon as possible. Time will dull your vivid memory. If you write soon after the interview, you can remember details that make a story live.