

## **Character Portraits: Record The Inner Person**

We cherish photos of those people who are important to us. These photos keep alive the look of our relatives and friends. They show from whom that distinctive family nose is inherited and they provide a glimpse at personalities as we judge from clothes and haircuts, posture and activity recorder by the camera.

But, what about our persistent feeling that the essence of who these dear people were—really were—is lost? We very much want to pass on to future generations who our mother or our father was on the *inside*, what their characters were—not just what they looked like. Why aren't there inner snapshots of them the way there are outer, physical ones?

Well, you can create inner snapshots by writing character portraits that convey a sense of the inner person. It isn't as hard as you might think. Here are some suggestions that will help bring your people's inner lives to the fore in your writing.

**1. Write about their feelings about their lives, actions and choices.** Create windows on your people's inner lives by writing **how they might have felt**, why they felt that way, and what they thought. There are several ways you can do that.

■ First of all, if you have a memory of what a person said about his/her life, write it down.

*"I was always a woman who enjoyed her own family first," my mother often said  
to me.*

■ Secondly, you may simply have to write how you *suppose* your characters felt and thought—and be sure you attribute your guess work to yourself or to another person ("*I always sensed that my father wanted to...*") It is not a fact. This is an interpretation. But, that is ok since you wrote "I always sensed..."

■ Lastly, you can write interpretative leaps from remembered conversations and actions of your characters. By basing yourself on your person's words and actions, you make your leaps of imagination more acceptable to the reader. Perhaps your father often said, 'I wanted to be a

pharmacist...’ or perhaps he said “I could have enjoyed being a firefighter....” If you quote him, then you are being more plausible when you also write:

*He was dissatisfied with his job in the warehouse and wished he had prepared for a more challenging job that would fit his sense of himself as a smarter than average person.*

**2. Write about the setting in which they lived and about how they related to that setting.** This includes writing about their houses and neighborhoods, about landscapes they saw everyday and their geographic regions, about their eras. You can also write about ethnic heritage and about social, political, and religious beliefs to make fuller character portraits.

*The table we see so little of next to my grandmother’s overstuffed chair included a prayer book that was filled with holy pictures and mortuary cards. They made the book twice the thickness. Next to the prayer book she had her rosary beads and a statue of the Sacred Heart. Everyday my grandmother spent hours in that chair reading and reciting prayers.*

Setting is crucial for interpreting character. It is often the most inaccessible element for younger people viewing your albums. Make the setting easy to understand since it is an element they will need in order to understand the lifestory you are telling about their ancestors.

**3. Write dialogue.** Dialogue lets the reader listen to your characters and experience them as individuals. Here are three ways you can capture their voices on paper while they still resonate in your ears.

- Make use of favorite words and expressions.

*Dark as the inside of a pocket,” my grandmother used to say..*

*“TWO, two, two! Here me come.” Max would call out when we played hide-and-seek.*

- Write according to sound your people used rather than “correct” grammar. This can give a big glimpse into your characters education and background. *“Ain’t no way, I sez ta dem, ain’t no way yous guys gonna do dis!” I can still hear my uncle Jet say as he told us his amazing stories from his childhood in the city.*

- Mention the pauses and other mannerisms that characterized a person’s speech. *“Well, the way it seems to me,” my father would say, and then he’d look out the window and, for a while,*

*I would think that he had forgotten what he was talking about. I'd begin wondering if I should leave and then he'd pick up again and say something.*

In writing dialogue, choose words that convey something meaningful about the person. You don't need to fill your space with *clichés* like, "Here we go again." These simply don't have enough meaning to take up space on a scrapbook page.

#### **4. Write about something your subject did and your response. "**

*My uncle Robert would always ask me about school and, when he did, he wasn't just being polite to a little girl. He really seemed to want to know how I was doing and how I felt about things. He made me feel I was special."*

Character portraits are an essential addition to a lifestory photo album and it is not difficult to include them.

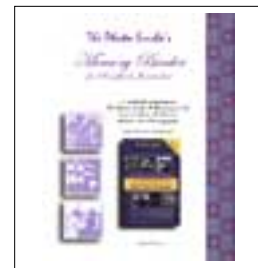
Remember: all your contemporary albums will someday be heritage albums and you will want others to know more about you and your family than just hair color and the size of noses. The way to do this is to include character portraits.

These exercises are from *The Photo Scribe: A Writing Guide / How to Write the Stories Behind Your Photographs*

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