

How to Create a Legacy Story

Photographs fade over time and, sadly, many are irreplaceable so they cannot continue to be shared. The same is true for our memories. According to the National Archives, “it only takes three generations to lose pieces of an oral family history.” However, by writing a legacy story, you can permanently document your personal experiences and accomplishments and your ethnic and cultural heritage. You can also share the lessons you have learned along the way.

You are best qualified to determine how you want to be thought of now and remembered later. Moreover, by taking the time to record and share your story—and the motivation behind your decisions and transitions—you gain a sense of what you have done already and a better idea of what you want to do next. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard summed it up well: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

Everybody has a story to tell; you do not have to be a celebrity or public figure to create yours. Your life is more interesting and meaningful than you think, and you should record your story while you can still do so. Everybody has survived some circumstance or overcome some obstacle—information that can be passed on to inspire others and, importantly, help them learn who they are and where they came from.

It is never too soon to begin preserving your legacy, a term that usually refers to a gift of property or money distributed through a will. But you own a greater asset: your life’s experiences and lessons learned. You are a link that connects your family’s past to its future generations. Very few of us have the time, energy or talent to handle telling our entire life story, but we do know what parts are most significant to us and of value to our family. Sharing your life story is one of the greatest—and least expensive—gifts you can leave your family. **Students helping seniors create their legacy story receive a free legacy story for themselves.**

Notes on getting started.

Creating a legacy story through Americans All is not hard. Our legacy preservation initiative includes templates and tutorials to guide you through the process. And you may be surprised that there are people around you who, when you reach out to them, will be excited to help you create your story. Whether you are writing your story yourself or helping someone else to do so, consider these tips.

- There is no one correct format for your story. It can be told chronologically or start with a specific event. It can be a memoir, a tribute, an autobiography, an ethical will or an archive of information. It can focus on as many aspects of your life as you choose or share particular experiences you believe made you who you are today.
- You can change the format of your story as you proceed simply by rearranging the paragraphs and adding new transition sentences.
- You do not need to include everything you did or everyone you know or interacted with in your story. Some things are better left unsaid or unknown.
- Your story can be a combination of written text, images and audio-visual recordings.

- Your story can include hyperlinks to other websites to provide additional (e.g., historical) information tied to an event in your life.
- Your story does not have to be completed in one creative session; it can be saved in draft form while you continue to work on it.
- After your story has been published, it can be updated at any time, with previous editions archived.

How to begin the process.

- Go to www.americansall.org/heritage-honor-roll and scan some of the published legacy stories. At least one or two stories should offer inspiration and guidance on how you may want to structure your story.
- Identify topics of interest to you: a hobby, a job, travel/vacations, volunteer work, etc.
- If you plan on starting chronologically, you may want to consider events at various times in your life.
- Once you have preliminarily decided on how you want to begin, start writing a paragraph or two on the most important topics.
- Collect images to enhance your story. You will need a headshot and plenty of photographs to create—or have someone help you create—your photo montage.
- Collect more images than you think you can possibly use and have them scanned into a folder on your computer's desktop, so they will be available when you need them.
- Look for family videos you may have and have them prepared to add to your story. Instructions on how to do so this are provided in one of our tutorials.
- Look for any logos you want to use—religious, military, education, work or volunteer based. Make sure that you have permission to use the logos and that they are of good quality.

Questions and topics to help guide the thought process.

Your early life: Your parents and biological family; special games and toys; where you lived; where you went to school; favorite pet(s); who made the greatest impact on you growing up; what was it like to grow up in your household and how this may be different from the one you created when you moved out; holiday events; vacations; how you learned to drive and your first car; what you now realize you would like to have done differently and how that impacted your life today; how you decided at that time on a career; what changed when you went to middle and high school.

The next level: What followed high school; have you changed careers and why; how you met your spouse or significant other; details of your wedding or honeymoon; what was or were your “ah-ha” moments or events that changed the path of your life; what part of your military or volunteer service was most meaningful to you and how did it change your life; what you may have learned from your children or friends as you matured; how you deal with your faith; what does wealth mean to you and has that changed since childhood and what lessons would you like to pass on regarding this topic; have you had an emotional health or physical crisis and how did it change your life.

If you are doing an interview, here is a list of questions you should ask. The list may also be useful if you are creating your own story.

First and last name

Birthdate and place

Parents' names and siblings and background information on them

Ethnic and/or cultural background

Pets growing up

Schools attended

Favorite activity as a child and as an adult

What type of music do you like and which musician, instrument or song?

What is your favorite food and did that change as you grew up?

Are (were) you married, spouse's name and how and where you met?

Do you have children or grandchildren and names and ages?

Where have you traveled?

What do (did) you do for a living?

What was the greatest success and/or mistake you made during your life or career?

How did you spend your first paycheck?

What are your favorite memories?

What is your favorite place to visit?

What is the biggest sacrifice you ever made?

What habit do you have that up to now, nobody knows about (and is now safe to discuss)?

What are the two or three things you most care about?

What advice did your parents give you and did you follow it? Also, what was the one (or two) things your parents did that really made you angry?

If you could roll the clock back, where would you be and what might you have done differently and what would you have avoided?

What would be the one thing (or two) that you would want your children or grandchildren to remember about you?

What is (was) your most prized possession?

What things bring you the most pleasure?

Sources: *Reasons Why Writing Remains a Critical Skill for Success*, Tomas Laurinavicius, a lifestyle entrepreneur and blogger; *The Importance of Good Writing Skills in the Workplace*, CareerAddict, a career- and success-focused blog; and *The Importance of Good Writing Skills*, a blog created by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D., and Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

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Storytelling for Younger Children

What's the secret for a happy family? They talk. A lot.

Dr. Marshall Duke, a renowned psychologist, is the guest on this important podcast episode. For an Emory University research project, Dr. Duke created the *Do You Know Scale*. The survey instrument asks children 20 *Do You Know* questions about their family and its history.

The results were quite surprising. Turns out the children who knew more about their family's history had higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of anxiety, were much better at facing challenges, and a whole lot more. Yes, family stories are a critical part of a child's emerging identity and well-being.

And don't feel left out! These stories can and should be told in any family, of any age. This information is provided in the Legacy Café Podcast. To learn more about all facets of legacy, visit www.legacycafe.org.

The "Do You Know" Scale

Want to know how much your children and grandchildren know about their family history? Have them answer the following questions and circle a "Y" for "yes" or "N" for "no." Even if they know the information you are asking about, they don't need to write it down. You just wish to know if they know the information at this point.

1. Do you know how your parents met? Y/N
2. Do you know where your mother grew up? Y/N
3. Do you know where your father grew up? Y/N
4. Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up? Y/N
5. Do you know where some of your grandparents met? Y/N
6. Do you know where your parents were married? Y/N
7. Do you know what went on when you were being born? Y/N
8. Do you know the source of your name? Y/N
9. Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were born? Y/N
10. Do you know which person in your family you look most like? Y/N
11. Do you know which person in the family you act most like? Y/N
12. Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger? Y/N
13. Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences? Y/N
14. Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school? Y/N

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| 15. Do you know the national background of your family (English, German, etc.)? | Y/N |
| 16. Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young? | Y/N |
| 17. Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young? | Y/N |
| 18. Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to? | Y/N |
| 19. Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to? | Y/N |
| 20. Do you know about a relative whose face “froze” in a grumpy position because he or she did not smile enough? | Y/N |

Score: Total number answered Y ____

Important Note: About that last question! Fifteen percent of our sample answered “Yes!” This is because the stories that families tell are not always “true.” Often, they are told to teach a lesson or help with a physical or emotional hurt. As such, they may be modified as needed. The accuracy of the stories is not critical. In fact, there are often disagreements among family members about what really happened! These disagreements then become part of the family narrative. Not to worry!

Next Step: After learning which questions were answered “N,” you’ll have a great start on transmitting the family narrative by telling those stories.

Addendum: The major criterion for inclusion in this set of questions was that they test knowledge of things that children could not possibly have learned firsthand, either because they happened before the children were born or they involved family members who were less familiar to them than parents and grandparents.

Given this limitation, the children who knew the information would therefore have had to receive it from others through stories, writings or other indirect sources. In our research, higher scores on the Do You Know scale were associated with *higher levels of self-esteem, an internal locus of control* (a belief in one’s own capacity to control what happens to him or her), *better family functioning, lower levels of anxiety, fewer behavioral problems, and better chances for good outcomes* if a child faces *educational or emotional/behavioral difficulties*.

However, correlation is not causation. Simply knowing the answers to questions will not produce the good outcomes described above. The good outcomes as well as the knowledge of family history that the children possessed were all the result of something else. We have written about this something else in several publications, and I quote from one of those publications here:

“If simply knowing family history could make for better states of well-being, some might propose (confusing correlation with causation) that we simply teach children various facts about their families and they will become stronger.

Clearly, this approach would not work! Rather, it is our belief that knowledge of family history reflects certain processes that exist in families whose members know their histories. One such process is the communication of family information across

generations; important questions about this process would include “Who is passing this information?” and “When is this information transmitted?”

In our study of family stories at the Emory University Family Narratives Project funded by the Sloan Foundation, we found that family stories seem to be transferred by mothers and grandmothers more often than not and that the information was typically passed during family dinners, family vacations, family holidays, and the like.

Other data indicated that these very same regular family dinners, yearly vacations, and holiday celebrations occur more frequently in families that have high levels of cohesiveness and that they contribute to the development of a strong sense of what we have called the intergenerational self.

It is this intergenerational self and the personal strength and moral guidance that seem to derive from it that are associated with increased resilience, better adjustment, and improved chances of good clinical and educational outcomes.”

Source: Duke, M.P., Lazarus, A., & Fivush, R. (2008). Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 45, 268–272. Retrieved from <https://legacycafe.org/dyk/>

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