

Writing personal histories

Writing the life story of people who have died

My only experience of doing this is of writing about members of my or my husband's family after their deaths. It was only after their deaths that I realised that although we had letters photos, documents, and knew some family stories, these had never been put together in a format that could be passed down the generations.

The main thing to remember is that everyone who knew the person you are describing, will have their own memories, views and perspectives. So it is important to avoid giving your subjective views or opinions unless these are corroborated or balanced with more nuanced views.

Writing the life story for a living person.

There are some important principles to establish and observe when working with someone on their personal history.

One it is important that the subject wants to or is neutral about telling their story. Some are reluctant because they don't think there is anything much to say about their lives as they didn't feel they had achieved anything. This is seldom if ever true. Two of the people I worked with, both women, one in her 80s the other in her 90s, felt far better about themselves as a result of telling their story and having been listened to.

However, there are people simply don't want to look back or talk about certain aspects of their lives. For some, reflecting on the past can be damaging. They have coped with trauma by refusing to think or talk about it which for them, has enabled them to carry on their lives relatively unscathed.

Two Who is this for? Is it for family and future generations For the benefit of the subject or for some other purpose such as material for the Migration Museum? If the story is for future generations you may need to add footnotes or illustrations to explain things that will probably be unfamiliar to subsequent generations.

Three Careful Listening (which is not as easy as many people think), is essential as is a pledge of confidentiality. It is vital to assure the subject at the onset, that they have the final say about what is written and if they tell you something that they later decide should not be included, this must be respected. The subject should have an opportunity to review and edit the final draft.

Below is a list of questions. In practice I have never asked them all. Most people, once they get going, follow their own train of thought and it's far more productive to let that happen than to be directive. This may lead to rather disjointed notes and that writing them up requires careful thought. It may also mean that you go back to subjects that have been missed or that need further clarification.

PERSONAL HISTORY – POTENTIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

YOUR CHILDHOOD

Where and when were you born?

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Memories of your maternal grandparents

What were their names?

Where did they live? What did they do?

Your relationship with them?

What kind of home was it?

What sort of values did they have? What was expected of you?

Any stories or incidents that you remember?

What do you know about their backgrounds?

Do you think you have inherited any of their traits?

Birth and death dates?

Memories of your paternal grandparents

What were their names?

Where did they live? What did they do?

Your relationship with them?

What kind of home was it?

What sort of values did they have?

Any stories or incidents that you remember?

What do you know about their backgrounds?

Do you think you have inherited any of their traits?

Birth and death dates

Your mother

When and where was she born?

Did she have siblings?

What sort of childhood did she have?

What did she do before she met your father?

Any romances before she met your father?

How did they meet?

Where did they meet?

When and where did they marry? **IF RELEVANT**

How would you describe her? Your relationship with her?

When and where did she die?

Your father

When and where was he born?

Did he have siblings?

What sort of childhood did he have?
What did he do?
Any romances before he met your mother?
What sort of a person was he?
What did he do?
How would you describe him?
Your relationship with him. When and where did he die?

YOUR CHILDHOOD

What are your earliest memories?
Did you have siblings? If so, older or younger than you? Your relationships with them?
Where did you live?
What was your childhood like?
Where did you go to school? What was it like?
Memorable teachers and/or school friends?
What did you enjoy/dislike? At school / hobbies and interests?
Did you have family holidays? If so where did you go?
What ambitions or plans did you have?

How old were you when you left school?
What did you do? What was this like?
Were you still living at home or did you move away? If so what was this like?

FURTHER EDUCATION / WORK IF RELEVANT

MEETING YOUR PARTNER / SPOUSE IF RELEVANT

When and how did you meet?
How soon after did you get engaged? Where and how did he propose?
What was his name? Age, place of birth
What did he do?
What were his interests – his values?
Family background?
What did he do?

MEMORIES OF YOUR WEDDING IF RELEVANT

Where and when did you get married?

Where did you live? What was this like?
Were you taught to cook and run a household? Or did you learn as you went along?
What were your in-laws like? What was your relationship with them like?

BECOMING A PARENT IF RELEVANT

How did it feel to become a parent?
Why did you choose the names you gave them?

FAMILY LIFE

What were they like as children?

What was good and what was hard about being a parent?

Did you and your partner have similar or differing views about how the children should be brought up?

Did you see your own parents differently after having your own children?

Holidays and festivals.

Did you have time for other activities / hobbies?

What were your children like as teenagers?

Did you and your partner / spouse agree about what they were allowed to do?

What was it like when they left home?

Did you take up any new hobbies / activities?

Becoming a grandparent

LIFE AFTER RETIREMENT

When did you / your partner retire?

Howe did your life change?

Health issues?

Other thoughts

Looking back, how do you think your background and life has shaped you?

What were the main turning points – the most important decisions?

Who have you most admired in your life and why?

What values and principles have been important to you in your life?

What values and principles would you like to pass on to future generations?

Anything else you would like to add?