

Life Story

What Is It and How Do You Write It?

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Do you remember when you met your spouse? How much did you pay for your first house? What was your experience like when you went to school or started your first job? Perhaps these things seem ordinary to you. But what if you were asking your parents or grandparents these questions? Would their stories seem uninteresting? Most likely not! In fact, many of us wish we knew more about our family history and experiences.

A life story is an account of the series of events and experiences that make up our life and represent who we are. Our account starts at birth and continues throughout our lives, but few document or share their accounts. Because we never know when our time will be up, it is important to share experiences while we are still able and before disease or other circumstances prevent us from doing so. Writing our own life story or the story of someone we love can be a rich and rewarding experience.

The Benefits of Documenting and Sharing a Life Story

Life story is important for many reasons. It helps explain who we are, where we've been, where we are and how we got here. It can even provide insight on future choices and inspire dreams and aspirations. Documenting and sharing your life story

- Contributes to an active brain, well-being and mental healthfulness
- Reinforces a sense of purpose
- Creates self-awareness
- Invites self-exploration
- Influences future decision making
- Encourages communication
- Strengthens relationships, including caregiving relationships
- Authenticates family history and legacy

Writing a Life Story

It is common to find an excuse or put off talking about life story. "I'm too busy." "I'll sit down with Grandma next week when I have more time." But one day, we may not have that opportunity due to a variety of life's circumstances including accidents, illnesses and even death. When time runs out, untold stories and valuable lessons are lost forever. Whether it is our own or that of someone we love, writing a life story can be a rich and rewarding experience. It is also a gift that can last for generation after generation. To get started, it is important to be organized, prepared, and flexible.

To successfully capture a life story

- **Be prepared.** Prepare questions in advance. Find a quiet time and place to limit interruptions. Use a voice or video recorder in addition to taking notes. Use memory aides that trigger the senses such as photos, mementos, smells and sounds.
- **Be flexible.** A life story will likely take more than one sitting to capture. For some people, much of their story may surround a defining life moment, such as childhood or war time. Be sensitive to these moments, ask questions/reflect and listen extra-carefully to yourself or to others as it is likely that you will uncover rich experiences, emotions, values, beliefs and layers of complexity that help you better understand yourself or the person you are interviewing. Don't force topics that cause discomfort.

- **Organize life story questions/reflections into life domains and stages.** There are 8 key life domains or areas to which we can sort or categorize our life events and experiences. It is helpful to think about each of these domains separately and across the various stages of life: childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood and old age. Upon establishing each domain across the life stages, you can start to integrate and organize your story. The life domains are

- ◆ **Family/friends.** Family and friends are often our most loyal supporters. Think about family customs, practices and traditions. Explore family ambitions, fears, failures and triumphs. What changes in family have occurred in regard to births, deaths, marriages, or military deployment?
- ◆ **Place/home.** For many, home is where the heart is. As a feeling, home can evoke comfort, security, love, warmth and a variety of memories. It can also be a place to hang your hat, or it may be dwelling from which you want to escape. From birth to death many people experience multiple homes and/or places to live. How many places have you lived? When did you move to be on your own for the first time? How many places have you called home and why?
- ◆ **Education.** Human beings are lifelong learners. From the time we are born we begin building skills and knowledge through formal and informal educational experiences. Formal education includes such experiences as attending or graduating from high school or college, tutoring, mentoring, apprenticeships and training. Informal education experiences could include learning how to cook with your parents or learning to play a game with your siblings. What schools did you attend? What are your favorite school day memories? What lessons did your family teach you?
- ◆ **Work/volunteer.** Many people work because they have to. Paychecks help put food on the table and a roof overhead. Some people work at home without pay to raise a family and to maintain a safe and healthy home. Others have jobs, careers or work as volunteers. Within a lifetime, it is not uncommon to experience many different kinds of work and volunteer experiences. What

was your first job? What jobs and volunteer positions have you held throughout your life and why? Are you carrying on a family occupation? Have you ever been promoted or fired? What came of these experiences?

- ◆ **Recreation and Leisure.** Hobbies, leisure and recreational activity provide enjoyment, amusement and pleasure away from business, work and other chores. They keep us healthy by refreshing the mind and body and by helping to ease the stresses of daily living. What hobbies do you pursue or want to pursue? When did this interest start and why? How do you spend your leisure and recreational time and why?
- ◆ **Spirituality.** Spiritual, religious and faith-based beliefs are personal and private. There are a wide range of spiritual practices and activities, including belonging to a faith community, symbolic or ritual practices, meditation, prayer, retreat, pilgrimage, reading scripture, playing or listening to music, mind/body/soul activities (yoga, tai chi), fellowship with friends, and engaging with and enjoying the arts and nature. This domain of life reflects a process of growth and development which can take place over a long period of time. Good spiritual health can result in a sense of inner peace and comfort. What are your spiritual beliefs? How did your beliefs begin? Have they evolved and if so, how?
- ◆ **Historical context.** Significant cultural, political, social and economic events such as the Great Depression, WWII, the JFK and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, 9-11 Terrorist Attacks and the Royal Wedding create certain moods and attitudes that have tremendous impact on our development. What historic events have made an impact on you in your life time? How?
- ◆ **Health.** Personal and family health histories can hold important clues about our risk for disease and can help us reduce our risk of developing health problems. Identifying personal and family health behaviors and issues can lead to a healthier lifestyle. What health problems run in your family? What are your diet, sleep and exercise habits? Do you go to the doctor on a regular basis? Do you seek recommended screening tests, such as mammograms, colorectal, prostate and ovarian cancer screenings?

Recording and sharing life story is important because it helps explain who we are, where we've been, how we got here, and even where and what we anticipate doing in the future

Tips on Writing Someone Else's Story

Asking questions about someone's life is not always easy. We may feel pesky or fear arousing negative or sad emotions. But it is healthy for people to talk about their trials and tribulations, and many people appreciate appropriate opportunities to share significant life events and experiences. People's stories are interesting. People's lives do matter. Life stories allow different generations of people to learn from one another. Families can strengthen their history and pass along valuable lessons through life story. Caregivers can provide better quality of care when they are familiar with a person's story. In capturing someone else's story, it is important to do so in a logical, structured way and to make sure that the story is complete and accurate.

A life story script can help us prepare and ask the right questions so that focus and structure can be maintained. A script should include open-ended questions and allow for flexibility to encourage further exploration and discussion. The attached worksheet provides 50 questions organized into life domains and life stages. These questions are suggestions. There are no rules stating that we have to ask these questions or every question on the worksheet. Nor do we even have to follow the order of the questions. It is recommended, however, that we try to cover a variety of questions that highlight the various key life domains. For accuracy, it is also important to record the responses with paper and pencil, recording or videotaping, or a combination of both. Have fun learning about and documenting someone else's story.

Tips on Writing Your Own Life Story

While there are many ways to document life story—journaling, writing, tape recording, video recording, scrapbooking and even online programs, the thought of actually doing it can be intimidating and overwhelming. To help eliminate the stress

- **Write or record bits and pieces at a time.** There is no rule that says a life story has to be written in one sitting or that it has to be documented in sequential order starting at birth. If and when you think of a story—document it! Write and record when and where you feel like it. You can organize your entries later.

- **Make sure stories are complete and accurate.** As a part of your family's history, it is important for your life story to be factual. Part of the fun and challenge in documenting a life story is to look up information or to ask questions.
- **Schedule time.** Create a schedule to get into the habit of making a life story entry. Once a week or once a month is better than nothing.
- **Use technology.** Similar to letters that were more common place in years past, email, text messaging, and social media updates can hold valuable life story information. If nothing else date and keep copies of personal entries that you have received or written in a life story file.
- **Think about your life in the context of life domains and stages.** Common life domains include family/friends, place/home, education, work/volunteer, recreation/leisure, spirituality, historical contexts and health. It is also helpful to think about your life events and experiences within these domains across the various stages of your life: childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood and old age.
- **Generate ideas** using “50 Life Story Questions to Ask” worksheet.

Conclusion

We are never too young or too old to start writing a life story, but the sooner we start, the more accurate and detailed our story will be. Make life story entries a habit. Life story can be captured many ways, including journaling, photographs, voice recordings, and formal life story programs. Recording and sharing life story is important because it helps explain who we are, where we've been, how we got here, and even where and what we anticipate doing in the future. Writing and sharing a life story also promotes well-being, quality relationships, mental healthfulness, and legacy building.

Resources

Family Health History Workbook and the Surgeon General Family Health History Initiative. The Surgeon General has provided a tool to help make it easier to create a portrait of your family's health. The Family Health worksheet will help you organize your family tree and provide a record to identify common diseases that may run in families. www.ct.gov/dph/lib/dph/genomics/fhh_wbkb.pdf or www.hhs.gov/familyhistory/

Memory Banking. Contact your local Extension Agent for more information about this life story program. Memory Banking is a 4-week program designed to increase participant's knowledge and skills to collect, document and maintain life stories and health histories. The program is valuable for promoting an active brain, quality relationships, mental healthfulness and legacy building.

University of South Maine National Life Story Center. Through recording and preserving the life stories of people of all ages and backgrounds, the National Life Story Center celebrates individual lives and strengthens community bonds by bringing people of all generations together to share life stories. <http://usm.maine.edu/olli/national/lifestorycenter/>.

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50 Life Story Questions to Ask

The following questions have been adapted from the GreatLifeStories.com web site. These 50 questions have been used with success in generating conversation and high-quality information. You do not have to ask all of these questions. You may edit and add to this list according to your own interests and preferences. Often, after one or two questions, questions are no longer needed as the interview takes on a life of its own. Don't forget your pen and digital or video recorder!

Family/Friends

1. What were your parents and grandparents full names, dates of birth, places of birth?
2. What were the occupations of your parents?
3. How many children were in your family? Where were you in the lineup?
4. Generally speaking, what was your childhood like?
5. What one or two stories do you remember most clearly about your childhood?
6. Are there any particularly happy, funny, sad or instructive lessons you learned while growing up? What were your family's favorite jokes or pranks?
7. Who is, or was, the family comedian? "Straight" man?
8. What's the funniest family story you remember?

Place/Home

9. What was it like where you grew up?
10. Describe your most important friendships
11. Where and how did "news of your neighborhood" usually flow?
12. Education
13. What are the names of schools and dates you attended grammar school, high school, colleges, trade or technical schools?
14. What are your earliest school day memories?
15. Are there any teachers or subjects you particularly liked or disliked?
16. What did you learn in those first years of school that you would like to pass along to the next generation?
17. Were you involved in sports, music, drama, or other extra-curricular activities?

Work/Volunteer

18. What did you want to be when you grew up?
19. What was your first job, and how did you get it?
20. What was your first boss like? What did you learn from him or her?
21. Did you leave? Quit? Get promoted? Get fired?
22. Were you ever out of work for a long time? If so, how did you handle it?

Family/Friends

23. What do you recall about your first date?
24. How did you know you were really in love?
25. Tell me how you "popped the question," or how it was popped to you.
26. Tell me about your wedding ceremony. What year? Where? How many attended? Honeymoon?
27. Tell me about starting your family.
28. Were you married more than once? How often?

Recreation/Leisure

29. What were the most memorable family vacations or trips you can recall?
30. What leisure time activities are you involved with?
31. What are your greatest accomplishments in this field?

Spirituality

32. Do you follow any religious tradition?
33. If so which one, and what is it like?
34. Have you ever changed faiths?
35. What role do your beliefs play in your life today?
36. What would you tell your children about your faith?

Historical Context

37. Were you a volunteer, drafted or a conscientious objector?
38. If you didn't serve, what do you recall about being on the home front during the war?
39. What key moments do you recall about your service?
40. What would you tell today's young soldiers, sailors and fliers?

All Domains

Triumph and Tragedy

41. What were the most joyous, fulfilling times of your life?
42. Any sad, tragic or difficult times you'd care to share such as losing a loved one, a job, or something you cared about?
43. What lifelong lessons did you learn from these tough times? Joyous times?
44. Were there any moments you recall as true breakthroughs in any area of your life?
45. If you could do one thing differently in your life, what would that be?

Words of Wisdom

46. What have you learned over your lifetime that you'd like to share with the younger generation?
47. People will sometimes repeat aphorisms such as "honesty is the best policy." If they do, be sure to ask how they learned that life lesson.

Gratitude

48. What are you most grateful for your life?
49. How have you taught your children to be grateful?
50. Are there items or places that mark special gratitude for the ones you love? What are they? What are their stories?