

Life Story Recording Guide

Questions, Setup & Everything You Need Before You Press Record

Inside: a preparation checklist, five chapters of guided interview questions, a session tracking log, toolkit recommendations, and a path forward to your next legacy project.

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This guide belongs to anyone who needs it. Share it with a parent, a friend, or a family member who has stories worth preserving. Print it and leave it on the kitchen table. Send the download link. Pass it along.



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How to Use This Guide

This guide is built for two situations. Use it to record yourself, or use it to interview someone you love. Both paths work. Neither requires any experience with recording or interviewing.

IF YOU ARE RECORDING YOURSELF

Work through Section 1 first. Set up your space, test your equipment, and choose two or three chapters to focus on. You do not need to answer every question. Start with the ones that feel most alive.

Write brief notes in the space under each question before you record. They do not need to be complete sentences. Think of them as a map, not a script. The camera does not care about a prepared speech.

One session is enough to begin. You do not need a plan for the whole project before you press record for the first time. The momentum of a single good session will carry you further than any amount of preparation.

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING SOMEONE

Read the questions out loud and let the conversation follow wherever it goes. The written questions are starting points, not a script. Your job is to listen, not to manage.

Share this guide with the person you are interviewing at least one day before your session. The best answers come to people the night before, not on the spot. Give them time to remember.

Do not be afraid of silence. When someone pauses before answering, resist the urge to jump in with a follow-up or a softer version of the question. The pause is where the real answer is being formed. Let it breathe.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Some sessions will be easy and warm. Some will be harder than you expected. Certain questions will open things that have not been spoken about in years, or ever. That is not a sign that something went wrong. It is a sign that the conversation is working.

You do not need to capture a perfect, polished story. You need to capture something honest. An unsteady voice, a long pause, a moment of unexpected laughter: those are the parts that will matter most to the people who watch this recording in ten or twenty years.

A FEW PRACTICAL NOTES

- You do not have to complete all five chapters. Three focused sessions are more valuable than one exhausting one.
- Shorter recordings are easier to revisit and share. Aim for 45 to 60 minutes per session.
- The Session Notes log in Section 3 is the most important page in this guide. Use it every time.
- If the speaker becomes emotional, let the silence sit. The most honest answers come after a pause.
- Before you end any session, confirm exactly where the recording file is saved. Do not skip this.
- You are not trying to capture everything. You are trying to capture something true.
- Back up the recording before the next session. Not after. Before.

Note: *The question guide is organized by life chapter, not by difficulty. Feel free to begin anywhere. Many people find that starting with Childhood opens the voice more easily than any other chapter.*

On privacy: *Speakers sometimes answer questions differently depending on who is in the room. Consider whether the speaker would feel more at ease recording certain chapters alone, with just one trusted person present. Some of the most important answers only come when the audience feels small.*

On perfection: *The families who never start because they are waiting for the right time, the right equipment, or the right words are the ones who eventually run out of time. A recording made on a phone propped against a coffee mug is worth infinitely more than a recording that was never made.*

Before Your Session

Work through this checklist before your first session. The fifteen minutes you invest in preparation will save you from the most common frustrations: poor audio, harsh or flat lighting, sessions that wander without direction, and recordings that never get backed up.

YOUR ENVIRONMENT

- ❑ Choose the quietest room available. Carpet, curtains, and upholstered furniture absorb echo better than hard surfaces.
- ❑ Turn off ceiling fans, HVAC systems, and any appliance that hums or cycles on and off during recording.
- ❑ Position yourself so light comes from the side or slightly in front. A bright window directly behind you creates a silhouette.
- ❑ If using a lamp, place it at approximately face height and slightly to one side. Overhead-only lighting flattens features and ages the subject.
- ❑ Clear your background of visual clutter, or set up in front of a bookshelf or a neutral wall.
- ❑ Do a 30-second test recording before your full session begins. Watch and listen to it before you start.

Setup tip: *The single most common lighting mistake is recording with a bright window directly behind the speaker. Move your chair 90 degrees so the window is to your side. One small lamp at face level, positioned slightly off center, does more than any other adjustment.*

YOUR EQUIPMENT

- ❑ Your phone is fully charged or plugged into power for the duration of the recording.
- ❑ Your lavalier microphone is clipped 8 to 10 inches below your chin, clear of fabric that might brush against it.
- ❑ Your tripod or stand is positioned at eye level. Recording from below is unflattering; recording from above feels impersonal.
- ❑ Your recording app is open and a test clip confirms the audio is clean before the real session begins.
- ❑ A TRRS adapter or USB-C adapter is within reach if your microphone requires one.
- ❑ A glass of water is nearby. Long recordings and emotions both dry out the voice.

YOUR SESSION

- ❑ Print this question guide, or have it open on a second device that will not interrupt your recording.
- ❑ Choose two or three chapters to focus on. Covering everything in one sitting is rarely the goal and rarely the result.
- ❑ If interviewing someone, share the general topic area at least one day in advance. Stories surface in the hours before a session, not during it.
- ❑ Silence all notifications on every device not being used to record.
- ❑ Plan for 45 to 60 minutes maximum. Short, focused sessions produce better recordings than long ones that exhaust the speaker.

- Decide where you will save the recording before you begin. Name the file and know its destination before you press stop.

Before you begin: *Let whoever you are recording know there are no wrong answers and no requirement to answer every question. Permission to skip removes the pressure that makes people perform instead of speak. The best recordings feel like conversations, not interviews.*

Childhood & Early Life

These questions often unlock the most vivid memories, the sensory details that bring a story to life: the smell of a grandmother's kitchen, the sound of a neighborhood at dusk, the weight of a particular season. Start here. The past is often where the voice finds its confidence.

What is your earliest memory? Describe it as completely as you can, including what you saw, heard, or felt.

Where did you grow up, and what was daily life like for your family during that time?

Interviewer tip: *After any answer, try: 'Can you tell me more about that?' or 'What do you remember most vividly?' These simple follow-ups pull out the detail that would otherwise stay unspoken. The best stories live in the specific.*

Who were the most important people in your childhood, and what did each one teach you?

What did you love to do as a child, and what do you think that says about who you are now?

Reflection prompt: *If the speaker struggles to connect childhood activities to who they are now, ask this instead: 'What is something you still do, or still love, that started when you were young?' The bridge between then and now is often shorter than people expect.*

What was hard about growing up in your family or in the time and place you grew up?

What do you remember about the home or homes you grew up in, and what made them feel the way they did?

What is a memory from childhood that you have carried with you your whole life, and why has it stayed?

Family & Relationships

The people we love shape us more than any event, any decision, any circumstance. These questions move from the broad family picture into the individual relationships that mattered most, including the complicated ones that are often the most worth preserving.

How would you describe your parents as people, not just as your parents?

What is a story about your family that you have told many times, and why does it stay with you?

Interviewer tip: *These questions sometimes open doors that have been closed for a long time. If the speaker needs a moment, let the silence sit. It often comes just before the most honest answer. You do not need to fill the pause.*

Who is someone you loved deeply but lost touch with, and what do you want them to know?

How did your most important relationships change the direction of your life?

A note on difficulty: *Not every family story is warm. Some of the most important answers in this chapter come from complicated relationships, estrangements, or losses that were never fully spoken about. Allow space for those answers. They matter too.*

What do you wish you had said to someone you love that you never found the right moment to say?

What is the relationship in your life you are most proud of, and what made it what it became?

What do you hope the people who love you understand about who you really are, beyond your role in their lives?

Work & Turning Points

Work shapes identity in ways that outlast the job itself. The decisions we made, the work we took pride in, the moments we almost gave up: these are the chapters where character becomes visible and where the stakes of a life come into focus.

What work are you most proud of in your life, and why does it matter to you?

Describe a moment when everything changed, a decision, a loss, or an opportunity that redirected your path.

Interviewer tip: *The most revealing answers often come not from questions about success but from the moment before giving up. If a speaker pauses here, ask gently: 'What kept you going?' The answer to that question is often the heart of the whole story.*

What did you want to be when you were young, and what happened to that dream?

When was the hardest period in your adult life, and how did you get through it?

Reflection prompt: *This question sometimes brings up grief, regret, or failure. Those answers are worth capturing with the same care as the victories. Ask follow-up gently: 'What did that period teach you that you could not have learned any other way?'*

What is the accomplishment, professional or personal, that you most want people to remember?

What is something you tried and failed at, and what did that failure end up giving you?

If you could go back and give your younger self one piece of advice at the start of your working life, what would it be?

Chapter 4

Beliefs & Values

The beliefs we hold and the values we live by are often the hardest things to put into words. These questions slow that process down and make space for the kind of honesty that usually only happens in writing, or in a conversation that genuinely feels safe.

What do you believe about why we are here, and has that belief changed over the course of your life?

What is the most important thing you know now that you wish you had understood at twenty-five?

Interviewer tip: Give the speaker permission to be uncertain. Many people hold beliefs they have never tried to articulate. 'You don't have to have it all figured out' is one of the most useful things you can say before a question like this. Uncertainty on camera is honest. It lands.

What has life taught you about love, and what do you most want the people you love to understand about it?

What are you most grateful for, and why does that particular thing stand above everything else?

Reflection prompt: *Gratitude questions sometimes produce surface answers at first. If a speaker names something general, follow up: 'Tell me about a specific moment when you felt that most.' The story behind the answer is what the next generation will actually remember.*

What is something you believe, deeply and privately, that most people in your life do not know about you?

What values do you hope you passed on to the people who came after you, and where do you see them taking root?

How have your beliefs changed over the decades, and what changed them?

Messages for the Future

These are the questions most people wish someone had asked their parents or grandparents before it was too late. They are also the questions a speaker is most likely to want to sit with in advance. Consider sharing these a full day before your session.

What do you want the people who love you most to know about who you really are, beyond your role in their lives?

What advice would you give to someone just beginning the kind of life you have lived?

A note for speakers: *These questions are not asking for a performance or a final speech. They are asking for what is true. The people who will receive this recording do not need you to have everything figured out. They need you, in your own voice, speaking honestly.*

What is the most important thing you hope your family carries forward after you are gone?

Is there anything you have never said out loud that you want recorded now, while you have the chance?

On this question: *Some speakers need a moment with this one. Others have been waiting their whole lives to be asked. Either way, do not rush the answer. Leave the camera running. Some of the most valuable things ever recorded happened after a long pause.*

What do you want people to feel when they remember you?

What is a story from your life that you would most want a grandchild or great-grandchild to hear someday?

Is there someone you never properly thanked, and what would you want to say to them now?

Section 3

Session Notes

Recording a full life story typically takes three to five sittings. Use this log to track your progress across sessions. Note which chapters you covered, any follow-up questions that surfaced, and confirm where the recording file is saved before you end each session.

Do not rely on memory to track your sessions. After three or four sittings, the details blur. A brief log entry at the end of each session takes two minutes and prevents the confusion that derails long-term projects.

#	Date	Chapters & Topics Covered	Follow-Up Questions	Recording Saved To
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

On file safety: *The most common reason recordings are lost: the file stays on the phone and is never backed up. Before leaving any session, move the recording to a second location, whether a flash drive, a cloud folder, or an email to yourself. This step takes two minutes and protects everything you just captured.*

On naming files: *Give each recording a clear filename before saving it. Something like 'Dad-Chapter3-March2026.mp4' is infinitely easier to find in five years than 'VID_20260315.mp4'. The extra thirty seconds of naming pays forward for as long as the file exists.*

Section 4

Your Recording Toolkit

You do not need professional equipment. You need audio that is clear enough to hear, an image steady enough to watch, and light honest enough to show who the person really is. These four items cover all of it.

Rode SmartLav+ Lavalier Microphone

Clips to a shirt and connects directly to a smartphone via the headphone jack. The most important upgrade on this list. The difference between a phone's built-in microphone and a lapel mic is immediate. If your phone lacks a headphone jack, add a TRRS-to-USB-C adapter for under \$10, also on the Amazon list below.

Manfrotto PIXI Mini Tripod with Smartphone Clamp

Compact aluminum tabletop stand with a push-button ball head. Holds a phone steady at eye level on any flat surface. Sets up in under a minute, packs down to jacket-pocket size. The smartphone clamp is included. The right stand for a seated conversation at a kitchen table.

ULANZI VL49 LED Video Light

A small rechargeable light that eliminates the flat, shadowy look most home recordings have. Place it at face level, slightly off to one side. One light at the right angle does more for footage quality than any camera setting or editing app. No assembly, no separate power source needed.

Samsung USB-C Flash Drive

Plug directly into your phone's USB-C port immediately after each session and copy the recording file. Do not rely on the phone's internal storage as your only copy.

Also Recommended: Our Two Best Books for Legacy Building

Should Tomorrow Never Come (Legacy Edition) is a 239-page guided journaling experience for those who want to write their full story. **How to Legacy Journal (200+ Prompts & Memory Writing Ideas)** is a practical prompt-based companion free on Kindle Unlimited. Both are available at memorialmerits.com/books/



Scan to view the complete recommended kit on Amazon

Ready to Go Deeper?

Recording your story is one powerful way to leave something behind. These are the other paths, each designed for a different way of telling.

Should Tomorrow Never Come

Legacy Edition • A Memorial Merits Book

A 239-page guided legacy journaling experience structured as a play in Acts and Intermissions. For those who want to write the full story, reflect on what their life has meant, and leave something their family can hold in their hands. Hardcover only. Includes a QR code unlocking access to Solace, a companion grief support resource. Visit memorialmerits.com/legacy-journal-edition/ to learn more.

How to Legacy Journal

200+ Prompts & Memory Writing Ideas • A Memorial Merits Book

Three sections: a complete how-to guide for getting started, over 200 prompts organized by life chapter, and blank practice pages for writing freely. For those who want to journal without a structured template. Free on Kindle Unlimited. Visit memorialmerits.com/legacy-journal-prompts-for-seniors/ to learn more.

Remento

Preserve Your Story in Your Own Voice

For those who prefer speaking over writing, Remento sends weekly prompts to your phone and captures your answers as audio or video recordings that can be shared with family. Use code MMFREEBOOK for a free second book, or MEMORIALMERITS for \$10 off. Visit memorialmerits.com/remento-preserve-family-stories-memories/ to learn more.



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Thank you for preserving what matters.



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The QR code and link above go to the full web guide, which includes a step-by-step video walkthrough and the original download link for this guide so you can share it with others.

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