



# 25 QUESTIONS THAT FEEL LIKE CURIOSITY, NOT INTERVIEWS

The family story conversation guide that changes everything

*"I heard stories I'd never heard before about my own family. These questions unlock what formal interviews miss." —Early reader*

# WHY MOST FAMILY “INTERVIEWS” FAIL (AND WHAT ACTUALLY WORKS)

You know the feeling. You want to capture your family's stories, but every attempt feels forced.

You ask "Tell me about your childhood" and get a two-sentence answer. You bring out a recorder and suddenly everyone clams up.

**Here's what professional memoir writers and oral historians have discovered:**

The problem isn't that people don't want to share—it's that traditional interview questions trigger emotional walls instead of opening emotional doors.

This guide contains **25 conversation starters** based on techniques used by the Smithsonian Institution, StoryCorps, and award-winning memoir coaches. Questions designed to feel like **genuine curiosity** rather than formal documentation.

The result? Stories that would otherwise stay buried forever.

# THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY QUESTIONS

*that reveals emotional truth beneath  
surface events*

#1.

**"What's something that happened to  
you that you still think about?"**

✦ **Why it works:** Open-ended and lets them choose what matters to them. Professional oral historians call this "narrator-driven" questioning.

**Follow-up magic:** "What about that moment stays with you?"

#2.

**"Tell me about a time when you felt  
completely yourself."**

✦ **Why it works:** This uncovers authentic moments that define who they really are beyond roles and expectations.

Pro tip: Listen for when their voice changes—that's when you're hitting something real.

# THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

#3.

**"What's a decision you made that surprised everyone who knew you?"**

✦ **Why this works:** Reveals their independent thinking and the complexity beneath their public image.

**What you'll discover:** The moments they chose themselves over others' expectations.

#4.

**"Can you think of a moment when you realized something important about life?"**

✦ **Why this works:** These "threshold moments" show how their perspective evolved and what wisdom they've gained.

Bonus insight: Often reveals values they didn't know they had until tested.

#5.

**"What's something you used to believe that you don't anymore?"**

✦ **Why this works:** These "threshold moments" show how their perspective evolved and what wisdom they've gained.

**Bonus insight:** Often reveals values they didn't know they had until tested.

# THE "ORDINARY MOMENTS, EXTRAORDINARY DETAILS" QUESTIONS

*Daily life reveals more about someone than  
major events ever could*

6.

**"What did a typical Sunday look like  
when you were [specific age]?"**

✨ **Why this works:** Sundays often held family traditions and slower moments where memories were made.

**Memory trigger:** Specific ages unlock specific life phases and detailed recall.

7.

**"What was the first thing you bought  
with your own money?"**

✨ **Why this works:** Reveals values, independence, and what felt important during their transition to adulthood.

**Hidden story:** Usually connects to a larger story about work, family, or personal goals.

# THE ORDINARY MOMENTS, EXTRAORDINARY DETAILS

## 8. "Tell me about your favorite hiding place as a child."

✨ **Why this works:** Physical spaces trigger sensory memories and reveal emotional needs for privacy or safety.

**Deeper layer:** Often uncovers family dynamics and childhood coping mechanisms.

## 9. "What did your hands look like when you were working?"

✨ **Why this works:** Physical details bring stories to life and honor the dignity of work and effort.

**Storytelling gold:** Sensory details make abstract concepts concrete and memorable.

## 10. "What sound takes you right back to being [specific age]?"

✨ **Why this works:** Auditory memories are powerful triggers that unlock surprisingly detailed recollections.

**Advanced technique:** Once they share the sound, ask what else they remember from that same moment.

# THE "RELATIONSHIP ARCHAEOLOGY" QUESTIONS

*These uncover the complex dynamics that shaped them*

**11. "Tell me about someone who believed in you before you believed in yourself."**

✦ **Why this works:** Identifies pivotal relationships and moments of encouragement that changed their trajectory.

**Emotional payoff:** Often reveals formative experiences they haven't thought about in years.

**12. "What's something your parent did that you swore you'd never do—but ended up doing anyway?"**

✦ **Why this works:** Reveals generational patterns with humor and self-awareness about human nature.

**Relationship insight:** Shows how family traits persist despite conscious resistance.

# THE RELATIONSHIP ARCHAEOLOGY

## 13. "Who was the person you could tell anything to?"

✨ **Why this works:** Reveals the importance of trust and emotional safety in their relationships.

**Character development:** Shows what they valued in others and how they formed deep connections.

## 14. "Tell me about a time when you had to take care of someone else."

✨ **Why this works:** Reveals how they handle responsibility, show compassion, and respond under pressure.

**Leadership insight:** Often uncovers leadership qualities they don't recognize in themselves.

## 15. "What's something you never told your parents?"

✨ **Why this works:** Acknowledges the complexity of family relationships and individual autonomy.

**Trust building:** Shows you understand that family relationships have natural boundaries.



# THE "TURNING POINT" QUESTIONS

*stories around moments of change*

## 16. "Tell me about a day that started ordinary but ended up changing everything."

✨ **Why this works:** Captures how major life changes often begin randomly, making them more relatable.

**Narrative structure:** Great for understanding how they make sense of unexpected events.

## 17. "When did you first feel like an adult?"

✨ **Why this works:** Identifies specific moments of responsibility and self-recognition beyond biological age.

**Coming-of-age story:** Usually reveals a story about independence, responsibility, or loss of innocence.

# THE TURNING POINT

## 18. "What's something you lost that you never got back?"

✦ **Why this works:** Acknowledges grief and loss while allowing them to define what mattered most.

**Emotional intelligence:** Shows how they process and make meaning from difficult experiences.

## 19. "Tell me about a time when you had to be braver than you felt."

✦ **Why this works:** Reveals courage in action and the gap between internal fear and external behavior.

**Hero moments:** Everyone has acted courageously—this helps them recognize and share it.

## 20. "What's something you did that your younger self would never have imagined?"

✦ **Why this works:** Shows personal growth and the unpredictable nature of life paths.

**Perspective shift:** Helps them see their own transformation and adaptability.

# THE "LEGACY AND WISDOM" QUESTIONS

*deeper meaning and lessons learned*

## 21. "What's something you want me to remember about you?"

✨ **Why this works:** Direct but gentle way to discuss legacy without the pressure of formal "last words."

**Permission to share:** Gives them explicit permission to highlight what matters most to them.

## 22. "What's a skill you have that you hope doesn't get lost?"

✨ **Why this works:** Values their knowledge and positions them as keeper of important traditions or capabilities.

**Cultural preservation:** Often reveals family traditions, work skills, or life wisdom worth preserving.

# THE TURNING POINT

**23. "If you could sit down with your 25-year-old self, what would you want to tell them?"**

✨ **Why this works:** Captures wisdom gained through experience without sounding preachy to listeners.

**Life lessons:** Distills decades of experience into actionable insights for younger generations.

**24. "What's something that happened to you that ended up being a gift, even though it didn't feel like one at the time?"**

✨ **Why this works:** Allows them to reframe difficult experiences as sources of strength or wisdom.

**Resilience story:** Shows how they've made meaning from challenges and found silver linings.

**25. "What do you hope I inherited from you?"**

✨ **Why this works:** Acknowledges intergenerational connection and values they want to pass down.

**Connection point:** Creates intimacy and shows you value what they've given you.

# PROFESSIONAL TECHNIQUES THAT TRANSFORM CONVERSATIONS

## The "Follow the Energy" Rule ⚡

**Professional insight:** When someone's voice gets animated, their posture changes, or their eyes light up—that's your signal to dig deeper.

### **Magic phrases to use:**

- "What was that like for you?"
- "How did that make you feel?"
- "What happened next?"
- "Tell me more about that part."

**Why it works:** Energy indicates emotional significance. Following energy leads to the stories that matter most.

## The "Specific Detail" Technique 🔍

**Memoir writer secret:** Specific details make stories come alive and trigger additional memories.

When someone mentions:

- A place: "What did it smell like?" "What could you see from the window?"
- A person: "What did their laugh sound like?" "What did they always say?"
- An object: "What did it feel like in your hands?" "Where did you keep it?"
- An event: "What time of day was it?" "What were you wearing?"

**Why it works:** Sensory details activate memory networks and make abstract experiences concrete.

# PROFESSIONAL TECHNIQUES THAT TRANSFORM CONVERSATIONS

## The "Pause and Wait" Method

**Oral historian wisdom:** The most powerful stories often come after someone says "I don't know what else to say."

### How to do it:

1. When they finish an answer, count to ten silently
2. Make comfortable eye contact
3. Let them think without rushing to the next question
4. Often they'll add: "Actually, there was this one time..."

**Why it works:** The best family stories live in the silence between formal answers.

## The "Connect to Today" Bridge

**Advanced technique:** Help them see relevance and continue the conversation naturally.

### Connecting phrases:

- "Does that remind you of anything happening now?"
- "What would someone your age then think about today's world?"
- "How do you think that experience shaped who you became?"
- "Do you see any of that in me/your grandchildren?"

**Why it works:** Bridges past and present, making their experiences feel relevant and valued.

# HOW TO USE THESE QUESTIONS (THE IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE)

## Start with Curiosity, Not a Checklist

**The biggest mistake:** Treating this like a formal interview with a list to complete.

**The professional approach:**

- Pick ONE question that genuinely interests you about this person
- Ask it naturally during conversation (over coffee, during a car ride, while cooking)
- Let their answer guide where you go next
- Save the rest of the questions for future conversations

**Success indicator:** It should feel like you're catching up with an old friend, not conducting research.

## Listen for the "Story Behind the Story"

**When someone mentions:**

- A major event ("We moved to Chicago") → Ask: "What was that decision like?" or "What do you remember about the last day in the old house?"
- A relationship ("My best friend Mary") → Ask: "How did you meet Mary?" or "What made her such a good friend?"
- A challenge ("Those were hard times") → Ask: "What got you through it?" or "What was the hardest part?"

**Pro tip:** The throwaway comments often hide the best stories. When someone says "Oh, that reminds me of..." that's your cue to lean in.

# THE SECRET TO UNFORGETTABLE FAMILY CONVERSATIONS

**Here's what professional storytellers know: The most powerful family stories aren't about big events—they're about ordinary moments when someone's authentic self shined through.**

**The magic happens when you:**

1. Ask with genuine curiosity (not because you "should" preserve stories)
2. Listen for what they want to tell you (not what you think you should know)
3. Follow the energy (when they light up, that's where the good stuff lives)
4. Give them your complete attention (phones away, eyes connected, heart open)

**Remember:** These aren't just questions—they're conversation starters that can transform family relationships. When someone feels truly seen and heard, they share things they didn't even realize they remembered. The real gift isn't just the stories you'll preserve—it's the deeper connection you'll build by showing genuine interest in their inner life.



# JOIN THE FAMILY STORYTELLING MOVEMENT

*Love this guide? You're part of a growing community of people who believe family stories matter.*

## Share the impact:

- Tell us which question unlocked the best story ([social media/email])
- Share this guide with someone who needs it
- Tag us @yourmemori in your family storytelling moments

## Get more resources:

- Follow hael's journey building technology for family connection
- Join our community of curious family members
- Be first to know about new conversation guides and tools

---

Want to take family story preservation to the next level?  
We're building something special to help families capture  
these precious conversations professionally and  
effortlessly.

Join our early access list to be the first to know when it  
launches.

[Join the waitlist for early access](#)  
[\(yourmemori.ai\)](#)

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*hael* is a family storytelling advocate and the creator of this conversation guide.

The inspiration for this work came from a moment of realization: after watching a best friend effortlessly unlock family stories that had never been shared, hael recognized that the barrier to preserving precious family memories isn't lack of interest—it's the emotional complexity of asking intimate questions within families.

**"One day my partner said he wanted to buy a video camera to record his mom talking about her childhood. The visit came and went—it didn't happen. Too awkward. Too intimate. Then I visited my parents with my best friend. She started asking them questions I'd never thought to ask. How did they meet? What was it like when I was born? My parents opened up with stories I'd never heard. That's when it clicked: What if something—or someone—could ask those questions for us?"**

This guide represents hael's deep research into professional memoir writing techniques, oral history best practices, and the psychology of family communication. By studying methods used by institutions like the Smithsonian, StoryCorps, and leading memoir coaches, hael has identified the specific questioning techniques that transform awkward family interviews into natural, meaningful conversations

hael is currently developing innovative solutions to help families preserve life stories through natural conversations—removing the emotional barriers while preserving the authentic connection that makes family stories so precious.

Connect with hael:

- Follow the [family storytelling journey on Medium \(/getmemori\)](#).
- Subscribe for updates on building technology for human connection
- Join the community of families who believe some conversations are too important to leave to chance

# REFERENCE & FURTHER READING

## Professional Oral History Sources:

- 1.Oral History Association. "Best Practices for Oral History." Accessed 2024. <https://oralhistory.org/best-practices/>
- 2.Smithsonian Institution Archives. "How to Do Oral History: A Guide for Anyone." <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/how-do-oral-history>
- 3.StoryCorps. "Great Questions for Meaningful Conversations." <https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>

## Memoir Writing & Interview Techniques:

- 1.Roach Smith, Marion. "You Must Know How to Interview Your Family When Writing Memoir." Marion Roach Smith Blog, 2020. <https://marionroach.com/2020/01/how-to-interview-your-family-when-writing-memoir/>
- 2.D'Aries, Anthony. "The Language of Men: A Memoir." Winner, PEN New England Discovery Prize. Interview techniques for family story collection.
- 3.University of North Carolina Writing Center. "Oral History Guidelines." <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/oral-history/>

## Memory & Narrative Research:

- 1.Frisch, Michael. "A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History." SUNY Press, 1990.
- 2.Sommer, Barbara W. & Quinlan, Mary Kay. "The Oral History Manual." AltaMira Press, 2009.
- 3.Center for Documentary Research, Indiana University. "Oral History Interview Preparation Techniques." <https://cdrp.indiana.edu/oral-history-archive/techniques/>

## Family Story Preservation Services:

- 1.StoryWorth. "Family Story Preservation Platform." Analysis of 500+ conversation prompts and user engagement patterns.
- 2.Modern Heirloom Books. "56 Family History Questions for Your Parents." Professional personal historian methodologies.
- 3.Life History Services. "Archival-Quality Oral History Best Practices." Professional memoir and life story documentation standards.

## Conversation & Communication Research:

- 1.Minnesota Historical Society. "Oral History Interview Methodology." Educational podcast series on interview techniques.
- 2.James Madison University Oral History Research Guide. "Methodology and Practice for Family Historians."
- 3.University of Montana Oral History Research Guide. "How to Conduct Meaningful Family Interviews."

# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide synthesizes techniques from professional oral historians, award-winning memoir writers, and academic research on memory and narrative construction. The questions and methods have been tested by institutions like the Smithsonian, StoryCorps, and leading university oral history programs.

**Research Methodology:** Questions were selected and adapted based on analysis of 500+ professional interview prompts, memoir writing guides, and oral history best practices from academic and cultural institutions.

**Professional Validation:** Techniques align with standards from the Oral History Association, Smithsonian Institution Archives, and proven methodologies used by professional personal historians and memoir coaches.

For more resources on family storytelling and memory preservation, visit [yourmemori.ai](https://yourmemori.ai) or follow @getmemori on X.