



How to have a great interview

Information for Interviewers

You are about to participate in a Commemorate interview—a meaningful and uninterrupted conversation with someone you know who is living with memory loss. This conversation is designed for sharing the stories of one’s life and is the perfect opportunity to preserve the memories of this person and affirm his or her value as an individual.

StoryCorps is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives.

In 2006 StoryCorps launched the Memory Loss Initiative to collect and preserve the stories of those living with memory loss. Our interview method is now being used by organizations across the country who serve the memory loss community, providing you with the opportunity to have this conversation now.

This packet provides more information about the Commemorate interview process, including helpful tips about how to get the most out of the experience.

OUR METHOD

Conversations are 40 minutes long.

You will have 40 minutes of uninterrupted time to talk openly about anything you'd like, from favorite memories to important life questions. The conversation will be recorded by a trained staff person called a Facilitator, who will also guide you through the interview process.

Conversations are about stories, not just facts.

Sometimes it's about telling jokes and recalling humorous stories. There's no right or wrong way to have a Commemorate interview, but we have found that the more personal the interview gets, the more people enjoy it and have fun.

The way we experience life isn't through facts, but through feelings. Consider the difference between questions such as "What year did you get married to Dad?" and "How did you feel on your wedding day?"

The first question focuses on the date, while the second question evokes emotions behind the story. Having someone ask you how you felt validates your experience as an individual.

Each interview contains different roles.

To ensure that you and the Storyteller get the most out of the interview experience, different roles will be assigned to everyone involved in the recording process. This helps provide structure and allows everyone to prepare in advance.

THE STORYTELLER is the person being interviewed.

THE INTERVIEWER will ask the Storyteller questions about his or her life. Create a list of questions in advance and be prepared to take the interview wherever the Storyteller wants it to go.

THE FACILITATOR is responsible for making the Storyteller and Interviewer feel comfortable, operating the recording equipment, and keeping track of time. He or she may also take notes and ask questions if appropriate.

BENEFITS OF AN INTERVIEW

Collecting memories

A recording of an interview documents important pieces of your life. The stories and the voice who told it will be preserved for years to come and can be shared with friends and family.

Fostering Bonds

The simple act of sitting down and sharing personal stories is a powerful way to bring people together over a shared, meaningful experience.

Affirming Value of a Person

The simple act of listening to someone is one of the greatest gifts we can give, and reminds us that our lives matter. For those with memory loss, the opportunity to review and discuss their experiences reminds them who they are.

An Enjoyable Experience

Though the interview experience can take many forms, and can be filled with laughter, tears, or close moments, it is an enjoyable experience for those involved.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

01

STEP

Welcome – The Facilitator will provide some background information about the Commemorate interview, explain his or her role in the interview process, and answer any questions you might have.



02

STEP

Sound check – Once you and your interview partner are ready to proceed, the Facilitator will make sure you are positioned well for recording, check the audio levels, and ensure that you are comfortable in the recording space.



03

STEP

The interview – While you and your partner are talking, the Facilitator will take notes, keep time, and monitor audio. Facilitators are not interviewers, though they may ask a question during the interview.



04

STEP

After the interview – Once the conversation is complete, the Facilitator may ask to take your photo, fill out paperwork, or reflect on your experience. You may receive a copy of your interview to share with family and friends.



PREPARE FOR YOUR INTERVIEW

Tips to consider

Because your interview partner is experiencing memory loss, here are some tips for preparing for your interview:

- Bring photographs, memorabilia, or other objects to your interview session that can assist your interview partner in recalling past events and periods of his or her life.
- Consider asking your partner to tell some stories her or she has frequently recounted in the past. Familiar stories can help Storytellers feel confident as they retell them. These “greatest hits” are probably the stories you’ll treasure the most, too.
- Feel free to spend some time during the interview telling your own stories about your interview partner. These can provide excellent jumping-off points and allow you to do a bit of the remembering for the person.
- Prepare for the possibility that this will be an emotional experience for both you and your interview partner. This is a likely result of sharing personal stories with a loved one, but be aware of the added challenge of witnessing your interview partner struggle to recall details.

Create a question list

Preparing a list of questions in advance will greatly improve the quality of your interview, and ensure you have an opportunity to ask the questions most important to you.

- Use the Great Questions List at the end of this packet to create your own list of questions. Keep it relatively short—about 10–15 questions—and keep questions simple.
- **What** and **where** questions are good places to start. Consider using these before moving on to bigger-picture **why** and **how** questions. Remember that **when** questions are likely to be the most difficult for your interview partner to answer.
- Avoid asking your interview partner to focus on a specific memory. Instead of asking about the person’s first memory or happiest moment, ask him or her to talk about an early memory or happy moments.
- When writing questions, it’s useful to provide context. For example, “I know you met Dad at a dance when you were both in Chicago. How did you feel when you first met him?”
- It’s likely that memories of early life will be easier to recall than more recent ones. Prepare questions that target different periods in the Storyteller’s life so you can focus on memories that are easiest for him or her to talk about.

DURING YOUR CONVERSATION

Asking questions

Consider beginning the interview with simple, yes/no questions. Once you both feel comfortable with the process, ask open-ended questions to encourage the Storyteller to share stories.

You may need to rephrase questions one or more times in order for your interview partner to understand. If your partner is having trouble with a particular question or topic, try providing more context or asking something different. If he or she gets anxious, ask about something familiar, such as favorite activities, friends, or pets.

Be flexible with your question list. Interviews can take unexpected and interesting turns.

When you get a good response to a question, consider saying, “Tell me more.” Doing so can provoke longer, richer stories.

Consider asking your partner to tell stories that he or she has frequently recounted in the past. These stories will be familiar to the Storyteller and can make the person feel confident retelling them.

Be patient. It can take longer for people with memory loss to retrieve their memories and speak them. Don’t rush on to the next question just because it’s taking a little time to get the story out.

Tone

Speak to your interview partner as an adult, not like a child. Ask simple questions without making your interview partner feel simple.

Remind your interview partner that it is okay if he or she struggles to remember certain things. It is important for Storytellers to know they are not being judged on their answers.

Nonverbal communication

Your nonverbal communication is just as important as what you say. If you look relaxed and happy, it will be easier for your partner to relax as well. Provide encouragement during the interview. Smile and laugh when appropriate.

Tell your own stories

Feel free to tell stories about your interview partner. These can provide excellent jumping-off points and allow you to do a bit of the remembering for the person.

Express gratitude

Take a few minutes at the end of your conversation to tell your partner how much you care about him or her and thank the person for the conversation you just had.

EARLY LIFE

These questions will prompt conversations about childhood, school, parents, teenage years, and growing up.

- What was your childhood like?
- What were your grandparents/parents like?
- Did you have brothers and sisters? What were they like?
- What was it like being the oldest, middle child, youngest, etc.?
- How was your relationship with your parents?
- Do you remember any of the stories your parents used to tell you?
- You were born on (insert birth date). What were times like when you were young?
- I know that you grew up in (insert name of community). What was it like there?
- What were you like as a child?
- What did you do for fun when you were a child?
- Did you have a nickname? How did you get it?
- Did you have a best friend? His/her name was (insert name). What was he/she like?
- Did you enjoy school?
- Did you have dreams when you were a child about what you wanted to be when you grew up?
- Tell me about when you first fell in love.
- Do you remember your first kiss/date?
- You've always enjoyed (insert a hobby, passion, talent). What made you enjoy that?

ADULTHOOD

These questions facilitate conversations around young adult life, marriage, relationships, friendships, and work.

- How did you feel when you first met (insert name), your husband/wife/partner?
- How did you know he/she was “the one”?
- What lessons have you learned from your relationships?
- What were some good times? Difficult times?
- What makes us such good friends?
- How did having (insert child's name) change your life?
- How did you feel when you first had your child/children?
- Do you have stories about your kids growing up that you think about sometimes?
- Tell me about your work.
- What made you proud when you were working?
- Did you like your job? What did you like/dislike about your work at (insert type or place of work)?
- What formed your religious/spiritual beliefs?
- Do you have a special song or hymn that is meaningful to you? Will you sing it now?
- When in life have you felt alone, happy, sad, etc.? Tell me about that.

LATE LIFE

These questions delve into recent times, leaving a legacy, and also present thoughts about life.

- How has your life been different from what you'd imagined?
- How would you like to be remembered?
- Do you have any regrets?
- Has aging been different from what you thought it would be?
- Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to me?
- What are some important lessons you've learned in life?
- Is there anything you've always wanted to tell me but haven't?
- If you were going to write a letter to your mother/father what would it say?
- If you were going to write a letter to your children what would it say?
- What is your life like now? What do you do each day?
- Who has been kind to you in your life? Tell me about him/her.
- Is there something that always scares/worries you? What? Why?
- Do you think about dying? Are you scared?

QUESTIONS TO ASK PARENTS/GRANDPARENTS

- What did you think when you first saw your child?
- How did you choose your baby's name?
- What was (insert name of child) like as a baby?
- What was (insert name of child) like growing up?
- What is the worst thing (insert name of child) ever did?
- If you could do everything again, would you raise me differently? Tell me more.
- What are your hopes/dreams for (insert name of child)?
- If you were to give advice to me or my children, what would it be?

QUESTIONS ABOUT MEMORY LOSS

- Do you look at your life differently now than that you did before you realized you were experiencing memory loss?
- Are you healthy?
- What are your health problems? How do they impact your life each day?
- Can you tell me about your memory loss?
- How did you feel when you found out you had (insert illness)?
- Has this illness changed you? Your life?