YOURTALE

150 life story questions

Questions in eight stages of life, from childhood to looking back, for a parent, a grandparent or yourself. Ask a few at a time, follow the answer wherever it goes, and tick each question once it has been asked.

How to use these questions

1. Pick six to ten questions from one stage before each sitting. An hour is plenty.
2. Ask one question, then stop talking. The best part of an answer often comes after the pause.
3. Use the follow-ups in italics. They turn a one-line answer into a story.
4. Put in the names and places you know, and skip any question that does not fit.
5. Record the conversation, and say the question number before each answer.
6. Leave hard subjects for late in a sitting, and take no for an answer.

Whose story _____

Asked by _____

Started on _____

Where the recordings are kept _____

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Notes

Childhood

QUESTIONS 1–18

- [ ] 1 What is the earliest thing you remember, and who is in the memory?
  Where were you standing, and what could you see?
- [ ] 2 Where were you born, and what were you told about the day?
- [ ] 3 Who chose your name, and were you named after anyone?
- [ ] 4 Describe the house you grew up in, starting from the front door.
  Which room did the family actually live in?
- [ ] 5 Who lived in the house with you, and where did everyone sleep?
- [ ] 6 What work did your parents do, and did you ever see them at it?
- [ ] 7 What did a weekday morning look like before school?
- [ ] 8 What did you eat most days, and who cooked it?
  Is there a dish from then you have never tasted since?
- [ ] 9 Which neighbor or relative did you spend the most time with outside your own family?
- [ ] 10 What did you play, and where, when no adult was watching?
- [ ] 11 What were you allowed to do alone at eight that children are not allowed to do now?
- [ ] 12 What were you afraid of, and who did you tell?
- [ ] 13 What were you punished for, and how?
- [ ] 14 How did your family celebrate the biggest holiday of the year?
  Who was at the table, and where did you sit?
- [ ] 15 Was money tight, comfortable, or never talked about?
- [ ] 16 What happened in the world that the adults around you worried about?
- [ ] 17 Who in the family told the stories, and which one did you ask to hear again?
- [ ] 18 If you could walk back into one day of your childhood, which day would it be?

Notes

School and growing up

QUESTIONS 19–40

- [ ] 19 How did you get to school, and who did you walk with?
  What did you pass on the way?
- [ ] 20 Describe your first classroom: the desks, the walls, the teacher.
- [ ] 21 Which teacher do you still think about, and why?
- [ ] 22 What were you good at in school, and what did you dread?
- [ ] 23 Who was your best friend at twelve, and what did you do together?
  Do you know what became of them?
- [ ] 24 What did you and your friends do on a Saturday night as teenagers?
- [ ] 25 What music did you play loud, and what did your parents think of it?
- [ ] 26 What did you wear then that you would not be seen in now?
- [ ] 27 What was the first thing you bought with your own money?
- [ ] 28 When did you first feel grown up?
- [ ] 29 What rules did you break, and did you get caught?
- [ ] 30 Who did you look up to at fifteen?
- [ ] 31 What did your parents want you to become, and what did you want?
- [ ] 32 What news from those years do you remember hearing, and where were you when you heard it?
  Who told you, and what did the adults say?
- [ ] 33 Did you play a sport, sing, act or belong to any team? Who else was in it?
- [ ] 34 Who was your first crush, and did they ever know?
- [ ] 35 How far did you go in school, and who decided when it ended?
- [ ] 36 Did you learn to drive? Who taught you, and in what car?
- [ ] 37 What did you do the summer you finished school?
- [ ] 38 When did you leave home, and what did you take with you?
  What was the first night away like?
- [ ] 39 What was the first place of your own like, and what did it cost?
- [ ] 40 Looking back, what were you right about at eighteen?

Notes

Work

QUESTIONS 41–60

- [ ] 41 What was your very first job, and what did it pay?
  What did you spend the first wage on?
- [ ] 42 How did you get it, and who gave you the chance?
- [ ] 43 Walk me through an ordinary working day, from the alarm to coming home.
- [ ] 44 What did your hands, clothes or shoes look like at the end of a working day?
- [ ] 45 Who taught you the job, and what did they show you that nobody else would have?
- [ ] 46 What did a week's pay buy you then?
- [ ] 47 What was the hardest job you ever had, and why did you stay?
- [ ] 48 Who was the best boss you had? The worst?
- [ ] 49 What is something you made, fixed or built that you were proud of?
  Is it still there?
- [ ] 50 Did you serve in the armed forces? Where were you, and what did you do?
- [ ] 51 Did you ever quit, get fired or get laid off? What happened next?
- [ ] 52 What did you do for work that your children never really understood?
- [ ] 53 What work did you do at home that nobody paid for, and who did what in the house?
- [ ] 54 What did you do with the people you worked with outside work?
- [ ] 55 Did your work change because of new machines, computers or a move?
- [ ] 56 What was the closest you came to a completely different working life?
- [ ] 57 Did you ever work alongside family: a parent, a brother or sister, your partner?
- [ ] 58 What did your work teach you about people?
  Is there one person from work you would like to thank?
- [ ] 59 When did you stop working, and how did the last day go?
- [ ] 60 What do you miss about working, and what do you not miss at all?

Notes

Love

QUESTIONS 61–80

- [ ] 61 How did you meet your husband, wife or partner? Tell it from the start.
  What was the first thing you noticed about them?
- [ ] 62 What was your first date, and where did you go?
- [ ] 63 What did your parents think of them?
- [ ] 64 How did you know this was the one? Or did you not know?
- [ ] 65 How did the proposal happen, or how did you decide to make it permanent?
- [ ] 66 What do you remember about the wedding day, beyond the photographs?
  What went wrong that day that you laugh about now?
- [ ] 67 Where was your first home together, and what was in it?
- [ ] 68 What did you call each other, and where did the names come from?
- [ ] 69 What did you argue about in the first year?
- [ ] 70 Was there someone before them who you still think of? (Better asked one to one.)
- [ ] 71 What did you do together when there was no money to do anything?
- [ ] 72 What did your partner do for you that nobody else saw?
- [ ] 73 What did you learn from each other?
- [ ] 74 Were there years when it was hard? What kept you together, or what ended it?
- [ ] 75 Which couple did you look up to, and what did they get right?
- [ ] 76 What would you tell a couple on their wedding day?
- [ ] 77 Who were your closest friends as a young adult, and how did you meet them?
- [ ] 78 Which friendship has lasted longest, and why that one?
- [ ] 79 Is there a letter, a song or a place that belongs to the two of you?
  Could we listen to it, or go there, together?
- [ ] 80 If you could tell your younger self one thing about love, what would it be?

Notes

Family

QUESTIONS 81–98

- [ ] 81 What do you remember about the day your first child was born?
  Who was there, and who did you call first?
- [ ] 82 How did you choose the names?
- [ ] 83 What was a weekday evening like when the children were small?
- [ ] 84 What did you do as a family on weekends?
- [ ] 85 What was the hardest part of being a parent? The best?
- [ ] 86 What did you do the way your parents did, and what did you do differently on purpose?
- [ ] 87 What did each child love when they were small?
- [ ] 88 What was the most frightening night you had as a parent?
- [ ] 89 Where did you go on holidays, and how did you get there?
  Who got carsick, lost or sunburned?
- [ ] 90 What did the family eat on a normal day, and on a special one?
- [ ] 91 What traditions did you start that are still going?
- [ ] 92 What did you worry about as a parent that you need not have?
- [ ] 93 What did your children teach you?
- [ ] 94 Who helped you raise them: grandparents, neighbors, friends?
- [ ] 95 What was the house like when it was at its fullest?
- [ ] 96 How did you feel when the youngest left home?
  What did you do with their room?
- [ ] 97 What do you want your children to know that you have never said?
- [ ] 98 If you did not have children, who became your family, and how?

Notes

The middle years

QUESTIONS 99–116

- [ ] 99 What were you doing around your fortieth birthday?
- [ ] 100 What did you want from your forties and fifties that you did not want at twenty-five?
- [ ] 101 Did you change jobs, careers or towns in middle age? What made you do it?
  Who thought you were wrong to?
- [ ] 102 What was the best year of your middle years, and why that one?
- [ ] 103 What did you do once the children were older and you had time again?
- [ ] 104 Who did you look after in those years: parents, a partner, grandchildren?
- [ ] 105 What was it like to see your own parents grow old?
  What did they teach you in their last years?
- [ ] 106 When did you lose your first parent, and how did the family change after?
- [ ] 107 Which friendships grew in those years, and which faded?
- [ ] 108 What did you learn to do in middle age that you could not do before?
- [ ] 109 What did you spend money on that you are glad of now?
- [ ] 110 Where did you travel, and which trip changed something?
- [ ] 111 What happened in the world in those years that changed how you lived?
- [ ] 112 What was the biggest risk you took after forty?
  Would you take it again?
- [ ] 113 When did you first feel older than the people around you?
- [ ] 114 What did you stop worrying about?
- [ ] 115 What did you do in your community: clubs, church, teams, volunteering?
- [ ] 116 What did you think retirement would be like, back then?

Notes

Later life

QUESTIONS 117–132

- [ ] 117 What does a good day look like for you now?
  What is the best part of it?
- [ ] 118 What has surprised you about this stage of life?
- [ ] 119 What did you take up later in life that you wish you had started sooner?
- [ ] 120 What was it like the first time you held a grandchild?
  What did you notice first?
- [ ] 121 What do you do with your grandchildren that you never had time to do with your children?
- [ ] 122 Where do you live now, and how did you choose it?
- [ ] 123 Who do you see most often, and what do you do together?
- [ ] 124 What has changed in the world that you are glad of? What do you miss?
- [ ] 125 What technology did you learn late, and who taught you?
- [ ] 126 What do you still want to do, see or learn?
- [ ] 127 What do younger people get wrong about being your age?
- [ ] 128 What do you enjoy more now than you did at thirty?
- [ ] 129 What is something you have only understood recently?
- [ ] 130 What are you reading, watching or listening to these days?
- [ ] 131 Who are you proudest of, and have you told them?
- [ ] 132 Which thing in your home would you save first, and what is its story?
  Who should have it one day?

Notes

Looking back

QUESTIONS 133–150

- [ ] 133 If your life were a book, what would the chapters be called?
  Which chapter would you most like to read again?
- [ ] 134 What was the high point, a single moment you would live again?
- [ ] 135 What was the lowest point, and what got you through it? (Ask only if they want to go there.)
- [ ] 136 Was there a turning point, a day after which things were different?
  Did you know it at the time?
- [ ] 137 Who shaped you most, for better and for worse?
- [ ] 138 What part of your life was luck, and what was your own doing?
- [ ] 139 What would you do differently, if anything?
- [ ] 140 What did you once believe that you no longer do?
- [ ] 141 What do you believe in now, and how did you come to it?
- [ ] 142 What has made you happiest over the years: people, work, places or small things?
- [ ] 143 What advice did you get that turned out to be right?
- [ ] 144 What makes a good life, as you see it now?
- [ ] 145 What do you hope your grandchildren know about where they come from?
- [ ] 146 What should happen to the family photos, letters and papers?
- [ ] 147 Which of your stories do you want told exactly right?
  Tell it to me now, the way you want it told.
- [ ] 148 What family saying or joke do you want passed on?
- [ ] 149 What do you want people to remember about you?
- [ ] 150 What question did I not ask that I should have?
  Then tell me the answer.

Notes

Life story questions from Yourtale, yourtale.art/en/blog/life-story-questions. Free to copy and use in families, classes and groups.