



Illinois Extension

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Penning the Past Description

For many of us, we probably remember hearing family stories from our parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Sharing how life was back when or telling stories of family lore is a way to bond and bring families together. Sometimes we remember or know only bits and pieces of stories and wish that our ancestors would have taken the time to write them down. Have you thought about writing your own life story as a way to share with others, or perhaps to leave a legacy? This packaged lesson will help you do just that. Come and explore ways to preserve your individual and family stories for future generations. No prior writing skills are needed – your writing is good enough!

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Penning Your Past

Leaders Guide



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"We live life forward, but understand it backward."

-Kierkegaard, a Danish scholar

History of Storytelling

There was a time when reminiscing about life events and history served an important community building function. This function was often the responsibility of older persons in the family and was a way to make sure other generations learned about their family's history and heritage.

Today, however, we live in a technological society where historical information is recorded instantly. Yet, ironically, many adults and children know very little about their own family's stories.

Do you find that you share family stories when you get together? If so, who in your family are the story tellers?

What are some reasons that this may be limited?

- family mobility
- geographic distance
- divorce
- hurried lifestyles

Benefits of Sharing Stories (from R. Atkinson, 1998, *The Lifestory Interview*)

Sharing life stories can be done through genealogy, writing life stories through journaling, or interviewing family members to capture their oral histories. The potential benefits of sharing a life story are many. People who share their life stories:

- Gain greater self-knowledge and increased self-esteem.
- May feel a sense of joy, satisfaction, and inner peace as their stories are shared with others.
- May be a way to purge or release burdens and validate personal experiences.
- Create a sense of community with others.
- Can help people see their lives more clearly and perhaps be an inspiration to others.
- Provide an opportunity for others to better understand them.
- May come to a better understanding of their past and present, which may help in identifying their goals for the future.

Of course, not all stories are happy ones. Sometimes memories are painful and upsetting when they resurface. Retelling unhappy stories may help in working through unresolved issues and conflicts. Family members who show empathy and understanding toward the storyteller may help as the story unfolds. However, the direction of the story is ultimately up to the storyteller.

Have participants brainstorm their story ideas under the following categories:

Have participants choose one of the following to write about and share:

Who gave you your name and why?

What is unique about your name?

Have you changed your name?

Do you have a nickname?

Childhood Summers

Cars

Family Traditions

Family Vacations

Jobs

Family Members

Pets

Firsts

Places I've been

Hobbies

Sundays

Keepsakes

Important Life Events

Loves

School Days

Historical events lived through

Friendships

Favorites

Humorous Moments

Advice (given or received)

Pet Peeves

These ideas can be prompts for future stories to pen. So, if you've ever said, "I should write some of my stories down before I forget the details," or "I want to start journaling my life story for my kids,"

then get going! We must take the time to share our stories. After all, no one knows your story better than you!

Memory Triggers

We can use our senses - seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling as triggers for stories. For some people, when they smell popcorn it will trigger a memory, perhaps a memory of going to the movie theater. For others, when they hear a sound like a train's horn for instance, memories of growing up near train tracks may come to mind. All kinds of things can trigger memories. Photos or objects are often used to trigger memories for stories.

Have participants think about their home and write down words or phrases under each of the senses that trigger memories of home. (For example, under smell, you may write banana bread baking, or floors cleaned with Pine Sol.)

See

Taste

Touch

Hear

Smell

Again, your answers may be prompts for future stories!

Family Keepsakes

Keepsakes can be triggers for writing stories. Most families have some special objects or keepsakes that have been passed down from one generation to another. Keeping objects such as these helps preserve a part of family history to be passed on through the generations.

Families have keepsakes because they are just that, important items that have special meaning or a story attached to them. Keepsakes without the stories can become meaningless over time if the stories are not passed along with the them.

Think about your family keepsakes. What special objects do you remember? Is there an item that brings back special memories for you when you see it?

By writing the story of the object you care about, you will be preserving it in writing for future generations. You can take a picture of your keepsake and add it to your story.

Have participants list three keepsakes that you want to write about:

*"You are the author of
your own life story."*

-Unknown

Family Traditions

Family traditions are great story starters. Some of the rituals, customs, or traditions that you remember from either the family you grew up in, or in your own family you've created can become stories to share. More than likely some of your traditions have centered around the holidays, and maybe specifically around food.

Activities from everyday living can even be seen as traditions. Slipping notes into children's lunchboxes, singing songs during certain events, saying prayers together, and doing chores, are all good examples of simple daily activities that become rituals and are often remembered later in life. Perhaps you have certain sayings that only your family knows what they mean or know their context. Putting your everyday family stories on paper to share with others is another way to create traditions.

Have participants brainstorm some family traditions and everyday traditions:

Family Traditions

Everyday Traditions

Five Minute Timed Exercise



Have participants look over all their brainstormed writing prompts and choose one story to write over the next five minutes, to then share with the group. Once the five minutes is up, ask for a volunteer to read their story and move around the group.

Summary

Our stories are a road map of our lives. They can be gifts to each generation that reads them and then passes them on to future generations. These same stories undoubtedly play a part in creating the traditions that bring a comfort and closeness to families. They are a tie to the past and a link to the future.

“We become fully conscious of our lives when we put them in story form.”

-Dr. Robert Atkinson, Director for the Study of Lives, University of Southern Maine

Take Home Activity

Open-Ended Questions for Writing Stories



- Tell me about a person who influenced your life.
- What was your favorite decade and why?
- Tell me about a holiday you remember?
- Describe a day when you were in school.
- Write about an incredible pet.
- Tell me about the neighborhood in which you grew up.
- Tell me about a birthday you remember.
- What did you do on hot summer days as a child?
- Describe a typical day with your family when you were a child.
- Tell me about a vacation you especially enjoyed.
- Tell me about the first time you remember falling in love.
- What was your favorite song as a child and why was it your favorite?
- Describe a favorite teacher. What made him/her your favorite?
- What job were you doing when you received your first paycheck?
- Tell me about your wedding day or another wedding you remember.
- On a hot summer day when you were a child, what did you do to cool down?
- What was your favorite food when you were a child?
- What was your scariest moment as a young adult?
- Describe one or more things that stand out about each of your siblings from childhood.
If you do not have siblings, choose friends, cousins, or others.
- What is your Mother or Father's best traits?



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Choose one of the following to write about and share:

Who gave you your name and why?

What is unique about your name?

Have you changed your name?

Do you have a nickname?

Brainstorm story ideas under the following categories:

Childhood Summers

Cars

Family Traditions

Family Vacations

Jobs

Family Members

Pets

Firsts

Places I've been

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Brainstorm some family traditions and everyday traditions:

Family Traditions

Everyday Traditions

Timed Exercise – Choose a memory to write about for five minutes



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- What was your favorite food when you were a child?
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