



PICTURES AND STORIES

YOUR LIFE. IN A BOOK.™

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# How to Interview Yourself for a Personal History

## WHO

Tom Taylor is the founder of Pictures and Stories, Inc., which since 1995 has been helping people write and produce personal and family histories. He is co-author of the book "How to Save Your Life, One Chapter at a Time."

## WHY

There are benefits to capturing stories in recorded form rather than writing them down. Interviewing yourself may feel a little strange at first, but it has its advantages: privacy, convenience, and last but not least, familiarity with the subject!

## WHAT

We will show you best practices for interviewing and recording yourself (and/or your friends and family) to get your stories down, including: preparation, recording, transcribing, editing, and multimedia options.

*"Stories are data with a soul." ~ Brené Brown"*



## Self-Recording Options

- Digital voice recorder
- Smartphone/tablet with app
- External microphone
- Video camera
- Speech-to-text software

## INTRODUCTION

You have stories in your head and your heart that may seem miles away from words on a page. You may hate to write. There are benefits to capturing stories in recorded form rather than writing them down. Interviewing yourself may feel a little strange at first, but it has its advantages: privacy, convenience, and last but not least, familiarity with the subject! Interviews are an easy and effective way to bring the best stories out of your head and share them with others. You can use a few basic self-interviewing principles to create an interesting and engaging oral or video history.

## WHY AN INTERVIEW?

We see interviews on television and hear them on the radio: a skilled interviewer guides the interviewee to open up and talk about a chosen subject. A good interview is engaging to listen to and participate in. The best interviews feel like a spontaneous conversation; the interviewer guides the discussion and may probe, but does not dominate nor get in the way of the subject's responses. Good interviews have a specific direction, but also leave room for unanticipated gems.

In a good interview you can connect with your listener. Natural emotion and authenticity can be captured and shared. Don't underestimate the sound of your own voice (or with video, your expressions).

## WHY WOULD I WANT TO INTERVIEW MYSELF?

Most people, when considering a personal history interview, think of being interviewed by a friend, relative, or professional historian. The idea of interviewing yourself may sound a little crazy at first. But there are several valid reasons that you might want to consider it:

**Quick and convenient.** You can choose when and where and how to record yourself; you don't have to rely on someone else's schedule or availability. The

process is generally easier and less time-consuming than writing. You can work at your own pace and address only the issues that are important to you. You can record it, review it, edit it, or scrap it and start over if you like.

**Personal comfort.** Some people feel more comfortable talking into a recorder when they are alone: there is no one there to judge or contradict them, and they don't feel pressure to entertain. However, some people speak more clearly and animatedly if they have an audience, even an audience of one. If you're not sure, try it both ways and see which appeals to you. (Make sure, if you do have an audience, that it is a "safe" person for you, someone with whom you can remain relatively uninhibited. Often a stranger or professional historian may be easier to talk to than a close loved one. )

**Familiarity with the subject.** After all, who is more acquainted with you, than you? And who understands better than you what you want to accomplish with your personal history?

**It's like painting a self-portrait.** This is an opportunity for you to look at yourself and tell others your story. How do you view the world? How do you see yourself?

## WHAT EQUIPMENT SHOULD I USE?

There are several recording methods from which to choose:

**Digital voice recorder.** There are dedicated recording devices that are available in a range of prices. DVRs generally give a higher quality recording when miked appropriately. May be preferable if the interview is to be preserved as a recording and not transcribed.

**Smart phone or tablet with recording app.** Convenient and can work quite well in the right environment.

**External microphone.** Adding an external microphone can improve the quality of your recording as well as making it easier to talk freely.

**Video recorder.** Seeing the face that goes with the voice is always a plus, but many are less comfortable "on camera."

**Speech-to-text software.** Programs such as "Dragon Naturally Speaking" transcribe your speech automatically as you speak into a microphone attached to your computer or other device. The downside is that the software is not always perfect in interpreting what you are trying to say; again, you will have to proofread carefully.

**Understand how to use your equipment.** Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the equipment you will be using. It is frustrating to have said something just how you wanted, only to find out your equipment was not turned on or the batteries were dead.

## HOW SHOULD I PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW?

A good interviewer is well-acquainted with his subject, having prepared before the interview with research and study. Preparation is just as important when you are interviewing yourself; it will keep you on task and keep you from rambling.

**Understand your PERSPECTIVE — Your point of view and attitude toward something.**

The reason someone will want to listen to you is because you have something valuable to offer. This value comes from your perspective. It is important to understand yourself and how you see the world. What did you learn from a particular experience? How did it shape you? Why? How did you feel? What insights can you share?

**Determine your purpose, audience, and scope.**

**Purpose:** Why are you telling your life story? What do you hope to accomplish? Write your purpose down and refer to it often. Your purpose will help guide what you talk about in your interview.

**Audience:** Who are you talking to? What may they want to know about you? Who will hear or read what you have to say? Write a clear statement of who your personal history is intended for. It may help you to put a picture in view and pretend you are talking to that person or persons as if they were in the room. What is your relationship with those who will listen? Speak in your own voice. Don't try to be or sound like anyone else. Your authentic voice will connect to your listener/reader.

**Scope:** What are you going to talk about? How broad or how narrow is your subject matter? Narrow your focus and be as specific as possible. Don't attempt to tell your whole life at once.

**Sketch out a life timeline.** Take some time before the interview to brainstorm people, places, and events in your life and note them on a timeline. Just jot down anything that comes to mind for now; you'll narrow focus later.

**Review memory trigger questions.** The Picturesand-Stories, StoryCorps, and Family Search websites, among others, have great lists of questions. Highlight those that you might want to talk about.

**Review your pictures.** Your pictures may help remind you of stories and bring a flood of memories. Go quickly through your pictures and select only those few that relate to your purpose, audience, and scope and make some notes.

**Select and prioritize your stories.** List the most important ideas from your timeline, brainstorming, and memory trigger questions. What begs to be told? What would others be curious about? List your top 3 to 10 most important stories. Give a rough working name to each story and sketch a few notes you can refer to in interview.

**Stick to the point.** Know what you want to say. What do you want your listener/reader to know? How do you want them to feel? Don't wander. Share your life one story at a time.

**Get comfortable.** Find somewhere private and quiet and with limited distractions. Eliminate background noise as much as possible (turn off loud refrigerators, fans, etc.). Bring some water, tissues, and a comfortable chair. (A parked car on a quiet street can make a good sound studio.) Then just begin, telling one story at a time.

**Preparation is 80% of the effort, BUT...** when you have your idea in mind don't overthink it. Relax, get a good night sleep, go for a walk, or do something to take your mind off this process for a while before you begin.

**Tell it in a story.** Stories connect. Share what you want in the form of a story. Don't preach or tell your audience what to think. Let them draw their own conclusions.

**Be yourself.** Talk as you would to the person you would share your stories with. If you are telling a funny story, be funny. If you are serious, be serious. Let your genuine self come through.

## NOW WHAT DO I DO WITH IT?

Once you have recorded your self-interview, you have several options:

**Archive and distribute your recording.** Your recording should be backed up and saved in more than one place and in more than one type of media. Put the recorded interview on a CD, USB flash drive. Post it to the internet if you like. Give it to your loved ones. You may want to send a copy to your local genealogical library or the Library of Congress. The value of hearing a cherished person's voice after they are gone is priceless.

**Transcribe your recording.** Listen to your recording and "type" it up into a document. Do it yourself, or hire someone to assist. Maybe a grandchild, a student, or a professional transcription service can assist. There are a variety of software tools that may be helpful (ExpressScribe).

**Edit and revise.** You don't need to, but you can make changes to your interview—it's yours. Add, delete, revise to make it what you want. Use your copy as is, or edit to your heart's content. Then, use the "typed" copy as a narrative for a life story book. Use pictures to make it even more interesting.

**Label and identify your recordings and written documents.** Make your recording and documents easy to find and recognize by those who know you (and those who may come in the future).

### Final words of advice: have fun with it!

Don't let the process overwhelm you. Even one small recorded personal experience is better than none! If you think you should record an interview of yourself, or someone else, don't wait.

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Or call us at 801-906-0609 Tom and Alison Taylor

