

SHARING STORIES FROM A DISTANCE

A QuickStart Guide to
leading meaningful
conversations with parents
and grandparents in a
time of forced separation

**ACKNOWLEDGE
MEDIA**

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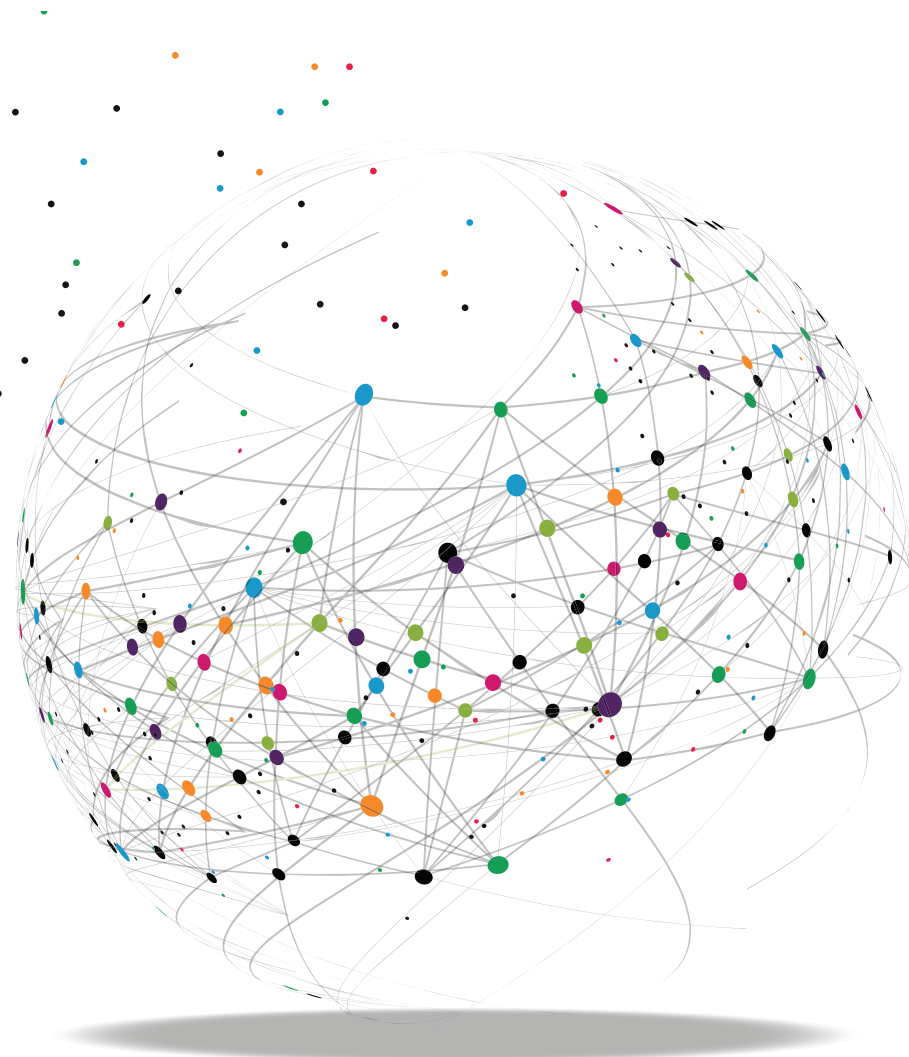


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WELCOME AND WHAT'S INSIDE

Thank you for downloading this QuickStart guide. Our goal is to provide you with easy tools, information, and tips to initiate meaningful story-share sessions with loved ones via telephone or video conference. In the following pages, you will learn about:

1. Preparing for a story-share conversation.
2. Developing engaging questions. (We share a list of our favorites.)
3. Effective interviewing techniques. (Hint: don't call it an "interview.")
4. Resources to make conducting and recording conversations easy. (Apps, services, equipment, and more.)



WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THIS?

As video biographers, we have conducted hundreds of life story interviews with clients covering every topic under the sun: family lineage, upbringing, education, military service, romance, professions, volunteerism, religion, parenting, grandparenting, struggles, rewards, and so much more. No matter who we speak with, these conversations elicit excitement, emotion, energy, catharsis, and joy. Why? Because inviting someone to share about their life is a profoundly compassionate gesture. It tells someone that you care about them.

Right now, many of our parents and grandparents are isolated. Many yearn for connection with family, whether across town or across the country. Some may be afraid. Calling up the parents for some quality conversation could be the perfect elixir. But this isn't just about adult children and grandchildren calling the older generation.

Grandparents, aunts, and uncles: this is your opportunity to take advantage of the fact that the kids and grandkids aren't running around from morning to night. In many cases, your adult children will be trying to manage work from home with the kids climbing on the walls. This is your opportunity to engage the family in some structured conversation on topics that rarely get explored.

Thanks to the availability of video conferencing technology, we can conduct face-to-face conversations with one another (and even record them for later viewing). So, let's begin!



1: PREPARATIONS

We begin by setting our intention. What is the goal of this conversation? Are you hoping to spend an hour passing the time? Do you want to hear new stories that your parents may never have shared? Is your goal to actually record a conversation on a very specific set of topics? Maybe you want to undertake a broad and structured story sharing project. Understanding your goals in advance will inform how best to proceed. Here are basic strategies to approach a sampling of different goals:

GOAL: “I want to have an engaging conversation with Mom, but not about the typical subjects. It might be nice to hear some new stories about the old days.”

- Set up a phone call or video conference in advance (see section 4). There is no need to call it anything other than a time to “catch up.” Calling it anything else will only create expectations and nerves. You’re just calling to check in and say hi.
- Develop a handful of questions in advance (see section 2). Make sure to vary your questions by subject and intensity level. You know what kind of questions will be engaging for Mom.
- Practice your interviewing techniques and listening skills (section 3).
- Thank Mom for the enjoyable conversation and suggest doing it again soon.

GOAL: “I want to have an intentional conversation with my parents about some heavier topics. I’d like to know about their hopes and dreams for the future. What they see as their greatest accomplishments. I want to know if they’re scared of dying.”

- Set up a phone call or video conference in advance (see section 4). You might let them know that there are some specific topics you want to cover during the call that you normally don’t have time to discuss. Only you can gauge what is or isn’t appropriate to share in advance. Avoid saying anything that would shut down the possibility of this conversation before it ever begins.
- Develop a handful of questions in advance (see section 2). Unlike the scenario described above, which is more exploratory, you will come into this conversation with an agenda.
- From the outset of the call, explain to your parents the topics you’re hoping to discuss. For example: “We never have a chance to really talk to one another given how crazy my schedule is, so I’m looking forward to having this time together. Among other things, I’m hoping we can talk about your retirement plans and maybe your bigger picture hopes for the future.” If your parents seem hesitant or resistant, assure them that they won’t have to discuss anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, and remind them how much you appreciate having this chance to talk.
- Practice your interviewing techniques and listening skills (section 3).
- Thank your parents for their candor and honesty. If there is still more left to be said, let them know how much this call meant to you and suggest a date and time for doing it again.

GOAL: “My father has led such an interesting life, but we’ve never taken the time to record any of his stories. I’d like to set up a weekly video conference where we ask him about different chapters of his life and record them with the webcam.”

- Before setting up any official calls, have a conversation with Dad to present the idea of recording him. It’s essential to communicate that this is something you want to have for yourself and possibly your siblings, children, and grandchildren. The point is, this is something he can give to his family. You’re not doing it just for him.
- Once Dad is on board, you can have one or several preliminary conversations to sort out what topics you want to discuss. The point of this call (or calls) is to create a road map for your project. You don’t want Dad to tell you his stories right now, but it’s great to know some of the headlines. (“I’ll tell you about the time I got lost in the woods and it took 3 days for me to be found!”)
- Set up a recordable phone call or video conference in advance (see section 4).
- Develop a full set of questions in advance (see section 2).
- Practice your interviewing techniques and listening skills (section 3).
- Thank Dad for the enjoyable conversation and schedule the next call/video conference that will be recorded.

2: DEVELOPING QUESTIONS

Uncovering stories is like going on a treasure hunt, and you are the treasure hunter. But instead of shovels and metal detectors, your tools are questions. Here are some things to keep in mind when developing your questions:

- **Simple questions about concrete events will evoke the best stories.** For example: Tell me about the day I was born: how did it unfold? What were you doing on the day JFK was assassinated? What is the story of how you and Mom met? Your goal is to invite the interviewee to revisit concrete moments in time and space.
- **Avoid questions that can be answered in a single word.** For example, if you want to know more about your great aunt’s relationship with her second husband, don’t ask: “Did you and Harvey get along well?” Instead you might ask: “Describe the kind of relationship you and Harvey had. How were you similar? How did Harvey differ from Uncle Joe?” As a rule of thumb, WHY and HOW questions will always evoke richer conversation and story sharing than WHAT, WHEN, WHO, and WHERE questions. To be clear, all of these questions are useful, particularly if you’re trying to obtain basic factual information (e.g., “What was the address of your second home?”). But when engaging conversation and stories are the goal, WHY and HOW and TELL ME ABOUT are the winning approaches.

- **Don’t shy away from the challenging questions.** It’s easy to focus on the joyous topics. “Tell me about your wedding. What do you remember about your honeymoon? How did you celebrate your 50th wedding anniversary?” It’s equally important to explore life’s challenges and the low points. There is a common misperception that victims of trauma prefer not to talk about their experiences. The fact is, when survivors open up about their suffering, they can find the experience cathartic, even rewarding. The conversations are not going to be easy, nor should they be. In some cases, you’ll be asking loved ones to recall events and memories that have long been dormant. That’s okay. Don’t shy away from asking the hard questions. Just listen more intently than you ever have before (see Section 3). You will be glad you did.
- **...but ease into more sensitive topics.** Think of the conversation as a workout routine. You need to have a warm-up before getting into the more challenging sets. If you intend to ask Mom about her miscarriages (a topic she seldom opens up about), plan to first speak about the joys of becoming a mother. Explore topics that will increase her comfort level with sharing. It’s like flexing her “sharing” muscles. Eventually, you’ll be able to ask questions like: “Knowing how much being a mother is part of your identity, would you be willing to tell me about the experience of having multiple miscarriages? How did it effect you? How did you deal with the grief?”
- **Vary subject matter and intensity.** A well-rounded conversation will be built on a set of questions that cover a range of subject areas spanning a spectrum of emotional intensity. Go into the conversation with a general plan. The Acknowledge Media website offers a free searchable database of 365 questions (one for each day of the year). Users can apply criteria filters and keyword searches to find light, probing, and deeply personal questions. Visit: <https://www.acknowledgemedia.com/questions/>.



SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR GRANDCHILDREN ...

Right now, many young families have their kids on lock-down at home, while the grandparents are likely elsewhere. Arranging for the grandchildren to have interview time with the grandparents is a wonderful way to bridge the generations and evoke meaningful conversation. Here are 10 questions that are guaranteed to get the conversation started (these can easily be adapted for adult children).



There are so many wonderful resources online for finding great questions. Another source that we like is provided by StoryCorps: <https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>.

QUESTION	COMMENTARY	ALTERNATE QUESTIONS
1) Would you tell me about the day my mother / father was born?	A great question for starting the conversation. It bridges the generation gap with talk about a shared relative and invites grandparents to recall a specific day.	What was <i>Mom</i> or <i>Dad</i> like as a teenager? Would you tell me about the day I was born?
2) How did you meet your spouse?	Another question that asks a grandparent to recount a specific event from the past. Probe for details whenever possible (e.g., "What was the weather like?")	Tell me the story of your marriage proposal. Tell me about your wedding day.
3) What were your mother and father like?	This question moves from concrete reflections about specific days to more general questions about people. Also, a great way to learn about great-grandparents.	What qualities and traits did you inherit from your mother and father? What do you miss most about your mom and/or dad?
4) When is a time in life that you have been happiest?	Note the phrasing. We don't want to assume that the answer is necessarily in the past. This question invites grandparents to move into the realm of self-reflection.	Where are some of the places that you've been happiest?
5) What is something you know now that you wish you had known when you were younger?	We're now moving beyond concrete reflection into the realm of hypothetical reflection. Give your grandparents space to answer and be careful not to judge responses.	What is an important lesson that you've learned? How did you learn it?
6) What was one of your greatest struggles? How did you cope with or overcome it?	Having opened the door with the prior questions, you may now be ready to probe further with a deeply personal question like this one.	Would you tell me about a stressful experience or time that you lived through? How did you make it through?
7) What do you consider your greatest accomplishments?	Most people want to know that they've made a difference. This question invites that conversation.	Of what are you most proud? What values most motivate your decision making? What has driven your choices?
8) Is there anything you would change if you could do it all over?	This question invites critical reflection and a conversation about smart choices, possible regrets, and roads travelled.	What is a choice you made that you would have approached differently with the benefit of hindsight? Do you have any regrets?
9) What do you want to be known for?	This question gets to the heart of legacy. Note that responses may differ for their public and private personas.	What do you want your great, great-grandchildren to know about you? For what do you want to be remembered?
10) What are your hopes for your grandchildren/great-grandchildren as we grow older?	This shifts the focus from the past and present to the future. It gives grandparents space to zero in on those values and experiences which they deem most important.	What do you want for your family after you're gone?

3: EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.” – The Dalai Lama

A skill that is rarely taught and not often practiced well is listening. Good, effective listening is key to having a productive conversation, especially when exploring more sensitive topics. Here are some tips for effective interviewing and listening:

- **Stop talking.** Communication need not be a ping pong match. In a constant back and forth, we become focused on what we'll be saying next. Let go of that. Your role is simply to listen now. What you say next will come naturally if you are listening intently.
- **Do not interrupt.** The biggest risk of interrupting interviewees is that you will not allow them to finish their full thought, and thus you limit the story, falling short of accomplishing your established interview goals. Sometimes a long pause can be interpreted as a completed thought. If by accident you begin to speak as the interviewee continues an unfinished story, simply apologize and invite them to go on.
- **Listen with your whole body.** Your body language is incredibly important, particularly during a video conference call. If you're looking at your watch or attempting to multitask, it tells the other person that your focus is elsewhere. That's a big no-no. Listening with your whole body begins with intently watching and reading the body language of your interviewee. Reading their body language accurately will create a magical connection of trust with your interviewees. You will then react more empathetically to their part of the conversation. They will see this and open up more to you as a trusted listener.
- **Listen without judging.** This can be very difficult to do, especially when it's our own parents or children that we're speaking with. If you find yourself being triggered by a comment or expressed sentiment, resist the urge to become defensive. Instead, consider this an opportunity for further questions. But be careful when you ask for clarification. If the interviewee perceives that your response or additional questions are judgmental and of a condemning nature, you run the risk of losing the interviewee's trust and shifting the mood of the entire interview.

4: RESOURCES

To be completely transparent, we are not technology experts. Our bailiwick is producing life story legacy films and we're lucky enough to work with top videographers and editors. That said, these strange times require that we use alternative tools and technologies to our benefit. This section covers some of the more well-known options that we have used. But this is hardly an exhaustive list. Feel free to let us know about other apps, services, and tools that you like so that we can round out this list moving forward.

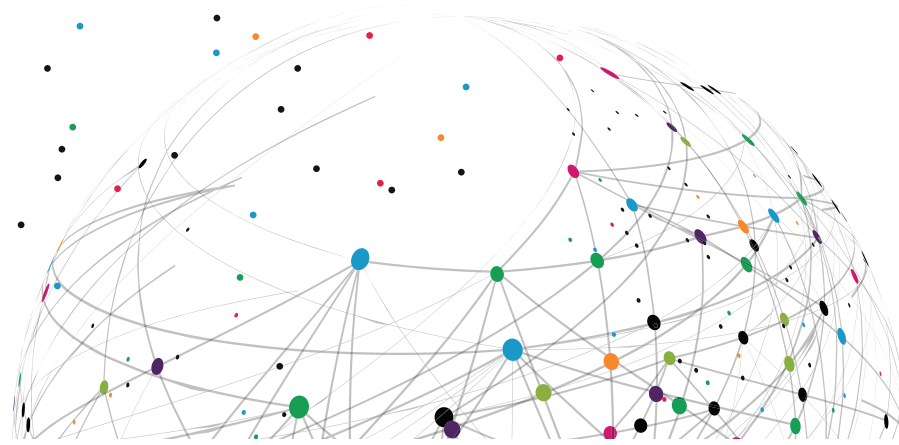
AUDIO-ONLY SERVICES: For non-recorded phone calls, simply pick up the phone and call someone. If you plan to conference together multiple parties from different locations, most cell phone providers offer conference call functionality. Indeed, most web-based audio solutions now also offer video-based solutions as well. Here are some popular web-based audio options:

- **Free Conference Call** (<https://www.freeconferencecall.com/>): Sign up for a free dedicated phone number with password and host ID. When you know you want to schedule a call, simply share the phone number and password with call participants. As the host, you will dial in and initiate the call with your host ID. It's that easy.
- **Free Conference Calling** (<https://www.freeconferencecalling.com/>) Not to be confused with the service above, Free Conference Calling is another of the many online providers that allow you to facilitate free group phone calls.

Both of these services offer recording features that allow you to download the entire conversation to your computer or upload it to a designated account in the "cloud." Fees may apply for these services. In addition, these companies offer low cost transcription services that allow you to convert the entire conversation to a word processing document. This is ideal if you want to use these conversations as the basis for a book or digital photo album.

Alternatively, you may want to record your smart phone conversation. Many phones have this function as a standard feature on the device. You still have the option to upload the conversation to a designated account in the "cloud" or share it directly to other platforms. For a complete list of apps that allow you to record cell phone conversations, visit: <https://www.rev.com/blog/best-apps-to-record-phone-calls>

****NOTE** – You should never record a call without obtaining your subject's express approval. This holds true in the business world and is even more important when dealing with people who you love.**



VIDEO CONFERENCING SERVICES: There are so many video chat options available to us right now. If your goal is to have a conversation with a loved one while seeing their face (something we always recommend if possible), any of the following apps will do the trick:

- FaceTime (for iPhone)
- Google Hangouts (on Android)
- Skype
- What's App
- Facebook Messenger
- Glide
- JusTalk
- Zoom

When dealing with video applications, it's important to remember that the device through which participants are viewing will directly impact the quality and feel of what you're seeing. If you do not plan to record the video conversation, then it's okay to FaceTime over a cellphone. Participants will be able to move about freely as they talk. But for recorded conversations, it's essential that the camera remain fixed in place. In this scenario, the subjects of the conversation should be sitting in front of a built-in laptop camera or a webcam mounted to the top of the computer.

For the most reliable one-on-one or group interactions we recommend using Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>). With Zoom, you can set up a free membership that allows you to conduct face-to-face video conversations that are fully recordable. With the free membership you can also conduct group video conferencing, but you are limited to 40-minute sessions. If you want to host longer group sessions, you will need to set up a "Pro" account, which costs \$14.99 per month.

AUDIO/VIDEO TECH: For most, the cameras and microphones that are built into computers or tablets will yield acceptable quality sound and visual resolution. However, if your goal is to record these conversations for posterity, it might pay off to invest in a nicer microphone and/or webcam for the computer. An investment of \$100 is all you need to experience a vast improvement. If you can afford a bit more, \$400 will get you near-professional grade equipment. Underscoring again the fact that we are not technology experts, we will share with you the microphones and webcams that we use for our recorded distance interviews. The equipment is incredibly easy to install – simply plug it into your USB port and it's ready to go. Keep in mind that some people are not as nimble when it comes to technology. If a webcam and mic will be daunting for your loved ones, best to go with the built-in options.

- **LOGITECH BRIO ULTRA HD PRO WEBCAM:** Retails on the Logitech website for \$199. More at: <https://www.logitech.com/en-us/product/brio>
- **RODE NT-USB STUDIO QUALITY MICROPHONE:** Retails on Amazon for \$199, but we've found it for less money at other online retailers. (We found it for \$169 on the [B&H website](http://www.bhphotovideo.com)). More at: <http://www.rote.com/microphones/nt-usb>
- **YETI PROFESSIONAL MULTI-PATTERN USB MIC by BLUE:** Retails on Amazon for \$130. More at: <https://www.bluedesigns.com/products/yeti/>



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



RICH POLT

Helping people share their stories is Rich Polt's passion and life's work. As the Founder and Producer of Acknowledge Media, Rich creates documentary-style videos built on conversations with loved ones, and layered with photographs, keepsakes, and music. These videos serve as a powerful link to the past and a treasure for future generations. Rich lives with his wife and two sons in Baltimore, MD.

ACKNOWLEDGE MEDIA

Visit <https://www.acknowledgemedia.com/> for more information. You can also see Rich speak on the power of communication at: <https://vimeo.com/258108208>.



MIKE O'KRENT

As the Founder and Producer of LifeStories Alive, LLC, Mike specializes in making personal history videos for families that value their heritage. He and his colleagues create family heirlooms in video — digitally mastered records of life stories with personal accounts, photos, and mementos of family history. Based in Austin, TX, Mike is a father of two and recently became a grandfather for the second time.



Visit <https://www.lifestoriesalive.com/> for more information. You can also see Mike's TEDx talk at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=21NxRWNFBY8&t>