

Prototype Questionnaire: Interview questions for parents, grandparents, or nursing home residents

(I suggest doing the interview over three or four segments. I envision each part of the interview as taking around 30 minutes, certainly no longer than an hour. Have your recording device set up before you begin, but be sure to explain that you will be recording the interview. My suggestion is that you pick one or two questions from each section—after the first general section—and let the interest of the interviewee direct your choices. If you are interviewing as a pair, one might pose the questions and interact or make eye contact while the other records and takes notes.)

Section 1: General info

1. What is your full name? Do you know why you have the names that were given to you? Did you ever have a nickname?
2. What is your family's ethnic, national, or regional background, on both sides? Did your family have a home place when you were little? Where was it?
3. When were you born? What events or social situations do you associate with the time period when you were young—up to when you were a young adult?
4. What was your first job? When (if you did) did you get married? Tell me about your spouse. Tell me about your children.
5. How do you most often identify yourself—e.g., as a retired teacher? As a business owner? As a mother? As an artist? As a machinist? As a salesperson? Has your sense of a primary identity changed over the years? How?
6. When did you find your way to (XX church, XX school, XX club, etc.)? Why did you choose to attend or become a member of this group?
7. When did you decide to move to (place)? What do you enjoy about your life here in (place)?

Section 2: Childhood

1. What games or entertainments do you remember from your childhood? Do you remember any particular incident from your childhood—a funny or scary experience, for example?
2. Did you have brothers and sisters? Do you have any specific memories you associate with your brothers or sisters? Something you did together, or something they taught you?

3. What were you like as a child? Did you enjoy school? Were you shy? Did you love to sing or make art or raise animals? Did you have a pet? Any stories?

Section 3: Youth/young adulthood

1. What did you like best about high school, or did you find that you had to do something else besides school as a young person? Were you in clubs or in sports? Who were your best friends? What did you and your friends do? Do you remember anything in particular from that time period—a funny story or an important event?

2. Can you remember what you wanted to be when you were a young adult? What was your ambition or desire? Did you continue to have that goal as an adult? Did it change? Why or why not?

3. Did you go to college? Did you want to go to college? How did you regard the whole idea of education? If you did go to college, what was your major, or your interest? Has that stayed with you? Did you have a mentor?

Section 4: Those busy adult years

1. What was your primary occupation as an adult? Did you enjoy it? Tell me something about your favorite part of being who you were and doing what you did as a 30-50 year old adult?

2. If you remember some specific incident from your middle adult years—something funny or interesting that you did or something that happened to you—tell me about it.

3. What do you remember as one of your best contributions to family, community, workplace, or simply life in general from your middle adult years? Why do you feel that part of your life, that contribution, was important?

Section 5: Becoming an elder

1. How many times have you moved house? Did you live for any length of time outside the US? Where have you lived? Why have you moved? What do you remember from each place you have lived? Any favorite places?

2. When did you retire, or when did your spouse retire? Did this change your life? What hobbies have always been a part of your life? Have you taken up new interests more recently? Tell me about your current hobbies or activities?

3. Have you lost important people in your life? How have relationships with other people been significant when you were younger and now that you are older?

Section 6: A story and a value (give the person a little time to think about this)

1. Tell me some story from your life that you feel helps people understand who you are or what is important to you.

2. What still amazes you about life? What do you find amazing?

3. What value or lesson or saying do you feel you would like to pass along to those who come after you? What has guided your life? Do you have a favorite motto or proverb? What is it and why do you treasure it?

Thanks very much for sharing your thoughts and memories with us and for taking time to speak with us. May we take a picture of you to share with others? Help us pick out the one you like.

As an added boon to this interview, could you photograph some of the objects in your house or apartment that you treasure or associate with the place you call home? If you have stories associated with these objects, could you share them?

This prototype questionnaire by Sandra K. Dolby, folklorist.