

Questions to Ask Your Grandparents

Pick three or four, not all 64. Ask one at a time, and let the answers wander.

TIP

Before you start: ask ahead, begin with something easy, and say they can pass on any question. An old photo is the easiest way in.

Five questions for any old photo

- ☐ **Who's here?** Names, nicknames and how everyone is related. And who was behind the camera?
- ☐ **Where and when?** The place, the year, the season. A best guess is fine. Just add a question mark.
- ☐ **What was going on?** The occasion, the day, and what happened just before the picture was taken.
- ☐ **What's outside the frame?** What the photo doesn't show: the sounds, the smells, the weather, who was standing just out of sight.
- ☐ **Why keep it?** What this moment means now, and what someone in the family should know about it a hundred years from now.

Follow-ups that turn an answer into a story

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| • What happened next? | • Why do you think it happened that way? |
| • Can you tell me more about that? | • Can you give me an example? |
| • What did it look like? Sound like? Smell like? | • What did people say? |
| • Who else was there? | • Is there anything I didn't ask that I should have? |
| • How did you feel then? How do you feel about it now? | |

Questions about their life

Childhood home

- ☐ Who lived with you when you were small?
- ☐ Where did you go to play, or to be alone?
- ☐ What frightened you as a child? What made you feel safe?
- ☐ Which neighbors did everyone talk about?
- ☐ What did your family do on a day off?

The family before you

- ☐ What do you know about where your parents grew up?
- ☐ What work did the adults in your family do? What did you think of it as a child?
- ☐ What did the grown-ups argue about? What made them laugh?
- ☐ Which relative are you most like? Who did people say you took after?
- ☐ What do you wish you had asked your parents or grandparents?

School and growing up

- ☐ What was your first school like? Can you picture the classroom?
- ☐ How did you get to school, and who did you see on the way?
- ☐ What came easily to you? What did you struggle with?
- ☐ What music, shows or games did everyone love when you were a teenager?
- ☐ What did your parents never find out about?

Work and making a living

- ☐ How did you end up in the work you did the longest?
- ☐ Who taught you the most at work?
- ☐ What mistake at work do you still remember?
- ☐ Did you ever change direction? What made you do it?
- ☐ What did your work teach you that you used everywhere else?

Questions about their life, continued

Friendship and love

- ☐ Tell me about a friendship that lasted. What kept it going?
- ☐ Tell me about a wedding, celebration or promise that mattered to you.
- ☐ Is there someone you lost touch with that you still think about?
- ☐ What did you learn about love or friendship the hard way?
- ☐ What advice would you give someone about choosing the people in their life?

Family life

- ☐ Tell me about a day a child came into your life, by birth, adoption, marriage or any other way.
- ☐ What surprised you most about looking after a family?
- ☐ Which house rules got broken the most?
- ☐ Who helped you through those busy years?
- ☐ What was hard about those years that people don't talk about?

Places and moves

- ☐ Tell me about a move that changed your life.
- ☐ What did the family bring with them? What did they leave behind?
- ☐ What was your first home of your own like?
- ☐ What has changed most in the place where you grew up?
- ☐ Where do you feel most at peace?

Food, traditions and celebrations

- ☐ Which traditions did you keep, and which did you let go?
- ☐ What did your family do when someone was celebrating, or grieving?
- ☐ What did you eat when money was tight?
- ☐ Who was the best cook in the family? Who was the worst?
- ☐ What songs did your family sing, or what music was always playing?

Questions about their life, continued

The world around you

- ☐ How did events in the wider world change everyday life in your family?
- ☐ How did people get news and keep in touch back then?
- ☐ Were you part of a community, cause or group that mattered to you?
- ☐ Did anyone in the family serve in the military or live through a war? What would they want people to know?
- ☐ What change in the world are you most glad you lived to see?

Objects and keepsakes

- ☐ Tell me about a piece of jewelry, a tool or a dish that has a story.
- ☐ What is in the box or drawer of things you can't throw away?
- ☐ Is there something you lost that you still think about?
- ☐ Which letters, recipes or papers in the family should be kept?

Hard times and turning points

Painful memories: ask only if they want to.

- ☐ What is the hardest thing you have lived through? Say as much or as little as you like.
- ☐ Who or what helped you through a loss?
- ☐ What did you learn from something that didn't work out?
- ☐ How did you change after the hardest years?
- ☐ Is there anything you would like the family to understand about that time?

Looking back, looking ahead

- ☐ What did your family believe in, and how did it show up in everyday life?
- ☐ Who taught you the difference between right and wrong?
- ☐ Have your views changed over your life? What changed them?
- ☐ What do you think matters most in a good life?
- ☐ How would you like to be remembered?

Shoebox to Storybook: all 114 questions, story sheets, question cards and a Story Page Maker that turns answers into a book. US\$29.

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