



Journaling Your Past

A workshop to record your personal and family history, and your most important memories.

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Journaling Your Past

This workshop packet will help you create a journal of your own history.

You'll get ideas for things to write about, and use some of these workshop forms to "jump start" your memories.

Best of all, you'll learn a system to make it easy to continue with this important journal in spare moments during even the busiest schedule.

Supplies

You'll need

- a pencil or pen
- notebook paper
- a binder to keep your papers in
- (Optional) some photos or notes to help jog your memories.

How to Organize Your Journal

The organization is simple, and the key to the success of this project:

1. Date every piece of paper, and put each memory on a different sheet of paper. Then, file the papers in date order when you have a spare moment. The page about losing your first tooth goes before the page about your first date. The pages you write about your first job probably go after the ones about your first bicycle, and so on.

Calendar dates are not very important. Time is relative. Work with what you know. That's usually enough.

If you don't know when something happened, write down things that tell you roughly when it occurred: What house were you living in? Was Grandma still alive then? Was it before weird Auntie Hazel Ann finally got married?

These relative notes help you place the event/memory in time, and maybe later you'll figure out when it happened, in calendar terms.

Genealogists know that **where** something happened is always more important than **when** it happened. If you're going to research an event using birth certificates, the US Census, and so on, you need to know where to look. You can usually guess at the time, within a ten-year period.

What to put in this journal

Put anything you want in this journal. Really. Write about anything from your past. What's important is to start putting this information on paper. And, it's important to start NOW.

It doesn't have to be just words, either. You can sketch, paint, collage, glue bits of stuff into your journal... use anything that helps you to remember and share your past with others.

Don't just 'report the news'

Tell us what happened in your life, but also tell us how you felt, what you thought about at the time, and so on. Make it more than just dates and events!

How to save your journal

In a perfect world, we'd be writing on acid-free paper, with acid-free art and writing supplies, and we'd store the papers archivally, too.

Forget that, for now. This has to be made "easy" or it's not going to happen. We're busy people.

Your first task is to put the memories on paper, period. Plain notebook paper will usually hold up at least 20 years. During those 20 or so years, you may have your work copied archivally. If not, one of your family members can probably do this for you. But, above all, **YOUR FIRST PROJECT IS TO WRITE STUFF DOWN.**

However... If you use pencil, not pen, it will survive a flood in the basement without smearing. If you enclose your trinkets, photos, and so on, in acid-free archival plastic, they'll last longer, too.

If it's easy to do this, great. If it isn't, don't worry about it right now. Just start writing on *anything* to get this started.

One note of caution: **DON'T LAMINATE!** Laminated items can decay within the plastic. Sorry.

If you've already laminated things, get them digitally scanned, photographed, or photocopied now, while they're still fresh looking. Then treat those copies archivally.

Okay, are you ready to start now? Great!

Start with a piece of paper or two, and something to write with. That's all you need at the moment.

...Now, turn the page, and let's begin!

The journaling process

Start with a question or a memory, and write it on a piece of paper. If time is a problem, set your timer for 10 or 15 minutes, and conclude whatever you're writing when the bell rings. Remember that this is NOT a marathon. Only write for as long as it's fun. If you have no time whatsoever, jot down one memory each night, before you go to sleep.

Also remember that this is not the *Great American Novel*. A few ideas and memories jotted down now, are far better than a brilliant autobiography that you never find time for, and never share with your children/family.

Let's start with some questions

These are called "journal prompts." They're ideas to get you started. You do NOT have to answer them all. Pick one question, and ONLY ONE, and write about that.

When you finish with that, you can take another piece of paper and answer a different question, if you want to.

Remember, each memory goes on its own piece of paper.

For example, if you remember three different cars that your dad owned and loved, write about each car on a different piece of paper; one memory per page.

Write as much or as little as you remember. You don't need to fill each piece of paper. If you write just a sentence or two, that's okay. If you write ten pages about that one question, that's okay too, but remember to number them so that they stay in order.

Ready? The questions (or "journal prompts") start on the next page...

The Questions

STORIES FROM OTHERS

How did your parents meet? Were either of them engaged before? Did they have a long courtship? Did your mother have an engagement ring? Did your grandparents approve of the marriage?

Do you have earlier stories? How did your grandparents meet? Did they live happily ever after?

Who were your immigrant ancestors, and where were they from? Why did they leave their homeland/s? What kind of work did they do? Meet and marry after moving?

Stories about your family - What was your father's favorite car, and did it have a name like "Abigail" or "Speed Racer?"

What did your mother figure she'd do/be when she grew up, and did she expect to meet Prince Charming?

What was your father's first job as a kid, and did he work his way through college? Did he change his lifestyle when his first child was born?

What would your parents say was the single most important thing they each accomplished? Has this affected your goals?

YOUR OWN STORIES

What was your first Christmas/holiday memory? Best holiday gift ever?

When did you get your first bicycle, and was it hard to learn to ride it?

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Did you have a favorite pet?

What was your favorite back-to-school outfit? Who was your favorite teacher... Did that teacher influence you the most... and how?

Favorite childhood TV show? Favorite teen TV show? Teen idol?

First favorite singing group? (For 'baby boomers' - Did you prefer the Beatles, Dave Clark Five, or Rolling Stones?)

When you see the movie, "A Christmas Story," what part/s make you nod your head in agreement? Memories of Dad picking out the Christmas tree? Snowsuits? The neighborhood bully... and who was he/she? Worst/best holiday dinner?

Did you take driver's ed, and how awful was it? How about gym class horror stories that make you laugh now? First attempts to cook for yourself? The first time you wore something because it made you look fabulous... even if it felt awful? (Platform shoes? Tube top?)

Where were you when...? Every generation has "Where were you?" memories. For example, if you're a 'baby boomer,' where were you when you heard that Kennedy was shot? When the lights went out? When the space shuttle exploded?

Write about landmark events, such as: Losing your first tooth. Being asked out for the first time. Your first dance. High school prom. Applying to college, and your first day at college... and/or at work. Going to the movies for the first time, without your parents. First pregnancy/child/delivery.

REMEMBER: Everyone has memories, and each one of them is a **single event** to put on a **single piece of paper**.

As you add memories (pieces of paper) and **start filing them in date order**, you'll soon discover you've written a wonderful story of your adventure... your life, for others to read and enjoy, and understand you.

Keep your pages in a **three-ring binder**. As soon as you have a few pages, use dividers to separate the pages for easy filing and reference.

It's usually easiest to **label your dividers with relative references**. That is, you might use labels such as "Early years - Grade school - Junior high - High school - College - First job - Marriage," and so on.

Or you might label the sections according to where you lived, or who you were living with. Or, if your mind works that way, you can divide your notebook by actually years, either decades or five-year groups usually works best.

When to take a break

If you're having fun, keep writing. But, just as soon as you start to feel tired, take a break. Stop for 15 or 20 minutes, or quit for the day.

Create a regular schedule for your journaling. Maybe you'd like to write one page every evening before going to bed. That works well for many people.

Or, spend an hour each Sunday writing about your memories, and then share them at the dinner table. Or, think of some other routine that you can enjoy.

Whatever you decide upon, stick with it. When you have a full notebook of great stories, you'll be very pleased that you took the time to do this.

At some point, you may need a **change of pace** or some fresh "journal prompts" to get the ideas and memories flowing again. The next pages are worksheets which you can use to make this more fun.

Childhood memories: (birth through pre-teen years)

Jot down simple, one-to-three word answers to these questions. Later, use your answers as "journal prompts" and write more about each subject.

Favorite snack:

The food I hated most at dinner:

Favorite meal:

Favorite pet?

Did you sneak food to him/her?

My favorite teacher/s:

My best friend/s:

Took the school bus? Walked? With whom?

Boy/Girl Scout? Highest rank achieved?

Did you go camping?

Where?

Did you like it?

Favorite Halloween costume?

Who did you go trick-or-treating with?

Did you go to church/synagogue?

What did you think of it?

Did you read? (a lot, a little, never?)

Favorite books/magazines:

Did you read under the covers with a flashlight?

Favorite comic strip:

Did you watch TV?

Favorite cartoon character/show:

Favorite TV show:

Did it influence your clothing/behavior?

Did you play outside?

Favorite afterschool game/sport/activity:

My home address:

My parents chose my name because:

My nickname was (and why):

Where I grew up

On this page, draw your neighborhood (the block, or the floor in your apartment building) and indicate who lived where. It's okay to use a ruler, or just draw squares for each house or apartment. If you lived in lots of places, draw the place you remember best. (Make more copies of these pages for additional houses you lived in.)

The address was _____

I lived here during the years: _____

Notes about that house

What I remember most about my bedroom:

Optional:

Where did the scary dog live?

Where did your best friend live?

Was there a neighborhood bully?

Who gave out the best treats at Halloween?

Which way did you walk to school, or where did the bus stop?

Where did you go to play?

Was there a 'haunted house' in town? What about the lady everyone said was a witch?

Who had the best swing set? Was there one backyard or house where all the kids liked to play?

When you were learning to ride a bicycle, where did you ride it?

In summer, whose house had the pool or sprinkler?

Those teen years... from your first crush, to college years

My favorite movie star or celebrity was (and why)

The movie I saw over & over again was

The celebrity who would fall in love with me if we ever met was

I wanted to look like

People said I looked like (celebrity look-alike)

Favorite musical groups and kinds of music

Song that still makes me smile when I hear it on the radio, and why:

My biggest crush was

His/her best feature:

(Did you ever really get over him/her?)

The most important dance or party that I went to was (When, where, and what did you wear? Who did you go with?)

What I wore when I wanted to be noticed (or be invisible) at school was

Career plans: In high school, I thought I'd become a

After high school, I planned to (job or college)

The one thing I really wanted to do, but my parents wouldn't let me:

My first car was

Trashiest girl/guy in high school:

How I felt about her/him:

The best thing I did as a teen was:

If you didn't go to college

First full-time job?

What did you like best about that job? What did you like least? How long were you there?

Did you get married... when and where? Funniest moment at the wedding?

If you went to college

Did you have a job to pay for some of your expenses?

Who was your favorite roommate? Your least favorite?

Did you change your mind about your major, and why?

What would you have done differently?

Which one was your favorite club/activity?

Who was your favorite professor?

Who was your best friend?

When you have some time, and want to write something deep and important:

The big events... not always easy to write about

Set your timer for five minutes, and **choose one of these topics** to write about, each one on a single sheet of paper:

First time you realized you could coast down a hill with your bike... maybe with "no hands."

First/only time you deliberately drove faster than the speed limit.

One time you seriously thought about running away from home. How far did you get? Did you tell anyone?

First kiss... where, when, with whom, and what happened afterwards? And, first big heartbreak, and what you learned about getting over it.

For girls: First lipstick, first high heels, first earrings, and first slow dance.

For boys: First real suit, first tie (not clip-on), first time you asked someone to dance, first time you gave someone flowers or a "romantic" gift.

Commitments: first car purchase, engagement/marriage, first apartment, first roommate, mortgage, hair color change.

Arrivals (and sometimes losses): pets, older relatives, friends, teachers, cars, and neighbors. Choose one to remember, and write about what happened and how you felt.

Your fantasy life

Many people's dreams change regularly. They also reveal a lot about you. Devote a few pages to your dreams and fantasies.

When you graduated from high school (and/or college), what did you imagine as your perfect (and most likely) future?

If money was no object and you could have three homes, where would they be, and why? When/what season would you live in each home?

If time, money, and talent were no problem, what would you be/do in a perfect world?

Let's pretend: The White House invites you to dinner. Why would they do this... what do you do-or what could you advise the President about-better than anyone else?

Who else would you want to see at the White House dinner table, who would you sit next to, and what would be served? Describe the entertainment after dinner.

If you could relive one disastrous time in your life, when would it be, and what would you change?

And... if you could relive one perfect time, when would it be and what happened then?

Assuming you could take the conveniences of modern medicine, etc., with you, what time period would you like to live in? Who would you be?

Remember when...

No matter what era you grew up in, evidence always lingers from previous times. Here are a few things to jog your memories...

The late Thirties and the Forties

Jalopies, the Depression, pin-ups, Roosevelt, Jazz, Swing, foxtrots, wireless radio, Brylcreem (a little dab 'll do ya!), Burma Shave, Bing Crosby, George Raft, Marx Brothers, Mae West, Frank Sinatra, big bands, WW II, Churchill, Hitler, television, self-service grocery stores.

The Fifties

Flying saucers, Sputnik, "keeping up with the Joneses," Queen Elizabeth II, Truman, Eisenhower, the Marshall Plan. Chesterfield cigarettes, gangs, colored refrigerators, Bakelite. Transportation: Cars with "shark fins," Studebaker, Nash Rambler, Ford Thunderbird (T-birds), Cadillac Coupe de Ville, Edsel, Vespa motor scooter.

Transistor radios, vapor trails from jet airplanes, bowling, skating rinks, and the juke box. Lilt permanent waves, Alpha-Bits cereal, motels, Disneyland, Lustre-Crème Shampoo, Breck shampoo, plastic flowers and fruit. French poodles. Nylon! Cuffed ("turned up") blue jeans, bobby sox, poodle skirts, pedal pushers, sneakers, and haircuts with a "DA." Stretch ski pants.

Movies: The African Queen, Ben Hur, The Ten Commandments, South Pacific, Oklahoma, The Caine Mutiny, The Wild One, Blackboard Jungle, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Jimmy Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Debbie Reynolds, Doris Day, Bobby Darin, Sandra Dee. **TV:** Howdy Doody Show, I Love Lucy, Phil Silvers, My Little Margie, Leave it to Beaver, The Mickey Mouse Club, Dick Clark. Dave Garroway on the Today Show. **Rock 'n' Roll:** Elvis, Buddy Holly, Bill Haley, Cliff Richards, Eddie Cochran, the Big Bopper.

The Sixties

JFK, Jackie Kennedy, shift dresses, mantillas, pillbox hats, white gloves, the Bomb, Cold War, Radio Free Europe, bomb shelters, Martin Luther King, Civil Rights, LBJ. Chubby Checker and the Twist. The Beach Boys, Jan & Dean. Folk music.

Bouffant hairstyles, teasing, Dippity Do, rattailed combs, Tangee lipstick, mascara (cake or brush on), fake pierced earrings. Flintstones, Jetsons, Avengers, Star Trek, Man from UNCLE, Monkees, Hullabaloo, Where the Action Is. Hair, the musical. Beatles' White Album. Head shops. Double knit fabrics. Pantyhose. Janis Ian. Judy Collins.

Silly Putty, superballs, Batman and Robin, the Green Hornet, Mary Poppins, Sean Connery as James Bond. A Hard Day's Night, Georgie Girl. John, Paul, George and Ringo. Rolling Stones, Dave Clark Five, Bob Dylan. Joan Baez. Janis Joplin.

Andy Warhol, Op Art, Pop Art. Mary Quant, Yardley cosmetics, Jean Shrimpton, Twiggy, Rudi Gernreich, gogo boots, Mondrian dresses, paper dresses, the Byrds' tinted half glasses, and Carnaby Street. Hot pants, topless swimsuits, streakers, maxi skirts, mini skirts, bell bottoms. Flower Power. Freaks. Partridge Family, Brady Bunch.

Woodstock, acid, Wavy Gravy, Hendrix. Deep Purple. Crosby, Stills, and Nash. The Who. Women's Lib. Grateful Dead. Dr. John, the Night Tripper. Sly and the Family Stone. Communes. Peace demonstrations. Tear gas. Joan Baez and Mimi Farina. Leary v. Letvin. Bose speakers. Volkswagens. Yellow submarine.

and, a little of The Seventies:

Heart. Bachman-Turner Overdrive. Banana Splits (cartoons), George of the Jungle. Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. Disney World. Bruce Lee. Disaster movies. Inflation. Nixon, Watergate, and then Ford. Gas shortages. Jaws. Star Wars. Designer jeans. Candies' platform shoes. Calvin Klein. Preppy Handbook. Izod shirts.

Genealogy for Your Journal

When you roll up your sleeves and start documenting your past and your ancestry in your journal, you may want to use genealogical resources for information.

I highly recommend this! Genealogy has been one of my favorite hobbies for nearly 30 years, and it's always a challenge and fun, too.

When you understand your ancestors' experiences and your heritage, sometimes the pieces seem to fall into place and your own life will make more sense.

The following notes are taken from my more formal genealogy classes. I specialize in Irish and Irish-American ancestry, so you'll see those references in the notes.

However, these resources apply to everyone who is tracing their family tree, regardless of nationality or background.

How to discover your family tree

Start with your parents. For them, and for every American or immigrant ancestor, find out:

Birth

- Full legal name at birth
- Where he/she was born: town, county, state
- The names of the parents as appear on the Birth Certificate, and what it says about their birthplaces

Marriage

- When and where the marriage took place: church/office, town, county state
- Who officiated at the marriage, and the witnesses
- The couple's names on the Marriage Certificate
- If provided, how long they lived at the current address on the Certificate
- Any info about their parents, especially birthplaces

Death

Yes, this sounds morbid but you'll get used to this. Death certificates tell you a lot of things, such as: place and date of birth, and parents' names and their birthplaces.

However, death certificates are notorious for being inaccurate. They can still give you good starting points for earlier research about that ancestor.

Using the information on these certificates, you'll be able to compare the information on them

Using Birth-related records:

Christening records (at the church) may give names of godparents, who are often relatives too.

Birth announcements (kept in newspaper archives) may list living relative. You can count ahead to establish likely years when you'll find records for Confirmation, or Bar/Bas Mitzvah.

And, you'll know a year and address where a person was, to help when you're searching census records.

Marriage-related records:

Marriage announcements (in newspaper archives) will often list biographical info about the parents.

Church records can provide personal, editorial entries by an otherwise-bored priest or minister...really! You can count ahead to figure when the first child may have been born. You'll know when and where to look, for the census records related to the couple.

Death-related records

Birth info is usually on the certificate, so you can then search for the person's birth certificate. Parents' names are often on the cert, and where they were born

Cemetery is noted on the certificate, so you'll know where to visit to see info on the headstone (may differ from the death certificate, and Irish immigrants' stones often say where they were born).

Note: Someone experiencing grief gave the info on a Death Certificate. So, this info may be less reliable than on any other record. Still, it's a good place to start. Last place of residence is noted, and how long they were there. This helps with census searches. Doctors and/or hospitals may still have records. My own Irish great-grandfather died in the early 1920s in a hospital, and they still had his file in the late 1970s.

I keep mentioning U.S. Census records because, particularly from the last half of the 19th century forward, you can find all kinds of information there. In some years, the records included parents' place of birth, year the individual arrived in the US (so you can check ship records), whether he/she became a citizen (so you can then get their citizenship papers with more info), military notes (military records can be wonderful), and who else was in the house. The latter can be a

surprise, sometimes, when you didn't realize that an immigrant ancestor lived in the US for a few years.

Sooner or later, you're going to have enough information about your immigrant ancestor, to go to foreign records. However, you don't necessarily need to travel for that.

For example, many Irish records are already online. Some Irish records can only be accessed by mail, which you can do more easily from your home, where you have an address! And some Irish records are on CD-ROM, on microfiche, on microfilm, and/or in books that you can peruse at your leisure in your local library.

Which leads to the next subject: Where you can find US and immigrant records, close to your home.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints maintains one of the world's largest genealogical libraries, with all kinds of government and personal family histories. Their massive library in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah, is legendary and unsurpassed for general research. It's also free and open to the public.

Even better: Except for some of their books, you have access to the same films, fiche, and CD-ROMs as they have in Salt Lake City, at your local "Mormon" family history library. You don't have to be a member of the church (most researchers aren't) and they won't try to convert you. Their libraries are staffed by volunteers.

Their records include many from foreign countries as well, not just American and Canadian records. For more info on how to find & use one of these libraries, visit their website, which has many of these same records online: www.familysearch.org

Another wonderful resource is the US National Archives. Look for the nearest one online, or in the blue pages of your community phone directory. They are not in all

communities. They have the full US Census, Immigration & Naturalization records, and some military records that can be helpful.

Your own public library can be helpful, too. Ask your Reference Librarian for information about borrowing US government records (such as the Census) for research in the library.

Online, www.cyndislist.com is the single largest resource for helpful links.

And, remember that a member of your family may already have many of the records that you're looking for. Genealogy is a popular hobby.

Someone (or several people) in your family may also have boxes of old family photos. If you find some, try to get an older member of the family to identify the people in the pictures.

Don't stop there! If you have photos in albums or boxes, be sure that they're labeled for future generations.

Write on the back of photos in pencil, never with ink that may run or later bleed into the paper. And, write down relationships. Many photo albums list the names of the people in the pictures, but don't identify who they were in relation to the rest of the family. If it's a cousin (on which side?) or neighbor, say so.

If you want to pursue this as a hobby, there are many free blank family tree forms and record sheets online. At www.familysearch.org you can also download a free genealogy program, Personal Ancestral File (PAF), which is pretty much the "industry standard" among genealogists. Family Tree Maker is another very popular program, but it is commercial and must be purchased for use.

For more information about personal journaling and basic genealogy, be sure to visit my website: www.aisling.net

Workshop Ideas

I have taught "Journaling Your Past" regularly since the 1980s and it is always a great success. Here are a few ways that you can use this workbook in classes that you teach:

This can be taught as a full-day, half-day, or weekly class. It works as well with adults as it does with teens.

Or, consider teaching it with a youth group. Ask each boy or girl to bring one older family member with them for the workshop.

This can be great fun if mom and/or dad are there, or even a grandparent. Expect lots of laughter. For example, kids are often shocked to discover that dad ever named a car. This workshop always brings families closer together.

What makes this workshop a success is open discussions in class. If everyone works quietly at his or her own desk for the entire class, the time will drag.

Instead, when people have been writing for 20 minutes or so, take a break. Get everyone up from their chairs and serve a soft drink or snacks. Ask a few leading questions to get people talking. Ask if everyone really did have a 'scary dog' in their neighborhood. (Almost everyone did.) Or, ask what their favorite TV commercial was, from childhood.

If you own old books or if your public library has some, bring books about the 50s, 60s, and 70s to class with you. These are usually good for bringing back memories.

Novelty shops such as Spencer Gifts often carry nostalgia items. Specialty candy shops sometimes feature classic chewing gums and candies, too. These can be

great visual aids to spark happy memories. Yard sales are also good resources for teaching aids.

This workshop works well as an art or scrapbooking class. If your students have photocopies of family photos (not original photos, please), they may enjoy creating collages that tell a story of their family or personal history.

Or, include some geography with this class. Print out maps of your town, state, or the entire country. Give a copy to each student, and they can chart their own movements, or their ancestors' travels. If they know their family's history and where their immigrant ancestors landed in this country, it can be fascinating to trace the paths of several generations across the U.S. or throughout other countries.

For many groups, especially Scouts (working on merit badges) and church groups, this workshop can be a great introduction to genealogy.

Mostly, teach this class as something that is fun. If it stops being fun, your students are likely to put their notes away when they get home, and not work on them again, despite their best intentions.

Keep the writing segments short. When people start to look tired, take a break or quit for the day.

If this is taught over a period of weeks, it's best to break the material up into four or six segments, and conduct class once or twice a week for two-hour periods.

This is a universally well-liked class, and if you keep it fun, you'll be asked to teach it again and again, and enjoy it more every time!