

How to Create a Legacy Story

Photographs fade over time and, sadly, many are irreplaceable so they cannot continue to be shared. The same is true for our memories. According to the National Archives, “it only takes three generations to lose pieces of an oral family history.” However, by writing a legacy story, you can permanently document your personal experiences and accomplishments and your ethnic and cultural heritage. You can also share the lessons you have learned along the way.

You are best qualified to determine how you want to be thought of now and remembered later. Moreover, by taking the time to record and share your story—and the motivation behind your decisions and transitions—you gain a sense of what you have done already and a better idea of what you want to do next. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard summed it up well: “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

Everybody has a story to tell; you do not have to be a celebrity or public figure to create yours. Your life is more interesting and meaningful than you think, and you should record your story while you can still do so. Everybody has survived some circumstance or overcome some obstacle—information that can be passed on to inspire others and, importantly, help them learn who they are and where they came from.

It is never too soon to begin preserving your legacy, a term that usually refers to a gift of property or money distributed through a will. But you own a greater asset: your life’s experiences and lessons learned. You are a link that connects your family’s past to its future generations. Very few of us have the time, energy or talent to handle telling our entire life story, but we do know what parts are most significant to us and of value to our family. Sharing your life story is one of the greatest—and least expensive—gifts you can leave your family. **Students helping seniors create their legacy story receive a free legacy story for themselves.**

Notes on getting started.

Creating a legacy story through Americans All is not hard. Our legacy preservation initiative includes templates and tutorials to guide you through the process. And you may be surprised that there are people around you who, when you reach out to them, will be excited to help you create your story. Whether you are writing your story yourself or helping someone else to do so, consider these tips.

- There is no one correct format for your story. It can be told chronologically or start with a specific event. It can be a memoir, a tribute, an autobiography, an ethical will or an archive of information. It can focus on as many aspects of your life as you choose or share particular experiences you believe made you who you are today.
- You can change the format of your story as you proceed simply by rearranging the paragraphs and adding new transition sentences.
- You do not need to include everything you did or everyone you know or interacted with in your story. Some things are better left unsaid or unknown.
- Your story can be a combination of written text, images and audio-visual recordings.

- Your story can include hyperlinks to other websites to provide additional (e.g., historical) information tied to an event in your life.
- Your story does not have to be completed in one creative session; it can be saved in draft form while you continue to work on it.
- After your story has been published, it can be updated at any time, with previous editions archived.

How to begin the process.

- Go to www.americansall.org/heritage-honor-roll and scan some of the published legacy stories. At least one or two stories should offer inspiration and guidance on how you may want to structure your story.
- Identify topics of interest to you: a hobby, a job, travel/vacations, volunteer work, etc.
- If you plan on starting chronologically, you may want to consider events at various times in your life.
- Once you have preliminarily decided on how you want to begin, start writing a paragraph or two on the most important topics.
- Collect images to enhance your story. You will need a headshot and plenty of photographs to create—or have someone help you create—your photo montage.
- Collect more images than you think you can possibly use and have them scanned into a folder on your computer's desktop, so they will be available when you need them.
- Look for family videos you may have and have them prepared to add to your story. Instructions on how to do so this are provided in one of our tutorials.
- Look for any logos you want to use—religious, military, education, work or volunteer based. Make sure that you have permission to use the logos and that they are of good quality.

Questions and topics to help guide the thought process.

Your early life: Your parents and biological family; special games and toys; where you lived; where you went to school; favorite pet(s); who made the greatest impact on you growing up; what was it like to grow up in your household and how this may be different from the one you created when you moved out; holiday events; vacations; how you learned to drive and your first car; what you now realize you would like to have done differently and how that impacted your life today; how you decided at that time on a career; what changed when you went to middle and high school.

The next level: What followed high school; have you changed careers and why; how you met your spouse or significant other; details of your wedding or honeymoon; what was or were your “ah-ha” moments or events that changed the path of your life; what part of your military or volunteer service was most meaningful to you and how did it change your life; what you may have learned from your children or friends as you matured; how you deal with your faith; what does wealth mean to you and has that changed since childhood and what lessons would you like to pass on regarding this topic; have you had an emotional health or physical crisis and how did it change your life.

If you are doing an interview, here is a list of questions you should ask. The list may also be useful if you are creating your own story.

First and last name

Birthdate and place

Parents' names and siblings and background information on them

Ethnic and/or cultural background

Pets growing up

Schools attended

Favorite activity as a child and as an adult

What type of music do you like and which musician, instrument or song?

What is your favorite food and did that change as you grew up?

Are (were) you married, spouse's name and how and where you met?

Do you have children or grandchildren and names and ages?

Where have you traveled?

What do (did) you do for a living?

What was the greatest success and/or mistake you made during your life or career?

How did you spend your first paycheck?

What are your favorite memories?

What is your favorite place to visit?

What is the biggest sacrifice you ever made?

What habit do you have that up to now, nobody knows about (and is now safe to discuss)?

What are the two or three things you most care about?

What advice did your parents give you and did you follow it? Also, what was the one (or two) things your parents did that really made you angry?

If you could roll the clock back, where would you be and what might you have done differently and what would you have avoided?

What would be the one thing (or two) that you would want your children or grandchildren to remember about you?

What is (was) your most prized possession?

What things bring you the most pleasure?

Sources: *Reasons Why Writing Remains a Critical Skill for Success*, Tomas Laurinavicius, a lifestyle entrepreneur and blogger; *The Importance of Good Writing Skills in the Workplace*, CareerAddict, a career- and success-focused blog; and *The Importance of Good Writing Skills*, a blog created by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D., and Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

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