

How to Collect Great Stories from your Family

This guide provides some hints and tips on how to get stories that you can then enter into Zahmoo[®]. It includes an extensive collection of questions to help you start to get people to share their experiences, encounters and adventures—their stories.

It is principally based around working one-on-one with a family member, in an almost ‘interview’ type situation. Future Zahmoo reference material and blogs will focus on how best to capture stories in group settings, how to capture other forms of stories (i.e. written, video), as well as how to best capture your own stories.

This guide is broken down into three main sections:

- **Getting started** – how to set up a session to give yourself the best chance of success
- **Story Questions** – an extensive list of story elicitation questions focusing on the key areas of our lives (e.g. our childhood, family, work etc.)
- **Hints and tips** – providing some advice on how to undertake a session like this, giving yourself the best chance to be successful in capturing stories to put in Zahmoo.

Getting Started

Before you begin there are a number of things you should consider to give yourself the best chance to collect stories.

We don’t believe you can rush these sessions, so ensure you have a decent enough amount of time to spend focusing on collecting stories, and the other person is aware and comfortable with the amount of time you may need. It may be that you may need to have a number of sessions.

You also need to make sure you choose a location which affords you the privacy you want to be able to do this, free from distractions, where the person feels comfortable and can relax.

Story Questions

Once you have got a decent amount of time set aside and chosen the best location you are ready to start asking questions to get stories. This section contains a series of questions that you can use to get people to tell your stories.

We recommend that you focus on a small number of areas in any one session and choose no more than say five questions which resonate with you, and you think will give you the best chance for the person to tell you their stories. The idea is not to ask every question listed here, but choose a small number that you think will get your good stories.



Childhood

- When and where were you born? How did your family come to live there?
- Were you named after anyone? If so who, and why?
- Where did your family originate?
- What is your earliest childhood memory?
- Who lived in your house with you as a child?
- Who visited your house when you were young?
- How did your family make its living while you were growing up?
- Are there things at school you are particularly proud of?
- Can you describe a person or situation from your childhood that had a profound effect on the way you look at life?
- Can you describe the first classroom that you remember?
- Did you ever run away from home? If you did, why did you do it?
- Did you get into trouble when you were growing up? What was the worst thing you did?
- Did you have a nickname? How'd you get it?
- Did you receive an allowance? How much? Did you save your money or spend it?
- How many brothers and sisters do you have? When and where were they born? What memories do you have of each of them from when you were growing up?
- Is there a particular birthday memory that stands out?
- Were you involved in sports, music, drama, or other extra-curricular activities at school?
- What childhood memory still makes you laugh (or makes you cringe) even today?
- What kind of games did you play growing up?
- What kinds of things did your family spend money on?
- What special kinds of food did your mother give you when you were sick?
- What was your typical routine when you came home from school?
- What were you scared of as a kid?
- What were your favourite books?
- What were your favourite foods as a child? Was your mother a good cook?
- What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up? Did any of them personally affect your family?
- When did you really come a gutser as a kid?
- When you were young, did you collect anything? If you did, what was it and why did you get into that?



- Where did you go when you wanted to hide?
- Where was your favourite place to visit when you were a child?

Home and Hometown

- Where did you grow up? What is it a farm, suburb, or city?
- What was your first home like?
- Do you remember any of the rooms in which you slept as a child?
- If your family moved, where to, and why?
- What do you recall about your neighbours?
- Who did you hang out with when you were growing up?
- When was the last time went back to where you grew up? What did you notice?

Work

- Can you remember your first job and how you got it? What did you do with your first pay packet?
- What was your first boss like? What did you learn from them?
- Did something that didn't work out turn out to be a blessing in disguise?
- Did you ever get something important finished in the nick of time?
- Did you ever have to go back to the drawing board with your career?
- Have you ever had to do work that you disliked?
- Have you ever seen positive changes happen as a result of your work?
- Have you ever challenged the 'powers that be'?
- Tell me about a time when you took a real risk. Did it pay off?
- What did you put the kibosh on that you wished you hadn't?
- When did you spend a lot of time doing something at work that didn't really get off the ground?
- When have felt that you dodged a bullet at work?
- When have you felt like an idiot at work?
- When were you really inspired by what was going on around you at work?
- Tell me about a moment when you felt really proud to be part of something at work.



Family - Grandparents

- How did your grandparents meet?
- Tell me what you remember of your grandparents. Were they strict? Were they religious? Did they laugh easily? What did they look like? What kinds of activities did you do with them?
- What is the image of each of your grandparent that persists?
- What is your most vivid memory of your grandparents?
- Are you comfortable talking about your grandparents death? How did they die? What do you remember about the funeral/s?

Family - Parents

- Do you remember any of the stories your parents used to tell you when you were a kid?
- Do you remember any songs that your parents used to sing?
- How did your Mum and Dad meet?
- Do you remember a time when Mum or Dad went through the roof over something you did?
- Describe a typical family dinner. Did you all eat together as a family? Who did the cooking? What were your favourite foods?
- Who was more strict: your mother or your father? Can you give me an example of this?

Family - Love and Marriage

- What did you think the very first time that you saw, spoke with, or met your future spouse?
- What do you recall about your first date?
- What are some of your earliest memories of your spouse?
- What gifts or tokens of romance do you remember getting from, or giving to, your future spouse?
- When was the moment you knew they were "the one"?
- Tell me how you "popped the question," or how it was popped to you.
- What made you choose the place where you celebrated your wedding?
- Describe your wedding – where did it take place? Did you have a reception and where was that? Who was at your wedding? Are there any stories you want to share from your wedding?
- Which friends did you choose to stand with you as you and your spouse shared your vows?
- What was the first big purchase you made with your partner?
- Describe the house you lived in when you were first married.
- What was something your spouse has done that just blew you away?
- Do you remember getting a good earbashing from your partner? What was the story?
- Tell me about buying your first house together



Family - Children

- How did you find out you were going to be a parent for the first time?
- Why did you choose your children/s name/s?
- What is something funny or embarrassing one of your children said at an early age that you'll never forget?
- In what ways do you think your children are similar to your parents? In what ways do you think they are different? What about you and your spouse?
- What is your proudest moment as a parent?

Wider Family

- Who was the best cook in the family? What is your favourite dish of theirs?
- Who were your favourite cousins?
- Are there any stories about famous or infamous relatives in your family?

Hobbies, Holidays and Pets

- Did you ever go away on holiday? Where? Who went with you? What did you do for fun?
- Did you have pets while growing up? If so, what kinds and what were their names? Why were they called that?
- Are there any special heirlooms, photos, bibles or other memorabilia that have been passed down in your family? When were they passed down, and by whom?
- What's your most boring interest you have, and when have you really bored someone with it?
- Have you ever taken a "dream" vacation, and if so, how did it turn out?
- Do you have any furniture that was passed down to you? Where was the furniture originally? How did you come to get it?
- What are your favourite sports team? How did you come to support them?
- Have you met people while traveling that have become great friends?
- Do you have any jewellery passed down to you? Who wore the jewellery? Why was it given? Did it mark a special occasion?
- Have any recipes been passed down to you from family members?
- How did your family celebrate Christmas when you were young?
- What stories about your pets do you remember the best?
- What traditions have been passed down in your family?
- When have you felt proudest of your hobbies?



Best and Worst

- Adventures you will never forget?
- Are people amazed by anything you do or about you? If yes, what?
- Can you recall a really close shave?
- Can you share a time when you were a real klutz?
- Did you ever get off on the wrong foot with someone who then became a good friend?
- Have you ever been at death's door?
- Have you ever done something brave?
- What are you most proud of?
- What has been the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- What's the absolute best gift you ever received?
- What's your biggest stuff up?
- What's the best compliment you ever received?
- What's the most memorable phone call you've ever received?
- What's the one thing you've always wanted but still don't have?
- When did you think you looked your best?
- When have you been caught out doing your most repulsive bad habit?
- When in life have you felt most alone?
- When was the last time you cried?
- Ever had the chance to be a good Samaritan?

Other Good Questions to Ask

- Ever felt you were living in the lap of luxury?
- Have you ever had a moment when you were surprised by the skills you have or dismally lack?
- Ever had to deal with the long arm of the law?
- Politicians - when have you felt angry, let down or felt like giving them a standing ovation?
- Have you ever been green with envy?
- Can you think of a time you had to really watch your "p's and q's"?
- What birthday were you least enthusiastic about? Why?
- What has been the most favourite concert you have been to? Who did you go with?



- Have you ever let the cat out of the bag?
- What have you thrown away in your life that you wish you hadn't?
- When was the last time you really through a wobbly about something?
- When was the last time you stayed up all night? What were you doing?

Hints and Tips

Don't:

Ask very personal or emotionally demanding questions before rapport has developed and the storyteller is comfortable and relaxed

Be a slave to your questions. Often someone will tell you a story which will prompt new questions and avenues of investigation. Just be curious

Stop listening. There is nothing worse than asking a question that has already been answered in a previous story

Let periods of silence fluster you. If they pause they may just be thinking or remembering; it can take time to call up memories of events they haven't thought of in years. Instead of jumping right in with the next question each time there is a pause, give them a little time

Interrupt a good story because you have thought of a new question or want to clarify a point. Instead, jot down your questions so you will remember to ask them later. Even if your subject gets off track a little, let them finish their story before steering them back on topic

Challenge stories or accounts that you think might be inaccurate. The person may just have a different perspective, and a challenge may put them on the defensive or even shut down the entire session

Pursue a subject that the person obviously doesn't want to talk about. Respect their wishes and move on

Do:

Let your storyteller know that you will be capturing their stories and entering them into Zahmoo

Be yourself. If you're relaxed, then it's more likely the person will be relaxed as well. Don't worry about fumbling a few questions or "doing it right." This will only show that you're human

Begin an interview by asking a few closed-ended questions. These are questions that require specific answers such as "Yes," "No," or "I was ten years old". These can help put the person at ease

Then start with a question or topic that you know will elicit a story, such as a story you have heard them tell in the past, or tell a story of your own to get them started

Use your prepared questions as a guideline, but don't be afraid to let the person go off on a tangent

Follow up. For any event or account brought up, follow up with additional questions to find out not only what the person did, but also what they thought and felt about what happened

Show them that you care about them and their stories



Keep your questions in day-to-day language. Use the language the storyteller would use in their everyday speech

Ask more about something if it interests you. Sometimes your storyteller may need to know that it's okay to talk about a certain topic. Let them know it is by saying, "tell me more about that"

Ask one question at a time. When you ask a series of questions at once, chances are the person will only answer the first or the last. Keep your questions brief, and present them one at a time

Give them feedback that the stories they are telling you are great and exactly what you are looking for

Show you are listening and interested in what they are saying. Maintain eye contact and really listen as they speak. Show interest by leaning forward, nodding, using appropriate facial expressions, or using words of encouragement

Look for themes. A good interviewer not only elicits stories, but also extends the stories by exploring themes. For example, if the person has just told a story about a childhood friend that they got into trouble with, you might pursue the theme by asking, "Were there other times you two got in trouble?" If that question leads to a series of stories about a series of raucous adventures, you might eventually ask, "Do you two still get into trouble?"

Remember to enjoy yourself

When you are done, be sure to thank them for their time

