



Drawing Stories Out of **Someone You Love**

*A guide to asking the questions that unlock
the stories your family needs to hear*

From the team at MyStories FOREVER Vault
www.mystoriesforevervault.com

Why This Guide Matters

Someone you love has stories you've never heard. Not because they're hiding them, but because nobody has ever asked in the right way.

Most of us assume we know our family's stories. We've heard the Greatest Hits — the funny anecdotes, the well-worn tales that come out at every gathering. But beneath those familiar stories are layers of memory, emotion, and experience that have never been spoken aloud. Not because they're secret, but because no one created the space for them to surface.

Drawing stories out of someone — really drawing them out, with depth and feeling and honesty — is a skill. It's not the same as having a chat. It's not the same as asking a list of questions. It's closer to what happens when a great conversation makes you say things you didn't even know you were thinking.

| *The best interviewer isn't the one who asks the most questions. It's the one who creates the safest space.*

This guide will help you become that person for your family. Whether you're sitting down with an ageing parent, a grandparent, an aunt, or a family friend, the techniques that follow will help you unlock stories that would otherwise be lost.

And here's the quiet urgency behind this guide: *every day, stories disappear*. Memories fade. People leave. The stories your mother hasn't told you yet — the ones about her childhood, her fears, her proudest moments, the things she learned the hard way — they're still in there, waiting for someone to ask.

Be the one who asks.

...

1. Before You Begin

A great story interview starts well before you sit down together. A little preparation makes an enormous difference — not to the questions you'll ask, but to the comfort and trust of the person you're interviewing.

Have the Conversation About the Conversation

Don't ambush someone with an interview. Let them know what you'd like to do, and more importantly, *why*. "I'd love to sit down with you and hear some of your stories — not the ones I already know, but the ones I've never thought to ask about. I want to make sure they're preserved for the family."

This framing matters. It tells them they're valued. It tells them this isn't a test. And it gives them time to start thinking — which means when you do sit down, memories will already be surfacing.

Choose the Right Setting

Where you sit matters more than you think. The best interviews happen in places where the person feels at home and at ease. Their kitchen table. Their favourite chair. A familiar café. Avoid formal settings — anything that feels like an office or a stage will change the energy.

If possible, choose a place connected to their stories. A family home, a garden they tend, a room full of their things. Surroundings trigger memories. The bookshelf behind them might spark a story you'd never have thought to ask about.

Think About Timing

Don't try to capture everything in one sitting. Two or three sessions of 45 minutes to an hour will yield far better material than a single three-hour marathon. Energy fades. Concentration drifts. And some of the best stories arrive *between* sessions — “I've been thinking since we last talked, and I remembered something...”

Time of day matters too. Many older people are sharper and more energetic in the morning. Some are more relaxed and open in the evening. Ask them when they'd prefer.

Bring a Trigger

Old photographs, letters, objects, or even a particular song can unlock memories that questions alone won't reach. If you have access to family photos, bring a selection — not to work through methodically, but to have on hand if conversation stalls or you want to explore a particular era.

Preparation Checklist

Let them know what you'd like to do and why. Choose a comfortable, familiar setting. Plan for 45–60 minutes (not longer). Bring a few photos or objects as memory triggers. Have water or tea available — a warm drink relaxes people. Make sure your recording device is charged, tested, and unobtrusive.

...

2. The Art of Asking

The questions you ask are important, but *how* you ask them matters just as much. The goal isn't to conduct a questionnaire. It's to start a conversation that goes deeper than either of you expected.

Open Doors, Don't Point Fingers

The most powerful questions are open-ended — they create space for the storyteller to go where the memory takes them, rather than channelling them toward the answer you expect.

🔒 Closed vs 🔓 Open Questions

You: “Was your childhood happy?” → “What do you remember most about being a kid?”

You: “Did you like your first job?” → “What was it like walking in on your first day?”

You: “Were you close to your father?” → “Tell me about a moment with your father that’s stayed with you.”

You: “Was the war hard?” → “What do you remember about how things changed when the war started?”

Notice the pattern: closed questions invite “yes” or “no.” Open questions invite a scene, a memory, a feeling. The word “*tell me*” is one of the most powerful phrases you can use. It’s an invitation, not an interrogation.

Follow the Emotion, Not the Timeline

This is perhaps the most important principle in this entire guide. When someone is telling a story and their voice changes — when they slow down, when they look away, when they laugh unexpectedly, when their eyes fill — **that’s where the real story is**. Follow it.

Most people instinctively move on when emotion surfaces. They change the subject, or ask the next question on their list, or say “That must have been hard” and close the door. Don’t. Stay with it. Gently ask:

- “What was that like for you?”
- “How did that feel at the time?”
- “What were you thinking in that moment?”
- “Take your time — I’d love to hear more about that.”

The willingness to sit with emotion is what separates a surface conversation from a meaningful one. You’re not pushing. You’re saying, “This matters. I’m here. Keep going.”

Use Sensory Prompts

When a memory feels flat or general, sensory questions can unlock vivid, specific recall. The senses bypass the part of the brain that summarises and go straight to the part that re-experiences.

- “**What did it smell like in there?**”
- “**Can you describe what you could see from where you were standing?**”
- “**Do you remember what the weather was like?**”

- “What sounds do you remember?”
- “What were you wearing? What were they wearing?”

These questions might feel unusual, but they produce extraordinary results. A person who can't remember much about their wedding day might suddenly recall the smell of the flowers, and from that, an entire scene unfolds.

The Magic Question

When a story feels complete but you sense there's more, try: “Is there something about that you've never told anyone?” You'll be surprised how often the answer is yes. People carry untold stories not because they're ashamed, but because nobody ever made it safe enough to share them.

• • •

3. The Power of Silence

This is the skill that transforms everything, and it's the one most people find hardest.

When someone finishes speaking, don't immediately respond. Wait. Let the silence sit. Count to five in your head if you need to.

Here's what happens in that silence: the storyteller keeps thinking. They go deeper. They often follow up their own answer with something more honest, more specific, more vulnerable than what they first offered. The best material in any interview almost always arrives in the seconds after the person thinks they've finished.

Why We Rush to Fill Silence

We're socially conditioned to keep conversations flowing. Silence feels awkward. We worry the other person is uncomfortable. So we jump in with the next question, or we offer reassurance, or we share our own story. Every one of these instincts, though well-meaning, closes a door that was about to open.

How to Use Silence Well

- **After they finish, wait.** Simply nod gently and maintain warm eye contact. Most people will continue.
- **Use soft encouragers.** A quiet “mmm” or “go on” or simply nodding can keep the space open without filling it.
- **Resist the urge to relate.** If they say something that reminds you of your own experience, hold it. This is their moment, not yours. You can share your story later.

- **Don't rescue them from emotion.** If they tear up, don't immediately hand them a tissue and change the subject. A gentle "Take your time" is enough. Tears aren't a problem to solve — they're a sign that you've reached something real.

Silence isn't empty. It's where the deeper stories live. Your job is to make it safe enough for them to surface.

What Silence Looks Like in Practice

You: "What do you remember about the day you left home?"

Mum: "Oh, not much really. I packed my things and Dad drove me to the station. It was fine."

You: [Nods gently. Waits. Doesn't speak.]

Mum: "...Actually, I remember he didn't say anything the whole drive. Not a word. And when we got there, he carried my suitcase to the platform and then just stood there. I think that was the only time I ever saw him not know what to say."

That second response is the real story. It would never have surfaced if the interviewer had immediately asked the next question.

...

4. Going Deeper Without Pushing

The surface answer is almost never the full story. Most people offer a summary first — a tidy, safe version of what happened. Your job is to gently invite them below the surface, without making them feel interrogated.

The Layering Technique

Think of each answer as a door. Behind it are more specific memories, feelings, and details. You open those doors not by asking harder questions, but by showing genuine curiosity about what they've already shared.

Layer 1: The Summary

"We moved around a lot when I was young."

Layer 2: The Specific

You: "Which move do you remember most?"

"Probably the one to Cairns. I was about ten."

Layer 3: The Scene

You: "What do you remember about arriving?"

“The heat. Stepping off the train and the air hitting you like a wall. And the house was smaller than the one we’d left. I remember Mum standing in the kitchen and not saying anything for a really long time.”

Layer 4: The Feeling

You: “What was that moment like for you — watching her stand there?”

“I think that was the first time I realised that grown-ups didn’t always know what they were doing. She looked lost. And I remember thinking, I need to be okay with this so she can be okay.”

Four layers. Each one richer than the last. And notice: the interviewer never pushed, never challenged, never asked anything intrusive. They simply followed what was offered and asked for a little more.

Phrases That Go Deeper

- “Tell me more about that.”
- “What was going through your mind?”
- “How did that change things for you?”
- “When you think about that now, what comes up?”
- “Is there something about that experience you’ve never quite put into words?”
- “What do you wish someone had asked you about that?”

Reading the Signs

Sometimes people signal that there’s more without saying it directly. They might trail off mid-sentence, look away, change the subject abruptly, or say something like “But anyway...” or “It doesn’t matter.” These are often signs that something significant is just below the surface. A gentle “Actually, I think that does matter — would you like to talk about it?” can open doors that have been closed for decades.

⚠ Know When to Stop

Going deeper is not the same as going further than someone wants to go. If they say “I’d rather not talk about that,” respect it completely. You can always come back to it in a later session, or they may bring it up themselves once trust has deepened. Never push past a boundary. The relationship matters more than any single story.

• • •

5. When Things Get Tricky

Not every interview flows effortlessly. Here are the common challenges and how to navigate them.

“I Don’t Remember Much”

This is the most common thing you’ll hear, and it’s almost never true. What it usually means is “I don’t know where to start” or “I don’t think my memories are interesting enough.”

The fix: don’t ask about periods of time (“What was the sixties like?”). Ask about specific, concrete things:

- “Describe the kitchen in the house you grew up in.”
- “What was your teacher’s name in primary school?”
- “What did you have for dinner as a kid?”
- “What was the first thing you bought with your own money?”

Specific, small questions unlock specific, vivid memories. Once one memory surfaces, others follow. The challenge is never that they don’t have stories — it’s finding the first thread to pull.

The Greatest Hits Problem

Some people have a repertoire of well-rehearsed stories they’ve told a hundred times. These are fine, but they’re already known. Your job is to get past them to the stories underneath.

When they launch into a familiar tale, let them finish — don’t interrupt. Then ask a question about something within that story that you’ve never heard about:

“You’ve told me about the time Dad got lost in Rome before. But I’ve never asked — what was Mum doing while all this was happening? Was she worried, or was she laughing?”

Asking about the edges of a known story often reveals entirely new ones.

The Person Who Deflects With Humour

Some people use jokes to avoid vulnerability. They’ll turn every answer into a punchline. Don’t fight it — laugh with them. But after the laughter fades, try: “That’s a great story. But I’m curious — underneath the funny version, what was that really like for you?”

This works because it honours their humour while gently naming what’s happening. Most people will pause and then offer something more honest.

The Private Person

Some people are naturally reserved. They won’t offer long, emotional answers no matter how safe you make the space. That’s okay. Not everyone processes through talking.

For private people, try:

- **Objects over questions:** Hand them a photo and say, “Tell me about this.” An object gives them something to focus on other than your eyes.
- **Third person:** “What do you think your mother would say about that?” Talking about someone else’s feelings can be easier than talking about your own.
- **Writing:** Some people are more comfortable writing than speaking. Offer to give them a few questions to think about and write down in their own time.
- **Walking:** A conversation while walking side by side, rather than face to face, can feel less intense and more natural.

When Memories Conflict

You might hear a version of a story that contradicts what someone else has told you, or what you remember yourself. Resist the urge to correct. Every family holds multiple versions of its own history. Your job isn’t to establish the “true” version — it’s to capture *this person’s* truth. Later, having multiple perspectives on the same event can be one of the most fascinating things in your Vault.

...

6. Questions Worth Asking

This isn’t a list to work through. It’s a resource to dip into when conversation slows or when you want to explore a particular theme. Pick the ones that feel right for your person.

Childhood and Growing Up

- “Describe the house you grew up in — take me room by room.”
- “What was the atmosphere like at your family’s dinner table?”
- “Who was the most interesting person in your neighbourhood?”
- “What got you into trouble as a kid?”
- “What did you dream about becoming?”
- “What’s a smell that takes you straight back to childhood?”

Family and Relationships

- “Tell me about a moment with your mother that’s stayed with you.”
- “What did your parents argue about? How did they make up?”
- “Who in the family did you feel most understood by?”
- “Is there a family tradition that meant more to you than anyone realised?”

- “What’s something about your parents you only understood once you were older?”

Love and Friendship

- “Tell me about the moment you knew.”
- “What’s the hardest thing you’ve navigated together?”
- “Who’s the friend who changed your life, and how?”
- “What do you know about love now that you didn’t know at twenty?”

Work and Purpose

- “What’s the proudest you’ve ever felt at work?”
- “Was there a moment when you realised you were in the wrong job? Or the right one?”
- “Who mentored you, and what did they teach you that you still carry?”
- “If you could do your career again, what would you change? What would you keep?”

Turning Points and Lessons

- “What’s the decision that changed everything?”
- “What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever had to do?”
- “When did you feel most lost? What brought you back?”
- “What’s something you failed at that taught you the most?”
- “Is there something you forgave that was hard to forgive?”

Wisdom and Legacy

- “What do you know now that you wish you’d known at my age?”
- “What do you most want the grandchildren to understand about you?”
- “Is there a family story you’re worried might be lost?”
- “What are you most proud of — not achieved, but who you became?”
- “What’s the most important thing you’d want to say to someone reading this in fifty years?”

• • •

7. The Practical Side

Recording

If you can, record the conversation — audio at minimum, video if they're comfortable with it. But **make the recording as invisible as possible**. A phone propped quietly on the table is far less intrusive than a camera on a tripod. Once people forget they're being recorded, they become themselves again.

Always ask permission first: “Do you mind if I record this? It’s just so I don’t miss anything.” Most people agree readily. If they don’t, take written notes instead — but write up the full stories as soon as possible afterwards, while the details are fresh.

Taking Notes

Even if you're recording, keep a notepad handy. Jot down follow-up questions as they occur to you, rather than interrupting. You might also note non-verbal moments — “Mum laughed here” or “long pause, looked at the window” — that a transcript won't capture.

After the Session

Write up your impressions within 24 hours. What surprised you? What moved you? What stories do you want to follow up on next time? These notes will be invaluable when you come to add the stories to the Vault. They'll also help you prepare better questions for the next session.

Multiple Sessions

The best interviews unfold over time. Each session builds trust. The first session is often the most polished and guarded. By the third session, you'll hear things that would never have surfaced on day one. Plan for at least two or three sessions, and let the person know there's no rush.



The Tea Principle

Always have a cup of tea (or coffee, or whatever they prefer) in hand. It sounds trivial, but a warm drink creates comfort, gives idle hands something to hold, and provides natural pauses for sipping that double as thinking time. The best interviews feel like conversations over tea — because they are.

• • •

8. Why This Is One of the Most Important Things You'll Ever Do

We want to be direct with you about something: the person you're thinking of interviewing may not be here forever. That's not a dramatic statement — it's simply true. And the stories they carry are irreplaceable.

When someone dies, the facts of their life can often be reconstructed — dates, places, achievements. But the *feeling* of their life — what their kitchen smelled like, what made them laugh until they cried, what they whispered to their children at bedtime, what they were afraid of, what they were proudest of — that's gone. Unless someone captured it.

You don't need professional equipment. You don't need to be a journalist. You just need a cup of tea, an afternoon, and the willingness to say: "Tell me."

The stories you capture will become some of the most precious things your family owns. Not because they're dramatic or historically significant, but because they're *real*. They're the sound of someone's voice telling you who they were and how they loved.

Every conversation you have is a rescue mission. You're saving something that would otherwise be lost forever.

Your First Session

Choose someone. Anyone in your family whose stories you want to preserve. Call them this week. Say: "I'd love to sit down with you and hear some of your stories. Not the ones I already know — the ones I've never thought to ask about. When would be good?" Then bring this guide, a cup of tea, and your genuine curiosity. That's all you need.

Happy listening.

The MyStories FOREVER Vault Team