



Teacher's Resource

Family Folklore Interview Questions – Suggestions

Every family is unique and every cultural group is unique. Every interviewer has his or her own special interests and style of interviewing. Because of this diversity, no single set of questions will successfully elicit family or ethnic folklore from all interviewees. The most useful questions will be those that you and the students develop through your knowledge of yourselves, your families and/or the cultural or other folk group(s) to which the persons you are interviewing belong.

For initial efforts you and the students may find the following lists of questions helpful. Just remember that they are meant to be suggestions, not absolute musts. Pick and choose among them as you see fit. No one interview will use all of these questions. By all means change the wording to suit your own teaching situation and students' ages and personalities. Also be sure to caution students to ask follow-up questions based on the interviewee's answer to a question before going on to another question.

1.
 - A. What do you know about your family surname? Its origin? Its meaning?
 - B. Did it undergo change coming from the Old Country to the United States?
 - C. Are there stories about the change?

2.
 - A. Are there any traditional first names, middle names or nicknames in your family?
 - B. Is there a naming tradition, such as always giving the first born son the name of his paternal grandfather?

3.
 - A. Can you sort out the traditions in your current family according to the branches of the larger family from which they have come?
 - B. Does the overall tradition of a specific grandparent seem to be dominant?

4.
 - A. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors?
 - B. How have these relatives described their lives to you?
 - C. What have you learned from them about their childhood, adolescence, schooling, marriage, work, religion, political activity, recreation?
 - D. Are they anxious or reluctant to discuss the past?
 - E. Do their memories tend to cluster about certain topics or time periods and avoid others?
 - F. Are there certain things in your family history that you would like to know, but no one will tell you?
 - G. Do various relatives tell the same stories in different ways?
 - H. How do these versions differ?

5.
 - A. Do you have a notorious or infamous character in your family's past?
 - B. Do you relish stories about him/her?
 - C. Do you feel that the infamy of the ancestor may have grown as stories passed down about him/her have been elaborated?
 - D. Would you like to think your ancestors were pirates even though down deep you know that they were honest, hard-working people?

6.
 - A. How did your parents, grandparents, and other relatives, come to meet and marry?
 - B. Are there family stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, or elopements?

7.
 - A. What historical events have affected your family? For example, how did your family survive the Depression in the 1930s?
 - B. Did conflict over some national event such as the Civil War or Vietnam cause a serious break in family relationships?

8.
 - A. Are there any stories in your family about how a great fortune was lost or almost (but not quite) made? Do you believe them? Why or why not?
 - B. Are these incidents laughed about or deeply regretted? If a fortune was made, who was responsible and how was it achieved?

9.
 - A. What verbal expressions are used in your family? If so, did they come from specific incidents?
 - B. Are there stories which explain their origin?
 - C. Is a particular member of the family especially adept at creating expressions?

10.
 - A. How are holidays celebrated in your family?
 - B. What holidays are most important -- national, religious or family?
 - C. What innovations has your family made in holiday celebrations?
 - D. Has your family created entirely new holidays?

11.
 - A. Does your family hold reunions? How often? When? Where? Who is invited? Who comes? Who are the organizers and hosts? What occurs during the reunion?
 - B. Are there traditional foods, customs, activities?
 - C. Are stories and photographs exchanged ?
 - D. Are records (oral, written, visual) kept? By whom?

12.
 - A. Have any recipes been preserved in your family from past generations?
 - B. What was their origin?
 - C. How were they passed down -- by word of mouth, by observation, by written recipes?
 - D. Are they still in use today? When? By whom?
 - E. Does grandmother's apple pie taste as good now that it's made by her granddaughter?

13.
 - A. What other people (friends, household help, etc.) have been incorporated into your family? When? Why?
 - B. Were these people given a family title such as aunt or cousin?
 - C. Did they participate fully in family activities?

14. A. Is there a family cemetery or burial plot?
 B. Who is buried with whom? Why?
 C. Who makes burial place decisions?
 D. If there are grave markers, what type of information is recorded on them?

15. A. Does your family have any heirlooms, objects of sentimental or monetary value that have been handed down? What are they?
 B. Are there stories connected with them?
 C. Do you know their origin and line of passage through the generations?
 D. If they pass to you, will you continue the tradition, sell the objects, or give them to museums?

16. A. Does your family have photo albums, scrapbooks, slides, home movies?
 B. Who created them?
 C. Whose pictures are contained in them?
 D. Whose responsibility is their upkeep?
 E. When are they displayed? To whom?
 F. Are they specially arranged and edited?
 G. Does their appearance elicit commentary? What kind? By whom?
 H. Is the showing of these images a happy occasion? Please describe an occasion you remember.

The above list was adapted from a document from the *Folklife Program - Office of American & Folklife Studies - Smithsonian Institution*. See Resources for contact information.

Family Oral History Interview Questions – Suggestions

1. What is your full name?
2. Why did your parents select this name for you?
3. Did you have a nickname?
4. When and where were you born?
5. How did your family come to live there?
6. Were there other family members in the area? Who?
7. What was the house (apartment, farm, etc.) like? How many rooms? Bathrooms? Did it have electricity? Indoor plumbing? Telephones? Were there any special items in the house that you remember?
8. What is your earliest childhood memory?
9. Describe the personalities of your family members.

10. What kind of games did you play growing up?
11. What was your favorite toy and why?
12. What was your favorite thing to do for fun (movies, beach, etc.)?
13. Did you have family chores? What were they?
14. Which was your least favorite?
15. Did you receive an allowance? How much?
16. Did you save your money or spend it?
17. What was school like for you as a child?
18. What were your best and worst subjects?
19. Where did you attend grade school? High school? College?
20. What school activities and sports did you participate in?
21. Do you remember any fads from your youth? Popular hairstyles? Clothes?
22. Who were your childhood heroes?
23. What were your favorite songs and music?
24. Did you have any pets? If so, what kind and what were their names?
25. What was your religion growing up?
26. What church, if any, did you attend?
27. Were you ever mentioned in a newspaper?
28. Who were your friends when you were growing up?
29. What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up?
30. Did any of them personally affect your family? How?
31. Describe a typical family dinner.
32. Describe any special foods or recipes used for holidays or birthday celebrations.