


The
MemoryList
QUESTION
BOOK

questions about life for lifestory writers

Denis Ledoux



Soleil Lifestory Network
E-Book Series



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QUESTION
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Introduction

Ready-made question lists can seem like notes from someone else's life. It's often better to let the list generate itself through the introspective process of the MemoryList which we advocate in our workshop text, *Turning Memories Into Memoirs*¹ and in the e-book, *Work your Memory, The MemoryList Book*. But...

We have noticed that when our participants share MemoryList items with each other in a workshop, the process stimulates their classmates to recall even more memories—sometimes in details that had hither to eluded them.

In that spirit of stimulating your recall, we offer this e-book of questions to prompt your memory and to push you to research more details of the past. This “canned” MemoryList is taken from our *Turning Memories Into Memoirs Memory Binder*.
www.turningmemories.com/bookstore.html

How to Work With This Booklet

First, linger with the questions. How do they stimulate your memory? Where do they take you? What new questions do they give rise to?

When I was
younger
I could
remeber
anything
whether it
happened
or not.

—Mark Twain

1. *Turning Memories Into Memoirs, A Handbook for Writing Lifestories*
by Denis Ledoux. \$24.95

MemoryList Question Book

Then write the answers in enough words and phrases so that you will understand what you wrote later. Usually three to five words are enough to fix the memory so that you will make sense of it when you sit down to write. For instance do not write “hat” instead write “Aunt Jeannette’s feisty feather hat.” MemoryListing is not the time to write in long paragraphs. It is the time to take notes. The actual story writing will come later when you refer to these notes.

In doing this work, collect and confirm all the details you can from records, relatives and family tales. Be a sleuth.

If you find that a question that is asked in one section but not in another would be useful to you there, by all means use it where you need to!

The work you are doing is important. Don’t give up on it.

Good luck.

—Denis Ledoux
Lisbon Falls, Maine

MemoryList Question Book

MemoryList
Questions

*B*irth

What is your birth date?

Where were you born? State? Town?

Were you born on your due date?

Where and at what time of day or night?

What was life like for your parents around the time of your birth: their jobs, other children, where were they living?

What was happening in the world then (i.e., politics, storms, anything)?

Were you born in a hospital or at home—write all the details that are available to you.

Who was there (or in the waiting room) at the time of your birth—attending person and relatives?

What was the weather that day?

How long did the birthing last?

What was your mother's physical, emotional, spiritual attitude through it all?

Your father's?

If you were not born at home, how long did you stay in the hospital?

Well begun is half done.

—Aristotle



MemoryList Question Book

How did others react to your birth: other siblings, relatives?

Describe yourself at that time: who did people say that you looked like?

Were you thought to be especially long or chubby or or bald or “easy”?

Were many families, the first days and weeks of life are celebrated with rituals—religious or secular—to incorporate the new member into the family or group.

Were there any special words, actions, or clothing involved in these ceremonies or rituals?

Infancy & Childhood

When did you start teething, crawling, walking, talking?

What were your favorite toys, games, foods, activities?

Write the stories you have heard about yourself as you were then.

How do you feel about the way you-as-an-infant have been presented in your family stories?

Describe yourself in those years.



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What illnesses did you have?

From when does your first memory derive?

Describe that memory in detail. Be sure to include settings, actions, and any and all words you remember whether you or someone else spoke them.

Describe your siblings—physically, emotionally, intellectually.

Do the same for your parents and other significant people around you.

Where did your family live at this time? Describe the house, the town, the state, etc.

What did your parents do for work, fun, etc., at this period?

I shut my eyes in order to see.

— *Gauguin*

An Early, Important Experience

Write about an event or occurrence that you remember from when you were very young.

Tell what it was that made this experience important enough to stick in your mind.

Explore its emotional or psychological implications.

MemoryList Question Book

Perhaps you can uncover what this memory reveals about you that is typical of you even today.

Have you had these sorts of experiences again?

How did others react to this event?

How did they react to your responses to this event?

*B*efore You

Who were the oldest persons in your family when you were very young? What was the role of these person in your family?

What were some of the most striking things about him/her—looks, what he/she had done in life, his/her role in your family's life?

What effect (directly or indirectly) did that person have on you?

Realize that who you are isn't necessarily all your fault. You can blame it on your gene pool.

—*Micheal Keaton*

*G*randparents

Be sure to repeat this exercise for both sides of the family and even for other significant adults like teachers or neighbors.

What are your grandparents' names? (Be sure to mention maiden names.)

Where and when were they born?

Who were their parents?

Where did they live—name and describe the town and neighborhood.

How many siblings did they have?

What were the family circumstances—financial, emotional, etc.—at various times of your grandparents' childhoods?

Did they go to school?

Where?

What did they like about school?

Did they have any memorable teachers?

What were their early work experiences?

How and when did they meet?



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What was their courtship like?

Describe their wedding—place, clothing, guests, etc.

Did they go on a honeymoon?

Describe the various places where they lived.

Describe their home as you knew it.

Describe your grandparents physically and emotionally.

(What sorts of temperaments did they have? How did they react to things and to you?)

Describe their relationship: how did they "work" together as a couple?

What sorts of jobs did they have in their lives?

Were these jobs ones they liked?

How many children did they have?

Where are their children now?

How did your grandparents feel about where their children went, what they became, and what they were doing?

What was your grandparents' relationship to you?

Which grandparent are you most like (and in what way) and which are you least like?

How did your parents feel about these resemblances?

Describe some activities that you did together.

What values of theirs do you maintain to this day?
Describe in detail.



*P*arents

(You have already written about your parents in the section on your birth. Now fill out the picture with more details about each of their lives.)

What are your parents' full names?(Include maiden name)

Where and when were they born?

Where did they go to school and what did they study?

What training did they undergo for the work they have do or have done?

How and when did they meet?

Where have they lived?

How many siblings did they have and when was each born?

Describe your parents physically and emotionally at different times in their lives.

What sorts of temperaments do you associate with your parents?

How have they reacted—at different times of their lives—to things or to you?

What sorts of jobs have they had in their lives?

Are these jobs they have liked?

My father! I never
never
thought of
him in this way
but then, who
really knows his
father, or his
mother?
In our dramas
they play older,
supporting roles,
and we are
always center
stage, in the
limelight.

—Robertson
Davies

MemoryList Question Book

How many children have they had?

Were they married to someone else before they married each other?

Did they have children with these mates?

Are your parents divorced?

Describe what that was like for them and for you.
Did you feel abandoned, hurt, scared?

Are they now remarried?

How old were you when your parent(s) remarried?

Describe your step-parents and try to do this entire exercise for them, too. What is the relationship of each parent (and/or step-parent) to you?

Which parent are you more like—physically, emotionally, interests-wise (and in what way) and which are you less like?

In which ways are you least like your parents?

How do or did your parents or step-parents feel about these resemblances and dissimilarities?

Which of your parents' values and traditions do you maintain? Describe in detail.

Hearing family stories gives me a sense of connection, identity, and belonging. Telling them gives shape and meaning to the life of the teller.

—*Vera Rosenbluth*
writer

*B*rothers and Sisters

What are their names and when and where were they born?

Describe their births just as you described your own above.

Perhaps you can remember the births of some of your siblings—write about your feelings at the time.

Do you remember the first impression you had of them?

Describe their first year just as you did your own.

Write about some of the interactions that you have had with them—playing together, bathing together, fighting together.

Do all of your siblings live at home? If not, describe how they came to live elsewhere.

How do you feel about this?

How do you feel about them now that they are gone?

Which of your siblings are you most alike and which are you least alike?

Which do you get along with best and which do you get along least well with? Why?

Describe their mates and their children.

All the arts we practice are apprenticeship. The big art is our life.

—*M.C.Richards*

MemoryList Question Book

If any of your siblings have died, describe their deaths (illness? accident? how you learned about it, reacted/participated).

Was there a funeral? Did you attend? participate? plan it?

Did the experience bring you closer to your family? or confirm the distances?

How did your family re-form around the empty place your sibling left?

Other Family Members, Mentors and Friends

Not all the influential people in our lives are members of the nuclear family. Answer the questions above to describe any uncle, aunt, cousins, neighbors or family friends who have played a direct or indirect role in shaping your life.



Self-portrait

Write a word portrait of yourself at various ages—every few years (10?) is a good choice.

Use old photographs to prompt memories, and research facts and impressions by asking friends and relatives.

Written self-portraits (character sketches for your lifestories) can create a background that informs your awareness when you come to the story-writing stage, or be directly incorporated into a story.

For each era's "portrait" answer the following questions:

How tall were you?

Were you thin or fat?

How was your hair?

What sorts of clothing did you wear?

What were your most marked features?

How did you compare to other people your age?

How did this make you feel?

What sorts of things did you do at this age—for fun, for learning, for getting attention, for mischief, in

R eal learning
comes
about
when the
competitive
spirit has
ceased.

—*Krishnamurti*

MemoryList Question Book

order to ask for love?

What sorts of books did you read?

What games/sports did you play?

What arts did you learn—piano, dancing, painting?

What movies did you watch?

How did you typically spend time with friends?

What games/sports did you play?

Write something about your relationships to your parents and to your siblings at each of these times, too.

How do these word portraits help you to understand your life?

Is your development smooth or can you see a period when you seemed to have slowed down and others when you seemed to leap forward?



*S*chooling

Write about your first day of school.

Where was that?

Did you take a bus, walk, or go with your parents?

MemoryList Question Book

What were you wearing?

Who was your teacher?

What was she/he like?

Describe the building.

What happened when you first entered the building, the classroom?

Can you remember some activities?

Who were the other children?

How many were there?

What sorts of things did they do?

Describe your later schooling. List all the schools you have attended.

Give names and describe buildings, teachers, classmates and anyone else who was important to you.

Write about classes and activities that you enjoyed.

What did you learn that seemed important?

What would you have changed about each teacher, class, or school?

What classes did you take outside of school: dance, theater, art? Give all the details.

Did you attend camps or programs or clubs? Compare what you learned there with what you learned in school.

Did you go to college? Whether yes or no, how was



MemoryList Question Book

this decision regarded in your family? Amongst your friends?

How did you choose your college and your major?

Describe your college—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

What were some of your most important learning experiences?

Was college a significant learning experience for you?

Would you do it over again?

What would you change with hindsight?

Did you use knowledge from your college education in your work?

What was it like to leave college and go to work?

*W*ork

Describe your earliest paying jobs—babysitting, lawn mowing, gardening, clerking at a store.

How did these earliest work experiences shape attitudes for the future?



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Was work a necessity or a choice for you? Describe the circumstances.

Was work an experience of early independence for you?

How did you spend the money you earned?

What social life did work provide for you?

Did you / have you maintained friendships from work?

When and why did you change jobs?

What kinds of advancement have been open to you?
What training or education has been necessary?

Were your bosses supportive or difficult?

Was the work tedious, difficult, or satisfying?

How did your work schedule fit with the rest of your life—with schooling, family responsibilities, or other commitments such as church or clubs?

Did you find your “life’s work”—meaningful, soul-satisfying work?

How did you come to this work? Describe it in detail.
What did you do? With whom did you work?

If it was not satisfying, is there work you have always wished to do?

If income or other restrictions were not an issue, what work would you do?

What were your work conditions?

What kinds of salaries, recognition, and satisfaction,

Work keeps us from three great evils; boredom, vice and poverty.

—*Voltaire*



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advancement, disappointments, frustrations did you experience?

What values did you learn from your family and community regarding work?

What were (are) your own assumptions regarding work and what it should be in your life?

How have these assumptions helped or hindered you?

What work values have you passed on to your own children or other young people?

If you are retired, write about your decision to retire.

How old were you?

Was it your decision?

What was the reaction of other people in your life?

How did it feel to leave the structure of work?

Were you financially secure?

Emotionally prepared?

What did you do once you were retired?

If work was a source of identity, was it hard to replace it in your life?

How has it felt to be an older person?

Have health issues played a role in your retirement?

Is your spouse also retired?

How has she/he reacted to your being retired?



*M*arriage

What did your upbringing teach you to expect in a mate?

How did you meet your mate?

Describe your engagement—was it long? Short? Stormy? Content?

Describe your wedding day. Include your feelings and apprehensions.

Were your ideas about marriage compatible with those of your mate?

How were they the same and how did they differ?

Did the reality of your marriage match your expectations?

What were your first years together like?

Do you remember your first disagreements?

How were these symptomatic of your subsequent interactions?

Did you have children?

Were you in agreement about how to raise your children?
About values and traditions you wanted to impart?

Was raising children a satisfying experience for you?

What was the best or favorite era of parenting?

The melting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances, if there is any reaction both are transformed.

—*Carl Jung*



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What was the hardest?

What would you do the same again ?

What would you do differently if you could?

Describe what it was like for you when your children left home, found mates, had their own children?

What is / are your relationship(s) with your adult children?

If you are divorced, describe what it was like to be in the process of divorcing and what it was like to be alone in the years afterwards. If you have remarried, redo this entire list for your second marriage. Compare your first and subsequent marriages.



*C*hildren

Answer questions with each of your children in mind individually as well as together.

How did becoming a parent change your outlook on your own life?

What was it like to see yourself or other members of your family in your children?

Did you see your parents differently after having your own children?

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What child-rearing customs did you maintain from your parents and which ones did you alter? Why?

What are you most satisfied with in your child rearing and what are you most disappointed with?

How did having children affect your relationship with your mate?

What funny stories do you remember about your children?

What do you see in your child's early years that, looking back, seems typical of their later choices and personality traits?

What was the most painful or difficult part of parenting for you?

The most satisfying and joyful?

How was it when your children left home? Married?

Became parents themselves?

What relationship do you have with your children-in-law?



Grandchildren

Answer the above questions for your grandchildren, too.

Do you maintain a close relationship with some or all of your grandchildren?

What do you do to keep these relationships close?

How is your grandchild like you (like your spouse, like your child)

How is she/he different? In personality? attitudes? looks? life expectations and goals?



Celebrations and Holidays

List the holidays, vacations, events (for example, funerals and weddings) and birthdays that are (were) celebrated in your family and in your community.

Do you have a special way of spending Sunday afternoons or Saturdays in your family?



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Is there a seasonal celebration such as a barbecue or bonfire, a yearly sliding party or a summer trip to the beach? Describe some of the most memorable of any of these formal or informal happenings.

Where are they held?

Who attends?

How do you prepare? Plan? Participate?

What do other people do?

What do you wear?

Is there a program to be followed or are the happenings spontaneous?

Who takes on the role of preparation? Clean up?

Is this celebration still held?

How do you feel about it today?

What role did it play in your family life—was it anticipated with pleasure or dread? Were the event, the activities, the setting, the people involved reinforced by storytelling before and after?

Was there silence around certain relatives or friends?

Are there mysteries in your memories of family, church or ethnic get-togethers?



Sports, Arts, Hobbies, Pastimes

What are your favorite sports, hobbies, and pastimes?

How did you start doing these?

Are these solo or group activities?

Is there a public forum of achievement and recognition for each activity?

What have been some of your most memorable experiences in each one?

Did you have a mentor, teacher / coach or hero who inspired you?

If being better is important to any of these, how did you develop the skills?

With whom have you shared these activities—parents, siblings, children, or friends?

Did you abandon dreams of success at a sport, or other skill such as performing? Why?

How did that loss affect your later choices?

As people grow up, they cease to play and they seem to give up the yeild of pleasure which they gain from playing.

—Sigmund Freud

Hard Times

What were some of the hard times in your life (or your parents' or children's lives).

Has there been illness, poverty, prejudice, or family conflict?

Describe the event(s) or choose a memorable scene that illustrates the time.

What happened?

Who was there?

How did you and the people who were there react?

How did you or your family overcome this difficulty?

Were you able to ask for and receive the support you needed?

Has this influenced you in a permanent way?

What have you gained from this experience?

What have you lost?

A talent is formed in stillness, a character in the world's torrent.

—Goethe

*A*ccomplishments

What have you done in your life that you are most proud of?

Academic achievement?

A longstanding friendship or marriage over the years?

Overcoming a handicap or set-back?

Financial success?

Independence?

Perseverance in achieving personal goals of any kind?

Overcoming or adjusting to illness or physical limitations?

Leadership at work or in your community?

Sacrifice or dedication to family?

Volunteer work?

Surviving the death of a loved one?

Making major personal changes?

What was hard about achieving this accomplishment?

What was easy?

Who was there with you?

Who helped you?

Who didn't?

Would you do it over again?



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How did others feel about what you accomplished?

Is your achievement on-going or a thing of the past?

How have you passed on your skills or shared your enthusiasm?

The Future

List your goals and dreams—and steps to take toward realizing them!

What are your hopes, dreams and plans for your life?

Would you like to study something new

Join a new club?

Learn a new skill or trade?

Have a second career?

Travel?

Would you like to form new friendships, romances, or affiliations with groups, clubs or communities?

Reconcile an old conflict?

Find a lost friend or relative?

Adopt a child?

Join the Peace Corps?

Create a beautiful garden?

Go into politics?



It is never too late
to be what
you might have
been.

—George Ernst

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