

# Becoming the Family Storycatcher, Step 1: Getting Permission

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[\*Photo courtesy of SXC.\*](#)

Today, I'm kicking off a blog series that discusses some strategies for completing a personal or family history project. If you've always been the person running the camera or writing down what happened at family holiday gatherings, and want to take your documenting to the next level, this series will show you some basic tools and techniques for making it happen.

But before we get started today, I want to ask you, do you know how your parents met?

[I do. And here's the audio that proves it.](#)

Wouldn't it be great to know some of your relatives' most important life stories and have them preserved for future generations? You can become the "family storycatcher" – but the first step is getting the person you want to interview to agree to talk to you.

## **Excited, not anxious**

A lot of people have no problem telling stories informally, but may clam up if you stick an audio recorder or video camera in their face without warning. There are a variety of reasons people, particularly older people, might feel self-conscious at the thought of a formal, recorded interview session.

- The pre-Baby Boom generation [tends to be more modest](#) than generations coming after them.
- They may believe their life has been ordinary and unexceptional.

- They may judge themselves harshly for mistakes they have made.
- They may have parts of their lives or experiences they do NOT want to discuss.
- They may think they won't look or sound good on a recording.
- They may think (despite the fact that you're asking for their stories) that nobody cares what they have to say.

You want your loved one to feel comfortable, relaxed and thoughtful as you interview them, so in order to get their permission to do the interview, you'll want to create that sort of atmosphere around your family's stories. If reminiscing isn't a regular part of your time together, now is a good time to start.

You don't have to make an epic announcement to introduce some personal storytelling time into your visits with your loved ones. You might consider "priming the pump" by directly soliciting their stories:

- After a visit to a location that holds a lot of memories for them (whether or not it looks the same now as it did "back in the day").
- During or after a fun/meaningful family activity.
- Leading up to a milestone birthday or anniversary, especially if you're planning a party around it.
- During a regular family visit, as an alternative to everyone sitting and staring at their phones or the TV after dinner.

If your loved one isn't one to volunteer his or her stories, it can help to be encouraging and validating to them, in order to help them feel like they are doing you a favor – because they are! They're sharing their accumulated life wisdom and helping you understand who you are and where you come from better.

Many times, **appealing to their ego** in a subtle (non-obvious!) way can be helpful. **Remind them of how much they've accomplished** and how grateful you are for their hard work and dedication. Related to this is appealing to a very human desire most of us to **leave a legacy** that truly represents who we were. Our stories are a part of us – and something that can be readily shared under the right conditions (which you are going to provide for them).

If you have **children in your life** who are also related to the loved one, they can be powerful allies in your quest to record his/her life story. Helping little ones understand their family has an appeal that get ordinarily very reticent folks to open up. Plus, who can resist a kid climbing into your lap and asking, "**Tell me about the old days?**"

### **Talking tech**

Another issue that can cause anxiety for potential interviewees is not understanding the process you intend to use to record and share their stories. **Clarity eases minds** – you may first want to get comfortable enough with audio or video recording that you can explain it in a simplified way to someone.

**Walk your potential interviewee through the entire process** you want to use, without going into gory detail about each step. They may just want to know how much time it will take, if they

want to get their hair styled before being videotaped, if they could share the end product with their friends, etc. Let them know you'll interview them at a pace that's comfortable for them, and take breaks whenever needed.

Another point to reinforce with your interviewee is that although this is your project, **THEY are in control of what parts of their life story that they share with you and with all others.**

Explain that **they will have final veto power** on anything you record, and that yes, they can change their minds once something is recorded, or that something they originally didn't want to talk about can be recorded later.

Once you have permission from your interviewee to conduct the interview, it's time to get ready for the recording session – which will be the topic of the next post in this series!

## Becoming the Family Storycatcher, Step 2: Pick Your Format

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*Photo courtesy of .p a n e on Flickr.*

Once you've [invited a family member or loved one](#) to share his or her life stories, you'll immediately be faced with a crucial choice point as you prepare to record their memories: What format are you going to use?

That sounds like a simple enough question, but as anyone who's ever happened upon a trove of reel to reel audio recordings or 8mm film canisters can attest, the only thing more frustrating than not being able to capture family stories is to save them in a format that no one can access. To deal with the technical obsolescence factor, it's important to educate yourself about [digital preservation](#) and plan ahead for that eventuality.



*Digital preservation is a reality in today's family history environment. Photo courtesy of Christian Haugen via Flickr.*

### **Format choices**

Most family storycatchers think about compiling their narrator's stories in a book, or making a video after interviewing the narrator on camera. And these two options both have distinct advantages ...

*Books are low-tech to produce* – all you need is a notebook and a pen to get started with your interviewing. They're sturdy, portable and don't rely on batteries or a specific type of digital device to bring them to life.

*Videos are now easier than ever to shoot, edit and distribute* – In fact, some family historians have produced presentable films using nothing more than their smartphone.

But family histories are as unique as the individuals they chronicle. Your narrator's story may fit better in less conventional formats, such as:

- **Audio** – Provides a focus on that most powerful of all communication channels, [the human voice](#). You can also add ambient sound, music or sound effects to enhance the storytelling impact.
- **E-book** – Can be shared online or even sold through a site such as Amazon.com or Lulu.com. If you have a family glued to their Kindles or Nooks, this might be your format.
- **Graphic novel** – AKA the comic book. Before you snort at the idea of doing a personal history this way, check out [Maus](#) or [Fun Home](#).

- **Animation** – As with the graphic novel format mentioned above, this format requires access to a good illustrator. But StoryCorps [demonstrates that it can work](#) with a series of audio memories that have had cartoons/animated features created to illustrate what's being talked about.

In the end, there are three factors that will most likely influence your selection of format ...

1. *Time.* For those who want to share the stories of an aging narrator while the narrator is still alive, it's important to figure out which medium would allow them to finish most quickly. If the narrator is comfortable on camera, making a quick video (if you know how to edit it) could be a way to share the footage as soon as possible.
2. *Comfort.* It's becoming easier and easier to gather raw material using the most basic of tools. Your smartphone can handle a lot of tasks if that's all you have to work with. But especially if you are pressed for time, it makes more sense to go with a medium you're familiar with, so you're not piling on a tech learning curve on top of producing the family story.
3. *Legacy.* Simply put, how durable do you want this project to be? All-digital platforms are appealing to younger generations, but come with [built-in preservation challenges](#). On the other hand, if you want your materials to be available 50 years from now for your great-grandchildren, or members of the local historical society, a printed book may be the answer.

### **Mix it up**

If you've got one foot in the new-tech "kinda now, kinda wow" camp and one in the old-school "tried and true" camp, one solution can be to create a project that combines analog and digital components. For example, your project capturing the early years of your parents' marriage could have a printed component – a book or mini-book – as well as a digital part that includes a disc (CD, DVD, Blu-Ray) containing photos, audio files, video files, etc.

Here are a few more ideas for blending formats:

- If your primary format is a **DVD or Blu-Ray video disc**, you could provide "special features" on the disc that include **photographs, audio files, or text excerpts** from your interviews or documents such as personal letters or journals.
- If your primary format is an **audio CD**, if you format it as a data disc, you can also include **text files and images** on it.
- If your primary format is a **printed book**, you could include a **companion CD or DVD** with audio or video interview outtakes, additional photos, or scans of original family documents, including letters, journals, handwritten family tree diagrams, etc.
- If you have web developer or graphic designer friends and share your project on a **website**, you can include **interactive features** such as puzzles or quizzes, links to maps or a Google Earth current street view of a property, as well as the full gamut of audio, video, photos, and text.

### ***The questions to you***

1. What format will you choose for your family history project?
2. Do you have any concerns about either wanting to incorporate old materials in “obsolete” formats into your project, or how to ensure your current project is accessible in 10 years?
3. How do you plan to address these challenges?

## **Becoming the Family Storycatcher, part 3: Getting the Story**

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Photo via [Jon Rawlinson](#) via [Flickr](#).

In the first two posts in this series, we discussed [how to invite your family member](#) to tell his or her life stories, and how to [select a format](#) for presenting their stories. Today, we'll talk about how to set up the interview environment and conduct the interview in order to best capture your loved one's narratives. Thanksgiving and the December holidays represent an ideal time to catch the stories of visiting relatives, and these tips will work no matter where you're conducting the interview – your house, their house, or another place (such as a relative's house or even a hotel room).

### **Getting ready on interview day**

Once you've confirmed a time and location for the interview, review your own schedule so you can plan to start your preparations 30-45 minutes before the designated start time.

If you're meeting at someone else's house, ask the host if it's OK for you to move furniture in order to facilitate conversation or allow proper audio/video recording. Test your camera and microphone placement before your narrator arrives. (And use headphones when you test, to be certain of the quality of your audio output.) Evaluate the recording location for background noise, such as the hum from a nearby appliance or the surprisingly loud "thunk" of the heater kicking on or off.

If other people will be at the recording location besides you and your narrator, explain what you need in terms of privacy and quiet. And make sure all the pets in the household have whatever they need in order to remain calm and quiet!!

### **Setting your narrator at ease**

Many people find it awkward to sit down and just start talking about their life history. This feeling can be compounded if they aren't used to being recorded. Your job as the story-catching interviewer is to set them at ease – to get them so focused on their stories that they forget they're in an interview at all!

One way to smooth the path into the interview is to begin with small talk. If you're able to quietly turn on your recording device, you can start with some conversation about the weather, or how their day has gone so far, then gently move into a series of factual questions that have definitive answers and (important point here) you know your narrator can answer without struggle. It's always a good idea to get your recorder rolling as early as possible – your loved one may say something remarkable and you want to be able to preserve it right the first time.

Another strategy for reducing interviewee jitters is to share your questions with your narrator beforehand. This allows them to think about what they want to say, and may even prompt them to check on a fact by digging out an old photo album, yearbook, or cache of letters – all of which could yield a trove of fabulous stories for you!

### **Answers about questions**

Becoming a good interviewer takes practice, but it's a skill that's easy to learn if you focus on LISTENING to your narrator and adjusting your approach to respond to what they are saying to you in that moment. Here are some tips on how to draft story-igniting questions and how to ask them.

– As mentioned above, start the interview segment with easy factual questions, to get them used to the rhythm of your conversation. Examples of this kind of question could include their year of birth, where they were born, names of the schools they attended, etc.

– Do NOT leap into the "hard stuff" – such as divorce, war experiences, job loss – immediately. That's a good way to get them to clam up. Ideally, you and your narrator have agreed on a list of topics, and they have seen your question list, so they can feel safe sharing difficult information or recalling painful memories.

### **Framing questions and answers**

If you've ever watched Bill Moyers at work on PBS, or listened to interviews conducted by the late radio journalist and oral historian Studs Terkel, you know that how a question is asked

greatly influences the quality of answer you will get. Here are a few tips for how to frame your questions to elicit fascinating stories from your narrator.

If you're recording the interview and don't want your "interviewer" voice in the recording, you'll want to ask questions in such a way that interviewee is encouraged to provide a "story frame" for remarks. A story frame simply means that your narrator, in the final product that you are going to produce, will sound as if they are truly telling a story, and not responding to questions. You should discuss why you're doing this with your narrator ahead of time. Explain why this is important to you, and let them know you'll gently coach them if their answers don't provide the frame.

Here is an example of an unframed versus a framed answer.

- No frame answer: "We went there in 1932."
- Framed answer: "We went to Texas in 1932."

### **Probing for detail**

Even in the case of stories that your narrator has related to you informally many, many times, they may not remember every detail of the event or time period. For some interviewees, this is upsetting; for others, it's not that big of a deal. But pre-interview research on your part can help fill in faded memories. Looking up facts such as the date of a marriage, years that your narrator attended a certain school, or some local history related to a geographic setting your narrator may be talking about will both help you prompt them when they're relating the incident, and give you a rich source to draw questions from.

For topics that you and your narrator want to cover, but for which they struggle to remember some of the fine details, you can employ two strategies to get around the memory issue.

1. Ask them, "How did this make you feel?" Often, feelings about a time period or person or event remain long after the fine details fade in one's mind.
2. Ask subject how incident fits in the context of their entire life. What lessons did they learn, or what is the significance of this person/time period/event in their life?

### **Pauses that refresh**

Outside of the holidays, a typical family history interview conducted by a professional personal historian typically runs 60-90 minutes. Since you and your narrator may have many other activities you want to pursue this week, and/or you may not have that long a stretch of quiet at your recording location, you may want to break the interview down into a couple of 15-to-30 minute sessions. (Just remember that your narrator's "costume changes" might need to be explained if you do recordings on different days!)

The pace at which you proceed with the interviews should be determined by your narrator's energy level. Even for short interviews, 1-2 breaks during a session are fine. Keep a glass of water handy in case they need to take a drink (it helps keep the vocal cords fresh and comfortable, too).

Interviewees often have extra insights on a topic after a break, so it doesn't hurt to ask as you resume, "Would you like to add anything to a previous answer?"



### **How to handle regrets**

For some interviewees, talking about difficult subjects may create some real emotional upheaval, even if they're interested in sharing these memories. You may have them come to you after the interview and say they do not want to have that material in your presentation of their story. You can reassure them that this is a collaboration between the two of you and that, in the end, it is THEIR story, so they get to determine what gets edited out. But keep the raw tape/notes from your interview — your narrator could just as easily have a change of heart back towards inclusion of that material!

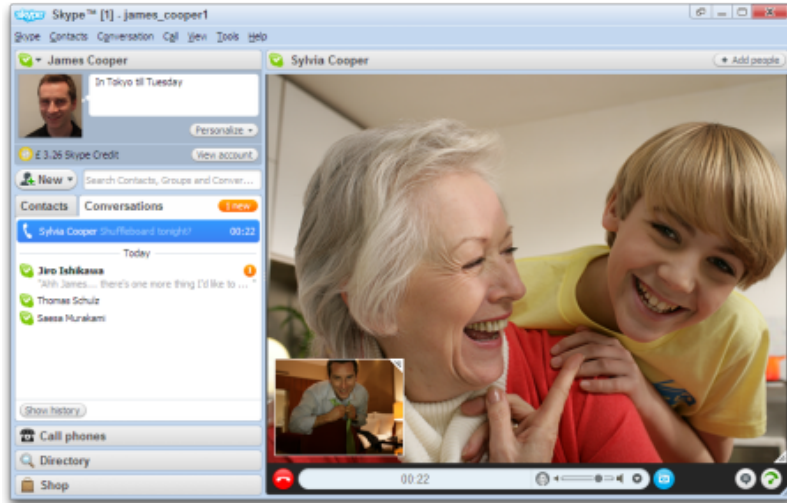
You may also want to reassure them that they will see the edited final product first, before anyone else does, so they can approve how you've assembled the material.

### **Rewarding your interviewee**

Talking about one's life story can be taxing, even for motivated, enthusiastic narrators. If it's possible, plan something for after the interview that your family narrator will view as a treat. If they're able, going for a walk together (especially if you've been eating all that delicious holiday food!) can shift your mutual perspective and get the blood flowing. Sharing a meal or joining the rest of your clan for informal visiting time or a favorite family activity can reaffirm the context of your story-catching and reconnects both of you with those who have helped make the interview session possible. If there is a small favor you can do for your narrator, this is a good time to do it — it reinforces that you are doing him or her a favor by participating in your project.

## **Becoming the Family Storycatcher, Part 4: Gathering Stories At A Distance**

Published January 14, 2015



*Photo courtesy PixGood.com.*

So far in our series on storycatching, we've focused on working with narrators with whom you are working with face to face. And certainly when asking permission, getting prepared, or conducting the interview itself, working with someone who is within easy driving distance makes things easier.

But sometimes when you do a personal history project, you won't have the time or money to travel to your narrator's hometown, or to visit other contributors. And health or other considerations may make it imperative that the interviews be conducted right away, so you can keep your project moving toward completion.

### **Find a buddy**

One of the more challenging aspects of working across the miles is that often, you'll be asking your narrator to cooperate with you in conducting the interview via some sort of digital technology. It can be difficult to work with an elderly person (or a person of any age, really) who isn't tech-savvy to do a Skype interview, but if time is of the essence, you could look into enlisting an on-site "helper" whom you trust to handle the technology and help the narrator get ready. They can also help you determine when the narrator is tired, hesitant, or reluctant to talk about something, since nonverbals are harder to read correctly at a distance.

If technology is becoming your primary stumbling block, and the "buddy plan" won't work, reconsider your format options. Do you, your narrator or your family absolutely have your heart set on a video? If not, could you interview them by phone and take notes, or use a digital audio recorder while putting them on speakerphone. That set up will not give you high-quality audio, but it will give you good enough material to write up a text version of your conversation, which is a powerful, and extremely durable, format.

### **Tech talk**

I can't advise you in this little post on the fine details of your computer set up or the precise manner in which you might choose to record your interviews at a distance, but here are some links to get you started ...

[Skype Essentials video series](#)

[Free Skype Video Recorder app](#)

[Skype's YouTube video channel](#)

[A post on how to record a FaceTime video call for free](#)

[Call Recorder for FaceTime video conversations \(NOT FREE\)](#)

Once you feel as if you've got the technology set up ready, test it with friends, co-workers, anyone other than your narrator. It's best to not stress out your interviewee with technical issues, especially ones related to your level of competency with the distance recording equipment. Things can and will pop up on your recording day, but if you've been through the set-up process a number of times, it's likely they won't fall in the "which button do I push?" category.

### **Share and Share Alike**

Sometimes, it's not recording or interviewing your narrator that's the distance challenge – it's working with others on the project and sharing text files, photos, or media like video and audio files. You can use a host of free or low-cost tools that are at the right scale to work on this type of project.

– [Google Drive](#) – one of my favorites. It's super easy to share documents and files with people, and I also appreciate the ability to work on projects on my mobile devices (especially my smartphone).

– [Dropbox/Box.com](#) – These cloud storage solutions let you transfer media like photos, videos, and audio files easily, and in bulk quantities (no more emailing 3 photos at a time to each other or whatever). This is especially helpful if you have relatives scanning photos out of their old photo albums and sending them to you for a presentation.

– [Freedcamp](#) – If you have enough people working on a family history project, sometimes it's not storage or sharing that is the issue – it's having a coherent way to coordinate the entire thing! This app is a totally free way to do project management, such as assigning tasks, tracking how long it is taking, expenses, etc. This software is totally free and fairly robust, but the free version (you can purchase upgrades) is limited to 200 MB in file uploads.

– [Podio](#) – Another program with a free version that is good for small teams (it allow up to 5 users per project) working on a project.

I mention the file sharing options because in this day and age it is simply NOT necessary to mail priceless, irreplaceable originals back and forth, or to clog emails with large digital scans. The tools make it much easier to manage a sprawling multimedia project, particularly if you're working with several helpers and you don't all live in the same town. And the project management interfaces can help show who's doing what in a more organized way than just mailing out a "to do" list.

***The questions to you***

- Have you ever tried to interview a family member for a personal history project at a distance? What were your results?
- What has been the hardest part of collaborating on a family history with relatives who live out of town?

# Becoming the Family Storycatcher, part 5a: Getting It Ready – Finding the Storyline

Published March 29, 2015



*Photo courtesy of [Jon Madison](#) via Flickr.*

So far in our series of how-to posts related to family history, we've discussed [getting permission](#) from your narrator, [selecting a format](#) for the project, [conducting the interview](#), and how to [gather stories at a distance](#), when your narrator doesn't live close to you.

If you've followed these steps, you're now at a crucial point in the storycatching process. While it can be a challenge to set up and conduct the interview for some people, for others the big sticking point comes when they review the big pile of raw material they have generated and must now figure out how to work with it.

## **Remember scope**

Earlier in the storycatching process, we mentioned establishing the scope of this project – meaning, what parts of your narrator's life are you going to cover? The scope should have

helped you do pre-interview research, frame your questions, even know when it was OK to encourage your narrator to go “off script” and discuss a favorite memory that was outside of your original plan.

Scope will come in handy again now, during the organizing and editing phase of the project. You can use it as your “blade” to carve away interesting, but out-of-scope, material. (If these tidbits are truly compelling, they could form a separate group of “outtakes” that you could include along with your main deliverable.)

### **Know what you have**

The first step in organizing your project is to find out what raw tape/footage you have, if you recorded the interview electronically. If you do it yourself, I recommend creating a log of high points in your footage or tape. ([Here is a blog post](#) with some good technical and physical considerations on how to do it.) You can also have a word-for-word transcription made, but I would recommend hiring someone else to do that.

### **Finding Storylines**

After you have a record of your raw tape/footage, grab a highlighter and review the content to look for recurring themes in your narrator’s stories and how they frame them. Do they frame their stories in terms of being “Mr. or Ms. Fix-It,” who always rushes in to make a situation better? Do they focus on the positives (who helped, what was great) or the negatives (how scared everyone was, how tough an era was) of the situation? Do they focus mostly on their own perceptions of events, or do they like to include what their friends or family members did or said?

The basic building block of storytelling is the scene, also known as a vignette or an anecdote. It’s a sequence of continuous action, so if your narrator is relating a long sequence of events, there will probably be a number of scenes involved in advancing their overall story.

One of the most basic ingredients for shaping a compelling story including true stories from raw materials gleaned in an interview is the [narrative arc](#). Boiled down to its essence, it has three parts:

- *A challenge or conflict* – this can include inner conflicts or struggles.
- *Action* toward a goal or to resolve the conflict/challenge
- *A change* – your narrator could shift perspective, achieve his or her goal (or not), master the challenge (or not), but he or she has become a different person because of their experiences.

### **But real life is so messy!**

You may be thinking at this point, “Wow, my interview with Mom wasn’t nearly this neat! We talked about so many different topics, and in such a random order.” If that’s the case, don’t worry. We typically do NOT experience our lives as one continuous (or series of interlocking) stories, so it’s unlikely that your narrator related his or her experiences in that fashion (although if you asked him or her to recount favorite family stories, things may go a little easier in putting your material together).

If you [framed your questions](#) during the interview well, you've probably got what you need to tell your narrator's story. You will just have to employ a skill that not all of us practice on a regular basis – that of a story editor.

In our next installment of this series, we'll talk about how to edit your narrator's story so that your raw footage/tape or your interview notes are transformed into a coherent, compelling set of stories from his or her life!!

## Becoming the Family Storycatcher, part 5b: Getting It Ready – Editing Tips

Published May 16, 2015



*Photo courtesy mobilechina2007 via Flickr.*

In our [last post](#), we looked at some ways to organize the raw materials from your interviews with your family narrator, including how to find a storyline and a narrative arc in their series of

anecdotes. Today, I'll provide a couple of keys to the actual act of editing the material – ones that apply whether you're editing the final product into a book, a video, an audio program, or some other form of media.

I find that I use one of two basic editing approaches when I'm working on a personal or family history project, depending on how closely the flow of the interview tracked with the timeline of the story the narrator is telling for the project.

### **Chop Til You Drop**

This is the most basic approach to editing a story, in which you trim away excess detail, or unrelated asides, but basically leave the arrangement of the questions and answers from the interview alone.

You don't absolutely need a transcript or log of the interview to do this kind of edit, but that can also come back to haunt you. Even when a narrator basically tells a story in the order that it happened, there can be references to prior events laced throughout the latter part of an interview – ones that you might want to leave in because they are cute, funny, eloquent or really amplify the story. However, if you don't have a transcript or log, and you remove the original reference (and/or even worse, you don't save a copy of the raw footage/tape/notes), you may have to get very creative in order to salvage that awesome second reference. And that is guaranteed to take some time to figure out.

When I take this approach to editing, I often say I am condensing or distilling the interview. The end result packs the same punch as the unedited story, but presents it in a more entertaining, user-friendly way.

### **Building a Story Blueprint**

This second approach is suited to more complex stories – the kind with multiple chapters, characters, or narrators. If your narrator related a great story to you, but did it in a disjointed fashion, this is the way to edit it into a coherent presentation.

To build a story blueprint, you will have to have some sort of tangible collection of building blocks. Even if your interview log is very simple, giving just the topic and length of their remarks, this will give you what you need to draw up a blueprint, which I call an [edit decision list](#) when I'm using it to edit a video or audio story. It could be considered a detailed outline if you're working from interview notes to construct a written story.

I start my story blueprint with the best quotes from my narrator and arrange them in roughly the order I want them to appear. If they flow from one quote to another with very few transitions needed, then the story-crafting portion of the project is almost done.

If not – and I find this is the case most of the time – the next consideration is how to provide transitions. Some possible methods that are appropriate for a family history project include:

- On-screen title cards to frame the question being answered or provide more information.
- Run the interview question being asked, as well as the answer.
- Voice-over narration to act as a bridge between quotes.
- Film/record a second narrator to provide context for primary narrator's remarks.



- Create sidebars in a print project that help guide the reader from one quote to the next.

Once you've got the heart of your story refined, it's time to consider how you are going to introduce it. Do you have anything that shows us the narrator talking about who he/she is, or about the time period of the story in question? Some of the methods mentioned above for dealing with transitions also would work for an introduction.

Finally, look at your edit decision list or outline and consider the end of your story. Does the narrator set the audience down at a satisfying stopping place? It doesn't have to be the ultimate end of their story – chapters can end satisfyingly, just as much as books can. But if your narrator's story started with a question mark (?) to hook the audience into following along, and the middle contained enough of an exclamation point (!) to keep them interested, the end should have enough resolution to feel as if a period (.) is helping them find the resting place before they move on to another story.

### **Resources related to editing**

#### **[I'm Ira Glass, Host of "This American Life," and This Is How I Work](#)**

From the Lifehacker blog. Pay special attention to Ira's answer to the question, "What everyday thing are you better at than everyone else?" He gives detailed instructions (complete with illustrations) on how he turns a mass of audio interview tape into a compelling radio show.

#### **[My Kingdom for Some Structure | Transom.org](#)**

Rob Rosenthal, host of the always-entertaining podcast HowSound ("the backstory to great radio"), provides analysis and cocktail napkin drawings of typical stories played on several different national NPR programs. It's a nice deconstruction of the way several programs on the same network approach a topic in their own unique style.

#### **[How to Make an Outline of a Memoir | eHow](#)**

This very brief outline is a little choppy, but if you need a simple checklist to help you start organizing interview/research material for the family/personal history you're writing, it doesn't get more basic than this. I do especially like the suggestion to find the climax of your story first and work backwards from there.

#### **[Structuring Your Memoir](#)**

Fiction writer and memoirist Wendy Dale has produced a marvelous explanation of the classic dramatic three-act structure and how you can apply it to a life story. Even better than that, she goes on to discuss how to provide literary twists to your real-life plot so the story you're writing is not ho-hum predictable because of the structure.

# Becoming the Family Storycatcher, Part 6: Getting It Done

Published July 30, 2015



Photo courtesy of [mirsasha](#) via Flickr.

This post concludes our series, which has walked you through the process of creating a family history project. Now that we've edited our interview material into a story that relates to our narrator's life, it's time to consider how we will deliver the book, audio program, video or scrapbook to its intended audience.

## Deciding who's in the in-club

But before we go any further, let's consider that audience. Hopefully, at the time you considered the scope of the project with your narrator, you discussed audience.

Some narrators will be more than happy to have your project distributed to every living relative, and maybe the local historical society to boot! But others may be more reluctant to share their life story with certain relatives (maybe they expressed an opinion about them in the interview process...) or with the general public.

The [Association of Personal Historians](#) talks about this issue in its "Tips Before You Start" guide:

*What is the purpose of this interview? Who will hear or see it? Who will have access to the unedited interview?*

*Who is your intended audience? Family? Friends? Historians? Researchers? The public? Will the stories based on the interview be published, made available to a select few, or kept private? Does the narrator want the material (or parts of it) kept confidential?*

It can be helpful to frame this issue in terms of levels of access, and not either/or. Some narrators may want to have the only copy of their unedited transcript, especially if a lot of contentious or emotionally intense material gets edited out. Another idea for sharing different materials with different audiences is to create a short, highly focused excerpt to share widely – one that is drawn and condensed from your longer project, which can have a more limited distribution.

Another area related to distribution is how and when to debut your book, audio recording, video, etc. If the project is tied to a milestone anniversary event, that's a natural (not too mention super convenient) venue to celebrate the project's completion. Holidays of course make good distribution platforms too. But if you finish in March and no family events are scheduled for months, it's perfectly OK to create an event, such as a screening, a listening party, or a book reading, and invite your tribe.

Talking about the distribution of your project, which is likely to be limited, can bring up the question of why it is important to catch personal or family stories in the first place. Author [William Novak](#) reflected on the meaning he's derived from the private-run books he's helped to write – and how these books differ in tone and content from many commercially published books:

*“After writing half a dozen books that can't be found in any library or bookstore, I've found rewards that mean as much to me as seeing my name on the best-seller list. Often, publishers of commercial memoirs or biographies encourage the writer to pay special attention to the sordid elements of a life, because, let's face it, scandal, crime, addiction and other human failings are more compelling to most readers than the values I'm likely to be writing about. But when a family or an organization commissions a book, they're more interested in stories, personalities and lessons, rather than adversarial journalism or sensationalism.”*

### **Need help? Hire a personal historian**

Let's say that after reading this entire series on storycatching you're still struggling to finish your project. First of all, there's no shame in that situation. Many of us bounce into a project like this, full of enthusiasm, only to wonder what happened to that energy when we're editing the material for the fifth time.

But just because the stories you're catching concern your family doesn't mean you can't hire someone to help you! A professional personal historian is trained to help families complete projects in a timely and high-quality manner.

Often personal historians have worked as an writers, editors, audio producers or videographers, and possess amazing storytelling skills, along with a passion for bringing individuals' stories to life.

[Personal historians can help you](#) with a number of key project tasks, including...

- Locating transcription resources (referrals)
- Coaching you on how to organize and structure stories
- Editing/assembling raw materials
- Assistance with the final formatting of your book/video/audio/etc. and advising you on its distribution to your family members

There are a lot of advantages to working with a personal historian.

- They do the heavy lifting on project
- Professional quality writing/editing/multimedia production
- They are there to help you produce the product you want
- They provide a fresh perspective on your family's history
- Your project will get done!

There are a few downsides to using a professional personal historian, depending on how you look at it.

- Hiring them can involve a significant investment, anywhere from \$300 for a very small project to more than \$10,000 to co-write a full length memoir.
- The end result is not 100 percent your work.
- Your narrator gives up some privacy in exchange for their assistance, although personal historians hold all materials in confidence in accordance with a families wishes.

At this point, your project is nearly done. Congratulate yourself for doing something important – both for yourself and your family. Personal historian Jane Shafron, in a [blog post](#) on the Association of Personal Historians site directed at potential narrators, put it this way:

*“Who you are, and what you have experienced along the way—and what you have learned—is very rare. You are the only true witness to the events of your life! You are also the only surviving witness to so many other important lives. Doing this—recording your story, talking about the family history—is the greatest gift to all of your special somebodies, and to all future generations. It’s also a kind of immortality.”*

So get out there, and get your personal or family history project finished!!

**The questions to you:**

1. Are you in the middle of a personal/family history project? What do you need to finish your work?
2. Who will you share the final product with? Have you and your narrator(s) discussed this, or how you will release the project (timing/events)?

3. Have you ever considered working with a personal historian to finish your project? In what ways might they be helpful to you?