

How to Write Your Memoir: 101 questions to ask yourself

Consider these questions as a springboard for your memories: expand, enlarge and add to them, in keeping with the particulars of your life that are most significant and meaningful to you.

To begin, look through the questions and find one you feel like exploring. Focus on answering that one question fully, giving specific details about the people, places, sights, smells, sounds and emotions that accompany your recollections. Include dates if relevant.

If you think of other questions you'd like to answer, add them to this list. If you recall amusing or poignant anecdotes, include them too. If there are pivotal moments in your life that aren't covered by these questions, make sure to add details about them.

Once you have made a start on your memoir using these questions, you may decide to continue on your own, following the meandering turns of memory. A chronological approach, beginning in early childhood and continuing towards maturity, is customary. Yet you may prefer to start your memoir at a dramatic point in your life, and then go back in time, to show your reader all the steps that led to that moment.

You may decide to simply focus on one period in your life: your childhood; your school days; a romance. You may choose a couple of significant anecdotes from different periods of your life, rather than following each point along your biological time line. No one approach is right or wrong. Whatever you choose to write about, bring it to life by invoking your senses and exploring your feelings, weaving them into your story. Specify the particular over the general to engage your reader.

One last word of advice. What you leave out is just as important as what you choose to include. As Voltaire said: 'The secret to being a bore is to tell everything.'

The following questions are divided into different time periods. You don't need to answer them all; simply choose those that interest you and are relevant to your life story.

Your early years

1. When and where were you born? Was there anything unusual about your birth?
2. How would you describe the social and cultural atmosphere in the time and place you were born? How was it different from the world today? How is it different from where you live now?
3. What is your earliest memory?
4. What are the earliest memories of your parents, siblings, other family members, or where you lived?
5. Did you have a pet? Why, or why not?
6. What sort of relationship did you have with your parents? In what ways do you consider them to have been good or bad parents?
7. Which of your parents are you most like, and in what way(s)?
8. What is your mother's background? And your father's?
9. Do you have any siblings? Did you get on well as children? And later?
10. As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? What were your early passions or dreams? Did you pursue them?
11. What were your favourite toys, books, TV shows? Which character(s) did you want to be?
12. What is your happiest childhood memory? Your saddest?
13. Who was your first best friend? Did they influence your future life?
14. What incidents from childhood had most impact on the adult you grew to become?

Your school days

15. Do you remember your first day of school?
16. Was learning to read and write easy or difficult for you?
17. Who was your favourite teacher? Your least favourite teacher?
18. Which subjects did you excel at, and which were your worst?
19. Did you play any sports or instruments?
20. Were you part of a clique or group at school?
21. Did you have a best friend? Are you still in touch with them?
22. Did any of your schoolmates influence your future life? How?
23. How has schooling changed since you were a child?
24. What do you wish school had taught you (that it didn't teach you)?
25. What did you learn about yourself through your experiences at school?
26. Was your high school graduation a significant event for you?
27. Has education been an important aspect of your life? In what way(s)?

Your teenage years and early adulthood

28. What did your parents do that annoyed you when you were a teenager?
29. What is your best memory from your teenage years? And your worst?
30. When did you leave school, and why?
31. What was your first job?
32. When did you learn to drive? Who taught you? When did you buy your first car?
33. Did you have a close friend or group of friends after you left school?
34. What were you passionate about when you were in your teens and early twenties?
35. What was the wildest party you attended / had?
36. Did you have an eighteenth or a twenty-first birthday party? Who came, and what was it like?
37. What plans for the future did you have at that time?
38. Do you remember your first experience(s) of feeling like an adult?
39. What did you imagine 'the future' would be like? How was it different from our world today?
40. Did you grow up in a religious household? How did it shape your childhood and teenage years? Did you rebel against your faith?
41. Did you do anything reckless when you were young? Did you regret it later? Do you regret it now?

Your romantic life

42. When did you first experience feelings of affection or infatuation, and for whom?
43. What was your first kiss like?
44. When did you first start dating?
45. What did your parents think about you dating? Or about your first partner?
46. When did you first fall in love? And what happened?
47. When and with whom did you lose your virginity?
48. What was your most romantic experience?
49. When did you meet your husband / wife / partner (if applicable)?
50. What first attracted you to him / her / them?
51. What was your early relationship like?
52. Can you remember a time when you felt truly loved?
53. Has anyone ever proposed to you? What happened?
54. Did you want children?
55. How did your marriage, or long-term relationship, change your life? Did it affect your career?
56. Is your partner your best friend? Why, or why not?
57. Do you have a 'one that got away'?

Your work life

58. What was your first job?
59. How much were you paid?
60. What did you spend your pay on?
61. Why did you leave your first job?
62. Have you ever had a big disagreement with your boss?
63. Have you ever been fired, and why?
64. Was your working life different from the way you'd imagined it would be?
65. What do you count as your primary career successes?
66. What was your working life like? Did you get along with your colleagues?
67. Did (or does) your career make you happy?

Your experiences of parenthood and/or maturity

68. Did you always want to have children?
69. What did becoming a parent mean to you?
70. What was it like being a mother or father when your children were young? How was it different from today?
71. What are your favourite memories from when your children were young?
72. What are your favourite memories of family life?
73. What are some of the rituals that have defined your family life?
74. Are there any pivotal experiences that led to your maturity as a person?
75. Have you made any choices that significantly changed your life?

Your beliefs, values and personal perspective

76. Are there any philosophers, writers or thinkers whose ideas significantly shaped your thinking?
77. Have your politics changed over the course of your life? Which politicians have you admired? Despised?
78. Has religion shaped your life, and in what way(s)?
79. Do you have any regrets?
80. In what ways do you feel successful in life?
81. Have you had any experiences of very good or very bad luck?
82. What sacrifices have you made in your life and why?
83. Are there many/any things you wish you'd done differently?
84. What are your most embarrassing moments?
85. What has been the most significant challenge of your life? How did you cope? What did you learn from that experience?
86. If you could go back in time and change one thing about your past, what would it be?
87. What have you done that you've never thought you would do?
88. Who has had the greatest impact on your life?

Your legacy

89. What advice would you give to your eighteen-year-old self today?
90. Do you have any mottos or guiding principles that you live by?
91. What would you want your great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren to know about you?
92. Do you feel as though you have made a positive difference in the world? How?
93. Which of your long-term goals have you attained?
94. If you could change one thing about the world today, what would it be?

Miscellaneous

95. If you could invite three people to dinner, dead or alive, who would they be?
96. What are the three words that describe you best?
97. Have you travelled a lot? What are some of your favourite places?

98. Where haven't you been that you'd like to go? What place would you most like to return to, and why?
99. Are there any books, films, music that are enduring favourites, and why?
100. What do your pet peeves reveal about you?
101. What do your tastes reveal about you? What foods do you like and dislike? Do clothes matter to you? Do you collect any particular items?

Hopefully, a few of these questions have piqued your interest, and assisted you to begin your journey. A final point about the memoir genre - it subtly differs from autobiography. An autobiography focuses on facts and dates, whereas a memoir tends to be more introspective, focusing on the meaning events and people have had on an individual's life. Although the 101 questions are autobiographical, the answers will ideally provide a portal to your inner landscape.

As William Zinsser commented in *On Writing Well*, 'Memoir isn't the summary of a life; it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition. It may look like a casual and even random calling up of bygone events. It's not; it's a deliberate construction.'