Conversation Preparation Guide

VOICES is not an interview—it is a conversation between you and a loved one, a colleague, a friend, or a mentor about your life, your successes, your failures, your wisdom. The person you bring with you will be part of the conversation. You will both be recorded on-camera—the conversation between the two of you will be preserved for all time.

Here’s a guide to help you get ready. It's helpful to think of questions beforehand—things will run more smoothly and make your experience extra rewarding. Keep in mind that the memories you hear are valuable for their history and also because they reveal your person’s particular way of experiencing the world.

What to bring. What to expect.

Bring:

• Yourself and your person
• Beverage for you and your person
• List of questions
• An idea of areas you'd like to explore with your loved one
Do:

• Arrive 10 to 15 minutes before your scheduled conversation.
• Use the restroom before you arrive. (You’ll feel more comfortable.)

What to expect:

• We’ll ask you to turn off your phone and other electronic devices.
• We may ask that you remove jewelry, such as bracelets, watches, necklaces—things that make noise.
• We’ll walk you through the process and handle the nitty-gritty—don’t worry about anything, just sit down and relax with your loved one.
• There’s no need to rehearse—you won’t be live on the radio.
• Your conversation with your person may be as short as 20 minutes or as long as an hour.
• We’ll ask you to sign a release form allowing VOICES to keep one copy of your recording and to archive a second copy. You’ll receive a link to watch, share, or download your video, to do with it as you wish.

What happens:

• You’ll arrive for your conversation with your friend or loved one.
• We’ll meet with you to explain the process, make you feel comfortable in our recording space, and sit with you during the conversation.
• If you arrive alone, someone from VOICES will guide the conversation.
• While you and your person are talking, the VOICES facilitator will take notes, keep time, and monitor audio. He or she might ask a question or two for clarification.
Anatomy of the conversation

Glad you’re here!
It’s not a mystery—we’ll share the philosophy behind VOICES and answer any questions you may have about our mission. We’ll also have you sign a release form.

Paperwork
Asking for personal info like name, address, ethnic background.

Equipment test
Once you're ready to roll, we’ll check our equipment to make sure the camera and sound are working.

Conversation
Here's where your list comes in. Ask questions in whatever order feels right but don't let them limit your conversation. When your person says something that resonates with you, ask more questions to flesh things out.

Photos
VOICES will take photos of you and your person separately and together. The photos may be included in the archive.

The conversation
As you talk, focus on your person. Ask questions about their past and how their upbringing and experiences have guided the person to this point in their life. The best narratives have some sort of structure—a beginning, middle, and end.
Listen closely and try not to interrupt their train of thought. And don’t let a few seconds of silence rattle you—your person is remembering and thinking of what to say next.

Open-ended questions are best as they encourage the person to give specific information (versus an abrupt "yes" or "no"). Be observant: if your person wants to talk about something that isn't on your list of questions, go with the flow. You never know where a conversation will lead and it could be golden.

Be yourself! Feel free to laugh or even cry with your person. Don’t be afraid to ask emotional questions like, “How did that make you feel?”

Don’t tie yourself to a formal list of questions; use your questions as guideposts for the conversation. Be flexible and have fun!

**So, let's start with your name. Where and when were you born?**

- Where did you grow up, and where have you lived?
- What was life like when you were a kid?
- What is your earliest memory?
- What jobs have you had, and what do you do for a living now?
- What do you know about your family name? Tell me what your name means.
- What is the strangest thing that ever happened to you?
- Please share some stories about how your family first came to the United States.

**If your family member is a first-generation immigrant, you might ask:**

- Why did you come to the United States, and what was the journey like?
- What were some of your first impressions and early experiences in this country?
• If you didn’t speak any English when you arrived, how long did it take to learn the language? Please share any humorous anecdotes related to you learning the English language.
• What languages do you speak?
• If you speak a different language in different settings, such as home, school, or work, please explain why.
• If there are any expressions, jokes, stories, celebrations where a certain language is always used, please share some examples.

Family history and traditions

• What are some of your favorite childhood memories?
• How are holidays traditionally celebrated in your family?
• What holidays are the most important? If there are special family traditions, customs, songs, or foods, please describe them.
• If your family has created its own traditions and celebrations, please share why and what they are.
• How many people are in your family? How often does the family hold reunions?
• Who's the black sheep of your family and why?
• What are some of your family’s cultural traditions and occupational skills?
• How did you first get started with this particular tradition/skill?
• What got you interested? Why do you believe the skill or tradition is important?
• In what context is the skill/tradition performed? For whom and when?
• What do you value most about what you do? Why?
• What do you think is the future of this tradition? What are its challenges and opportunities? Are others learning and practicing the tradition?
Love and Marriage (or not)

- Who was the love of your life?
- How did you meet?
- When did you first fall in love? Where? Did you marry?
- If there are any family secrets you’d like to share, now’s the time!
- What family heirlooms or keepsakes and mementos do you possess?
- Why are they valuable to you?
- What is their history? How were they handed down?
- What are the memories or anecdotes connected with them?

Local History and Community Life

- Describe the place where you grew up. What was it like? How has it changed over the years?
- Do you miss living there? Why or why not?
- How have historical events affected your family and community?
- For example, what were some of your experiences during World War II? The Civil Rights Movement? Vietnam War?
- Do you have anything that you would like to add that wasn’t covered?

your memories. your history. your life.