

Questions to ask your grandparents

Questions sorted by theme to get your grandparents telling their life story. Tick the ones you have asked and note what struck you.

Before you start

- Pick a quiet moment, with the television off, and keep it under an hour: several short conversations are better than one long one.
- One theme per visit is enough. The questions are starting points: follow wherever the story goes, even if it takes you away from the list.
- Bring a photo, a letter or an object. Something to hold often brings back more memories than a question.
- Accept silences and repetitions. Don't correct a date: write it down and check it later.
- Ask permission before recording, and say what the recording will be used for.
- Write down first names, places and dates right after the conversation: they are what fades fastest.

- ☐ Where were you born, and what house did you grow up in?
- ☐ What did an ordinary day look like when you were ten?
- ☐ What were your favourite games, and who did you play with?
- ☐ What were your parents like? What did they teach you?
- ☐ Did you have brothers and sisters? What do you remember of them as children?
- ☐ Which childhood mischief still makes you smile?
- ☐ What did your family eat on Sundays?
- ☐ What was your biggest dream when you were little?

School and youth

School years, friends, first outings: a time people often remember in precise anecdotes.

- ☐ How did you get to school, and how long did it take?
- ☐ Do you remember one teacher in particular?
- ☐ Which subject did you love, and which did you hate?
- ☐ Until what age did you go to school? Why did you stop?
- ☐ What did you and your friends do on Saturday nights?
- ☐ What music did you listen to at twenty? Where did you go dancing?
- ☐ What did you buy with your first money?
- ☐ Who was your best friend?

Notes

Work

Work fills a large part of a life, and the know-how of a trade often disappears with the people who practised it.

- ☐ What was your very first job, and how much did you earn?
- ☐ How did you choose your trade, or did it choose you?
- ☐ Tell me about a working day, from waking up to coming home.
- ☐ Which colleague or boss left a mark on you, and why?
- ☐ What are you proudest of in your working life?
- ☐ What changed most in your job over the years?
- ☐ Did you move for work? How did that feel?
- ☐ If you could have done another job, which would you have chosen?

Notes

Love and family

A first meeting, a wedding, births: often the stories grandchildren know least.

- ☐ How did you meet the person you shared your life with?
- ☐ Do you remember your first date?
- ☐ How did you decide to get married, or to live together?
- ☐ Tell me about your wedding day: the weather, the clothes, the meal, the guests.
- ☐ Where did you first live together? What was your home like?
- ☐ How did you feel when your first child was born?
- ☐ What advice would you give a couple just starting out?
- ☐ Which family tradition would you like us to keep?

Notes

War and major events

Some memories are painful. Let your grandparent choose what to talk about, and don't insist if they would rather move on.

- ☐ Which major historical events have you lived through? Where were you at the time?
- ☐ What did your parents tell you about the war?
- ☐ How did everyday life change during those years?
- ☐ Did anyone in the family go to the front, do military service or live far from home?
- ☐ Did you live through times of shortage? What was missed most?
- ☐ How did you hear the big news: on the radio, in the paper, on television?
- ☐ Is there one event that changed the course of your life?
- ☐ What would you like young people to remember about that time?

Notes

Recipes and celebrations

Cooking loosens tongues. A family recipe is also a memory you can make again.

- ☐ Which dish from your childhood would you like to taste one more time?
- ☐ Who taught you to cook, and what was your first recipe?
- ☐ Can you give me a family recipe, with your own tricks?
- ☐ What did your family eat at Christmas or on big holidays?
- ☐ Was there a garden, chickens, home-made preserves?
- ☐ Which family meal left you the best memory?
- ☐ Which failed recipe still makes you laugh?
- ☐ Which taste or smell takes you straight back?

Notes

What you want to pass on

More personal questions, best kept for the end, once trust has settled in.

- ☐ What are you proudest of in your life?
- ☐ What was the hardest decision you ever made?
- ☐ What helped you through the difficult times?
- ☐ What life lesson would you like me to remember?
- ☐ Is there a story you have never told and would like to tell?
- ☐ Which object in the house has a story, and what is it?
- ☐ What would you like your great-grandchildren to know about you?
- ☐ What makes you happy today?

Notes