



LIFE HISTORIES

Asking the Right Interview Questions

Preparing your interview questions is a balancing act. On one hand, you want to make sure you've done your research, and that your questions are thoughtful and specific (no subject wants to answer a question they've been asked a thousand times before!). On the other hand, you want to let the conversation unspool naturally, without feeling too forced or rigid. The trick, then, is to brainstorm as many different types of questions as possible that will draw out the life history of your subject, with the knowledge that you may not ask them all. Remember, you can always abandon your next prepared question in order to follow up on an interesting morsel from your subject's answer!

The following list of subjects is meant to help you brainstorm. We don't expect (nor want) you to tick these off like an interview to-do list. Rather, we hope you'll use this resource as inspiration for your own thoughtful—and original—questions. For “place of origin”, for example, rather than simply asking “Where did you grow up?” and moving on, come up with an open-ended question like, “What was it like living in the town where you grew up?” And for “family members”, you might ask a question like, “What family member do you feel had the most influence on you growing up? How/why?”

- Place of origin
- Name
- Family members
- Childhood
- School experiences
- Significant teachers
- Challenges
- Curiosities
- Advice



Greatest influences
Memories
Mistakes
Lessons
Fears
Aspirations
Inspirations
Values and philosophies
Changes and transitions
Sources of pride
Sources of regret
Sources of motivation