

Do-It-Yourself Instruction Guide

The StoryCorps experience is not limited to our recording booths. We encourage everyone to conduct Do-It-Yourself interviews in your home, workplace, or community. Choose a friend, colleague, or loved one to interview, and find some recording equipment. There's no wrong way to do it. Just listen closely, and ask the questions you've always wanted to ask. Here's how:

1. Select Your Interview Partner

Start by selecting whom you wish to interview. A beloved relative? A mentor? A local hero? Some people may be hesitant to participate; emphasize that everybody's story is important. Let your interview partner know that you would be honored to record the conversation.

2. Create a List of Questions

Preparing ahead of time will greatly improve the quality of your interview. Think about what you would like to learn from your partner, then make a list of 5-10 questions. Here are some questions that have led to great conversations:

- What are some of the most important lessons you have learned in life?
- What are you most proud of?
- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did they teach you?
- How would you like to be remembered?

For more suggested questions, visit www.storycorps.org to use our online Question Generator.

3. Find, Borrow, or Purchase Recording Equipment

Your recording equipment can be as simple as a cell phone, a tape recorder, a video camera, or a computer. You can find both basic and more sophisticated recording equipment at your local electronics store or for purchase online. You might even borrow equipment from a friend or relative. Whatever recording equipment you choose, we strongly suggest that you practice with it before your interview. See our Equipment Recommendations page for more details.

4. Choose an Interview Location

Pick the quietest place possible. A carpeted room is best. Avoid kitchens, which have reflective surfaces and noisy appliances. Be sure to turn the volume off on any TV, radio, or stereo. Close the door and listen for anything else making noise: buzzing fluorescent lights, ticking clocks, air conditioners, etc. If possible, turn off or move any noisy electronics out of the room. Listen for noise during the interview as well. If your storyteller fidgets, for example, feel free to respectfully remind him or her that the microphone picks up the sound. Make the space peaceful and calm by turning the lights low.

5. Set Up and Test the Equipment

Set up your equipment before the interview, and make sure you know how to use it. Once the interview starts you will be able to focus on your interview partner instead of the equipment. Before the interview, record your storyteller answering a few throwaway questions, such as, "Tell me what you had for breakfast." Stop, rewind, and listen to the sample recording to determine if everything is working. Remember to press RECORD again when you begin the actual interview.

A few tips for better audio quality:

- Wear headphones when recording. Your headphones are your "ears" for the interview; they tell you exactly what you'll hear on your finished recording.
- When possible, use an external microphone when recording. Always hold the microphone in your hand, moving it between you and your storyteller. Hold the microphone about one hand span (about 7 inches) from your storyteller's mouth. If you're using an internal microphone on a camera, set up the camera just far enough away to keep the picture in focus.
- Be careful of "mic-handling" noise. That's the low, rumbling sound you hear when you move the microphone in your hands. Use a light touch when handling the microphone, and minimize movement.

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6. Begin the Conversation

Start the interview by stating your name, your age, the date, and the location of the interview. For example, “My name is Marissa Martinez. I’m forty years old. The date is November 27, 2009, and I’m sitting with my grandfather, Frank Jackson, in his living room in Hamilton, Missouri.” Then ask your storyteller to do the same.

Remember, the questions you prepared in advance are just suggestions. Trust your instincts and ask questions in whatever order feels right. If something interests you, ask more about it. Sometimes your storyteller may need to know that it’s okay to talk about a certain topic. Grant permission by saying, “Tell me more.” Take breaks if your storyteller needs them. Avoid saying “uh huh” or interrupting. Instead, use visual cues like nodding your head to encourage the storyteller to keep going.

7. Keep the Conversation Flowing

Listen closely. Look your storyteller in the eyes. Smile. Stay engaged.

Stick with the good stuff. Try to keep to the topics that move you. If the current topic isn’t what you wanted to put on tape, gently steer the conversation in another direction.

Ask emotional questions. Asking “How does this make you feel?” often elicits interesting responses. Don’t be afraid to ask.

Respect your subject. If there is a topic that your interview partner doesn’t want to talk about, respect his or her wishes and move on.

Take notes during the interview. Write down questions or stories you might want to return to later.

Be curious and honest, and keep an open heart. Great things will happen.

8. Wrap It Up

We’ve found that 40 minutes is a good length of time for StoryCorps interviews, but you can talk for as long or as short as you like.

Before you turn off the recorder, ask the storyteller if there is anything else he or she wants to talk about. Then make sure to thank the person; opening up can be difficult. Express your gratitude, and let him or her know that it was a privilege to listen to the story.

Finally, hit STOP on your recorder. Congratulations! You have just joined the StoryCorps Do-It-Yourself community!

9. Preserve and Share the Conversation

Start your own archive at home by labeling your interview and storing it in a safe place. (At this time, only interviews recorded on StoryCorps equipment can be archived in the Library of Congress.) To share your interview, you can transfer the interview to your computer and burn copies for your family and friends. You can also upload your interview to www.entertainment.com/nationaldayoflistening to share it online.

Your recording is likely to become a treasured heirloom. Invite loved ones to your home to listen to it. Bring it to special occasions, reunions, or memorials.

Help StoryCorps record, preserve, and share even more stories throughout the United States. Donate today at www.storycorps.org/donate.

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Selected Great Questions from our Question Generator

Questions for anyone

- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did they teach you?
- Who has been the kindest to you in your life?
- What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?
- What is your earliest memory?
- Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to me?
- What are you proudest of in your life?
- When in life have you felt most alone?
- How has your life been different than what you'd imagined?
- How would you like to be remembered?
- Do you have any regrets?
- What does your future hold?
- Is there anything you've never told me but want to tell me now?
- Is there something about me that you've always wanted to know but have never asked?

Questions for parents

- Do you remember what was going through your head when you first saw me?
- How did you choose my name?
- What was I like as a baby? As a young child?
- Do you remember any of the songs you used to sing to me? Can you sing them now?
- What were the hardest moments you had when I was growing up?
- If you could do everything again, would you raise me differently?
- What advice would you give me about raising my own kids?
- What are your dreams for me?
- How did you meet mom/dad?
- What are your hopes for me?

Questions for grandparents

- What was your childhood like?
- Do you remember any of the stories your parents used to tell you?
- How did you and grandma/grandpa meet?
- What was my mom/dad like growing up?
- Do you remember any songs that you used to sing to her/him? Can you sing them now?
- What is the worst thing she/he ever did?
- What were your parents like?
- What were your grandparents like?
- How would you like to be remembered?
- What are your hopes for me? For my children?

Questions for friends

- What is your first memory of me?
- What was the most difficult moment in our friendship?
- What makes us such good friends?
- Is there anything you've always wanted to tell me but haven't?

Questions about growing up

- When and where were you born?
- Who were your parents?
- What were your parents like?
- How was your relationship with your parents?
- What is your best memory of childhood? Worst?
- Did you have a nickname? How did you get it?
- Who were your best friends? What were they like?
- What did you think your life would be like when you were older?
- Can you tell me any favorite stories/memories from your childhood?

Questions about love & relationships

- When did you first fall in love?
- Can you tell me about your first kiss?
- What lessons have you learned from your relationships?

Questions about marriage & partnerships

- How did you meet your husband/wife/partner?
- How did you know he/she was "the one"?
- How did you propose?
- What were the best times? The most difficult times?
- What advice do you have for young couples?

Questions about working

- What do/did you do for a living?
- Tell me about how you got into your line of work.
- What did you think you were going to be when you grew up?
- What lessons has your work life taught you?
- Do you have any favorite stories from your work life?

Questions about serious illness

- Can you tell me about your illness?
- Do you think about dying? Are you scared?
- How do you imagine your death?
- Do you regret anything?
- Do you look at your life differently now than before you were diagnosed?
- If you were to give advice to me or my children, or even children to come in our family, what would it be?
- What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?
- Has this illness changed you? What have you learned?
- How do you want to be remembered?

Questions about military service

- Were you in the military?
- Did you go to war? What was it like?
- How did war change you?
- During your service, can you recall times when you were afraid?
- What are your strongest memories from your time in the military?
- What lessons did you learn from this time in your life?

Equipment Recommendations

Although StoryCorps cannot archive Do-It-Yourself recordings at the Library of Congress, we still encourage you to record, preserve, and share Do-It-Yourself interviews for generations to come. Here are some equipment recommendations to help you along the way.

Portable Digital Recorders

Digital recorders will produce the highest-quality sound recordings. Like a digital camera, you must use a flash card compatible with your recorder.

Recommended digital recorders: Marantz PMD661 or the smaller, more portable Edirol R-09

Mp3 Players

You can convert an MP3 player into a digital voice recorder using a microphone attachment, which plugs directly into an iPod or other MP3 player.

Recommended iPod attachments: Blue Mikey, Alesis Pro-Track

Traditional recorders

Many people prefer more traditional recorders, such as a cassette deck, DAT (digital audio tape), or micro cassettes. We recommend transferring any analog recordings to a digital format for preservation.

Computers

It's likely that your computer has a built-in microphone, which will allow you to record with free, online audio software like Audacity. GarageBand, which comes pre-installed on all Apple computers, also works well. We suggest you plug in an external microphone into your computer whenever possible.

Recommended audio recording and editing programs: ProTools, Logic, or Audacity.

Mobile Phones & Video Cameras

Some mobile phones, like the iPhone and G1 (Google Phone), also have a recording device built-in. If you use a video camera, avoid excessive camera movement by setting your camera down on a level surface or tripod.

Headphones

A good set of headphones is essential. They will block out background noise and allow you to hear how the finished recording will sound. Many audio players already have headphones or earbuds. You can also purchase separate headphones at most general electronics retailers for as low as \$10.

Recommended headphones: Sony MDR-7506

Microphones

An external microphone will yield better sound than the internal mic on your computer or recorder. When connecting an external microphone to a computer, you may need to change your audio settings in your System Preferences (Mac) or Control Panel (Windows).

Recommended microphones:

- Dynamic microphones (*compatible with both digital recorders and computers*) — Shure SM-58
- USB microphones (*compatible only with computers*) — Blue Snowball

Share your interviews online

Free file-sharing websites, such as Box.net, allow you to easily upload and share digital audio or video recordings. Social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook also host audio applications that allow you to upload and share your interviews.

Additional online resources

- Transom*, an online public radio community, has extensive product equipment reviews and instructional recording guides at www.transom.org.
- Audacity* features instructions and tips for downloading, installing, and using their audio editing software package at www.audacity.sourceforge.net.
- The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress*, StoryCorps' archive partner, provides basic notes on folklife fieldwork at www.loc.gov/folklife/fieldwork/index.html.