

# Frequently Asked Questions

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**What is a personal history?**

Typically, a personal history is the story of a life, or stories from a life. It may be a memoir, a tribute, a life story, an autobiography, a biography, a video biography, or an oral history. It may also be a legacy letter or ethical will, expressing one's values, wishes, regrets, observations about life, lessons learned, and so on. Many personal histories are books, a growing number are captured on video, and some are still simply audio. There are also fine art projects such as paintings, collages, scrapbooks, quilts, and shadowboxes. You can read some delightful examples of (and tips about creating) personal history in the anthology *My Words Are Gonna Linger: The Art of Personal History*.

**What is a personal historian?**

The rich and famous have long employed professional writers and editors to help them with their memoirs or have hired "ghostwriters" to pen books in their name. Personal historians are creative professionals who help both celebrities and "ordinary people" tell their life stories. A personal historian may be engaged to help individuals, families, communities, or organizations preserve memories, images, voices, stories, and histories—often (but not always) in narrative form.

### **Why hire a personal historian?**

Writing your own life story can seem daunting. Working with a skilled collaborator turns the process from overwhelming to energizing. Telling your life story to a neutral outsider who is trained to listen and ask good questions often elicits a fuller, more revealing story than you might write on your own. A skilled personal historian can help you recall key events in your life, draw out details that will be meaningful to future generations, and find the thread that ties together the various stories in your life in a coherent and readable narrative. Personal historians can do research to place your stories in social and historical context and can interview friends, family, and colleagues to elicit a fuller, richer picture of your life. Also, some personal historians specialize in organizing and preserving photographs, film, letters, diaries, and related memorabilia—for private or special collections or for use in creating personal histories.

### **What's the point? Why would anyone be interested in an ordinary person's story?**

Wouldn't you like to know what your great-grandparents' lives were really like—in their own words? No matter how ordinary we might think our life is, it will be interesting to our descendants and to future researchers. And structured reminiscence produces more than nostalgia—though nostalgia is important in tributes (a form of personal history popular for birthdays, anniversaries, and other milestone events). Reminiscence and life review are now recognized as important life processes—sifting through memories to find the patterns, meaning, and value in your life.

Many people plan to interview aging family members, but put off doing so. Lack of time or skill may keep them from collecting and preserving the stories of those they care about, and when they finally find time to do so, it is often too late—those who lived the stories are too frail to tell them, or their memories have faded, or their voices are silenced by death. Family members often experience a sense of grief when it's clear those stories and voices are lost forever. A personal historian can help you collect those stories while there is time!

### **How is personal history different from genealogy?**

Genealogists research, record, and map family trees—who descended from whom. Families collecting information about family births, deaths, and marriages are learning that stories bring to life all those names on the family tree. It is those stories that personal historians are most interested in. Personal histories connect generations—including generations unborn—through stories, insights, and shared wisdom.

A genealogist's work is based on research in public and private records, while a personal historian may focus more on interviews with people who are still living. Ideally, personal histories bring to life the individuals portrayed and the kind of life they led. Most personal histories aren't strictly geared to the family tree: more often they narrate a particular life, relating stories and anecdotes within the story arc of one individual's life.

### **What's the final product? How do I know which product to choose?**

Among the possibilities: a set of audiotapes, an edited transcript of interviews (with or without photographs), a printed narrative (a book, typically with photos), an ethical will, a video photo montage, a custom video biography. The benefits and price range are different for each option. A

personal historian can clarify which products might suit your needs. [Find a personal historian](#) in your area, ask them questions, and consider the costs and time required as you review their portfolio and samples of other personal histories.

CDs and DVDs are increasingly used to digitally store words, images, and sound. APH members who specialize in multimedia productions can help you tell your story, pulling together in one product text, photos, audio, letters and other documents—even old home movies and videos. Rapid and constant advances in technology allow ever more imaginative ways to capture and convey a person’s life for future generations.

Many families choose to produce both a book and a multimedia product. It is important to produce a book on high-quality, acid-free paper if you want it to last, and it is important to ask about the “shelf-life” of a digitally produced product as well. It may be prudent to transcribe any audio or video interviews, including those done for a book, and to keep bound copies of the original transcripts.

### **What is an ethical will?**

In an ethical will or legacy letter, you may express to your family, friends, and descendants your love and gratitude, your personal and spiritual values and beliefs, what you stood for and achieved, the lessons you’ve learned, the things you regret or are proud of, your hopes and blessings for the future. Your message may be brief (e.g., “I want all my children to get along, and get together often, after I’m gone”) or several pages. Both a vehicle for self-exploration and the gift of a lifetime, an ethical will may also be a chance to forgive and to ask forgiveness. Ethical wills are not legally binding; they are messages from the heart, love notes to the future. But they are often done in association with estate planning (explaining, for example, that you are leaving a large sum to a particular charity because you value what the charity stands for).

### **What’s the point of creating a family, community, organizational, or corporate history?**

The “personal history” approach (combining interviews and storytelling with research in archival materials) helps bring to life the stories of families, communities, schools, churches, businesses, corporations, labor unions, fire and police departments, and other organizations. Histories of organizations are used for promotion, to boost employee morale, to explain the organization to donors and supporters, to inform clients and vendors, as fundraisers, or as tributes to founders or key employees and board members. Some businesses proudly direct their customers to a designated exhibit area or small museum in which both print and video histories may showcase the company’s history. (Depending on their purpose, the cost may be tax-deductible. Community histories are sometimes grant funded.)

### **Why can’t we produce our own community or corporate history?**

Communities, companies, and organizations want their stories told for all kinds of reasons, but are rarely equipped to produce organizational histories in-house. The tasks required to prepare an interesting organizational history are time- and labor-intensive, involving hours of research, interviews, transcription, photo-managing, writing, taping, editing, revising, illustrating, and preparing material for production and publication. Often there’s a fixed deadline by which the organizational history must be completed. Structuring the narrative for a written organizational history or writing a compelling script

for a video are specialized skills, and it's often easier for someone from outside the organization to ask the questions that elicit a clear and interesting story—for audiences now and in the future. Managing a project of this complexity can be a full-time job—like producing a commercial book or feature film.

### **What is the process for turning my life story into a book?**

Typically, your personal historian will first talk with you or the narrator (who might be you or might be someone else in the family) to get a sense of what period you want to cover, what general storyline and messages you might want to convey. After developing a rough outline and recording a series of interviews with the “narrator,” after transcribing the interviews or having them transcribed, your personal historian will then organize the material, usually as a narrative (sometimes by themes), and edit for accuracy, consistency, spelling errors, and the like—without editing away your “voice” (your way of expressing yourself). Sometimes the personal historian will actually write the narrative, trying to capture that voice, but filling in with material from other sources, too. You will be asked to read drafts for accuracy and to make sure you're saying what you want to say, the way you want to say it. Together you will choose photos and other memorabilia to include, and the manuscript will be designed as a book, with appropriate placement of photos and captions. After careful proofreading, the book will be printed and bound.

### **What are the advantages of a video biography?**

A video brings a subject to life in a way no other medium can. Future generations can see grandmother's expressions, the tone of her voice, and the way she interacted with the world. Think how exciting it is to read a history book and then see archival footage from the period you read about. You may want to combine a video interview with family movies and other visuals that provide historical context. Video biographies can range from a simple photo collage set to music, put together for a family gathering, to a series of longer oral history interviews, complete with archival photos, family movies, and multiple interviews. If you are worried about changing digital formats, remember: the home movies of the thirties and forties, the VHS format of the eighties and nineties, even the silent movies of the late nineteenth century can now be preserved and transferred to the format of today. With advances in digital technology, yesterday's formats can be transferred to tomorrow's formats, as they appear. You can also contract to produce a book with an accompanying DVD interview, or to produce a complex video project with an accompanying book.

### **What are the advantages of creating an audio-biography?**

Audio recordings engage the imagination in ways print cannot. When we listen to books on tape or radio interviews, we supply our own imagery but we can also usually concentrate better on what's being said. With no visual distractions, we can hear pauses and inflections, undertones and nuances that might not be evident on the printed page. Sound effects can be added to create all kinds of moods and worlds. Best of all, an audio-biography is extremely portable and can be easily listened to through speaker systems (as you drive or cook) or on private listening devices such as iPods.

### **Where and how are interviews done?**

Interviews should be recorded in a quiet, comfortable room, to minimize background noise. If you are being interviewed in your home, other family members are generally urged to occupy themselves elsewhere, to prevent distraction. If the goal is to get the story of a couple, most personal historians prefer to interview the partners separately before they are interviewed together. In a separate interview, the quieter partner may speak up more fully, not having to share the spotlight (or feel

censored by their partner), particularly when asked questions for which the couple has not developed a stock response.

If you are shy or reluctant to be interviewed, it may help warm you up to start by talking about objects in the home, the people in old family photos, others in the family, or anything that takes the focus off of you or your fear that you can't remember things. Disciplined remembering generally brings a flood of memories, some of them coming as you sleep. Keep a tablet at your bedside to jot down notes about long-forgotten scenes from your life, to relate at your next interview session. Expect to enjoy the process.

### **How long does it take to do the interviews?**

Recording a person's life story often takes from a few hours to ten or twenty, depending on the narrator's memories and his or her desire and physical and emotional ability to share them. Sessions typically last from one to three hours each, depending on your energy and comfort level, and are often spaced out over days or weeks. Mind you, some lives are more complex and some projects more ambitious—in which case the interviews may extend over many months, sometimes years. With video, projects tend to be shorter in time, more focused and intense. Some video producers ask for a pre-interview meeting, to help determine which questions will elicit the best (most usable) responses; others feel that nothing kills spontaneity like getting people in any way to rehearse their answers.

### **What if there are some things I don't want to talk about?**

Leave them out. No one will force you to say anything. Personal historians are not investigative reporters, digging for dirt. It often helps to talk about difficult periods in terms of how you survived them. Life writing is not therapy, but time after time we have seen its therapeutic effects. By understanding where you came from, you may come to better understand who you are. Even upbeat memoirs gain much of their strength from revealing the dark times through which a person has struggled, and the lessons you learned can be especially valuable to others going through dark times. But you don't *have* to discuss anything. When you hire a personal historian, you control the content.

### **How long does it take to complete a project?**

That depends on the scope of the project. Some projects can be completed in a matter of weeks, some take three to six months, and some take one or two years or more. Interviews captured in audio can often be completed in a matter of days or weeks. Producing a video, CD, or DVD, or turning audio-recorded interviews into a book, may require two to six months or more, from interviews through writing, editing, photo selection, and production. It depends on how much material there is, how much time you have to spend on the project, how many options you decide to include, and how soon the work can be scheduled. Sometimes families encourage a leisurely schedule, spread over time, so the narrator (the person telling the story) can relish the process and work at a comfortable pace.

### **How much does a personal history cost?**

Prices vary widely, ranging from several hundred dollars to many thousands for a complex biography, a large family or company history, or an intricate video production. Personal history services are labor-intensive, sometimes requiring many hours of interviewing, transcribing, videotaping, editing, revising, and preparing materials for publication or audio/video distribution. A personal history project can be

crafted to fit your budget, the price typically reflecting the number and length of interviews and the services needed to convert those interviews into the type of product you want. (See next two questions.) Often a personal history is commissioned as a gift — for a holiday, special birthday, anniversary, or milestone event. Since virtually all major costs are in the first book, video, or audio-recording, family members may choose to share the cost, making the project an affordable investment for everyone, from which all benefit.

### **What will a book project cost?**

Book prices vary widely, depending on the length and complexity of the process and particularly on the following factors:

- The skill and experience of the personal historian
- The time it takes the person to tell his or her life story, which determines the time needed to transcribe the tapes
- The time needed for writing, editing, revisions, and proofing
- The number of photos and illustrations used and their condition, color, and placement
- Whether a professional book designer is used to design (and lay out) the book and its cover
- The printing and binding process and materials used
- The number of books to be produced.

Book prices range from several hundred dollars for a short and simple unedited oral history to \$50,000 and more, with fees for organizational histories often in six figures.

### **What will a video project cost?**

Video prices vary, depending on the following:

- The skill and experience of the personal historian
- The time taken to do research and pre-interviews
- The number of interview hours shot
- The variety of locations and the difficulty of set-ups (lighting, sound, etc.)
- The time needed to edit images and sound (to create the narrative arc)
- The addition of family and archival photos and films, titles, graphics, voice-over, music and sound effects, etc.
- The number of copies made from the final cut.

Video work calls for fewer (more focused) interview hours than most books, but requires skilled professionals operating sophisticated production and post-production equipment. With video projects, as with book projects, the difference between a project that shines from the page or the screen lies in the writing and editing. Video prices range from several hundred dollars (for a video photo-montage created with very little editing) to \$15,000 (for a more complex project), on up to \$50,000 and more for a well-researched, carefully edited life history, done with multiple interviews at different sites, and produced with music, titles, archival footage and photos. A straight video interview with no editing might cost hundreds of dollars or more. A video biography focused on one subject, edited and derived from several hours of interviews with titles, images, and music might cost \$10,000 and up. When video biographers are asked to do a company or organizational history, with multiple interviews at several sites, the price can easily rise to six figures.

Clients who aren't prepared for a full video biography are often delighted with a less ambitious option, a photo-montage. With a photo-montage the personal historian digitizes photos, assembles them into storylines, and enhances the collection with titles, music, effects, and narration. These help a group celebrate a life—whether for a significant milestone (such as a graduation, a birthday, a wedding, an anniversary, or retirement) or for a funeral or memorial service.

### **Can I write my memoir myself?**

Yes, you can, and there are many books and classes to help you do it—but most people never get around to doing it on their own. They often need the motivation, structure, prompting, and encouragement that a professional personal historian can provide. Many APH members can serve as consultants to help you get started and give you some ideas about structure for your memoir. If you have already written your life story, a personal historian can help you take it from there by editing the manuscript, handling the inclusion of photos, preparing your story for printing, and overseeing the printing and binding process.

Many APH members teach workshops in memoir writing, guided autobiography, and other forms of life writing. The chief advantage of these workshops is that they keep you writing, whether for growth, for pleasure, for posterity, or for publication. In one common format, you write something at home each week and read it aloud in the workshop. (Some classes are even held online.) Reading your story aloud helps you identify and develop your own written “voice,” helps you hear where your story elicits reactions or drags, and helps you feel heard. Hearing stories written by others helps you learn what works and what doesn't and suggests new angles on your own life story. (It is also just plain fascinating.) The bonding that often develops when adults share their life stories in a safe and trusting atmosphere is one of the great side effects of this approach to personal history writing. By writing to an audience of familiar strangers, you are encouraged both to observe your own life closely and to write with the long view—and, most important, to keep writing.

### **What professional background do most personal historians have?**

Many members come to personal history work as a second, or a supplementary, career after (and sometimes during) careers in greatly different fields. The variety of backgrounds APH members bring to personal history work has enriched development of this relatively new profession. APH welcomes new members from a wide assortment of backgrounds.

- Some come from careers involving the written or spoken word: journalism, book publishing, radio or television broadcasting and production, visual effects supervision, and theater, film, video, documentary, and commercial production.
- Many have provided professional services as writers, editors, graphic designers, artists, illustrators, indexers, medical transcriptionists, court reporters (recorders?), or attorneys, among other specialties.
- Some have backgrounds as teachers, or in academic research, having specialized in fields as varied as English, history, sociology, geography, and geology.
- Some find their way through work as genealogists, oral historians, archivists, librarians, and program directors in senior centers.
- A fair number come from a corporate background (in sales, management, administration, advertising, publicity, copywriting, or marketing and communications)—in fields as varied as IT

and architecture; these members are often especially good at project management and marketing.

- Some come from health care-related fields (physicians, nurses, occupational therapists, and social workers).
- Some still work in practical, psychological, and spiritual fields that call for compassion, good listening skills, and counseling—as clergy, psychotherapists, career counselors, life coaches, mediators, hospice workers (and volunteers), gerontologists, and other geriatric specialists.

Many members join APH to acquire the skills and know-how they didn't get in their earlier career training and practice. "I used to tell my students," says one member, a former university career counselor, 'People will have many different careers in their lives.' As we grow, what might have been perfect at one point becomes less of a fit; what was imperfect before becomes an impetus for us to make a move closer to our 'real selves.' As we get older, we develop our 'shadow sides,' becoming more rounded and fully able to access all of our talents. I feel that all of my prior interests, training, and experience have brought me here, to personal history."

### **Why join the Association of Personal Historians?**

Celebrities and public figures have long employed professional writers and editors to help them with their memoirs. APH has led in the development of training in professional skills for helping both celebrities and "ordinary" people record and preserve their life stories, memories, voices, and images.

People starting a personal history business, or thinking about it, often join APH to learn how personal histories are done and how to develop an income stream from doing them. But many new members already have experience doing life story work and are surprised to discover so many others in the field. Lettice Stuart, APH's third president, for example, had been producing memoirs for about a year when she learned about an APH conference in California in 1998. "I had lots of clients, but I was just making the process up as I went along," says Lettice. "So I flew from Houston to Santa Ana, rented a car, and went to the conference with very little expectation. That conference changed my life. I would not be in business today were it not for the support, resources, ideas, energy, and wealth of information that I got there."

"In 1998, few people had ever heard of the personal history business," says book designer Marion Johnson, "and only a handful were making a living producing life stories. Thanks to APH, the personal history business is now a growing industry. I have had the privilege of watching APH and the industry grow. And without APH, I would not be in business today."

APH, a nonprofit 501(c)(6) trade association, was launched in 1995 to provide education, mentoring, and networking for its members.

### **Who attends APH's annual conference and why?**

Anybody can attend the conference, but most who attend also join the organization (there is an economic incentive to do so). APH members tend to share two qualities: curiosity and a love of storytelling. This makes any APH gathering just plain fun, but the conference also provides a rich learning experience, with education and shop talk going on both in formal workshops and in the

hallways and breaks between sessions. Over and over we hear, “I’ve never met a group so generous about sharing trade secrets.” New and emerging personal historians learn about the competencies essential for producing personal histories, including research, interviewing techniques, appropriate technologies, writing and editing, videography, audio and video editing and production, and print production. Members at all levels value workshops on marketing, workflow management, public speaking, identifying and targeting client and product niches, and the business and marketing skills specific to being a successful personal historians. (Marketing is often a mystery to members who are introverts, more adept at listening than at selling themselves.) All-day pre-conference workshops and three-hour workshops during the conference offer more in-depth coverage of some topics. APH’s education committee is also working with seasoned members to develop courses and workshops to offer between conferences.

See more about [past conferences](#) and the [forthcoming APH conference](#). Members (only) can purchase mp3 recordings of most conference sessions, along with syllabuses and helpful handouts from some workshops. Anyone can purchase the APH anthology, *[My Words Are Gonna Linger: The Art of Personal History](#)*, which includes memorable life writing as well as commentary on the process.