

Remember Then

memories of 1946-1969 and how to write your own

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Our family history does not begin with our grandparents; we should record details about our own lives as avidly as we do those of our ancestors. We find it all too easy to ignore writing our own life stories, we put it off because there are all those interesting ancestors to pursue instead and because we think we have plenty of time to get around to this one day. Imagine how thrilled we would be to find that grandma wrote her memories down. Our descendants might be equally excited if we preserved our own reminiscences for their benefit.

So how should we go about this? The important thing is to make a start. Be aware that memories will flash into your mind at odd moments. Make sure that you always have some method of jotting these down. This will probably mean that you need a notebook and pencil by your bed at night. If you are a hoarder, sort through your photographs, documents, diaries and souvenirs; perhaps assembling them in some kind of chronological order. You will need to create a rough timeline, recording personal milestones and perhaps any local, national or international events that impacted on your life.

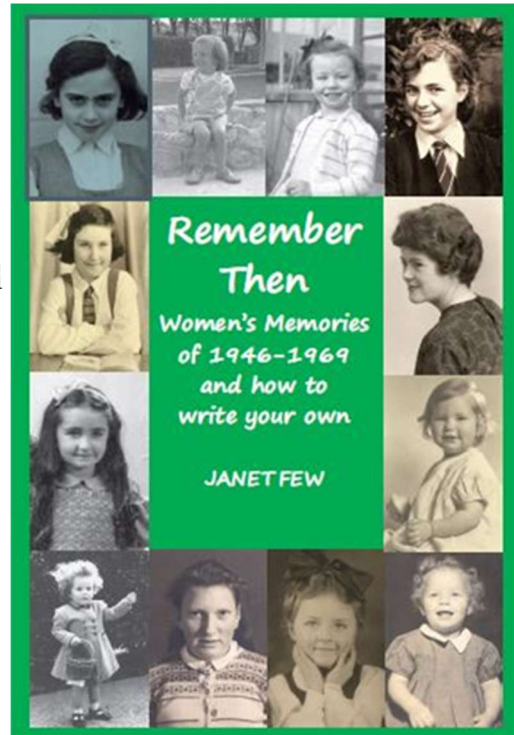
When it comes time to actually put fingers to keyboard, there are two basic approaches. You either write a chronological account, 'first I was one, then I was two, then I grew up' and so on, or, alternatively, you write thematically. Which of

these you opt for is obviously a matter of personal choice and I would not want to deter anyone by being prescriptive. What I will say is that, firstly, whichever approach you decide upon, you will need to create some form of chronology. I would however suggest that trying to write a chronological account is probably not going to be the easiest way for you to achieve the aim of recording your memories. Although what springs to mind, when people first decide that they should write their life story, is to produce a chronological account, a thematic approach is equally valid. This requires you to look at a range of topics. These might include, for example: schooldays, family, work, clothes, homes, leisure and hobbies, holidays and outings and many other options. It is much easier to dredge up those memories if you concentrate on a topic and it also helps to avoid repetition. The resulting account is also likely to be much more interesting for your potential readers.

The best advice with any major project such as this, which may appear daunting, is to ‘divide and rule’. Staring at a blank sheet of paper, or an open document on a computer, headed ‘My Life Story’, is unlikely to inspire you. Even a subheading, ‘My School Days’, is not much better. If you consider a series of smaller-scale subjects, you will find the project much more manageable. You could, for example, spend ten minutes or so writing about school dinners, or school uniform. This makes the project achievable without the need to devote significant amounts of time to it at one sitting. You do, of course have to come up with these precise topics. In some ways, they may be similar to questions that you might ask your older relatives when interviewing them about their lives. Think what you would like to have known about great granny and remember that this may be exactly what your great grandchildren would want to know about you.

When you have come up with the sub-headings that you want to use and then the more detailed questions that relate to each topic, do set yourself a realistic deadline.

Without that deadline, you are leaving yourself open to procrastination. When I helped eighty women write their memories of 1946-1969, we tackled one topic a month and most found this manageable but it will depend how much time you have to devote to this. You will also need to be prepared to return to 'finished' topics as you are bound to remember something else about food, whilst you are meant to be concentrating on clothes. Incidentally, all the questions that were sent as prompts to the women in my project are



included at the end of the appropriate chapter of the book. Even if you do not want to write thematically, you may find it easier to concentrate on a small section of your life at a time.

Do immerse yourself in the era. Speak to friends and relatives to see what they recall, although be aware that siblings often have very different perceptions of the same event. Read books about the time and watch relevant television documentaries to jog your memory. It can be very helpful to undertake a project such as this as a small group, so you can share your memories of a particular topic.

If you have reservations about the actual writing process, try not to be overly concerned about spelling, grammar and writing style. Especially with an autobiography, allowing your own personality to shine through is an advantage. Computer software will prompt you when it thinks you have slipped up with your spelling. Write as you speak; once you have something on paper you can always tidy it up afterwards if necessary. However young you are, start recording your own memories today.

The topics covered by those who took part in the first 'Remember Then' project were:-

Clothes

Homes

Communities

School

Housework

Health and Personal Hygiene

Child Rearing

Toys and Children's Leisure Activities

Youth Culture

Leisure Activities for adults

Festivals and Celebrations

Work and Money

Food and Shopping

Relationships

Attitudes – to religion, politics, race, class, the role of women.

Transport and Communications

National and Local Events that had an impact

To give you an idea of how it is possible to divide a topic up into manageable sections, here are some questions that you could use for the School topic:-

Describe your school(s). What type of schools were these (public, fee paying, single sex or mixed)? For fee paying schools, what were the fees?

Describe the curriculum. Was this the same for boys and girls? Which subjects did you enjoy or dislike and why? What were you good at, or less good at? If there was a stage when you had a choice of subjects, were there expectations about which subjects you would study?

Think about memorable (for good or bad reasons) teachers and lessons. What were relationships with teachers like? What about parent/teacher relations? How much homework was expected, if any? What sanctions were there for those who misbehaved? Mention class sizes and the times of the school day? Write about school examinations. How were you prepared for these? How was revision handled? What were the expectations? Was there pressure to leave or stay on beyond statutory school leaving age? How did this vary with gender or class? What about playtimes and break times? Did you stay at school for lunch? What were school dinners like? Can you remember playground games or activities? Mention school trips or outings.

Each topic is broken down in this way in the book. One topic a month has worked well for past participants.

Few, Janet *Remember Then: women's memories of 1946-1969 and how to write your own Family History Partnership* (2015)

I also run a monthly Write your Life Story Club for the Society of Genealogists
<https://sog.org.uk>