Scrhoz

Start Your Family History Prompt Pack

Prepared by Isla Baird | Scrhoz

15 simple prompts for the first steps in family history: what you already know, who to ask, sorting photographs and papers, and which records to look for first.

How to Use This Pack

- Copy a prompt, paste it into any AI assistant (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini or similar), and replace each [BRACKETED] part with your own details.
- Use first names or labels such as "my grandmother". Leave out birth dates, addresses, ID numbers and health, legal or financial details, especially for people who are still living.
- Ask permission before you share anyone's story or photograph, and leave out anything they'd rather keep private.
- AI can invent names, dates and places. Each prompt asks it to flag anything it can't verify, and you should still check facts against records and the people who were there.

Note: Family stories involve real people, some of them still living. These prompts are for personal family history. They are not genealogical, legal or medical advice. If you come across something difficult, take your time with it.

Begin With What You Know

1. Set the Ground Rules

> For this conversation, help me begin researching my family history as a careful, patient guide. Use first names or labels only, and don't ask for birth dates, addresses, ID numbers or health details. Never invent a fact, a name, a date or a record. When you can't verify something, say so plainly. Explain things simply, ask me before you assume, and leave the decisions to me. Reply with "Ready" and wait for my first request.

Tip: Paste this first in each new chat. The AI doesn't carry it over.

2. Who's Who in My Family

> I'd like a simple list of who's who in my family. Here's what I know, using first names or labels and rough decades only: [PASTE NOTES, E.G. MY GRANDMOTHER, BORN IN THE 1930S IN A FISHING VILLAGE]. Organise it into a plain list by generation, show how people are related, and mark what's unclear. Don't add people or facts I haven't given you, and flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Begin with the people closest to you and work outwards.

3. Fact, Story or Guess?

> Here are some things I believe about my family: [PASTE A FEW LINES]. Sort each one into three groups: things I probably know from a record, things someone told me, and things that are a guess. For each, ask me one question that would help me find out more, and say where it could be checked. Don't verify anything yourself, and flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Family stories often hold truth. They're best labelled as stories until you've found a record.

4. Start a Timeline With Five Facts

> Here are five things I know about [PERSON, FIRST NAME OR LABEL], with rough years: [LIST FIVE]. Put them in order, mark which are estimates, and show me two gaps worth looking into. Don't add any facts or dates yourself, and flag anything that doesn't seem to fit.

Tip: Five facts are enough to begin. The gaps tell you what to ask next.

5. Choose Where to Start

> I'm researching my family and I'm not sure where to begin. Here's who's in my family and who is still alive to ask: [NOTES, USING FIRST NAMES OR LABELS]. Suggest three possible starting points, such as one person, one place or one question, and say what each would involve. Ask me what I'm most curious about first, and flag anything you're unsure of.

Tip: Start with the person who is still here to ask.

Talk to Someone

6. Three Questions to Start

> I'm going to talk with [RELATIVE, E.G. MY AUNT] about the family for the first time. Suggest three open questions that would be easy and pleasant to answer, and a gentle way to explain why I'm asking. Include a line I can use if they say they don't remember much. Don't invent details about my family, and flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Three good questions are plenty for a first conversation.

7. When They Say "I Don't Remember Much"

> [RELATIVE] tends to say they don't remember much. Suggest six gentle ways to help them remember, such as looking at an object together, asking about a smell or a place, or asking what the weather was like. Explain why each might help, and remind me that memories and records can differ. Flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Put an old photograph or a familiar object between you. It takes the pressure off.

8. Sort What They Told Me

> Here are my rough notes from a conversation with [RELATIVE]: [PASTE NOTES]. Sort them into three lists: facts I could check in records, stories to keep in their own words, and questions to ask next time. Don't change the meaning or add anything, and flag anything that seems to conflict.

Tip: Keep their exact words for the stories. The way they tell it is part of it.

Photographs and Papers

9. Sort a Shoebox of Photographs

> I have a shoebox of about [NUMBER] unlabelled family photographs. Suggest a simple way to sort them in one afternoon, such as piles by person, place or decade, what to do with the ones I can't identify, and how to handle old prints gently. Don't write captions. Tell me if any step might risk damaging the photographs, and flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Use a clean table and clean dry hands, and put the unknown ones in one envelope for now.

10. A Simple Folder and Naming System

> I'm scanning family photographs and documents. Suggest a simple folder structure and a file-naming pattern I'll still understand in ten years, with five example file names using made-up details. Add three tips for scan quality and one for making a backup. Flag anything that depends on my equipment.

Tip: A simple pattern you use every time beats a clever one you drop.

11. Which Papers Are Worth Keeping?

> I've found old family papers: [LIST, E.G. LETTERS, CERTIFICATES, MEDALS, RECEIPTS]. Don't ask me for ID numbers or dates. Suggest which kinds are usually worth keeping and why, how to store them, and which to photograph or scan first. Flag anything where I should ask an archive or a conservator.

Tip: Scan first and sort later. A scan is a backup of the original.

12. Capture One Memory in Five Sentences

> I want to write down one family memory before it fades: [BRIEF DESCRIPTION, USING FIRST NAMES OR LABELS]. Ask me five questions about it, one at a time. Then show my answers back to me as five plain sentences in my own words, with no extra detail. Mark any sentence where I might be unsure, and flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Five true sentences are worth more than a page you never finish.

Records and Next Steps

13. Which Record Should I Look for First?

> I'd like to find out [WHAT I WANT TO KNOW, E.G. WHERE MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER LIVED IN A PARTICULAR YEAR] about a family in [COUNTRY OR REGION] around [PERIOD]. Suggest the first two or three kinds of record to look for, what each is likely to tell me, and where such records are usually held. Don't name specific entries. Say clearly where practice differs by place or time, and flag anything you can't verify.

Tip: Look at the website of your local archive or library. Many explain what they hold.

14. Read a Record Entry

> Here is a transcribed record entry with names and addresses removed: [PASTE]. Explain what each column or abbreviation probably means, what the entry tells me, and what it doesn't. Don't guess at missing words. List two questions it raises, and flag anything I should check against the original.

Tip: Photograph the original before you transcribe it, so you can check later.

15. A Four-Week Plan

> Help me plan the next four weeks of family history at about [2] hours a week. What I've done so far: [NOTES]. Suggest one small task a week, such as a conversation, a scanning session, a record search and a write-up, with a short reason for each. Don't promise results, and flag what depends on records I might not find.

Tip: A small plan you keep is worth more than a large one you set aside.

Where to go next, and more from Isla Baird:

- Family Stories & Staying Connected Prompt Pack (15 prompts)
- Family History and Memory Bundle (45 prompts, with a printable interview sheet)

More from Isla Baird

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