

UNDERSTAND FAMILY HISTORIES

Family histories help us understand the traditions, values, and experiences that shape who we are. They include stories passed down from parents and grandparents, descriptions of where families lived, the jobs they had, or the routines they followed. When learning English, understanding how people talk about their family background is essential—not only for describing your own history but also for understanding others' stories in conversations, interviews, and reading passages.

Talking about family histories often involves describing **past routines**, **lifestyles**, and **generations**, which means you will encounter verbs in the past simple, time expressions, descriptive adjectives, and sometimes structures like *used to* or *would* for past habits. Learning to recognize these patterns will help you follow narratives more easily and communicate your own past more accurately.

1. Key Language for Family Histories

When English speakers describe their family background, they use a mix of structures that provide context and detail.

Common Expressions

- *My grandparents grew up in...*
- *My parents used to tell me stories about...*
- *Back then, life was very different because...*
- *Our family traditions included...*
- *We lived in (place) until...*
- *Every holiday, we would...*

These expressions help listeners understand the setting, time period, and significance of the story.

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2. Useful Vocabulary for Family Backgrounds

Word / Phrase	Meaning	Example
generation	people born around the same time in a family	<i>Three generations lived in the same house.</i>
tradition	custom passed through time	<i>A family tradition was making bread together.</i>
ancestor	person from previous generations	<i>My ancestors came from Spain.</i>
heritage	cultural background or family identity	<i>Our heritage includes music and storytelling.</i>
upbringing	the way someone is raised	<i>Her upbringing taught her discipline.</i>
roots	where your family originally comes from	<i>My roots are in the countryside.</i>

These words appear frequently in stories about family memories and origins.

3. Narrative Example - “My Grandmother’s Story”

Understanding family histories often involves listening to or reading short narratives like this one:

My grandmother grew up in a small rural village surrounded by mountains. When she was a child, she helped her parents on the farm, and every morning she walked several kilometers to get to school. She always tells me that her family didn’t have much money, but they shared everything they had. During the holidays, the whole village came together to prepare traditional meals, and music filled the streets.

Today, life is very different for our family. We live in a big city, and our routines have changed completely. Still, my grandmother’s stories remind me of our family’s origins and the values that have been passed down through generations.

This type of reading helps students identify time markers, past actions, and transitions in narratives.

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4. Recognizing Time Expressions in Family Stories

Family histories often use time markers to help place events in chronological order.

Expression	Use	Example
in the past	general reference to earlier time	<i>In the past, my family lived near the river.</i>
when I was a child	childhood memories	<i>When I was a child, my dad worked nights.</i>
back then	emphasizes a contrast with today	<i>Back then, people grew their own food.</i>
many years ago	distant past	<i>Many years ago, my grandparents moved to the city.</i>
until	reference to a stopping point	<i>We lived there until I was 10.</i>

These expressions help organize family stories and keep the narrative clear.

5. Dialogues About Family Histories

Dialogue 1 - Talking About Parents' Childhoods

A: Where did your parents grow up?

B: My mom grew up near the coast, and she used to spend her weekends fishing with her brothers.

A: That sounds peaceful.

B: Yes, she says life was much slower back then.

Dialogue 2 - Family Traditions

A: Does your family have any special traditions?

B: Yes! Every winter we visit my grandparents. We always cook the same traditional dish they learned many years ago.

A: That must feel very meaningful.

B: It is. It connects us to our roots.

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Dialogue 3 - Generations and Changes

A: How has your family changed over the years?

B: Well, my grandparents used to live on a farm, but my parents moved to the city for work.

A: And what about you?

B: I've always lived in the city, so our lifestyles are completely different.

6. Mini-Reading - "A Family of Travelers"

Some family histories include stories of migration or movement:

My family has always been on the move. My great grandparents moved from one country to another looking for better opportunities. Later, my grandparents settled in a small town, where they raised their five children. My parents grew up hearing stories about long trips, new cultures, and unexpected challenges. Because of that, my parents encouraged me to learn languages and explore the world. Our family history is full of change, travel, and resilience—and it continues with every new generation.

This type of text helps students understand how families evolve over time.

7. How to Identify Key Information in Family Stories

When reading or listening to family histories, focus on:

✓ Who?

Which family members are mentioned?

✓ Where?

What places (cities, towns, countries) appear in the story?

✓ What happened?

What actions, events, or routines are described?

✓ When?

What time expressions help locate the story in the past?

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✓ How has life changed?

What differences exist between past and present?

Recognizing these elements helps you understand the structure and meaning of any family narrative.

Reference:

British Council. (2024). Past continuous and past simple. British Council. Recovered from: <https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/free-resources/grammar/a1-a2/past-continuous-past-simple>