

RVS Virtual Village Hall Facebook Live Workshop 8 – Tales of My Family

prompts by Alison Mott

*I created the following prompts for **'Tales of My Family' Facebook Live writing workshop** shared on the Royal Voluntary Service's Virtual Village Hall Facebook page on Tuesday 15th June 2021. You'll find a recording of the workshop [here](#).*

As always, I put together more prompts than I had time to use in the workshop but have included them here for those who might like to continue mining the rich resource of 'family stories' in their writing.

Feel free to share the prompts with others (though I'd appreciate if you could spread the love and credit them to me if you do!)

Our writing activities this month focus on families - partly because whenever I do a quick creative writing exercise in a workshop it's memories of my family that usually turn up. Some of them I revisit again and again, telling them from slightly different angles, and some - like the one I wrote in this 'live' workshop - pop out of nowhere and take me by surprise. I don't always do anything with the rough pieces afterwards but usually feel better for having got them off my chest, even when I don't share them with anyone.

Our urge to belong to a family is primal: human offspring aren't capable of fending for themselves as many other creatures can, so in our earliest years our survival literally depends on being part of a family: for food, shelter and protection. For some, family experiences will have been positive and for others they won't, so practice self-care as you're writing. These activities are meant to be a fun, pleasant way to spend an hour or two but if you find yourself recalling unhappy memories that upset you, then stop.

Warm up: set your timer for **7 to 10 minutes** and begin to write quickly, starting off with the prompt 'a family is ...' You might want to write single-word responses to this prompt or long babbling sentences (like mine!) - it's up to you! Nothing is wrong, anything you write is fine, just don't overthink it.

If you get stuck as you're writing, return to the prompt and begin the next sentence again with 'a family is ...'

Here are some examples shared in the workshop:

Family is ... a home full of memories and love – Karen F

Family is where you find it – Ursula G

Family is not defined by space or time – Donna H

And here's what I came up with:

Family is a house full of toys and books and shoes and clothes and noise and laughter and lost PE kits and over-full reading bags and unfinished homework and well done's and swimming certificates and snuggles and tears and love.

Family is a group of people who remember what your favourite toy was when you were three and join in with songs your mum used to sing and call you by a nickname none of your friends know you by.

Family is a long list of Christmas cards to send in November that sadly gets smaller as the years tick on.

When the time is up, look back over what you've written and see what you think. Can you use the ideas in a poem? Write a 'recipe for making a family'? Spark off a story about one aspect of the ideas? You might decide to do nothing - just 'play and throw away' - and that's fine. Whatever your creative mind wants you to do is okay.

Activity A: here's another quick-fire activity. I gave this **7 minutes** in the workshop and at first it seemed too long, but as I waited for the timer to tick back to zero I suddenly remembered family members I hadn't thought of for years. (That's one of the benefits of having a ticking timer beside you when you write – it prods the brain into action.)

List as many family members as you can. They could be –

- Immediate family
- Grandparents
- Aunts, uncles, cousins
- In-laws
- Ancestors
- People who are 'real' relatives and people you have chosen as your family

You might like to space them out on your sheet of paper, to jot detail around them in the next activity.

Activity B: zooming in and adding detail

You have a choice about what you might like to do here. You could either:

Choose one member of the family and create a spider diagram of information about them

- Biographical info – when they were born, where etc
- What they were/are like, their characters
- What they look like – any strong physical features? Red hair, Roman nose, small hands etc?
- What they dress/dressed like
- Routines, hobbies, mannerisms
- Sayings of theirs - 'well, it is what it is!'
- Stories you were told about them
- A memory of a time you spent with them
- An object you strongly associate with them - a pipe, the toolbox they'd had since they were an apprentice, their ancient leather handbag, a cuddly toy.

Create a character profile for your chosen person much like you might for a fictional character, so that when writing about them, you can add enough detail for the reader - who may not know them - to get a really clear picture of who that person was and what they were like.

Alternatively, you might choose to **jot notes beside several of the characters in your original list** - not so many facts for each, perhaps, but the most outstanding memories and bits of info about them that come to mind.

Activity C: create a piece about your relative/relatives, using the notes you've jotted

There are lots of things you could do with your 'family character' notes:

Poems:

Michael Rosen's poem for children 'Going Through Old Photographs' has a great line in it: ['Uncle Billy being silly.'](#) Me and my children used to 'riff' off that on car journeys, making up our own version. Here's the kind of thing we came up with:

Mum and Dad – drive us mad!
Aunty Mel – moans like hell
Uncle Pete - big feet;
Brother Roy - nicked my toy
Little sis - a proper Miss!
Nanna Horne – washed Pete’s mouth out with soap till he wished he wasn’t born;
My son Ned – jumps up early out of bed

Can you write a similar humorous poem about your relatives?

Or how about writing a **kenning**? Kenning is an [Old Norse word](#) meaning to understand or describe, and they’re usually short noun-verb or noun-noun phrases used to describe something by what it’s like or what it does. For example, here’s one of mine:

My son
Online-gamer
Van-driver
No longer childlike
Footie-player
Bike-rider
Heart-melter
Mother’s-darling
Cider-drinker
Thrill-seeker
Bungee-jumper
Determined-trier
Tigers-watcher
Sport-statistics-nerd
My son

Have a go – they’re fun to do and can be humorous or sometimes thought-provoking.

Here are some other things you could do prompted by your notes:

Write a story or memory about someone in your family –

in first person:

In 1974 I was a bridesmaid at my aunt’s wedding ...

or third person, from the point of view of a stranger looking on:

The child stood nervously behind the bride, her small hands clutching the laced-edged bouquet tightly ...

Write about them through objects they owned which you associate strongly with them (for example, a handbag, jewellery, hats)

Write a story about them related to their hobbies ...

Your grandfather who spent every weekend at the Steam Railway Trust, your mother who enjoyed knitting and hoarded wool ...

or a physical trait

Read 'My Father's Hands' by LB here.

Write a letter to/from them

From you, now

To you as you are now

As if they were writing to you in the past

Tell a short story of their life in fairy-tale form:

'Once upon a time there was a young man in Barnsley who wanted to be an engineer. So, he left his family and moved to the Midlands, where he was taken on as an apprentice in a small industrial town. One day as he stood at the window of the youth hostel where he lived, he spotted the landlady's daughter playing tennis in the playing fields behind – so tall and straight and beautiful that he decided there and then he should ...'

Use a family photograph as a writing prompt

Canadian author Michael Ondaatje makes excellent use of old family photographs in his 'fictionalised memoir' [Running in the Family](#), opening most chapters with a black and white snapshot of his parents' families in their Sri Lankan homeland and using these as a vehicle to share stories about them. Where he doesn't know true details of what's in the picture, he creates a semi-fictional story, based on tales passed on to him by others, to try and flesh-out the history of his family.

Why not try the same? Find an old family photograph – one you are pictured in or one that you're not – and either share your memory of the day it was taken or create a fictional 'story behind the snapshot' imagining what might have been going on.

And finally – story prompts and an ideas grid

Use sentence prompts to write up some of the memories you've jotted down – about one particular family member or several of them, for instance:

The funniest thing I've ever seen was/is ...

The weirdest thing I've ever seen ...

The happiest thing I've ever seen ...

The saddest thing I've ever seen ...

The funniest thing I've ever seen was my mum going up and down the street on my dad's moped. She didn't know how to stop it and just kept going up and down, up and down, shouting the world 'help!' as she sped past.

The happiest thing I've ever seen is my husband crying when our children were born.

Or use the mix-and-match grids below to write a memory or story from the sentence starter 'the time when'

The time when	your relative's name	an action	a family occasion
---------------	----------------------	-----------	-------------------

For example:

<i>The time when ...</i>	<i>... Grandad ...</i>	<i>... ruined ...</i>	<i>... a wedding.</i>
--------------------------	------------------------	-----------------------	-----------------------

Here are some possible actions:

visited	saved	ruined	cried at
got lost at	enjoyed	celebrated	giggled at
forgot	remembered	helped at	missed
went to the wrong	got drunk at	travelled to	danced
fell	sang	was surprised	gatecrashed

And here are some family occasions:

wedding	engagement	funeral	holiday
christening	a significant birthday	anniversary	Christmas
Thanksgiving	Eid	Diwali	a birth
graduation	family crisis	Easter	the World Cup
the Coronation	The Jubilee	a bar mitzvah	bank holiday

Feel free to add specific details – 'Aunt June's wedding' rather than simply 'wedding' – and you may need to tweak the sentences to make them work grammatically for you, but hey, you're creative! You can manage!

Enjoy the activities and let me know how you get on!

Alison Mott