

# Before I Was Born

Who you are today depends a lot upon people who have lived before you. Perhaps you inherited your curly red hair from your grandmother. Perhaps you learned to play chess from your stepfather, who learned it from his father, who learned it from hi. Perhaps you love a certain kind of cookie because your grandmother loved it and learned the recipe from her grandmother. Perhaps you live in this country because of your great-grandparents' interest in starting a new life in the United States.

Your family may be made of parents, brothers and sisters, stepparents, foster parents, guardians, some combination of all the above or some entirely different combination. You may be born into a family, adopted into a family, moved into a family or become part of a family in some different way. Some people even consider themselves to have more than one family. No matter what form they take, our families have a big effect on our lives.

Tell about the people who came before you in your family. Who were they? Where did they come from? How did they live?

You will need to do some research before you can start writing. Talk to your parents. Telephone your grandmother. Email an uncle. Visit a cemetery. Ask to look at family scrapbooks or mementos. Take time to find out as much as possible about your family's part – the past that helped lead to you.

## **Getting Started**

Choose from the following questions to help you write:

1. How did your family wind up in this country? Are they Native Americans? Did your ancestors emigrate from another country? If so, why did they come to America? How? When? Where did they settle? Did they come to the United States by choice?
2. Tell as much as you can about your grandparents and/or your great-grandparents. Which ones are still living? What are they like?
3. Do you know about any "characters" in your family's past? Every family has its clowns, saints, black sheep and eccentrics who are deeply loved or loathed. Do you know any stories about "characters" in your family?
4. Are there any special family history stories that are told again and again in your family? For example, your grandmother may often tell the story about the time her brother's nose was almost bitten off by a junkyard dog. Or you might know that your great-grandfather's name was changed when he arrived in America, because the officials at Ellis Island couldn't read Hebrew.
5. Are there any characteristics or personality traits that run through your family? Perhaps people describe your sister as "smart as a whip, just like her Uncle Alfonse." Or they describe Aunt Judy as "stubborn as a mule, just like all the Millers." Perhaps, generation after generation, there are relatives who tend to be optimistic, ornery, ambitious, depressed, fun-loving or artistic. Explain what family traits run in your family.
6. Does your family have any items from previous generations? Perhaps you have an old desk that once belonged to your great-grandfather. Perhaps there is an old shawl, quilt or piece of jewelry that has been passed down from generation to generation. What stories do you know about these items?