



## From You to Me and Back

Sue Lisk looks at effective ways to have those family history conversations

“SORRY, BUT I DIDN’T QUITE GET THAT.” WHEN I PHONED Rose, she frequently responded to my questions and comments like this. With diminished hearing, she had trouble understanding phone conversations. She needed to see me to read my lips and watch my facial expressions and body language to carry on a two-way conversation.



Conversations can take many forms. “Conversation”, a life-size sculpture executed by Pericle Fazzini, located in Albany, TX, Carol M. Highsmith. (Library of Congress)

My cousin, Paul, clammed up on the phone but wrote letters so frequently that I could almost imagine he was sending me emails.

And then there was Stella. In her nineties, she missed almost everything that anyone tried to communicate to her in person. The hugs were there, but she needed to rely on the telephone to comprehend what others were saying. Provided that she was in a quiet room when my call came in, I felt as if I were chatting with an exceptionally wise young adult with a husky voice.

Genealogists converse with relatives and others to hear stories, clarify their understandings of “facts,” and make discoveries related to their family history research. Different communicative strategies are appropriate, according to the situation. I’d like to look

at some factors to consider and ideas to keep in mind, when deciding on the most effective ways of communicating with others about family history.

### Limited Options

Perhaps most opportunities for genealogy-related discussions with relatives inherently allow for only certain types of communication.

If a family member lives far away, an in-person visit may not be possible. Meetings can be planned but the cost of travel may be prohibitive.

Some people you’d like to speak to may have physical conditions that will narrow your options. They may have mobility issues. Or they may tire easily. Or perhaps they have difficulty hearing. The best means of communication varies according to the case.

But even those with no physical limitations may simply prefer to communicate in particular ways. An elderly relative absolutely refused to invest in a computer, despite his doctor’s recommendation that it would “keep him sharp.” The option of sharing information with him online in a matter of minutes vanished once I learned how he felt.

Yet he was perfectly happy to share family stories during visits. And he would write long letters



Some people still prefer to communicate via handwritten letters. Writing a letter, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, ca 1906. (Library of Congress)