



LIFETIME MEMORIES AND STORIES

How to Write an Autobiography



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Why do you want to write the story of your life? Every person has an interesting story to tell and writing your autobiography is a great way to share it with people. But why do you want to do it?

This is the first question you will need to ask yourself before you actually sit down to write an autobiography.

What is your motivation for writing your biography? Ask yourself these questions:

- Am I interested in passing on my family history to future generations?
- Am I recording my personal history?
- Is it my work history
- Is it my community work?
- Is it my personal values and philosophies?
- Is it when I underwent a personal transformation?

What is it I really want to share? Time spent pondering this and clarifying your purpose will give you the motivation and focus that is necessary to see through your autobiographical project to completion.

All of the above are great reasons for writing an autobiography and certainly your own reasons will be personal to you. The reason you embark on, what can be a very rewarding but time consuming project, is what will provide you with the motivation to keep going and finish it.



Lists and Getting Started

Once you have decided your reasons for setting down your personal memoirs you are going to be writing a lot of lists. This is where just spending time thinking about things and jotting them down will help you build the structure of your personal memoir, your autobiography.

Telling your story in a written autobiography is a popular method but it isn't the only way. Other options include an [oral history audio book](#), a [videography](#) where you tell your story and it is recorded and presented on video, or you could preserve it through a combined [oral history and life story book](#).

No matter what method you choose to tell your story your own reasons for writing your autobiography will colour how it is approached. The emphasis you place on the various areas will be different from another person embarking on their own autobiography.

For now let's assume you are setting out to write your life story but the methodology can be applied to your own chosen subject.

Here are a few subjects for lists and the short descriptions that go with them that will get you started. The questions are only to give you a starting point, make your own list of questions and jot down the answers.

Start with a simple list and then expand upon it so that you build up short word pictures.

Places

What are the places I have lived in? As a child, a teenager, a young adult etc.

What were these places like?

What was significant about the place? If it was a farm what was the land like? Was it a cropping farm or livestock?

What was the town, suburb, city like?

Did you change places and what did that feel like?

People

Who were the significant people in my life? As a child, a teenager, a young adult etc.

What did these people mean to me?

What were they like? What did they look like, what sort of clothes did they wear, how did they behave?

What did I learn from them? What experiences did I share with them? How did they affect my life?



The people in your autobiography give it colour and interest. Your readers will want to get to know the main characters of your story and read about your opinions and interactions with them. *All stories need characters.*

Events and Experiences

Jot down as many events and life experiences about your life as you can think of. Keep your note book handy so that when you think of something it is there for you. A few words will do the trick, this is your “memory trigger” they don’t have to be complete sentences or even fully detailed.

- Maybe it is something about one of the places you lived in?
- Something you remember about a favourite uncle or aunt.
- Perhaps it’s about when you saw something in the big city or the birth of a child.
- You may have travelled widely or undertook studies.

Once you start you will get the idea and the memories will start flowing. One thought will lead to another and soon you will have filled your first notebook.

Deciding on an Autobiographical Style

There are many different ways to tell your story and once you have your lists started you can begin to consider the style you want to tell it in.

Point of View

What point of view are you going to use in telling your story? Are you going to tell your story in the first person or from the viewpoint of another person?

Many autobiographies are told from the teller’s (your) unique perspective. After all it is your experiences you are writing about. It’s the most common approach if you are doing the actual writing.

Example:

“My Mum and I waited on the platform for the train at Gosford and the wind whipped down the gully and fair lashed me. And when the train chugged into the platform the smuts from the smoke stack made my eyes water so bad I could hardly see the step to get on.”

Or you can tell your story, or have it ghost written for you, from another’s perspective.



Example:

John and his Mum waited on the platform for the train at Gosford with the wind whipping down the gully and lashing him as he stood there. And when the train chugged into the platform the smuts from the smoke stack made his eyes water so bad he could hardly see the step to get on.

In the first example John is telling the story about himself and in the second, the same story is being told from another point of view. Telling the story in the third person as in the second example is more common if you hire a ghost writer to do the actual writing for you.

Both ways of telling the story are equally as effective but a personal memoir from your own perspective often is a very powerful way of telling your story. If you do choose to tell the story from your own perspective just be careful that you aren't too overbearing with the use of I, I, I as it can turn the reader off.

Autobiography Structure

Now that you have your lists developed and you have decided on your perspective, you can always change your writing style and perspective later, it's time to put your outline into a structure.

Organise Your Lists into a Structure

Even though you may not decide to tell your personal memoir chronologically this is probably a good place to start. Get another notebook and go through your list rewriting your notes and organising them into a chronological order. This is a good time to think about any facts you might want to check. To think about anybody you may want to confer with to clarify information. Another list!

You may also want to jot down a note for the really important things to search out, any photos or documents you might have that will illustrate the important parts of your story. Another thing to go on your conferring list is that others, friends and family, may well have that special document or photo you would like to use. You will need to ask them whether you can use it and/or get permission from the photo's copyright holder.

This is a good time to start to pull together your lists so that you are matching up people, place and events on the one list. You will probably find that you will think of more as you go through this process.



Once you have pulled all your notes together you will have a very comprehensive short hand note of your autobiography and the daunting task is once again becoming more manageable again.

You have an outline structure! Congratulations!

Themes

Reading through your outline structure certain themes will emerge. These may be family, love, love lost, perseverance, adventure, achievements, work, travel that type of thing. Perhaps one is obviously dominant; you are almost certainly going to have more than one threaded through your outline structure. You might need to explore some of the events and experiences in a little more depth to uncover their underlying theme.

To enhance the readability of your autobiography and increase the enjoyment for your audience you should employ an over arching or umbrella theme. What that actual theme actually is depends on your motivation for writing your story and the events, experiences and interactions with the people you meet along the way. It's important to find your underlying theme for the main message you want to convey in your story.

Unless you are very firm in the message you want to convey at the outset and are writing specifically to convey that message, you may find that your key theme changes during the writing process. This happens as you steep yourself deeper into your own story and rediscover events and purposes with significant meaning for you.

Focus

Now that you have organised everything chronologically, your lists of events, characters and places, *you don't have to tell your story chronologically at all!*

Organising your thoughts chronologically does give you an outline structure to work with and does act as an important "memory jogger" but there is nothing to say that you have to tell your story this way.

Are you telling your whole life story, an autobiography, or are you telling a memoir concentrating on a particular theme or collection of themes or a specific time and series of events?

You can present your story and tell it in many different ways and you can start where you want to start. It is common for writers to just start writing about a particular event, person or place and then jump to a completely different one unrelated by time. If you find that your mind leaps to a particular theme, event or time then start there and just write. This will inspire and motivate you to continue. Pick a subject and



write about it and when you have finished writing this portion you can take a deep breath and admire what you have achieved!

Then pick another subject. Often when writing your first section you will be inspired for the next, by all means jot those down as you write and come back to them later. You will have a lot of notebooks by the time you have finished. *Perhaps you will even discover another complete story you want to write.*

Closer to the end of the writing process you will be able to re-order things to suit the way you want to present your story so the order you actually write in isn't important. It is good to have your overall structure so you are writing with a purpose but the order you write in isn't important.

The placement of the parts of your story will most likely be worked out nearer the end of the writing. You certainly can benefit from an outline, but the table of contents might not be finalized until after you've recorded your different experiences.

Editing Your Autobiography

A question many biographers ask when starting out on their project is "How long should it be?" This is your choice but an interesting story to read is one that keeps your attention, one that builds up to an action point, a climax and then usually presents some resolution revolving around that action point and theme. Your story should be long enough to cover the subject but short enough to be interesting.

As you work through the "How to Write Your Autobiography" process, and particularly as you organise your lists into an overall structure some of your jottings will stand out as strong themes, events or experiences that you will want to focus on. This is how you begin to decide what to include and what to leave out.

What are the key points of your story, what are the most relevant things in your life – family, career, travel, or all of these with equal emphasis? What will your readers find most interesting? Usually readers like to discover more about the person whose story they are reading. They like to know about the context of events. What were the places, times and events you experienced really like? Be honest and write from the heart and allow your readers to feel your emotions and form a picture in their mind from your words. Talk about your struggles and triumphs, the strong emotions and if difficult decisions had to be made write about how you made your decisions. *Do take your audience's feelings into account especially if it is a family story you are telling.*

Once you have your completed draft set it aside for a little while and take a break from it before you come back to it and read it from start to finish. A good soft lead



red pencil is handy to mark those pieces that really don't work, need a rewrite or need deleting because they just don't move the story forward at all.

After you have done the rewrite it's time to think about the title and to organise a table of contents and chapter headings if you haven't already done so. Certainly you can find a good title from one of the strongest themes of your autobiography. I'm sure you will have a more interesting title than "My Life".

Take the time to read a selection of other people's autobiographies, the famous and the not so famous from a critical perspective. Get a feel for what works in the way they tell their story and what doesn't.

It's your autobiography, your story and its worth telling well.

Publishing your Autobiography

After having written your story how are you going to share it with family and friends? Unless you are blessed with beautiful copperplate writing and even if you are, you most probably will want to publish your story so that others may read it easily.

Now that you have decided you would like to publish your story it's time to consider the different options:

- You can self publish – Often the most practical option
- You can look for a professional publisher – a definite if you feel you have a block buster.
- You can record an audio book – great for letting friends and family hear you tell your story.
- Or you can work with an oral history company such as Lifetime Memories and Stories who can work with you to record and print your own custom audio CD and autobiography.

Contact Lifetime Memories and Stories to find out how they can help make producing your life story easy.

Lifetime Memories and Stories

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