

MY LIFE STORY

DEFINITIONS

What's the difference between an autobiography and a memoir?

People may confuse the terms because both are written by the author, about him or herself. However there are a few distinctive differences. The reasons for writing a memoir might be quite different from the reasons for writing an autobiography.

Both autobiographies and memoirs are told in the first person and both are true accounts about the author's life. They each contain personal information and are meant to allow the reader insight into the author's mind.

★**An autobiography is a sketch of the author's entire life**, possibly from birth to the time of the writing. It will contain many details to give the complete picture.

★**A memoir focuses on one aspect of the author's life**. Many people write memoirs to talk about their experiences in a war or their careers or their family life. Memoirs usually cover a relatively brief span of time, and their main purpose is to draw the reader's attention to a specific theme or experience. So, probably details about the author's childhood or family won't be in a memoir because a memoir is just a small part of a person's life but a part which is memorable and worth recording.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

During the last decade there has been an upsurge of interest in the immediate past. Many people are tracing ancestors, making scrapbooks or quilts incorporating photographs and documents of interest about the events of which they were a part. Is this because we live in an ever accelerating environment and the feeling that time and events are evanescent? Is this why there is an emphasis on trapping experiences while they can still be recalled?

Perhaps it is because the use of computers, with the opportunity to collect and edit facts and pictures so simply, to retrieve data and verify information, makes this project more possible than it was even a few years ago. As I sit at

my computer I can zoom into the street I lived in as a child and see it on the screen. I can email anyone around the world with the click of a mouse; I can send photos of the family to them and receive pictures of their new home in Sweden, Spain or Argentina within seconds.

If you read one of the many books on writing autobiography, there is emphasis on the importance of setting the scene as well as how to tell the story. That is good advice, because in an autobiography there is an opportunity to tell how you remember personal experiences.

So what matters when writing an autobiography? Is it necessary to stick to facts, indeed what facts should be included? What jogs the memory?

Surely, the first consideration when undertaking this work is to consider who is the audience? Is this to tell the grandkids what life was like in a time they are learning about from the history books or is this an opportunity to entertain yourself? Not all memories are happy, and some writers find that writing one's life story is a source of pain rather than the catharsis that was anticipated. Realizing some of the pitfalls but determined to proceed there seem to be certain decisions to be made.

Most of us lead, so-called, ordinary lives inasmuch as we didn't discover penicillin or fly the first jet aircraft or invent refrigeration, but each of us has led a unique life. It is worth telling for our descendents. We lived through our era, they didn't.

What is going to be of interest? Does it all have to be true? Several facts are evident; some memories are lost, many are seen through a child's eyes and, at least some of the part as an adult was in an age gone forever. Therefore it would seem logical that concentration should be on the things which were different. The minutiae of living in that time will fascinate the youngster of today. They may not believe it but that is their problem, not yours.

Your story should lose nothing in the telling, even though you are making it a true account. Incidents in retrospect can benefit from hindsight. So, make it interesting, put it against the background of history and if you exaggerate a bit, well, it's a story. As in any good writing, use all your senses:

Smell, touch, sight, hearing and taste to evoke memories for they will be authentic.

When I smell tar heated by the sun I am back in Montreal, age six, on a walk to the top of Westmount on a hot day. So too, the clasp of a hand, the déjà vu of a person or place, the sound of a piece of music, a bitter taste can immediately transport one in time and space. These will make the life story real.

Life is a journey, when you invite your reader to travel that route with you make it an entertaining ride, for only you can do it. See to it that your readers experience what they would probably term *The Wow Factor!*

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Your audience! Who do you want to read this story? Do you want anyone to read it? Some people who live through tragedies may want to write for cathartic reasons. This can be a very good idea, but it does not always work as some people have discovered.

Probably you want this to interest your kids and grandkids and because that is why you are doing this you need to write an interesting story. Don't let them stop at the end of the first page!

Where do I start? Logically at the beginning! No! Not this time! Start anywhere! Actually there is no real reason not to start with your birth, but, while most of us were present at our birth, few of us actually remember it. So...think about this:

What you are writing is your life story so why start off with something which you have to tell second-hand? My suggestion would be to start your story with an event which changed your life. BUT don't start with that yet! Start by writing several simple episodes and as you get used to writing (again for some of us) later on you can choose which episode will start your story. More of that later.

How do I start writing? Writing fiction and autobiography are very different in some ways and in others, very similar.

When writing fiction the author makes up the world, the characters and the action but when you write your life story you know those things already, which is a huge advantage. But the actual technique of getting the words down on paper needs similar skills. When writing a short story or a book the author needs some sort of plan and so will the life story writer. The latter will need only a list of things which will trigger ideas and memories, rather than having to make it all up from the imagination. So we will do a list and see if that helps.

Telling your story. The vital part of the whole thing is to ensure that your reader turns further than page 2. You may find the whole thing riveting to do but you need to ensure that your audience agrees with you.

How many times have you recounted things which have happened to you? Thousands! Was it a bother? Usually it was done without much thinking! It happened. So you are going to sit down and, having decided on the episode,

start to scribble or hit the keyboard. This is not an exam! You are going to do something you have done many times before so, imagine you and I are sitting down and, over a cuppa, you are going to tell me about a day at school. Or imagine you are writing a letter, not that we really do that too much anymore, telling a friend about it. Think of what you would like to include: where, when, your age, with whom, the teachers, the subjects, what time you did things and so on. Record this and you have made a start. Always remember that you can edit later. Another thing to bear in mind is that this is your story, so while you will be introducing other relatives, link them to you.

Maybe your job was to write reports or deal with formalities in the workplace; this writing will need to be a little more informal because it will read better. Having said that, everyone has their own style of writing and it is as individual as your handwriting. Your style will happen because that is how you feel most at ease when you write. I might use the word *begin* but you might use *commence*, I might use *older* while you use *elderly*; neither is right or wrong, just different.

Unboring your autobiography. This is something we all need to know about! So many things have changed during our lifetime and this is why this task is so worthwhile. Things have changed, not always for the better as we see it, and most things will never revert. But change is interesting and so well worth recording. But recording facts can be boring, so what can we do to create interest? Think about description...You need to describe some things but try to keep it to necessary description. You are going to compare things then and now. Your audience know the now part so you don't have to include much detail about it. There are two things which will help to unbore your story and those are dialogue and humour.

Dialogue. There is perhaps an odd phrase or remark which is indelibly etched in your mind and it would be a pity to leave it out. However you will not remember word for word all the things which have been said over your lifetime. That doesn't matter but you do need to put in dialogue as this will do a couple of things. Firstly it will bring the story to life. You will have an idea of the sort of remarks people make so write them. This may not be 100% accurate but we know that and near enough is fine. The second thing it will do is to make the page look better. Chunks of information need to be broken up in order to appeal to the reader and this is most important. You don't have to put in long made-up conversations, but putting in a remark, question, comment and so on, does make a piece much more readable. While it is not dialogue, remember that body language can do much to tell a person's mood and set a scene. How people act tells a lot!

Humour. Most stories benefit from humour. Often humour is something which is said and if you can include it, do. As you are writing with hindsight you may recall something which makes you laugh now, even if it was not funny at the time.

Truth or Verisimilitude? Of course you are not going to remember everything. How many of us have diaries from Day One? It must be believable but it can be told with the benefit of hindsight and so you can, without over-exaggerating, tell things just a little larger than life. Looking back makes some things clearer.

Sad Events. All of us have sad things happen to us and you may feel you can't write about them. That's fine! You don't have to! But, after you have done some writing you may feel you can write these events down. There are a couple of ways of doing this. One is to put this into third person (so you would be John/ Jane instead of I) and tell it as if it is someone else's story or just report the incident. The other thing is to cover it with just the barest facts, and no emotion. Either of these things work.

Confession! No! You do not have to tell about how you robbed a bank, pushed Granny off the cliff, poisoned your neighbour etc! What you decide to tell is up to you. If there is something you want to tell, but not during your lifetime, how you do that is up to you. Just remember that you are not compelled to do it.

Where does my story start? Again, this is personal but rather than start with your birth, start at a point of change in your life and work from there. Then you can go back and tell what went before (because it could be that your life before led to that point of change) then tell what happened as a result of that time. Using flash-back, as it is called, is a very common way of getting a fictional story across to the reader and it works well in autobiography too.

Another way is to start with a bit about your forebears and then move into your story. You can also use a theme, or several themes, to tell your story. It really is up to you. If you have photos you can include, that could influence how you put things together.

Writing about personal experiences. Polio comes under this section and again this will differ from person to person. Firstly where you were when it happened, your age at the time and the care you had. You probably won't remember everything especially if you were quite young at the time. How

people are helped also makes this personal because the end result will depend a lot on how you were affected and your treatment.

The younger people today will have only vague ideas about this illness and its consequences and this must be explained so they can understand at least some of what is involved.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to explain about the condition in general at some point and after that explain about your experience.

It probably will not be easy to write this and one thing which is essential if you want others to read your story is not to start with negative facts. Try to select something which was a good happening, where you made progress and were pleased.

I have suggested earlier that you write in episodes and I am convinced that can work for most people. So start with something which is easy to write about and get onto the more difficult things when you have done some writing.

However, this suggestion is not set in stone and if you want to write about polio first, to get it overwith, please go back later, when you have done more writing and edit your first piece of writing.

Having mentioned all these things the most important one is to start writing and once you start you will find while it may be hard at first it does become easier. Don't be too critical of yourself and remember you are writing your story and you are the only one who can do it as you want it done.

PUTTING A LIFE STORY TOGETHER

Putting the story of one's life into readable order has no fixed rules. It will very much depend on what you have written and how much you want to include. Some people find it difficult to write on some parts of their life and so have written nothing about certain aspects. There is no rule which says that you have to include everything.

There are a few things which need to be considered.

Chronological Order. If you are going to include episodes which cover all your history this may be a good way to organise your story. It assumes you will have a bit about most things to include. With this version you will probably start with some details about your family and lead in from there. Then you will go through your life up to either now or where you want to finish. The negative of using this order is if you have some times you haven't recorded, the obvious question your reader will ask is: *What happened between.....?* Also there may be imbalance if you have written much more about some parts than others.

Subject Order. Because you have not written about all your life you may want to group what you have written into subjects. This works well and there is no need to explain why you have chosen to do it this way.

Start from a Crisis Point. This is a time when there was a change in your life. For many it could be migration but it could be a change of job, a marriage, the day you became the boss, got a degree or passed your driving test and so on. From the point you have described you can go back to the beginning or go forward and then, later fill in the background.

Because you want your reader to read further than Page 1, I think the last suggestion works best but it is a matter of opinion and very much a personal choice. What you put on page 1 is vital because, as with any book, you need to catch and hold the attention of your audience. If you do that then this whole writing effort has been worthwhile.

Having decided where to start, what next? Do you want to have an introduction? One person I know had one of her children write that and it worked well. The daughter said how much she wanted to know what had happened before she could remember, as her mum had lived through history. It was supported by a photo of the young family.

Another way of starting is to write a minimal résumé of your life; the disadvantage of that is that your audience may stop there!

Or start with a quotation which is appropriate or just write why you wanted to write your story. Maybe some photos of you over the years and who you are could be a start.

You have decided the order and an introduction (or not) so now you have all these episodes to put together. One thing to avoid absolutely is to put in *but that is another story* at the end of an episode. What you need is a link between one and the other. This can be done in several ways.

Links. It often takes only a sentence to join something up. You need to make your reader want to read more.

Let's say you have just received a degree or qualification

This is the last sentence of that episode. After five long and hard years I had the piece of paper in my hands at last. The next episode is about getting a job. The job interview took place in a high-rise building in the city and I had to go to the sixteenth floor.

To link these you could add to the first piece: This was to be my means to go where I hoped my career would be. My next step was to find a job.

Or start the second piece: My certificate was what I needed to find a job and hopefully, start to fulfil my ambitions. A week later I thought I had found what I wanted.

Either way would work and either sentence could be put in either place. What both do is to move the story on. It often is just one more sentence which forms the link. You would not need to add both sentences!

Let's assume that you have linked up the things you want to follow on but find that they form into groups and how to link the groups. Again this is a matter of opinion. One of the things you could do here is to include articles you have written which give an insight into who you are. These work well between groups of episodes. They are different but are still part of you! Maybe you write poetry or have written about things in your life that are to do with you, such as hobbies, and this might be a way of including them. It helps to break up your story and this can be a real advantage as it will catch your reader's attention.

Remember they won't have the background knowledge you have and they may well find that interesting too. Even including a few general details about things which have happened during your life, in the form of a short article will do this.

Finishing. Where do you end? Again, no rules about this either, if you want to finish at a certain point make it short and try to draw in what you have written. This could be just a statement or a real insight about who you are. Again this is a personal choice but it is always better to finish anything on a positive note. Better for you and your reader!

Have I really finished? Well, the ball is in your court. That is up to you!



THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN EDITING

Spelling and Punctuation. Before anything else this must be correct. Don't trust spell-check for either spelling or punctuation. Be sure you are right.

Paragraphs Better to have too many than too few. Start a new paragraph when things in the story change. This is usually obvious. However, try to have more than one sentence in a paragraph.

Story Content. Have you told the story you intended? When you write in episodes you need to keep focused on just that part of your story. You need to be sure that you have not put in too much extra detail which doesn't actually belong in that episode. This will become clearer when there are more episodes to put together.

The Beginning. This must grab the reader so consider if you have started in the right place. A bit of cutting and pasting sometimes makes a world of difference. If you feel that the start is not grabby enough look at another episode. This might be where to start. If that doesn't work go right on to the end. Is that the place to start the story? Get it right and your audience is hooked! Each episode of your story needs to grab the reader's attention.

The Ending. The same applies to the ending of an episode. When you put them together you may have to add just a few words to make the link between them.

Tense. Remember thoughts and speech are usually in present tense and the rest will be in past tense as what you are writing about has already happened.

Use of Words. Have words been repeated close to each other? Do any words sound the same? This can put the reader off (e.g. He turned to his host as he chewed the toast).

Thoughts. These do not have inverted commas. If you want to, thought can be put in italics, but you must do that for every thought.

Padding. In each section every word must need to be there. Too little description is usually far harder than too much. Remember things have changed over the years and you may have to describe something for your readers because they won't understand what you are referring to. Anything which detracts from the story may be able to be omitted but you do need to retain enough so the story is told in full. This is something that gets easier with practise.

Characters. You are the main character as this is your story. However relatives and friends, teachers, carers and others will need to be included but check that you have described exactly who they are .

Dates and Facts If you are unsure of facts do some research so you know you are correct. Think especially of dates, locations and perhaps people in the public eye at the time.

Your Style is fine for you so don't compare what you have written with how someone else writes. It won't work. Learn to edit!

Know When to Stop! This is a very important part of editing. It is easy to take out a part of something which needs to be left in. **Never** delete your first draft until you are certain you have no further use for it.

After Editing. Give yourself time to edit. Some do it as they go but even so, go over it later. If you can leave it for at least 24 hours you will be more objective and do a better editing job.

Keep this sheet handy and use it!