

WRITING YOUR LIFE STORY

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It can be stated that those of us alive today have experienced changes which no previous generations could have foreseen or even imagined. If only because of this we need to leave a record because things will never be the same again. Many of the things we lived through are now taught as history.

Each of us will have a different story to tell and I think we should do it. Why? How much does each of us know about our forebears? Will our grandchildren or great grandchildren want to know about how things were in our lifetimes? There has been a huge interest in the last decade or so about tracing ancestors and many of us have found out how little we really know and probably many of us want to know more. I think we need to tell our story. It may or may not be for publication but it is interesting to do, to share and a goal to achieve. It can also be addictive and some U3A people I know started writing three years ago and are still going and still enjoying it! So let's assume you are going to record at least some of your history so how are we going to set about it?

Where do I start? The answer to that question is really up to the writer but it is necessary to have some forward planning.

Most people find it is easiest to write about something which is familiar. Writing episodes seems to work and then the stories will be able to be joined together later.

How do I actually write this? Forget about... am I using the 'right' word, grammar, punctuation and all that and ,instead, imagine that you and I are sitting having a cuppa or a drink. Think what you would like to tell me about whatever the subject is, and write it down as if you are talking. That style of writing works! You can check the spelling, grammar and so on once you have got what you want to say actually on the paper.

Not all your episodes are going to be the same length and some are going to overlap. Some, you may find are actually introductions to information which will be expanded later to explain more of your story.

Asking for help! Relatives and friends can be quite helpful when it comes to memory jogging, but how they see things and how you do, may not be quite the same! However, what they remember will help you to think and remember and that is fine. If you want someone to assess your story, that is something different and it is far better to have someone who does not really know you to help in that area. There are people around, like writers' groups and U3As who would be happy to help.

What am I going to include? Anything you want to include will be fine. Here is a list of the things I suggest might spark the creative part of each of us. I use this list in my classes.

A day at school.

I remember the day when...tie this up with some historical event

An interview

You and your family (where you came and how that affected you.)

An episode which makes you laugh.

You and new technology.

Romance. (This is one the kids really want to know!!)

This day (or event) changed my life.

Learning to drive.

The day my first child (or grandchild) was born.

Moving.

In a fire I would grab.....

What money would buy then and now (Remember to mention wages.)

A facet of medical science which has helped you.

A moment of success

Changing jobs, redundancy and/or retirement.

It could only happen once.

My first...could be first day at work, or as a parent or your winning picture etc

Pastimes or hobbies you have tried.

Someone who influenced you.

What is great about retirement?

That smell takes me back....

Something I always wanted to do and I did it....

It made my heart beat faster.

If I could change something in my life it would be.....

What I would love to have done but didn't have the opportunity.

Something I feel passionately about is....

Sadness. (Of course some things we just can't write and this may be one.)

BUT....It is obvious that polio is going to make a difference so we need to talk about that aspect. I realise this is my opinion but many people have very little idea about this virus and its consequences, so it would seem a good idea to give a short account (and you can look this up to be sure the facts are right) of what polio is. The disease was in epidemic proportions when I started my nursing training in UK in 1952. I worked in an orthopaedic hospital and saw many people in the first stages and the measures which were used to help them. Since that time an effective vaccine has been found, but for those affected that was not the end of the story.

It would seem a good idea to include some medical facts so your readers can understand a bit about the background. You don't have to be too technical as they will probably go and look it up too!

What about me? The age you contracted this will, of course, make a difference to the story you are going to tell. So will the severity of the results and for each person this will be different. Remember you do not have to give any details you want to omit. That is up to you.

How do I write about this? I do a life story class with U3A Online and only meet the people in cyberspace. One student told me she would not be writing a particular episode and the class went on over the usual eight weeks and remains active for another month. In Week 10 she sent me the piece she was not going to write. It was quite short. She had seen her daughter murdered in the street where they lived. While this was tragic, how she had written it was one of the best pieces of autobiographical writing I have ever read. It taught me a lot. It had impact because she just related what had happened with no reference about how she felt, or the family felt or what happened surrounding the event. You may not agree but just stating what happened allowed me to decide how I would feel; it made me somehow more involved. Perhaps that could be worth thinking about when you tell about contracting polio.

When do I put this in and how do I go on? I think that possibly it could be an idea to start with the onset of the disease and then maybe tell a bit about your background; much will depend on your age at the time. For instance, if you were a baby, you won't remember but you could start with a bit about your family and siblings to give a bit of background to work on. Then give the account you were told and add what you remember.

If you were older, again you could start at that point, tell what happened initially and then go back to fill in your earlier life. The contrast will work.

Now what? What you are going to write is a story of positivity (Is that a word?!!) and achievement. If this were not so, you would not be sitting here! Of course there will have been set-backs, moments of deep depression, frustration and anger, but there have been many moments of triumph, some small, some large and some just a big relief. There must have been things you did you would never have believed possible...and those don't have to be big things either. They are worth recording.

Some of the things in the list of what you might write about will be important to you, as to anyone but put in how you coped. Have there been funny moments? Things which make you laugh can make others laugh too.

Won't this stuff be boring to my readers? No! Try to dwell on the positives, with just a reference, but not huge accounts, of difficulties. I was asked to edit a book one time which was written by a woman who was married to an aggressive drunk. She did have a very difficult time and she wanted to write this book to help others understand how to cope. It certainly taught me a lesson. There wasn't anything light or positive in the whole book and the theme throughout was "Poor me!" It just didn't work but what I found out was that having got it down on paper it had helped her. It was not published.

So see that when you write your story don't dwell too long on anything and try not to repeat things you have already recorded. Wow your audience with your outlook, capabilities, and I'm sure, the lessons you have learned that focus your thoughts on others. Each of us has a unique story and writing it as you would tell it is a wonderful way to create a readable style.

Getting it together. Just start writing...about anything to do with you. Maybe you want to start with your parents, that's fine, but remember this is YOUR story. Don't let others hog the limelight! Start with something easy. Once you have started, it is easier to keep going. Word count is not an issue...just write! If there are things you don't want to include, okay, you might do it later. If you start with what you don't want to write you won't get far! I know that from my classes!

You can think about getting this in order when you have a bit on paper (or the computer). Sometimes you will find you write about a subject and you can use that as an introductory piece and expand on the points you have included in it. This works well.

Flashback also works well as *then and now* is a very good way of getting the picture across.

Try to include some dialogue. You may not remember exactly what was said but you may remember the gist of it. This helps to make the story real and it looks better on the page!

Have you photos you can include? This helps enlarge the story too.

Other Points. There are going to be many things to record which would have happened to you anyhow. Please remember to put those in too because they are all part of your life.

I will just add the sheet I give to all my students! It might come in handy!

THINGS TO LOOK FOR WHEN EDITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Spelling and Punctuation. Before anything else, this must be correct. Don't trust spell-check for either spelling or punctuation, especially proper names. Be sure you are right. Your mistakes are not always underlined.

Paragraphs Better to have too many than too few. It is usual to start a new line when the speaker changes. This means your reader won't have to go back to check who is speaking and you don't have to add too many he/she said.

If the speaker is saying more than one paragraph then you do not close the inverted commas at the end of the paragraph but you do open them again at the start of the next paragraph.

Start a new paragraph when things in the story change. This is usually obvious.

Story Content. Have you told the story you intended? You need to be sure that you have told one story without too much extra detail which doesn't actually add to the story (getting side-tracked!). Does the story have a beginning, middle and ending?

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. The same applies to the ending. Did the story stop at the optimum spot? Too much or too abrupt?

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 agreed to that and took off his hat). Are all the words you have used in the correct place and have the correct meaning? (Never use a word which has a meaning you are not quite sure of.)

Speech. All speech has inverted commas. Use either "this" or 'this' but be consistent.

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 an episode every word must need to be there. Check your descriptions. 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 we are aware of and it gets easier with practise.

Characters. Your characters need to speak, think and act. This makes them real.

Research. The story is true, but, if you are unsure of facts do some research to know you are correct. This applies especially to dates and events.

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

Know When to Stop! This is a very important part of editing. Always keep your first draft till you are sure the edited version is the one.

If you can find a writing group or a U3A (University of the Third Age) near you this could be a help. Even if you just ask for a bit of guidance I'm sure there will be someone who will want to help you, but attending will be a real bonus.

U3A Online (www.u3aonline.org.au) will get you to the site and there are some fifty courses on all sorts of subjects you can do as well as some writing courses.

Now it is over to you!!