

How to Write Your Memoirs So Everyone Will Want to Read Them

People write their memoirs to preserve their life stories. But they often discover that memoirs don't just benefit future readers—the act of writing a memoir can have a profound impact on the writer, too.

Writing memoirs helps memoirists better understand themselves. Reliving past victories helps them regain spirit and confidence that might have ebbed over the years. Rethinking old failures could help them work through long-suppressed missteps and traumas.

Example: A woman in her 70s always spoke glowingly of her late mother—but when she wrote her own memoirs, the stories that she included about her childhood suggested that her mother was a very flawed parent. She realized that she was angry at her mother and had felt abandoned all her life. The realization explained a feeling of emptiness that had stayed with her.

Writing a memoir can be a daunting proposition, particularly for people who haven't written anything longer than a letter since high school. Here's how to craft a memoir that will be a joy to write and to read...

PLANNING YOUR MEMOIRS

Don't attempt to recount every detail of your life in your memoirs—you'll end up with a tedious, hard-to-read book. Instead, focus on telling only a relatively small number of stories—10 may be plenty. Each of these stories might highlight a crucial phase or turning point of your life. Together, they'll show how you've gotten to where you are in an interesting, readable way.

Examples: One story might be about how you first found success in your career...another about when you and your spouse were just starting out...the third might be about having young children...the fourth about facing the greatest challenge of your life...and so on.

Two potential alternatives to this approach...

You could choose only stories about a single aspect of your life if this part of your life is particularly notable or holds important lessons.

Example: Someone who has a serious disability might write a memoir consisting entirely of stories about how he/she coped with this condition. Such a memoir could be a valuable resource for others who have a similar disability.

You could share humorous anecdotes from your life. A memoir that sets laughter or a comedic viewpoint



as its primary goal usually doesn't lead its writer to any deeper understanding of his life. Still, writing such a memoir can be an enjoyable project, and the result can be a fun read for friends and descendants—assuming that the stories are as funny as the memoirist believes.

Some of the stories you wish to tell in your memoir might come immediately to mind, but others likely will require reflection. Flip through your photo albums, reread any correspondence you've saved, and chat with friends and relatives who have shared your past.

When you recall a story that might be worth telling, jot down the idea. *The Memory List Question Book*, available through my Web site, can help you dig even deeper into your memories. This ebook features a long list of questions meant to tap into the past. Don't try to answer every question—just focus on those that resonate with you. Use the questions as a guide rather than a formula.

PUTTING IT ON PAPER

Five tips when you sit down to write...

Show, don't tell. Rather than tell your readers how you felt or what you were thinking at the time, use action, setting and dialogue to show them. This makes for a more engaging, exciting read.

Examples: You don't need to write, "I was really cold" if you write, "I shivered under my parka in the freezing rain"... You don't need to write, "Barbara was angry with me," if you write, "Barbara threw a plate against the wall inches from my head."

Be honest. Some people put their public faces on when they write their memoirs—they present themselves and their families as they wish to be seen, not as they truly are. You don't have to disclose things that you consider private in your memoir, but do be completely honest about everything you choose to include. Dishonesty tends to show through in memoirs, and it could cause readers to doubt the veracity of the rest of the memoir, too.

Set a specific time to write each day. Memoirs tend not to get written unless memoirists make writing a part of their daily schedules. Try to write for perhaps 40 minutes per session—long enough to make progress but not so long that writing becomes a chore.

After you've written a story, go back and shorten it by 10% to 20%. First drafts almost always can be improved by removing unnecessary words, sentences and paragraphs.

Write an introduction after you've written all of your stories. One simple way to write an introduction is to take your readers to a high point or a low point of your life, then ask how you got there.

Example: A woman began her memoirs by recounting the crowning achievement of her professional life—accepting a prestigious marketing award in London—then asking how she reached this point after spending the first seven years of her career as a small-town schoolteacher.

FINDING HELP

If you want your memoirs to be very well-written but your writing skills are limited, consider hiring a professional memoir coach or editor. The rates charged by these pros vary from a few hundred dollars to

many thousands, depending on experience level and services provided. Make sure that you're clear about what you're getting before you agree to work with someone—some will completely overhaul your manuscript, while others just provide occasional guidance.

You could even hire a ghostwriter to do all of the writing for you. Skilled ghostwriters can be expensive, however—potentially five figures. (You can get a free 70-page book on choosing the right ghostwriter by sending an e-mail to memoirs@turningmemories.com.)

Online, use search terms such as “memoir editor,” “memoir coach” or “memoir ghostwriter” to find candidates. Favor those who can provide numerous references and well-written writing samples and with whom you sense a natural chemistry—you don't want to trust your memoir to someone whose outlook on life differs substantially from your own.

Example: If you consider your political viewpoints, religion or ethnic background an important part of who you are, it's probably best to select a memoir coach or editor who shares this background or viewpoint.

If you don't want to spend money obtaining help with your memoir, consider joining a local writers group to obtain feedback on your writing. Many local libraries host such groups.

You even can publish your memoir without spending a fortune. Companies such as Lulu (www.Lulu.com) and CreateSpace (www.CreateSpace.com) turn manuscripts into professional-looking books for a reasonable price.

Source: Denis Ledoux, author of *Turning Memories into Memoirs: A Handbook for Writing Lifestories* (Soleil). Based in Lisbon Falls, Maine, he leads workshops on memoir writing and has been named the Lifewriting Professional of the Year by the Association of Personal Historians. He has worked with dozens of memoirists as a memoir ghostwriter, editor and coach. He also has won the Maine Fiction Award and twice received the Maine Writing Fellowship Award. TheMemoirNetwork.com