

Writing a Memoir

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Facts

It seems strange that you would have to research your own life, but it's important. We're not writing as we were then, we're writing as we are now. Memory is unreliable, and when things happen to us, that is the perspective we remember them from. When you're rewriting as story, you will often find yourself pondering more deeply on the reactions and responses of other people who were involved in your story.

A good basis for telling the story with integrity and meaning is to write out the episode or incident as a factual account, and then:

Check your chronology.

Check the location.

Check what others were present or involved.

Check what happened before (what led up to it).

Check what happened after (what ensued.)

When you're recording a story that is being told to you by someone else, or working from archives, letters, diaries, and other old records, concentrate on what the facts are and how they fit together. See what questions you'll have to ask of yourself and of others to fill in the missing gaps.

Observation

When something is going on we may not notice what the weather was like or how the room was decorated. When you write the story, your reader may find these things important in themselves. Or you as writer may find them helpful in creating atmosphere, making things 'real'. So if you can't go back and observe, take time after reading the bare bones of your factual account to transport yourself back in time through creative visualisation and see what you can add to round out your story and bring it to life.

(Creative visualisation in this context is not the process of imagining a new and improved you; it is the process of closing your eyes and allowing yourself to drift back to who you were then and what you were doing and see what comes up from your memory bank. Sometimes something from that time can be a trigger, or stimulus - a photograph, a song that was popular then, a belonging from that time.)

Observation is also an important skill when you're interviewing someone or listening to a story. The expression on a person's face, their body language, is important in helping you to understand the effect of what happened on them, and whether there are further questions you should be asking. Telling a story face to face with words is therapeutic to the person who is telling it and this sometimes means emotions burst out – tears or laughter. These are important clues for assessing and replicating the impact of the story.

Content

In any storytelling there are things you decide to include, and things you decide to leave out. Working out your content helps you to make these decisions, i.e. what form the story will take – a journal article, a chapter in the story of your life, a family record ... It also helps you to understand what facts and information you are looking for to complete your account, and where this can be obtained – from within the family, or your own personal life story – or supplemented by outside sources – school reports, diaries, medical records, letters, newspapers, etc.

Every life has a timeline – and so does history. A timeline or chronology of when and where things happened is useful as the basis of content, and you can tie it to a national or international timeline, find out what was happening, what songs were in the top ten, who was prime minister, how much things cost – such content is a trigger to memory.

Understanding

When you rewrite something from your own life or when you are dealing with family history, you are reframing the past. This is what psychologists and psychotherapists help clients to do when they are working together on healing, and something of the same process occurs when you are engaged in writing things down. 'Reframing' means you come to these things from who you are now, and that means two levels of understanding come into operation: what the experience was then, and how the experience can be comprehended now.

This makes writing based on personal or family history occasionally difficult, but always worthwhile.

You learn to write by writing.

Marcelle d'Argy Smith

Structure

Delay thinking about structure until you've done a draft or two. Though any form of storytelling does need structure, with a personal or family history, it is sometimes difficult to plan in advance - you map it out as you go.

Any story is one scene after another - it's as easy as that - so pretend you're observing a play with real characters doing real actions. Write your story scene by scene. Then check each scene in the overall drama that is the story you are writing. Does it create tension - a desire to know what happens next and how it's all going to turn out? Does it push the story forward?

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The main influence on structure is what you want to end up with. If it's a straightforward account of an individual incident or episode in your life, use what you've already learned about plotting, character and dialogue; and about planning, construction, lucidity and flow.

A poem, a short story or an essay - memoir - that is contained can be more easily controlled than a longer project like your own life story for your children and grandchildren, or a family history, or a genealogy.

One of the simplest means of structuring a story is to stick to chronology - what happened when in the sequential order in which it happened. Chronology answers the question what happened.

You might prefer to answer the question of why it happened - in which case your structure might include as its central focus a specific account or particular events, but would look at it from a different perspective - circumstances, significant characters, background commentary.

Another structure is theme - early childhood, school years, in the Army, sports, aunts and uncles, rites and rituals - all dealt with in whatever order you prefer and including incidents from any stage of your life.

“To be human is to want to figure things out. To be human and to hunt for meaning, to make sense of our seemingly random lives. And we have a powerful (and rather charming way) of giving shape and pattern to the chaos.

“We tell stories. We live fully by constructing and ordering scenes – that is, people doing things for reasons, whether known or unknown to themselves – and thus come to understand the random details and chaotic experiences of our lives.”