

Writing Tips for Memoir and Biography

A free ebook

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Writing tips for memoir and biography



A sunset I captured with my camera.

This free ebook is for life writers who want some “back to basics” reminders for how to get your story on paper. Whether you’re writing memoir, autobiography, or biography, a few simple principles hold true. And most of them are fairly easy to spot in your own writing, so you can save a lot of time by referring back to these principles as you write.

Some key definitions

(These definitions are taken or adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary [online](#).)

Memoir: An account written of a particular time in a person’s life and particular experiences.

Autobiography: An account of a person’s life written by that person.

Biography: An account of a person’s life written by someone else.

The key principle: You are writing a story

Memoirs and biographies need to feel real for the reader. They need real drama.

Yes, it’s your story, but it’s still *a story*. Your story – or the story of the person whose life you’re chronicling – has already captured your attention and imagination and heart. It needs to be written in a way that also captures the reader’s attention and their heart.

1. Write scenes, not lists

A story is made up of scenes, not a list of what happened in chronological order. Use dialogue. For example, you could give us the simple version:

In the spring of '92, I got my first Tamagotchi for my tenth birthday. Unfortunately, I enjoyed playing with it so much – even during school hours – that my teacher confiscated it. It was just one more thing that made me distrust authority figures.

Or you could tell us the story in a series of scenes from start to finish:

My tenth birthday was a school day, so my parents woke me up early to give me my presents. I sat at the kitchen table with a big bowl of sweet-smelling porridge. I unwrapped the smallest gift first, thinking it would be the most boring, insignificant one. The blue cellophane wrapping crinkled as I opened it, and ...

Include little details. If there's a love story involved, where did you two meet and what were the first things you noticed about each other?

If the events you're describing happened many years ago and you're not confident that you're remembering scenes as they happened, or you just want a bit of creative freedom, consider including a disclaimer on a separate page at the start of your work. For example:

Author's note:

This memoir is based on my experiences over the ten years I spent travelling in South-East Asia. Some names have been changed to protect privacy. Certain events in the timeline may have been compressed or happened at a different time. This is my story as I remember it and may not be 100% historically accurate.

Or you could be even more explicit, like in the memoir *Dry* by Augusten Burroughs:

Author's note:

This memoir is based on my experiences over a 10-year period. Names have been changed, character combined, and events compressed. Certain episodes are imaginative re-creation, and those episodes are not intended to portray actual events.

2. Include your feelings and thoughts

A scene without thoughts and feelings is a boring scene. Work on the narrative tension.

What were you thinking when the teacher stole your Tamagotchi? If you can't remember, what do you imagine you were thinking? Did you feel so frustrated that you were almost crying?

3. When you include other people, describe real people

Focus on certain people. You don't need to write about every person you ever met, or everyone you met in the timeframe you're writing about. Those people won't appreciate it, and neither will your reader. You should only include people who are connected to your main theme or journey.

I don't believe in a hard-and-fast rule but in the past, I've given clients guidelines like, "You have 12 characters introduced in your first chapter and 30 in your whole book. Cut it back to 3 main characters in your first chapter, and add in only 1 or 2 new characters in each subsequent chapter."

A real story needs real people. People are more than just who they are in relation to you. My brother isn't just a generic sibling; he's a male nurse who makes patients laugh, rides a motorbike, breakdances at the slightest opportunity, and paints and draws like Dali.

Just remember what I said about [treading the fine line between honest and polite when writing about people you know](#).

4. Make the setting real

A story happens not on some random day in any old place. A story happens on a particular day, in a particular place. And the seasons happen differently in different cities and different countries. When you're going to tell a story in the spring of '92 in Brisbane, that's a damn hot morning. If you're telling a story in the spring of '92 in Vancouver, now...

5. Use the 5 senses

A lot of people are great at saying what they saw and heard. Do better – tell us more. Remind your reader of the smell of a fresh cup of coffee in the morning, and the taste of a chilli samosa, and the texture of squishy, dusty marshmallows.

6. Concentrate on the main themes and realisations

A memoir doesn't contain your entire life story – just the bits that relate to the themes you're talking about. By comparison, an autobiography and a biography does contain a person's entire life story, in the order that it happened. They're often ghost-written, because it's hard to make someone's *entire* life story into a good read.

There's usually a few main themes in your story, and that's what you need to focus on. Every chapter or section needs to take this theme further on your journey. This makes a memoir marketable, because it has a "hook" or focus, and it gives readers a "Yellow Brick Road" to follow.

Examples of themes in memoir or biography are the same as you'd find in fiction: things like the search for faith; triumph over adversity; coping with illness; education and growing as a person; things I learned while travelling around Australia. Examples of realisations during your journey include knowing you've grown stronger by learning to cope with an illness;

knowing you may not have achieved all you planned to, but you've found something greater, e.g. love, peace, or God's true purpose for your life.

Is there any symbolism that's showed up in your life that fits in with your story? For example, whenever I see a butterfly, I think of how my awareness of God's presence flits in and out and I thank him for always being there even when I'm not noticing what he's doing. If my journey revolves around the search for faith, then the symbolism around butterflies ties in well.

There's a fine line before you fall into becoming too repetitious and start bashing your reader over the head with your main theme. This is one of those things where I don't think you can pick up when you're being too repetitious in your own writing, so you need someone else to read your stuff for you.

7. Check your writing style

You definitely need a conversational style for a memoir – after all, you're telling your story. Again, it's hard to tell when you're being too cheesy, chatty or just waffling. You need beta readers.

Make the chapter lengths as consistent as you can. A 20-page chapter about your relationship with your mother and a 2-page chapter about what you learned from your father is only going to hurt people's feelings.

8. Write a story arc, create a “before and after” story

An essential part of any story, whether imagined or true, is a story arc, a.k.a. a literary arc. The arc needs rising action, a climax, and a resolution. The climax might not be something as dramatic as in a novel with a Mexican shoot-off, but there will be a moment of reckoning. Some kind of revelation or a release of pent-up tension related to the heart of the main theme of your journey.

And the best type of story is a story about someone who begins with a particularly crippling weakness and ends by having found a way to cope with or conquer that particular weakness. (They are human, so they will still have weaknesses in other areas.)

Think about Marty McFly in the *Back to the Future* series: he can't stand to be called “chicken”, and it controls how he responds to his enemies. He can't walk away; he has to stay and fight, endangering himself and his loved ones. But in the final *Back to the Future* movie, Marty refuses to duel with Buford, and then refuses to drag race with Needles because he's learned from his past mistakes.

Aussies especially don't like reading about someone whose story begins and ends with their character being at the same level of awesome. It doesn't seem fair.

The beginning of your story needs the ending in mind. Have you grown or changed? Are you now a more whole person than you were before?

And because everyone is constantly changing, the end also needs the future in mind. Have you had any major experiences or realisations while writing your story?

Being a Christian, my favourite before-and-after stories are the stories of how someone's life can be changed by finding out how much God loves them and sacrifices everything every day for them to be saved. God's power changes people. He inspires us; he provides for us. And we're not the same after we meet him.

Great life writers you could read for inspiration

My favourite memoirs of all time are these:

1. [*A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*](#) by Donald Miller, about story arcs and their power to help us achieve our dreams in life.
2. [*A Year of Biblical Womanhood*](#) by Rachel Held Evans, the absolute funniest Christian book I have ever read. I cracked up laughing so many times per chapter that I lost count. Plus it made me think about our faith and how it positions women. Double whammy.
3. [*The Hiding Place*](#) by Corrie Ten Boom, one of the only classics that everyone told me I "had" to read that I actually read. Moving, inspiring. Your heart will not let you have a boring, inactive faith after reading this book.
4. [*The Cross and the Switchblade*](#) by David Wilkerson with John & Elizabeth Sherrill, about a white American man who was called to share the hope of the gospel with the drug gangs of New York.

And my favourite biography is [*God's Smuggler*](#) by Brother Andrew with John & Elizabeth Sherrill, which was adapted into a children's comic book that I read at my Gran's house. An amazing book about this missionary who smuggled Bibles into Communist countries at risk to his own life and saw God come through in miraculous ways to help him succeed.

The bottom line

It's your story. It's your life. Make it a good one.

And if you need an editor to help you write your amazing life into a well-written story, then you know where to look. TJ Withers-Ryan, Freelance Editor, tirzah.withers@gmail.com

God bless you, folks.