

How to Write Your Personal History

Dawn Parrett Thurston, MA

www.MemoirMentor.com -- www.MemoirMentor.com/blog-- dawn@MemoirMentor.com

Summary: For the last 17 years, I've helped hundreds of students write and publish their memoirs and family histories. I've read umpteen student stories and a substantial number of professionally written memoirs. I've learned what works, and what doesn't. Most people—even the pros—find writing slow, tedious, and difficult. As with all things, it takes time and practice to develop into a confident and competent writer. Beginning writers often think because their writing doesn't come easily, they're in the wrong line of work. Not so. I've taught writing long enough to know that people can develop as writers if they have enough desire, focus, and tenacity. You can to, but you have to learn the ropes. So here goes—an introduction to the vision and tools you'll need to create a truly outstanding personal history.

1. How should I structure my story? What should I put in and what should I leave out? How do you choose which life experiences should go into your personal history? Should you write a narrative that encompasses your entire life (an autobiography), or just a portion—say, your childhood, or your career (a memoir)? What events should you emphasize? Here are some tools to help you decide:

- Make a list of the stories that must be told.
- Make a list of the turning points in your life. Arrange them on a timeline to help you envision the shape of your life. Your turning points **NEED** to be in your story.
- Create a life chronology (time line) and choose events that are the most important.
- Decide whom you're writing for and what you want them to know about you. Then choose incidents and events that will best communicate that information.
- Begin with a bang—a high point, low point, turning point, or scene. Don't start with "I was born on...." (Boring!)

2. What is important for me to include?

- The important places where you lived your life—the *settings* of your story
- The important people in your life—the *characters* in your story
- The important events in your life—the *plot* of your story
- The important turning points in your life—the *why* of your story
- Your reaction to it all—the *meaning* of your story

3. General Process: After you have a general ideal about what stories need to be told, pick a story that interests you, jot down images and details that come to mind, and start writing that lousy first draft. Just let it pour out of you. When you're done, let it marinate for a while, then go back and polish it—knowing you'll probably change it even more as you become a more experienced writer. Now pick another story and do the same thing. Write about 20-30 stories, then see how they fit together.

3. How do I reveal myself through my story? Many personal history writers have a tendency to leave a “travelogue”—a narrative of where they went and what they did on their life's journey. A compelling story, however, uncovers the personality and character of the writer, so you need to combine both the external story and the internal story.

- The external story—actual experience, events and facts
- The internal story—your thoughts and feelings, the meaning of the story
- Issues that keep us from getting beneath the surface—fear, pride, lack of skill
- Be honest. Share your thoughts, feelings, joys and regrets. Isn't that why you're writing your personal history...so your readers will know who you are?

3. How do I make my story interesting? It's all in the details—describing peoples, places and events in such a way that readers can visualize them. It's also about honesty and revealing the real you.

- Show what people and places looked like—in detail. They shouldn't be merely names on the page.
- Include sense details—how things sounded, tasted, smelled, felt, and looked.
- Capture your era—the music, trends, fashions, developments, current events, etc., and *show how they shaped who you are*.
- Don't include a laundry list of current events.
- Show how these events affected you.
- Don't assume your readers understand terms you take for granted. Define terms, explain processes, etc.
- Include scenes with dialogue to show readers what people and situations were like. Lively, interesting personal histories combine scene with summary. Nearly all published memoirs contain scenes.
 - ✓ What's a scene? Characters, setting, action, dialogue, sense of real time.
 - ✓ Scenes put readers in the moment so they feel like they're experiencing the moment with you. You could say your father was an impatient man, or you could show him being impatient by putting him in a scene where he reveals his impatience through what he says and does. The latter is far more effective...and believable.

4. How do I write honestly about sensitive issues? It can be difficult and it requires a balancing act between competing issues:

- Your purpose for writing your personal history and your purpose for revealing sensitive information.
- Its importance to your story. If it doesn't really pertain to your life experience, don't use it.
- Your audience. What would be the long-term repercussions of revealing this material? Who would it hurt?
- Your commitment to the truth
- Your tone. Sometimes it comes down to how you say something.
- The thickness of your skin.

5. What is my responsibility as a personal historian?

- You decide what stays in the closet and what comes out.
- You can make or break someone's reputation.
- You have to decide what is the truth.
- You have to deal with the risks and repercussions.

6. Recommendations. The following resources will provide you with an array of ideas to expand your vision of what your personal history can be.

- **Memoirs**

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*
 Jeanette Walls' *The Glass Castle*
 Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin*
 Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*
 Haven Kimmel's *A Girl Named Zippy*
 Mary Karr's *The Liars Club*
 Linda Joy Myers' *Don't Call Me Mother*
 Jennifer Lauck's *Blackbird: A Childhood Lost and Found*
 Jennifer Corrigan's *The Middle Place*

- **Memoir Writing Books**

Dawn Thurston's *Breathe Life into Your Life Story*
 Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*
 William Zinsser's *Writing about Your Life*
 Lisa Dale Norton's *Shimmering Images*
 Bill Roorbach's *Writing Life Stories*
 Maureen Murdock's *Unreliable Truth*
 Tristine Rainer's *Your Life as Story*

- **General Writing Books**

William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*
 Natalie Goldberg's *Old Friend from Far Away*
 Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*
 Anne LaMott's *Bird by Bird*
 Stephen King's *On Writing*