

Before You Begin Writing Your Memoir

A five-page guide to getting started

by Catherine Stover



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So often, in the moment before we begin something new, we are excited and scared . . . ready and reluctant . . . confident and doubtful. I know this moment. And I wonder if you do, too.

The idea of writing about your life may have come to you recently, or it may have been on your mind for years. Perhaps you have good reasons to document important events or think about your life. And so, here you are, not quite sure how to begin . . . or even – if truth be told -- if you *will* begin.

When I close my eyes, I picture the people I know who have worked through this moment and then went on to write. Their stories are gifts – written in the present, about the past, for the future.

You can be one of those people.

My grandfather decided to write about his life when he was 79 years old. He wrote a page a day for about three months. I was his typist. At age 20, I witnessed every step of his process that resulted in a 100-page self-published book. I was so inspired by his gift to our family that I vowed to continue his legacy by writing about my life. It took more years than you might suspect, but eventually, I became a writer and teacher who specializes in memoir workshops at a community college. We share our stories – stories that are hard and soft, made of muscle and magic.

And now, I would like to share what I have learned with you.

Step one: Understand your choices

The most important thing that I can say to you is this: Before you begin, understand your choices.

Choices?

When you see your options, you can make your best decisions. You can choose your target. There are types of memoirs to choose from, just as there are types of music. So, for example, if you wanted to write music, you would start by choosing rap, country, jazz, or something else. The same idea applies to writing memoirs. Start by deciding what type of memoir you want to write. Ask yourself if you want to *write family history*, or *tell stories*, or *find meaning*. Start with these three choices.

Three choices:
1. Write family histories, or
2. Tell stories, or
3. Find meaning.

Let's think about these three choices:

1. **You can write family history:** If your goal is to **describe important events and people**, you will write about the turning points in your family history – for example, decisions to move or marry or make changes. Perhaps you will focus on information that has been passed down to you about previous generations, or maybe you'll write about your own experiences. Examples of this type of writing include Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* books. Is there a historian in your family who wrote some pages years ago, which you'd like to update and expand to include your own perspective? If so, this type of writing is for you.

2. **You can tell stories:** If your goal is to **tell a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end**, then you will write funny or dramatic stories that people enjoy. Your primary audience is your family, but other people might like these stories too. Instead of compiling a record of family milestones, your goal is to focus on the “greatest hits” of stories. Classic examples begin with the words “Do you remember the time when.....?” This is a slight variation of “Once upon a time . . .” Authors of this type of writing include stand-up comedians such as David Sedaris and Jeannette McCurdy, more serious writers such as Anne Patchett and Ta-Nehisi Coates, and not-famous people whose stories are recorded on the [StoryCorp](#) and [The Moth](#) websites.

3. **You can find meaning:** If your goal is to **explore the meaning of your life**, then you reflect on your decisions and the patterns of your choices. Perhaps you want to look under the surface for understanding and healing and are drawn to the idea of writing as a type of therapy that is private. Perhaps you don’t want to hurt others’ feelings, hear their rebuttals, or see their surprise. Instead, *you* want to learn, to reveal, and to understand. This type of writing often starts in journals, and then expands as your thinking develops. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is an example; more current examples include Jonathan Van Ness’s *Love That Story* and Pamela Anderson’s *Love, Pamela*.

You might be thinking: *This is a lot*. It is. Take the time you need to digest these ideas before continuing. Everyone has a different starting point. Be kind to yourself. Don’t rush. Be curious. Do what’s best for you at this moment.

When you are ready, here is the next step:

Step two: Name your goal, your readers, and your subject.

Pinpointing your goal, your readers, and your subject will give you a target to aim for. When your intentions are clear, you will enjoy the process more and will be less apt to have to change directions later. Consider using this formula: **Goal + For + About**

“My goal is to _____ (write history? Tell stories? Find meaning?)
for _____ (Your grandchildren? Local history buffs? Yourself only?)
about _____ (What happened? Lessons learned? Ideas you discovered?)

Let's look at some examples of goals, readers, and subjects.

First example: “I have some photographs of my parents and grandparents, and I don't want these old pictures to be thrown away someday by someone who doesn't know who their ancestors were and what they did for us.” So....using the formula: **My goal is** to write family history **for** future generations **about** what my parents and grandparents did for us.

Second example: “There is so much that my grandkids don't know about my dad. I want to start by telling them about the day I decided to follow his advice, with mixed results.” So....using the formula: **My goal is** to tell a story **for** my grandkids **about** the day I decided to follow my dad's advice, with mixed results.

Third example: “Why do I keep making the same mistakes over and over? I want to spend some time thinking about my decisions, and I don't want anyone else to read it.” So....using the formula: **My goal is** to think carefully **for** myself, privately **about** my habit of making decisions that I regret.

Let's summarize what we have learned so far:

	Writing history	Telling stories	Finding meaning
Goal = the type of writing you want to do	Write a record of important events and people. You may write about yourself or other people in the family.	Tell a story. It might be about yourself or about other people in the family. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end.	Take a good look at your life to discover patterns, reasons, and motivations that influence your decisions.
Readers = Who you are writing for	Future generations. You might also be writing for people interested in local history.	Future generations, and maybe non-family members, too, who might enjoy the stories.	Yourself. It may be too personal to share with others. At some point, you may decide to let others read it. Or maybe not.
Subject: What you have to say about your topic	What happened and what you have to say about it.	What was learned or changed after something important happened.	The idea, pattern, or trend that you discovered after you explored your memories.

Now it's time to begin your journey, my friend. You are not alone. You are doing the important work that I believe you can do. Decide which type of memoir you wish to write, then select your goal, your readers, and your subject. When you have done this, you are ready to begin.

Start the process.

If you would like to join my community of memoir writers, let me know. I lead workshops through Madison Area Technical College. My upcoming book *Three Ways to Write Memoir* will be available soon. To receive updates about publications dates, email catherine.stover6@gmail.com.

May you begin to see your life in a new way – a way that you can create by putting words on a page. Let your adventure of writing about the past for the future start now!