POWER OF PERSONAL STORIES

Mapping your memoir project and navigating challenges.

852 PRESS

Helping you tell your story

Your life experiences and memories are invaluable treasures, waiting to be celebrated and immortalised. Whether you've lived through extraordinary adventures, undergone transformative experiences, or learned profound lessons, your story holds significance.

This guidebook is tailor-made for beginners like you who have a story to share and a desire to tell it.

In these pages, we won't overwhelm you with intricate theories or complex writing techniques. Instead, we'll gently guide you through the exciting process of crafting your memoir. Think of it as embarking on a journey, either through your own life or the lives of your family members. Our goal is to help you turn these cherished memories and pivotal life events into a compelling narrative.

This guidebook and workshop are designed to kickstart or enhance your memoir or family history project, offering you a practical approach to capturing your unique experiences. Dr. Julia Evans, an education specialist and the director of 852 Press, along with Richard Evans, an writer of nine books, have put their collective expertise into creating this resource. Additionally, we've enlisted the assistance of doctoral candidates Lucy Warden and Karli Furmage, who bring fresh perspectives and specialised advice to the table.

852 Press was born in 2020 as our pandemic project, with a mission to simplify the self-publishing process, making it both cost-effective and of high quality. We believe that every Australian should have the opportunity to share their story, and we're here to support you in that endeavour.

Should you ever find yourself facing a challenging aspect of this journey, please don't hesitate to reach out. We're here to assist you every step of the way.

Furthermore, once your memoir is complete and ready for publication, connect with us to share your news. We'd be thrilled to help spread the word about your remarkable story.

Wishing you the very best on your writing journey!

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Disclaimer

852 Press and Richard Evans don't believe in get rich quick schemes.

Writing and self-publishing achievement and success take hard work.

We have gone to our best efforts to present our knowledge and experience and provide up-to-date information, but this guidebook is far from complete in presenting everything related to writing memoir, family history and publishing.

852 Press and Richard Evans cannot and do not make any guarantees about your ability to get results or earn any money with the ideas, information, tools, or strategies outlined in this guidebook or workshop. The information presented here might not apply, or be appropriate, to your project or circumstance.

Any financial information presented here are estimates, averages, illustrative at time of printing and may not apply to your circumstance and strategy.

We encourage writers to seek professional legal, financial, tax and publishing advice. Nothing in this guidebook or workshop replaces professional advice.

852 Press and Richard Evans shall not be held liable for any loss of profit, money, or any other commercial damages from the choices and decisions you make.

Using this Workbook

Unlocking the Power of Your Story

Welcome to your Power of Personal Stories workbook!

We're thrilled to have you on this journey of self-discovery, creativity, and the art of storytelling. This workbook is designed to complement the Power of Personal Stories workshop you've embarked on. It's not a test of your writing proficiency; rather it's your companion in understanding the world of writing stories and preserving your personal history.

How to Use This Workbook

Workshop Complement: This workbook is your guide to dive deeper into the concepts and techniques introduced in the Power of Personal Stories. It's here to reinforce your learning and provide you with practical exercises.

Exercises for Understanding: Throughout the workbook, you'll find a variety of exercises. Some are designed for use during the workshop, aimed at helping you grasp the fundamental concepts of memoir writing. These exercises are user-friendly and meant to spark your creativity.

Creative Writing Exercises: In addition to workshop exercises, you'll discover creative writing exercises that you can explore at your own pace later. These exercises are an invitation to express your unique stories, free from judgment or deadlines.

Reflect and Connect: You'll find thought-provoking questions. Use them as prompts for self-reflection, offering you the opportunity to delve deeper into your own experiences and insights.

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01 True Stories, Well Told

What is memoir?

Memoirs are personal, subjective accounts that focus on specific life experiences, emotions, and personal growth, as told by the writer themselves.

Here are some key characteristics of memoir:

Scope: A memoir is a personal account of a specific period, aspect, or theme in the writer's life. It does not cover the writer's entire life but focuses on selected experiences, memories, or a particular time frame.

Subjectivity: Memoirs are written by the person who lived the experiences, making them inherently subjective. Writers share their own perspectives, thoughts, emotions, and memories, often without the same level of research as a biography.

Narrative Style: Memoirs are written in the first person and often employ a more personal, narrative style. Writers may use creative and literary techniques to convey their experiences and emotions.

Focus: Memoirs centre around the writer's personal journey, reflections, and inner thoughts. They offer insights into the writer's life, emotions, and growth during a specific period or set of experiences.

What is autobiography?

An autobiography is a form of nonfiction writing that is like a memoir but encompasses the writer's entire life, from birth to the present (or up to a certain point).

In an autobiography, the writer provides a comprehensive and chronological account of their life, including their personal experiences, significant events, relationships, achievements, and challenges.

Here are some key characteristics of autobiographies:

Purpose: Autobiographies are written to provide a comprehensive record of the writer's life, offering readers a deep understanding of the writer's personal journey. They may also serve as a means of self-reflection and self-expression for the writer.

Comprehensive Life Story: Autobiographies aim to cover the writer's entire life or a substantial portion of it. The writer typically starts from their early years and progresses through various life stages up to the present or a specific point in time.

First-Person Narrative: Like memoirs, autobiographies are typically written in the first person. The writer shares their own experiences, thoughts, emotions, and reflections, providing a personal and subjective account of their life.

Chronological Order: Autobiographies are usually organised in a chronological order, starting with the writer's early life and progressing through the years. This allows readers to follow the writer's life journey from beginning to end.

Reflective and Personal: Autobiographies often include the writer's reflections on their life experiences, lessons learned, and personal growth. They may delve into the writer's inner thoughts and emotional responses to the events of their life.

Objective and Subjective Elements: While autobiographies are primarily subjective accounts from the writer's perspective, they may also include objective information and historical context. Autobiographers may draw from their memory, personal records, and research to provide a well-rounded narrative.

Notable Achievements: Autobiographies often focus on the writer's accomplishments, challenges, and notable life events. They may provide insights into the writer's motivations, ambitions, and the factors that shaped their life.

Memoirs resonate with readers looking for a personal and intimate journey of change, wrapped around specific themes; autobiographies appeal to those seeking insights into prominent individuals' lives.

Questions for your project

Why are you writing your memoir or family history?

Before you begin your memoir journey, take a moment to reflect on your purpose for the project.

Why do you want to share your story?

Is it to weave a great tale, find healing through truth-telling, strengthen your sense of identity and belonging, leave a legacy for future generations, inspire others, set the record straight, or perhaps even to vent frustration or embarrassment?

Your motivations will shape the heart and soul of your memoir and provide direction about publication.

Writing Exercise 1

Your first memory.

02 Where to start?

Overcoming Writer's Block

Writer's block is that frustrating moment when your mind feels stuck, and you can't seem to put words on paper. It happens to the best of writers. But don't worry, there are ways to overcome it.

Tips to Beat Writer's Block

Set a Writing Routine: Write at the same time each day to train your mind to be creative at that time.

Start Small: Write just a few sentences, and before you know it, you'll be on a roll.

Change Your Environment: Sometimes, a change of scenery can spark inspiration.

Freewriting: Write anything that comes to mind without worrying about structure or grammar. Just let your thoughts flow.

Take Breaks: If you're stuck, step away for a short walk or a cup of tea. Physical activity can clear your mind.

Use Prompts: Sometimes, a simple word, question or photograph can kick-start your writing.

Remember, writer's block is a normal part of the writing process. Don't be too hard on yourself. Just keep writing, and the words will come!

Writing Exercise 2

Your memory of COVID-19.

Write no more than 15 words to reflect your memory of the pandemic period. Don't write facts, write feelings.

Example: *Covid didn't kill me, but the government almost did.*

Writing Exercise 3

A specific memory of the pandemic.

Write a short paragraph about an incident you remember during the pandemic.

Example: *Fear gripped the city. Stupidity driven by ignorance seemed the local government policy. I recall laughing out loud as I watched casual workers wiping down carparking signs, just the metal poles. I recall questioning the fear of the unknown driven by panic which must have initiated this ridiculous policy. As I walked past a diligent worker I pointed out she had missed a spot.*

Questions for your project

Remember, your story's beginning sets the stage for the entire narrative, drawing readers into your world and igniting their curiosity to journey alongside you.

Where does your story start? Your memoir is a tapestry of experiences, so think about the specific moment or event that ignited your desire to tell this story. This is your narrative's birthplace.

Where and when did it happen? Pinpoint the location and timeframe of this pivotal moment. The setting provides context, while the time adds a temporal dimension to your story.

Why do you want to start here? Reflect on the significance of this starting point. What makes it compelling? Why is it the most fitting place to introduce your readers to your story?

Set the scene – What was happening at that time? What do you remember or know? Paint a vivid picture of the circumstances surrounding this moment. What was happening in the world or in your life? What details do you recall, or what insights have you gained since then?

03 Navigating Memory Gaps

Unearthing Memories

Sometimes, our memories are like hidden treasures waiting to be discovered.

Here are some tools and techniques to help you find and bring those memories to the surface:

Photo Albums and Keepsakes: Look through old photo albums, diaries, letters, or any keepsakes you've saved. These can trigger forgotten memories.

Conversations: Talk to family and friends about your past. They may share stories and details that you've forgotten.

Sensory Triggers: Smells, tastes, sounds, and textures can bring back memories. Try smelling a particular food or touching an old object.

Journaling: Regular journaling can help you remember past events. Writing about your daily experiences can unearth hidden memories.

Mind Mapping: Create a mind map or diagram of your life, jotting down key events and people. This can help you see the bigger picture.

Music and Songs: Listen to music from different phases of your life. It can transport you back to specific moments.

Visualisation: Close your eyes and try to picture events or places from your past. The more you visualise, the more details you might remember.

Dreams: Pay attention to your dreams. They can sometimes bring back memories or emotions.

Remember, memory can be a bit tricky, and not everything will resurface. But these tools and techniques can help you uncover and capture precious moments from your past.

Writing Exercise 4

A childhood place that holds a special memory for you.

This prompt encourages you to revisit your childhood and focus on a specific place or location that had personal significance. It could be a park, a school, a grandparent's house, or any other place that triggers vivid memories.

Write a paragraph and evoke your memory – show us, don't tell us.

Unlocking the Power of Research

In the world of memoir and family history, memory forms the foundation of your narrative.

But sometimes, memories can be elusive, hazy, or even at odds with others' recollections. Understanding how to navigate the nuances of memory and the art of research is crucial in creating a seamless and captivating story.

Let's explore these aspects further.

Influences & Lenses

Your life experiences and family histories are deeply intertwined with the world around you at the time.

Factors such as gender, politics, historic events, social and economic circumstances, and your personal emotions all influence your memories. These factors can serve as significant influences on how you tell your story.

Additionally, you can use a "lens" to revisit your experiences from your current perspective. For example, considering what you know now, you can frame your story differently – a lens of "triumph" can be a powerful lens to explore the past, the journey, and the ending incident, presenting a story of transformation.

Questions for your project

How will the theme of 'change' emerge in my memoir or family history? Dive into the transformative moments within your story, whether they relate to individuals, relationships, or circumstances.

What other common themes emerge in my memoir or family history? Explore themes such as the circle of life, coming of age, faith versus doubt, fate versus free will, and many more. Identify the core themes that resonate with your story.

How will you tell the story from a fresh perspective? Find your unique voice and writing style to infuse your narrative with vibrancy. Capture the essence of your tale in an engaging and compelling way.

Mind the Gap

In the process of recalling your memories, you may encounter gaps in knowledge or memory. These gaps can create silences in your narrative. But do these silences need to be filled?

Filling gaps with speculation or guesses can blur the line between memoir and fiction, and memoirs require a foundation of truth. If you find that filling in the gaps is essential for your story arc, consider how to do so while maintaining the integrity of your truth.

Questions for your project

What are the gaps in my writing project?

Are the gaps critical to the story?

How can I fill the gaps that still presents the 'truth'?

Research techniques

Research can serve as a valuable tool to jog your memory, place your experiences in a broader context, and validate your recollections.

Here's how you can approach research effectively:

Collecting Evidence: Seek out information, documents, and evidence that complement your memories. This process can be challenging due to variations in personal recollection, locations, and document availability. Distinguish between primary and secondary sources, with primary sources being evidence created during the time you're researching (for example, newspapers) and secondary sources being those created after that time (such as books and websites). In memoir, evidence to collect includes your own memories, official documents, letters, diaries, photos, interviews, social media posts, and physical items.

Assessing and Using Research: How you interpret and use the evidence you've collected is vital when presenting memoir and family history. Ensure that your facts are correct, and your memories are plausible and reliable. Consider factors like reliability (information from credible sources) and validity (accurate evidence). Avoid copying large portions of text from source materials; instead, weave them into your narrative to add depth and colour.

Citing and Permissions: Properly cite or reference your sources to acknowledge where your information comes from. Include a reference list in your story or project or integrate citations seamlessly. Equally important is seeking permission from family members, friends, and interviewees to acknowledge their contributions.

Research plays a crucial role in enriching your memoir or family history, providing context, and validating your recollections. By following these research techniques, you can unlock the power of memory and ensure the authenticity and depth of your storytelling.

Questions for your project

What exactly do I want to know?

What do I already know and can prove/provide evidence of?

What are the gaps and where might I find the answer?

Research databases & resources

- ✓ National Library of Australia and Trove database
  https://www.nla.gov.au/getting-started/family-history
- ✓ National Archives of Australia
  https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/search-people/researching-your-family
- ✓ Society of Australian Genealogists
  https://www.sag.org.au/How-do-I-research-my-family-history
- ✓ Ancestry.com.au [fees apply]
  https://www.ancestry.com.au/

04 The Art of Storytelling

Great storytelling is the heart of a compelling memoir. To captivate your readers, you need to master the art of storytelling. Here are the essential elements of a good story, and tips for effective storytelling.

Elements of a Good Story

Conflict: Every story needs some form of conflict, whether it's internal (emotional struggles) or external (conflict with others or the world). Conflict creates tension and keeps readers engaged.

Characters: Well-developed, relatable characters are at the core of any memorable story. In your memoir, the characters are the people you've encountered in your life, including yourself.

Setting: A vivid and well-described setting can transport readers to the time and place of your story, allowing them to experience it with you.

Plot: The sequence of events in your memoir should be purposeful and should serve to drive your narrative forward. It's not just a chronological account but a well-structured story.

Theme: A central theme or message that ties your stories together can give your memoir depth and coherence.

Narrative Voice: Your unique voice and perspective should shine through in your storytelling. Be authentic and true to yourself.

Tips for Effective Storytelling

Show, Don't Tell: Instead of telling your readers what happened, show it through vivid descriptions, dialogue, and sensory details. Let them experience the story through your words.

Use Dialogue: Dialogue brings characters to life and can provide insight into their personalities and relationships. Make your conversations sound natural and engaging.

Build Tension: Keep readers engaged by gradually building tension and suspense. This can be achieved through foreshadowing, conflict, and unresolved questions.

Emotion and Vulnerability: Share your emotions and vulnerabilities in your storytelling. Readers connect with authentic, relatable emotions.

Use Imagery: Paint pictures with your words. Use imagery to help readers visualise the scenes and events in your memoir.

Symbolism: Employ symbolism to add depth to your stories. Objects, places, or recurring themes can symbolise larger ideas or emotions.

Writing Exercise 5

Write a paragraph using the tips.

Think of a time in your life when you faced a challenge or obstacle. Describe this challenge in a paragraph, highlighting the emotions you felt and the actions you took to overcome it.

Focus on building a narrative that captures the tension and resolution of this particular life moment.

05 Your Memoir Story Arc

A memoir story arc is the structure that shapes your memoir's narrative. It provides a framework for organising the events and experiences of your life in a way that creates a compelling and meaningful story. While traditionally associated with fiction, a story arc is equally valuable in memoir writing.

How It Works for Memoir

In a memoir, the story arc helps you make sense of your life's experiences and present them in a coherent and engaging way. It allows you to select the most relevant and impactful moments, arrange them in a meaningful sequence, and infuse your memoir with a sense of purpose and direction.

Key Elements of a Memoir Story Arc

Beginning: Introduce your readers to the world of your memoir. Start with an engaging hook that draws them in. Present the central theme or question that your memoir will explore.

Inciting Incident: This is the event or moment that sets your memoir's story in motion. It's the catalyst for the journey you're about to share.

Rising Action: Build tension and excitement by presenting a series of events and challenges that lead to the memoir's central conflict or question. The rising action should keep readers engaged and eager to know more.

Climax: This is the turning point, where the central conflict comes to a head. It's the most emotionally charged and significant part of your memoir.

Falling Action: After the climax, show how the central conflict is being resolved or how you've changed as a result of the events. Tie up loose ends and provide a sense of closure.

Resolution: Reflect on the lessons learned, the transformation undergone, and the impact of the story's events on your life. Leave the readers with a satisfying and thought-provoking conclusion.

Tips for Developing the Story Arc

Identify Your Central Theme: Know what your memoir is really about. What's the core theme or message you want to convey? The story arc should serve this theme.

Create Tension: Build tension and anticipation by strategically placing the most engaging and conflict-driven events in your rising action and climax.

Emotional Resonance: Ensure that your story arc evokes emotions. Readers should feel connected to your experiences and emotionally invested in your journey.

Reflect on Change: Pay attention to your personal growth and transformation. Highlight the evolution of your character as a result of the events in your memoir.

Engage Your Audience: Keep your readers captivated. Use descriptive language, strong imagery, and relatable details to make them feel like they are a part of your story.

The Story Arc structure example

A SECOND CHANCE

Beginning: John, a middle-aged man struggling with regret and unfulfilled dreams, decides to revisit his childhood passion for painting. He's at a point in his life where he feels stuck and longs for a fresh start.

Inciting Incident: One day, while cleaning his attic, John stumbles upon an old, dusty painting kit he used as a teenager. Memories of his youthful aspirations flood back, and he decides to pick up a brush once more.

Rising Action: As John starts painting, he faces self-doubt and obstacles. His initial attempts are uninspiring, and he questions whether it's too late to follow his dream. However, he's determined to improve, seeking out painting classes and mentors.

Climax: At an art exhibition, John showcases his work for the first time. A renowned art critic is in attendance and praises his paintings, igniting his belief in himself and his art. The climax represents a turning point in his journey, both artistically and personally.

Falling Action: John's art gains recognition, and he starts to sell his work. He reconnects with a sense of purpose and fulfillment he had long missed. As he continues to paint and exhibit, his life takes on new meaning.

Resolution: The story concludes with John having found his second chance in life, and he reflects on the transformative power of pursuing his passion. He has learned that it's never too late to follow one's dreams and live life to the fullest.

Writing Exercise 6

The inciting incident.

Identify the inciting incident and climax of your memoir.

How do these moments shape your story? Write a paragraph that highlights the emotional intensity and significance of each of these key points in your narrative.

06 Cast of Characters

Understanding Your Characters

When it comes to creating memorable characters in your memoir, there are several elements to consider, different types of characters to explore, and some tips to help students develop their characters effectively.

Elements of a Good Character

Depth: Create well-rounded characters with complex personalities, motivations, and emotions.

Authenticity: Make your characters feel real by portraying their strengths, flaws, and idiosyncrasies.

Consistency: Ensure that your characters' actions and words align with their established traits.

Development: Characters should evolve or change over the course of your memoir, showing growth or transformation.

Relationships: Explore how characters interact with one another, as these relationships can reveal more about them.

Types of Characters

Protagonist: The central character of your memoir, often the writer, around whom the story revolves.

Antagonist: The character or force that opposes the protagonist, creating conflict and tension.

Supporting Characters: Characters who play significant roles in the writer's life or story, such as family members, friends, or mentors.

Flat Characters: These are typically minor characters with limited development, serving specific functions in the narrative.

Dynamic Characters: Characters who undergo significant changes or growth during the story.

Refer to the writing exercise on page 25 to develop your characters.

Writing Exercise 7

Describe a character.

Choose a supporting character from your memoir, such as a family member or friend.

Write a paragraph that describes their appearance, personality, and their role in your life. Share an anecdote that reveals an important aspect of their character.

07 Ethical Reflections

Navigating Ethical Considerations

Embarking on a memoir or family history project is an act of courage, delving into the intricacies of personal lives, often exposing the imperfect and private aspects of individuals and families. But with this brave endeavour come ethical responsibilities. Let's explore the ethical considerations that should guide your writing journey:

Understanding Ethical Dimensions

When crafting your memoir or family history, you must remain vigilant about ethical aspects. Controversies surrounding truth in memoir are not new, and your project must strive for truthfulness and accuracy while minimising the risk of being accused of dishonesty.

Questions for your project

What are the major ethical considerations relating to my writing project?

Reflect on the major ethical considerations related to your writing project. Consider issues such as privacy, truth, and the portrayal of individuals.

Framework for reflection

Regular self-reflection is a crucial practice when working on your project. It involves self-monitoring and adopting a critical perspective on your initial instincts, especially in ethically ambiguous situations.

Jonathan Haidt's (2012) ethical instincts model, comprising five ethical dimensions, can guide your self-reflection:

Care/Harm: Consider whether your project might harm someone emotionally or professionally. Who might be affected, and why?

Fairness/Cheating: Examine the fairness of your narrative. Does your project reveal past injustices or create potential future injustices?

Loyalty/Betrayal: Reflect on your loyalty to family and others. Could your project be perceived as a betrayal, and to what extent does this concern you?

Authority/Subversion: Assess whether your project might break any laws or rules.

Sanctity/Degradation: Consider how you are honouring your ancestors and maintaining the sanctity of their memory in your project.

Ethical Questions to Ponder

The ethical dimensions of memoir and family history raise numerous questions:

- Who do you anticipate will read your memoir or family history, and why would it interest them?
- How will you involve living relatives in your research and project development?
- How will you handle negative emotions that may arise from your research and writing?
- Should family secrets be revealed or cherished stories debunked, and why?
- How can you address and potentially repatriate past family wrongs?
- To what extent is it acceptable to romanticise or alter your ancestral story?
- How will you respect privacy, personal information, and the wishes of living relatives and others?
- How will you collect informed consent and permissions from individuals?
- Should names and places be altered to protect privacy, and why?
- Will your project bring scrutiny or embarrassment to yourself and others, and what are your intentions in sharing these stories?
- How will you handle situations where you can't recall exact conversations or memories?
- Is your story focused on pain or victimhood, and if so, how will you narrate the story of change and growth?
- Does your project blend memoir with self-help, and what are your credentials for offering life advice?

Questions for your project

Reflect on the conversations you need to have with your family and others about your project. Can you anticipate what their perspectives and concerns might be?

Navigating these ethical considerations is an essential part of the memoir and family history writing process. By approaching your project with sensitivity and ethical awareness, you can craft a narrative that is not only compelling but also respectful of the lives and memories it portrays.

08 Journaling

Journaling offers significant value for individuals, writers, and memoirists in various ways:

Self-Reflection: Journaling provides a safe and private space to reflect on your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It encourages self-awareness and personal growth. This self-reflection is especially valuable for memoirists as it helps them delve deeper into their own lives and understand the events that have shaped them.

Emotional Release: Writing in a journal can be cathartic. It allows you to express and process your emotions, whether they are positive or negative. This emotional release can be therapeutic and reduce stress, making it easier to tackle the challenges of writing a memoir, which often involves revisiting emotionally charged memories.

Idea Generation: Journals are a breeding ground for creative ideas. As a writer or memoirist, you can jot down story ideas, character sketches, writing prompts, and other inspiration that can be invaluable for future projects.

Memory Preservation: Journals serve as memory banks. By recording the details of your daily life and significant events, you create a historical record that can be used as a source of accurate information when writing a memoir. It helps ensure that you accurately portray past events.

1. **Enhancing Writing Skills:** Regular journaling hones your writing skills. It allows you to experiment with different styles, tones, and voices, which can be useful when crafting a memoir that captivates readers with diverse storytelling techniques.

Organised Thinking: Journaling encourages structured thinking. When you write about a topic or event, it prompts you to organise your thoughts logically, aiding in clarity and coherence when conveying your life story in a memoir.

Staying on Track: Writers often use journals to set writing goals and track their progress. This can help memoirists stay on track during the writing process and maintain a sense of direction.

Exploration of Identity: Journals provide an opportunity for self-exploration. As a memoirist, it's vital to understand your own identity and the experiences that have shaped you. Journaling can be a tool for this exploration.

Creative Outlet: Journals offer an unfiltered creative outlet. You can experiment with different writing styles and voices, helping you develop the storytelling skills required for a compelling memoir.

Preserving Moments: Journals capture fleeting moments and emotions. These captured moments can be revisited in the future, offering a sense of nostalgia and a reminder of the journey you've undertaken as a memoirist.

In essence, journaling is a versatile and powerful tool for writers and memoirists. It provides a space for self-expression, creativity, reflection, and personal growth, all of which contribute to the rich and meaningful process of writing a memoir that resonates with readers.

09 Developing Your Project

Embarking on your memoir or family history project can be an exciting and deeply rewarding journey.

To help you navigate this process, here are step-by-step guidelines to bring your project to life:

Determine Your Motivation and Ethical Dimensions: Start by understanding your motivation for writing this memoir or family history. What drives you? What are your goals for this project? Be aware of the ethical issues that might emerge through the process.

1. **Define Your Project's Format:** Decide what your finished project will look like. Will it be a professionally published book, a short-form booklet, a website, or another format that suits your vision?
2. **Set Your Story's Focus and Starting Point:** Begin by defining the focus of your story. What aspects of your life or family history do you want to explore? Set the scene and identify the desires that drive your narrative. Select key events that will be central to your story.
3. **Identify Key Themes:** Explore the overarching themes your memoir or family history may delve into. Consider themes like the circle of life, coming of age, faith vs. doubt, and others that resonate with your narrative.
4. **List Your Cast of Characters:** Identify the individuals who will play significant roles in your story. This includes protagonists, antagonists, sidekicks, and other tertiary characters.
5. **Craft Your Story Arc:** Create a story arc to frame your narrative. Remember, your memoir doesn't need to chronicle your entire life in a linear manner. Map out your story arc and use it as your writing plan.
6. **Conduct Research:** Based on your story arc, identify the research you need to do to gather evidence and address any gaps in your narrative. Undertake thorough research to enhance the authenticity of your story.
7. **Address Ethical Considerations:** List and consider the ethical issues that pertain to your story. Develop a plan for proactively addressing these concerns as you write your memoir.
8. **Start Writing:** With your story arc plan in hand, begin writing your memoir or family history. Let your narrative flow while staying true to your plan.

852 Press Manuscript Method

852 Press recommends a manuscript method to help you refine your work:

Expect 8 Drafts: Be prepared to complete eight drafts and edits of your manuscript to ensure it's the best it can be.

Engage 5 Beta Readers: Form a group of five friends, family members, or writing peers to act as Beta Readers. They will offer fresh, reader-centric perspectives and feedback on early drafts.

Involve 2 Experts: Collaborate with at least two experts—an editor and a subject matter expert—to enhance your story's quality. Editing is crucial, and you should consider structural and developmental edits, copy edits, and proofreading to refine your manuscript.

10. **Publish Your Work:** Once your manuscript is complete and polished, it's time to move into the publishing phase. Explore options for self-publishing and refer to the 852 Press Self-Publishing Basics guidebook for more guidance.

By following these steps and embracing the 852 Press Manuscript Method, you'll be well-equipped to craft a compelling memoir or family history that captivates your readers and preserves your stories for generations to come. Happy writing!

852 Press Can Help

At 852 Press, we are passionate about supporting and empowering aspiring writers on their self-publishing journey – to help all Australians tell their story.

We are more than happy to engage with individuals seeking advice and answer their questions to the best of our ability.

We understand the challenges and uncertainties that emerging writers and self-published writers may face, and we are here to provide guidance and share our knowledge.

However, it is important to note that our primary focus is on delivering workshops and providing educational resources.

Occasionally, we offer project management services where we coach and support writers in following the steps outlined in our guidebooks.

Our preference is to not be directly involved in, or manage for writers, the financial investment required to publish a book.

For project management, a reasonable service fee applies, and an agreement will be provided that clearly outlines the scope of work and deliverables as a way of managing expectations. This agreement ensures transparency and clarity for both parties involved.

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Additional Writing Exercises

Reflection

In the journey of writing your memoir, you'll uncover moments in your life that have shaped you in profound ways. These moments are not just stories; they are windows into your personal growth, insights, and the invaluable life lessons you've gathered along the way.

As you explore your memories and experiences, you'll come across pivotal moments that have changed the course of your life. These could be times of triumph, challenges, or even moments of deep self-reflection. They are the chapters of your life that offer valuable insights and teachings.

For example, think back to a time when you faced a major decision, overcame a significant obstacle, or experienced a transformative event. What did you learn from that experience? How did it change you as a person? What insights did it bring to light?

Reflecting on these moments is not just an exercise in recollection; it's a journey of self-discovery and growth. It allows you to understand your own resilience, adaptability, and the lessons that have shaped your perspective on life.

Memoir example

Over the years, I had always been an anxious person, fearing the unknown and avoiding risks at all costs. The turning point in my life came when I decided to travel alone to a foreign country. This experience forced me out of my comfort zone, and I encountered challenges I never expected. I had to navigate unfamiliar places, communicate with people from different cultures, and solve problems on my own.

As I faced these challenges head-on, I realised that I was much more resilient and adaptable than I had ever given myself credit for. I learned the value of embracing uncertainty and the beauty of cultural diversity. I also discovered that stepping out of my comfort zone not only led to personal growth but also enriched my life in ways I couldn't have imagined.

This experience taught me a profound life lesson: that growth and self-discovery often lie just beyond the boundaries of our comfort zones. It's a lesson I carry with me in all aspects of life, reminding me to embrace challenges and uncertainties as opportunities for personal development.

Writing Exercise 8

Write about a life lesson.

Reflect on a significant life lesson that has shaped your journey. Describe the experience or moment that taught you this lesson. How did it impact your life, your beliefs, and your choices? Share insights on how this lesson has influenced your personal growth and your approach to life.

Explore the significance of this life lesson in your own words.

Developing Memoir Characters

Observation: Pay attention to the people in your life, past and present, and observe their traits, behaviours, and interactions for character inspiration.

Dialogue: Use dialogue to reveal character personalities, attitudes, and relationships. What characters say and how they say it can provide insights into their unique voices.

Show, Don't Tell: Instead of telling readers about a character, show their traits through their actions, thoughts, and interactions.

Character Arc: Consider how your characters evolve throughout your memoir. Reflect on their journey and how they change or remain consistent.

Emotion: Explore the emotions and feelings of your characters, as this can connect readers to their experiences.

In the realm of memoir and family history, your story still relies on the presence of characters. Let's explore these character definitions more thoroughly to help you navigate your memoir or family history project.

Writing Exercise 9

Develop your characters.

Protagonist (the hero, the main character)

In your story, the protagonist is the central figure, often representing you or a key family member. This character drives the narrative forward, experiencing growth, change, or challenges throughout the memoir.

Antagonist (who battles or opposes the protagonist)

The antagonist is the character or force that stands in opposition to the protagonist's goals or desires. This can be a person, an inner struggle, or external circumstances that create conflict in your story.

Deuteragonist (the protagonist's sidekick)

The deuteragonist is a supporting character who plays a significant role in the protagonist's journey. They might offer guidance, support, or serve as a close companion to the main character.

Tertiary characters (people who flit in and out)

Tertiary characters are those who briefly appear in your story, often serving specific functions or adding depth to the narrative. They might provide context, humour, or unique perspectives.

Protagonist's love interest(s)

Love interests are characters who share a romantic connection with the protagonist. Their presence can add emotional depth and complexity to your memoir.

Confidant (protagonist's best friend or mentor)

The confidant is a trusted companion, typically a best friend or mentor, who provides support, guidance, and a listening ear to the protagonist. They often play a crucial role in the protagonist's journey.

Foil character (personality or values clash with the protagonist):

Foil characters are those whose personalities or values contrast with the protagonist's. This contrast highlights specific qualities or dilemmas faced by the main character, adding depth to your story.

Writing Exercise 10

Diary entry.

Write a diary entry about a significant event from your past. Describe the event in detail and capture your thoughts and emotions at the time. Use the first-person perspective to relive the moment.

Writing Exercise 11

Photograph exploration.

Select an old photograph, preferably one that holds sentimental value. Write a narrative that tells the story behind the image. Describe the people, the setting, and the emotions it evokes. Use descriptive language to paint a vivid picture.

Writing Exercise 12

Fact-based account.

Choose a memorable event or day from your past. Write a factual account of what happened, like a news report. Stick to the who, what, where, when, and why. This exercise challenges you to focus on the objective details of the memory.

Writing Exercise 13

Emotional reflection.

Think of a moment that stirred strong emotions in you. Write an essay that delves deep into those emotions. Explore why you felt the way you did and how the experience impacted you. Use the first-person perspective to convey your emotional journey.

Writing Exercise 14

Letter to your younger self.

Imagine writing a letter to your younger self, offering advice or insights based on what you know now. Reflect on the lessons you've learned since that time and how you've changed. Use a compassionate and reflective tone.

Writing Exercise 15

Dialogue with a memory.

Choose a memory that involves a significant conversation or interaction with someone. Write a dialogue between yourself and the other person involved. Reconstruct the conversation as accurately as you can, incorporating your thoughts and feelings at the time.

Recommended Reading

Examples of Effective Storytelling

***The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls:** In her memoir, Walls uses vivid storytelling to recount her unconventional and sometimes harrowing upbringing. Her ability to convey her family's unique experiences and her own resilience through storytelling is remarkable.

***Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt:** McCourt's memoir is a testament to the power of storytelling. He brings the poverty-stricken streets of Limerick, Ireland, to life with vivid descriptions and a compelling narrative voice.

***Educated* by Tara Westover:** Westover's memoir is a masterclass in using storytelling to convey the journey from ignorance to education. Her vivid descriptions of her family and the Idaho mountains are essential elements of her storytelling.

***The Night* by Elie Wiesel:** Wiesel's powerful memoir about the Holocaust relies on storytelling to convey the horrors he endured. His stark and emotionally charged narrative is a stark example of storytelling's emotional impact.

Memoirs with a Difference

***The Year of Living Danishly* by Helen Russell**: In this memoir, the writer shares her humorous and insightful experiences living in Denmark and embracing the Danish way of life. It's a delightful exploration of culture and personal transformation.

***When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi:** This profound memoir chronicles a neurosurgeon's journey when he is diagnosed with terminal cancer. It's a moving reflection on life, mortality, and the pursuit of meaning.

***H is for Hawk* by Helen Macdonald:** A unique memoir that combines the writer's experience of training a goshawk with reflections on grief and the complex relationship between humans and nature.

***The Night of the Gun* by David Carr:** David Carr's memoir is an investigative journey into his own troubled past as a drug addict and the process of reconstructing his own history. It's a compelling and brutally honest self-examination.

Writing Memoir and Creative Writing

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft **by Stephen King:** Offers a blend of memoir and writing advice. It's a valuable resource for aspiring memoirists, with insights on the craft and the writing life.

The Art of Memoir **by Mary Karr:** A renowned memoirist, provides practical advice and guidance on writing memoirs, drawing from her own experiences as both a writer and a professor.

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life **by Anne Lamott**: This book is a classic in the field of creative writing. Anne Lamott's witty and compassionate guidance offers aspiring writers a wealth of inspiration and practical advice.

The Memoir Project: A Thoroughly Non-Standardized Text for Writing & Life **by Marion Roach Smith:** A practical guide to writing memoirs. It provides a structured approach and encourages writers to explore their personal stories.

Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir **by Beth Kephart:** Exploring the art of memoir writing in this informative and reflective book, offering insights into the writing process and personal storytelling.

Zen in the Art of Writing **by Ray Bradbury:** While not specifically about memoir writing, Ray Bradbury's book is a source of creative inspiration. It encourages writers to embrace their passion and unleash their creativity in their work.

Glossary

A

Antagonist: The character or force that opposes the protagonist in a story. The antagonist often creates conflict and obstacles for the main character.

C

Cast of Characters: A list of individuals who play significant roles in your story, including protagonists, antagonists, sidekicks, and tertiary characters.

Circle of Life: A common theme in memoirs and family histories that explores the natural cycle of birth, life, and death.

D

Deuteragonist: The secondary character in a story, often the protagonist's sidekick or a character with a significant role.

E

Ethical Considerations: Ethical issues and dilemmas that arise when writing memoirs and family histories, such as privacy, accuracy, and potential harm to individuals mentioned.

F

Foil Character: A character whose personality or values clash with the protagonist, highlighting the protagonist's traits and qualities.

I

Inciting Incident: A significant event or moment in a story that sets the plot in motion and often leads to complications or conflicts.

M

Memoir: A branch of creative nonfiction that involves telling a true story, often based on the writer's life and memories, written from a personal perspective.

Memory: The recollection of past events and experiences, which can be unreliable, contested, or influenced by various factors.

Motivation: The reasons and goals behind writing a memoir or family history, which may include healing, legacy, inspiration, or truth-telling.

P

Protagonist: The main character and hero of a story, often facing challenges and conflicts that drive the narrative.

R

Research: The process of gathering information, documents, and evidence to support and enhance the authenticity of a memoir or family history.

S

Story Arc: A framework or plan that guides the structure of a memoir or family history, including key elements like setting the scene, inciting incident, actions and obstacles, emotional beats, and the ending incident.

T

Themes: Central ideas or concepts explored in a memoir or family history, such as coming of age, identity, justice, survival, and more.

Truth-Telling: The commitment to presenting truthful and accurate information in a memoir while minimising the risk of being accused of dishonesty.

W

Writing Prompts: Questions and prompts designed to inspire reflection and guide the writing process in a memoir or family history project.