

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Memoir Writing

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Craft your life story with
confidence and creativity

Overcome common pitfalls and
challenges in memoir writing

Unlock the tools to recover
and organize your past

Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD
Chief Storytelling Officer



Memor Writing

2nd Edition

by Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand

Memoir Writing For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, www.wiley.com

Copyright © 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved, including rights for text and data mining and training of artificial technologies or similar technologies.

Media and software compilation copyright © 2024 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved, including rights for text and data mining and training of artificial technologies or similar technologies.

Published simultaneously in Canada

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning or otherwise, except as permitted under Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the Publisher. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Trademarks: Wiley, For Dummies, the Dummies Man logo, Dummies.com, Making Everything Easier, and related trade dress are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

LIMIT OF LIABILITY/DISCLAIMER OF WARRANTY: THE PUBLISHER AND THE AUTHOR MAKE NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES WITH RESPECT TO THE ACCURACY OR COMPLETENESS OF THE CONTENTS OF THIS WORK AND SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ALL WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION WARRANTIES OF FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. NO WARRANTY MAY BE CREATED OR EXTENDED BY SALES OR PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS. THE ADVICE AND STRATEGIES CONTAINED HEREIN MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR EVERY SITUATION. THIS WORK IS SOLD WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE PUBLISHER IS NOT ENGAGED IN RENDERING LEGAL, ACCOUNTING, OR OTHER PROFESSIONAL SERVICES. IF PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE IS REQUIRED, THE SERVICES OF A COMPETENT PROFESSIONAL PERSON SHOULD BE SOUGHT. NEITHER THE PUBLISHER NOR THE AUTHOR SHALL BE LIABLE FOR DAMAGES ARISING HEREFROM. THE FACT THAT AN ORGANIZATION OR WEBSITE IS REFERRED TO IN THIS WORK AS A CITATION AND/OR A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF FURTHER INFORMATION DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE AUTHOR OR THE PUBLISHER ENDORSES THE INFORMATION THE ORGANIZATION OR WEBSITE MAY PROVIDE OR RECOMMENDATIONS IT MAY MAKE. FURTHER, READERS SHOULD BE AWARE THAT INTERNET WEBSITES LISTED IN THIS WORK MAY HAVE CHANGED OR DISAPPEARED BETWEEN WHEN THIS WORK WAS WRITTEN AND WHEN IT IS READ.

For general information on our other products and services, please contact our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 877-762-2974, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3993, or fax 317-572-4002. For technical support, please visit <https://hub.wiley.com/community/support/dummies>.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at <http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024940636

ISBN 978-1-394-25007-3 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-394-25009-7 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-394-25008-0 (ebk)

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About this Book	1
Foolish Assumptions	3
Icons Used in This Book	3
Beyond the Book	4
Where to Go from Here	4
PART 1: THE FIRST STEPS TO WRITING A MEMOIR	5
CHAPTER 1: Diving into Memoir Writing: Just the Basics	7
Understanding the DNA of a Memoir	8
Identifying the Essential Parts of a Memoir	9
Making the Necessary Revisions and Edits to Help Your Memoir Shine	10
Focusing on the End Goal: Publication	11
Answering the Key Question: Why Write a Memoir?	14
CHAPTER 2: Getting Started: What You Need to Know about Writing Your Memoir	17
Exploring Why People Write Memoirs Anyway	18
You're an authority in your field (or you aspire to be one)	18
You have a powerful, unique story to share	19
You want to understand/know yourself better	20
You want to document your life	21
You want to set the record straight	21
You enjoy a challenge	22
You enjoy playing with language	22
You find writing therapeutic	23
You have wisdom to share	24
You can't help but write	24
Granting Yourself Permission to Write a Memoir	25
Creating the reading experience of fiction but with facts	25
Using elements of your life versus your entire life	26
Focusing on More Than Just Fame and Fortune	27
Tapping into the Vaults of Memory	28
Doing your best to remember	28
Discovering your past	28
Engaging your history	29
Contemplating the Role of Reading	30
Examining bestseller lists	30
Imitating how to write	31

	Finding your audience	32
	Understanding subgenre	33
CHAPTER 3:	Understanding What Readers Expect: The Story Behind a Good Story	35
	Following the Traditional Story	36
	Building your character's history: Pattern	37
	Disrupting the pattern: External change	38
	Upping the ante: Complication	39
	Guiding the story: Internal change	41
	Seeing Your Story as a Pyramid	42
	Starting the story: Exposition and inciting action	43
	Increasing the emotion: Rising action	44
	Reaching the emotional peak: Climax	45
	Starting to resolve: Falling action	45
	Wrapping up everything: Resolution	46
	Looking at an example of the pyramid structure: Little Red Riding Hood	47
	Eyeing the Importance of Plot	48
CHAPTER 4:	Researching and Remembering: Gathering Enough Material	49
	Tapping into Your Past: Unlocking Your Memories	50
	Coloring with crayons	50
	Practicing deep thinking and breathing	51
	Putting on Your Researcher's Cap: Uncovering Vital Info about Yourself	52
	Examining childhood photos and home movies and videos	53
	Reading old newspapers, books, and magazines	54
	Getting techy with the internet and AI	54
	Seeing what's been saved in scrapbooks	55
	Flipping through your school yearbooks	56
	Checking vital records	56
	Using Others as a Mirror to See Yourself	57
	Starting with others' stories	58
	Using personal interviews	58
	Sticking to the Truth: Avoid Embellishment	60
	Identifying the difference between truth-truth and story-truth	61
	Grasping why honesty matters	61
CHAPTER 5:	Developing Ideas like the Pros	63
	Summoning Your Muse: How to Get Inspired	64
	Finding and recognizing inspiration	64
	Seeking your sanctuary	66

Protecting your time to write	69
Dealing with (or creating) distractions	70
Keeping a journal	71
Avoiding alcohol and drugs	72
Giving Yourself Some Structure	72
Put yourself on the Stephen King plan	73
Take a writing class	73
Meet up with a critique group	74
Join a professional organization	74
Subscribe to a writer's magazine	75
Breaking Past Writer's Block	75
Checking your ego at the door	75
Silencing your inner critic	76
Writing a zero draft	76
Embracing the generative power of AI	77
Focusing on writing, not on publication	78
PART 2: TELLING YOUR STORY WITH PIZZAZZ	79
CHAPTER 6: Giving Your Story Some Structure	81
Going Chronological	82
Taking a Nonlinear Approach	83
Embracing Episodic Storytelling	84
Trusting the power of bite-sized scenes	85
Taking advantage of the unexpected publishing benefit	86
Sticking with a Thematic Structure: Focus on Connective Threads	87
Recognizing Unconventional Structures	88
Developing an Outline that Works for You	89
Creating a basic outline: No painkillers required	90
Using an outline: Take advantage of the benefits	92
Identifying the different types of outlines	93
Letting technology help	97
Knowing when to throw out your outline	98
CHAPTER 7: Considering Scenes and Setting	99
Maximizing Scene Power	100
Facing resistance to reach a goal	101
Thinking about sequels	101
Using story beats	102
Defining Setting: Where It's All At	106
Including the natural world	106
Dialoging your way into setting	107
Bringing in a little culture	108

Creating a Sense of Place	109
Adding dimensions: Physical space	109
Describing setting with movement	110
Noting familiarity with surroundings	110
Remembering the time	111
Building Atmosphere	111
Intensifying mood	112
Foreshadowing: What's to come	113
Tackling exposition: Keeping on task	114
Incorporating narrative summary: Knowing when it makes sense	116
Making history come alive in the present (tense)	117
CHAPTER 8: The Character of Characters	119
Understanding What Makes a Good Character	120
Getting physical	121
Giving your characters an age	122
Dealing with desire	123
Adding patterns of behavior	124
Getting inside their head	125
Portraying action	126
Identifying Character Archetypes	127
The story's hero	127
The nemesis	128
The antihero	128
Valuable secondary characters	129
Making Characters Three-Dimensional	130
Utilizing backstory	130
Avoiding stereotypes and clichés	131
Ensuring That Characters Evolve	132
Comparing static and dynamic characters	133
Presenting change: The how-to	134
Creating some motivation	135
Dealing with Minor Characters	136
CHAPTER 9: Making the Most of Dialogue	139
Managing Memoir Dialogue Differently than Novel Dialogue	140
The historical transcription approach	140
The staying true to the essence approach	140
Recognizing What Good Dialogue Should Do for Your Manuscript	141
Providing action	142
Advancing plot	143
Revealing character depth and values	145
Providing relief from the wall of text syndrome	147

Identifying the Four Types of Dialogue	147
Summary.	148
Indirect	148
Direct.	149
Combination.	150
Managing the Mechanics	151
Using commas	151
Verifying quotation marks	152
Drafting Speech that Sounds Real versus Real Speech	153
Working in sentence fragments	153
Considering um, er, and huh.	154
Using can't or cannot	154
Writing Less Is More	155
Avoiding long-winded-but-oh-so-empty speech.	155
Appreciating silence	156
Questioning but not answering.	157
Considering Accents and Dialect.	158
Examining accents: Righty-o, Guv'nor!	159
Integrating foreign words.	159
Staying away from phonetic spellings	160
Using idiosyncratic expressions	160
Recognizing Where Dialogue Goes Awry	161
Talking heads	161
Dealing with the "said" dilemma	162
Forcing inauthentic dialogue	163
Killing readers with the name game.	164
CHAPTER 10: Maximizing the Power of Voice	165
Grasping Voice: Your Manuscript's Soul.	166
Seeing how voice affects your manuscript	166
Whispering in the reader's ear	167
Being a Minimalist versus Maximalist	168
Shaping Tone	169
Reveal details	170
Come from a different angle	170
Stay consistent.	171
Take responsibility.	172
Creating Irony	172
Generating Humor	173
Using (Yes, I Said "Using") Clichés	175

CHAPTER 11: Handling Point of View	177
Understanding Your Basic Options.	177
Front and center with first person	178
Spotlight the reader with second person.	181
Add some distance with third person	182
Recognizing When “I” Isn’t “Me”	186
Using More Than One Point of View.	187
Creating Narrative Distance.	188
CHAPTER 12: Bold Beginnings, Magnificent Middles, and Fantastic Finishes	191
Going with the Three-Act Structure	192
Moving and changing	192
Writing effective acts.	193
Beginning with the First Scene: Setting Up Act 1	194
Making first lines matter.	195
Revealing your main theme at the start.	196
Avoiding common starting-line problems	196
Moving to the Middle Scenes: Making Act 2 Work	197
Meeting some basic obligations	198
Examining why so many middles fail	198
Raising the tension	199
Ending with the Final Scene: Closing Act 3.	201
Writing last lines that matter.	201
Finding some closure	202
Ending your memoir: Some helpful suggestions	203
Figuring out what to do next	205
PART 3: REVISING, EDITING, AND PUSHING YOUR STORY TO THE NEXT LEVEL	207
CHAPTER 13: Making Revisions	209
Differentiating Between Revision and Editing.	210
Embracing Rigor and Honesty in Your Revision Process.	212
Developing Your Revision Process (and Sticking to It)	213
Navigating with a Road Map: A Nine-Item Checklist	214
Incorporating Three More Advanced Revision Tactics.	216
Embracing the reader’s perspective	216
Highlighting the power of change.	216
(Re)committing to your subject matter wisely	217
CHAPTER 14: Adjusting the Big Picture: Fine-Tuning Structure and Story	219
Sizing Up Your Story: Maintaining Proportion.	220
Rewving Up the Story’s Engine: Bring on Conflicts Big and Small . . .	221

Adjusting the Pace	222
Speeding up or slowing down the pace	223
Avoiding three pacing mistakes even good writers make	225
Using Transitions Effectively	226
Enhancing narrative flow: Scene and chapter transitions	227
Mastering transitions in your manuscript	228
CHAPTER 15: Saying the Unsayable: Knowing What to Include or Exclude	231
Addressing Painful Memories with Care and Purpose	232
Touching on the Taboo: Family Secrets with the Living	234
Dealing with the Dead: Unclear or Missing Information	235
Looking at the Ethics of a Memoir	236
Thinking like a journalist	237
Looking beyond the “I”	238
Navigating Legal Considerations	239
Harming someone’s reputation: Libel	239
Appreciating the right to privacy	241
Bringing in the lawyers: Protecting yourself	241
CHAPTER 16: Streamlining Your Story with Sentence-Level Edits	243
Having a Firm Grasp on Grammar	244
Appeasing Your High School English Teacher: Avoid Wordiness	245
Choosing better nouns and verbs versus more modifiers and qualifiers	246
Creating clarity	247
Resisting the urge to overexplain	247
Showing versus Telling	249
Avoiding Amateur Constructions	251
Steering Clear of Common Grammar Issues	253
Fixing dangling participles	253
Identifying homonym issues	254
Maximizing the Active Voice	257
CHAPTER 17: Getting Outside Help: Critique Groups, Editors, Experts, and Sensitivity Readers	259
Trusting the Feedback Process	260
Joining a Critique Group	260
Giving feedback: The dos	262
Giving feedback: The don’ts	263
Finding a Golden Reader	264

Bringing in a Professional Editor	265
Making cuts before hiring a pro: The 10 percent rule	265
Seeing how a pro can help	266
Knowing how much an editor can cost	266
Finding and hiring a pro	267
Working with a pro	269
Seeking Expert Guidance	270
Going to college and universities	271
Bringing in sensitivity readers	272
Collaborating with cultural consultants	273

PART 4: SHARING YOUR STORY: A PUBLISHING PRIMER 275

CHAPTER 18: Locating and Landing a Literary Agent 277

Seeing What a Good Literary Agent Can Do for You	278
Eyeing an agent’s role	278
Determining whether you need an agent	279
Finding an Agent Who Meets Your Needs	280
Referrals rule	280
Agent listings and databases	281
Conference your way to connections	282
Hooking the Right Agent	283
Stick to the submission guidelines	284
Avoid getting on the agent’s bad side	284
Try some insider tactics	285
Be leery of a bad agent	286
Making Sense of an Agent Agreement	287
Identifying what’s in a standard agreement	287
Asking questions before you sign an agency agreement	288
Looking beyond the dotted line	290
Know when your relationship is at the end (and what to do about it!)	291

CHAPTER 19: Making Sense of Traditional Publishing and the Submission Process 293

Researching Publishers	294
Locating publishers	294
Checking out your prospective publishers	295
Working with a Publisher: The Pros	297
Editors, well, edit	297
Professional layout and design	298
PR plan and team	298
Higher chance of reviews	298
Advances and royalties	299

Going with a Publisher: The Cons	300
Acceptance to publication timeline.	300
Low royalties	301
One book/writer among many	302
Lack of control	303
Out of print.	303
Crafting a Winning Query Letter	305
Naming the basic elements	305
Recognizing what an editor (or literary agent) hopes for in your query	306
Grasping the Power of a Proposal: Think like a Publisher.	307
Staying Away from Serious Submission Don'ts.	308
Generically referring to the editor	308
Shooting a shotgun	309
Claiming that your book is the next best thing.	310
Sending sloppy writing	310
Submitting incomplete work	310
Using Subsidy/Vanity Publishers.	311
The pros of working with subsidy and vanity publishers	311
The cons of working with subsidy and vanity publishers	312
Working with hybrid publishers	312

CHAPTER 20: Going It Alone: Self-Publishing, E-Publishing, and Audiobook Publishing	315
Examining Self-Publishing and E-Publishing	316
Defining self-publishing and e-publishing	316
Exploring why some authors self-publish	317
Deciding Whether to Self-Publish: The Pros and Cons	319
The advantages	319
The disadvantages.	320
Common self-publishing issues	321
Expanding Your Reach with Audiobooks and Multimedia Formats.	322
Navigating the audiobook opportunity production options.	322
Embracing multimedia: Expanding beyond the written word	324
Facing the Reality of E-Publishers	324
Recognizing the three types of e-book publishing	325
The 411 on the main e-book retailers	325
Using DRM (or not)	327
Identifying self e-publishing pros	327
Considering self e-publishing cons.	328
Researching and Working with Printers.	329
Finding the right printer	329
Considering print-on-demand.	330

Getting the best deal.	332
Understanding ISBNs and bar codes	332
Pricing Your Book: Two Philosophies	333
Letting Amazon Distribute Your Book: You Need to Do More	334
CHAPTER 21: Promoting Your Finished Product (and Yourself)	337
Understanding Marketing versus Publicity	338
Finding Cost-Effective Ways to Promote Your Book.	339
Getting local author appearances.	339
Inviting friends to buy the book	340
Leveraging influencers to amplify your book's reach.	341
Promoting your book as a gift	342
Undertaking a blog or podcast tour	343
Offering a free reading or discussion to local book clubs.	344
Making a book PR signature line for your email	344
Writing your story for newspapers.	345
Making yourself available to the media	346
Writing your next book.	346
Marketing Your Memoir: A Little Monetary Investment Can Pay Off.	347
Developing a website for your book.	347
Throwing a publication party.	350
Sending out book cover postcards	350
Making and distributing business cards	351
Bringing in Professional Help: Hiring a Freelance Publicist.	351
Knowing what a freelance publicist can do for you	352
Finding a freelance publicist	353
Hiring a freelance publicist.	353
PART 5: THE PART OF TENS	355
CHAPTER 22: Ten Myths about Memoirs	357
No One Reads Memoirs	358
You Have to Be a Celebrity to Write One	358
My Family and Friends Remember Things Differently.	360
People Will Hate Me If I Include Them	360
I Can't Write an Entire Book	361
I'm Going to Be Rich and Famous	361
My Life Is So (Insert Adjective Here) that It Will Be a Bestseller	362
I Don't Have Any Writing Credentials	362
I've Been Journaling for Years So Writing My Memoir Will Be a Breeze.	363
I'll Get to It . . . Later	363

CHAPTER 23: Ten Reasons Memoirs Are Rejected	365
Insufficient Editing	366
Data Dumping versus Storytelling	366
Lack of Focus	367
Improper/Incomplete Submission Procedure	368
Skips/Avoids the Juiciest, Most Interesting Parts	368
Incredibly . . . Sloooooow . . . Pace	369
Lack of a True Emotional Experience	369
Theme Bludgeons the Readers	370
The Story Is Overly (and Unnecessarily) Complicated	370
The Writing Is Merely Competent versus Exciting	371
INDEX	373

Introduction

Writing a memoir offers a unique opportunity to explore and share the rich tapestry of your life experiences. It's not about having lived a life of extraordinary events or achievements, but about finding value and relevance in your personal journey. Through memoir writing, you can capture the essence of moments that have shaped you, ensuring that your story and the lessons it holds aren't lost to future generations.

Memoir Writing For Dummies is your guide to navigating this deeply personal endeavor. It's an invitation to reflect on your life, to uncover truths, and to articulate the complexities of your experiences. Whether you seek clarity, healing, or simply to preserve your stories, writing a memoir can be a profound act of self-discovery and a way to connect with others on a meaningful level. Join me in this incredible, creative journey, where every life is a story worth telling.

About this Book

If you've picked up *Memoir Writing For Dummies*, you've probably either tried to write a memoir before or you've been thinking about it for some time and want a little guidance to get started. Either situation is fine. There's no wrong way to enter the world of memoir — doing so is a worthy task to undertake, no matter how you come to it.

In my 25-plus years of teaching, I've encountered a lot of people just like you who at some point try their hand at writing a memoir. My goal with this book is to reveal all that you need to succeed with that task. In the pages to come, I identify the reasons why you should write a memoir, share the writing tips you need, and discuss what to do after you have a complete, well-edited, well-written manuscript. I also reveal the main pitfalls and how to steer clear of them. For those who want some extra inspiration and suggestions, I have you covered as well.

The ability to write sometimes doesn't get enough respect. This bias about writing is simply one of life's little injustices, I'm afraid. It comes from a realization people have: "Everyone can scribble something on paper, right? Big deal!" Well, you wouldn't expect to pick up a guitar or a paintbrush and create masterpieces in a week or two. The same is true for writing. Anyone *can* scribble something on paper, but to do it well is another thing entirely. But here's the reality: Writing is a craft. That means you can discover practical skills to improve your writing ability. This book gives you what you need to know to succeed in writing your own memoir, no matter the reason or goals you have for writing one.

I wrote the first edition of this book with the idea in mind that everything that's included would've helped me a great deal during the early part of my own writing career. This second edition has all of that plus more things that I've since decided could benefit readers like you. Now, if anything doesn't make sense to you or runs counter to the way you choose to do things, that's fine. Break any rule I give. Avoid any tip or technique I share that feels unhelpful. Just remember, though — this book represents the insight of two dozen years of my professional writing life and career as a writing teacher and writing coach. It also brings in the wisdom of my colleagues and friends in the writing, editing, and literary agenting business. It's time-tested, solid stuff. All I request is this: Give all of it a good-faith, earnest effort. You may be surprised at how often you'll strike gold.

The one golden rule of writing is that you can do anything you want . . . as long as the end result is good writing.

Although I've been a teacher of writing for more than two decades, I'm not coming to you as a teacher now. I'm simply someone who's been down this path before and is willing to share hard-won wisdom I've gained and gathered throughout the years. There are no grades, no deadlines, and no penalties for mistakes. What matters is that you commit to reaching across the chasm of memory and start retrieving the deep past, and then record it faithfully and vibrantly on the page. Memory by memory, moment by moment, you'll see a story take shape and grow into something that is a lesson in compassion, understanding, and humanity. That's memoir.

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and you want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the web page.

Foolish Assumptions

All writers know that you stand the best chance of hitting the mark with your audience if at some point in the writing process you stop and really think about who your audience is. I spent a good while thinking about you. Here's what I assume about you, the reader:

- » You want to write or have started writing a full-length (book-length) memoir.
- » You want to publish that memoir in one manner or another.
- » You realize that you can use many different blueprints for telling a great story.
- » You want this book to focus more on effective storytelling than grammar concerns.
- » You want expert-level, tried-and-true guidance on writing memoirs.
- » You want to have to buy only a single book that gives you all you need to know on writing and publishing memoirs.

If you've already put time into developing your ability to write on your own or in formal classes, no problem. Some of this book will serve as a useful refresher. Regardless of your current level of writing ability, I hope to reveal a few new insights along the way. The tips and techniques here can help you with writing memoir, but they also can help you if you decide to one day move on to writing screenplays, poems, short stories, or self-help books. Good writing is good writing.

Icons Used in This Book

To make this book easier for readers to read and understand, I include icons in the margins to help you find and make sense of key ideas and information.



TIP

These are the hints, guides, and suggestions that pro writers know. They represent some of the best available advice I have to offer. They're worth reading twice when you encounter them.



REMEMBER

If you've ever clipped something from a book or magazine and taped it on your wall to revisit regularly, then you know what type of stuff you'll find after this icon. It's the bumper-sticker-good material memoir writers need.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

If you want to immerse yourself in all the historical and technical things about writing memoirs, look for this icon. It offers up some pretty cerebral things that can impress your writer friends at parties.



WARNING

This icon gives you a heads-up on specific memoir-writing problems that you may encounter. Pay attention so you can avoid these hazards other writers often succumb to.



FIND
ONLINE

This icon point you to exclusive online resources at www.dummies.com/go/memoirwritingfd2e.

Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this product comes with access-anywhere bonus material on the web. Check out the free Cheat Sheet for more information about memoir writing that can get you started or supplement what you find here in this book. To get this Cheat Sheet, simply visit www.dummies.com and enter **Memoir Writing For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the Search box. Here you'll discover bonus writing exercises, prompts, and activities to expand your memoir writing skills and explore your story in even greater depth.

Where to Go from Here

If you're a completionist like me, go ahead and start with Chapter 1 and read all the way to the end to ensure you get everything. But this isn't a novel. You can skip around, picking and choosing whatever appeals most or what your current writing situation requires. For example, if you're struggling with getting your characters' voices right, hit up Chapters 9 and 10. If you're totally new to writing, however, I recommend starting with Chapter 1, which has a ton of foundational information.

Whichever way you choose to use this book, I hope it gives you exactly what you need to plan, write, revise, promote, and share your memoir with the world. Good luck!

1

The First Steps to Writing a Memoir

IN THIS PART . . .

Explore what makes a memoir unique and compelling.

Discover the purpose behind your writing journey.

Identify the essential elements of a captivating story.

Access and shape your life experiences.

Find the creative spark to fuel your writing process.

- » Recognizing the characteristics of a memoir
- » Identifying the elements of a memoir
- » Crafting and refining your memoir
- » Getting your memoir published
- » Understanding your memoir's purpose

Chapter **1**

Diving into Memoir Writing: Just the Basics

Writing a memoir used to be something done only by super-famous celebrities or retirement-home folks — like your great Uncle Fred from Boca Raton. Thanks to an explosion of exciting memoirs written by people of all ages and levels of fame, the memoir as a form has become a viable way for anyone to meaningfully share their story. It makes sense, because there's something incredibly rewarding to finding the leisure time to think, remember, reflect, and then write about your past. In doing so, you can discover the emotional truths that create the undercurrent of your life and share your wisdom with others.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Memoirs and autobiographies remain quite popular with readers, with almost 50 percent of nonfiction books on the *New York Times* bestsellers list being biographies or memoirs. Plus, memoirs and biographies are the number-one bestselling nonfiction category in hard-copy books on Amazon and come in second in the e-books category behind religion and spirituality. With numbers like that, it's clear that memoirs have a hungry audience, which is good news for you.

This chapter serves as your stepping stone to everything you need to know about writing your memoir. I cover the basics — from defining what a memoir is and how it differs from other types of life writing, to identifying the core components

of a successful memoir. You find out how to utilize revision and editing techniques to polish your work and how to incorporate impactful storytelling methods, even in the age of social media. And perhaps most important, you explore your motivations for sharing your story. No matter where you are in the writing process, this book will guide you every step of the way.

Understanding the DNA of a Memoir

The short answer for what makes a memoir a memoir is that like a novel, it tells a story, but unlike a novel, a memoir is 100 percent truthful. But that's an insufficient definition. A memoir also has other obligations that make it unique and distinct from other literary utterances. Understanding those differences is to understand the memoir's strengths. To know those is to know what areas you should play up when writing your own.

To be considered a memoir, your book needs to:

- » **Be book length.** Generally, a memoir is between 60,000 and 100,000 words.
- » **Limit what's included.** A memoir is focused on parts or elements of a life, whereas an autobiography strives to include everything about a life, from birth to death.
- » **Be truthful.** You can't play loose and free with the truth and still be called a memoir. Look up the hubbub around James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (Anchor) or Alice Sebold's *Lucky* (Scribner) if you want to see the fallout around a memoir that isn't truthful.
- » **Use the elements of narrative.** Fiction writers know how to tell a story and make it interesting. See the next section for more on this.
- » **Show desire.** A story gets interesting when the main character wants something — desperately so. Be specific and clear about what your main character wants, and readers will care.
- » **Have conflict.** If a character can just get what they want, who cares? That's not drama, that's grocery shopping. It's when a character *can't* get what they desire that things get interesting. Tell that story and you have the makings of a strong memoir.
- » **Reveal change and growth.** Show how your experiences, struggles, and triumphs shape you as a person. Demonstrate the transformation that takes place over the course of your story.

Check out Chapter 2 for more information about the concepts of a memoir in far greater detail.

Identifying the Essential Parts of a Memoir

Like any good work of art, numerous parts comprise a memoir. Getting the best end product comes from knowing and having control over all of those smaller elements. Most of what a memoirist needs are skills borrowed from the world of fiction writing, though those skills are used somewhat differently in the world of nonfiction in general, and memoir specifically. For instance, you can't generate more conflict to heighten reader interest in a chapter if the scene you're writing simply didn't have that level of conflict. You can't reinvent the past to make a better story. With fiction, you can (and should).

Some of the main elements that make up a memoir include

- » **Structure:** This is the shape of your story on the page. You may assume that the *structure* of your story has to be chronological to move forward in a very specific order like the days in a week, but you have far more options than that and you need to consider those options before defaulting to a chronological approach. See Chapter 6 to discover all of your structure options.
- » **Setting:** *Setting* is the where and when that a story takes place. A memoir may have 2, 3, or perhaps even 23 different settings if you traveled or moved around a lot. Setting matters because it has a direct influence on character. See Chapter 7 for details on how to create and utilize setting to best effect.
- » **Characters:** *Characters* are the people who populate the scenes and settings of your story. Yes, they're real-life people, but memoirists still call them characters, as novelists do. For more on why as well as how to make them come alive on the page, visit Chapter 8.
- » **Dialogue:** The conversations that your characters have are called *dialogue*. This is a particularly tricky thing to use in memoir because memory is imperfect. Who walks around recording all conversations in order to accurately quote people later? (If you actually do that, be careful — it's illegal in a lot of states.) You can discover more about the challenges and strengths of dialogue use in memoirs in Chapter 9.
- » **Voice:** *Voice* is the unique manner in which a writer writes. It comes from distinctive decisions, such as word choice, rhythm, and the way a writer says things. Taken together, voice creates a powerful effect on the reader. Interested in knowing more? Chapter 10 covers voice in depth.
- » **Point of view:** The perspective through which the story is seen is called *point of view*. This is an important choice because it can drastically change how your story is conveyed. Read more about point of view in Chapter 11.

- » **Theme:** *Theme* is what your memoir is about. It speaks to universal truths, core ideas, and emotional truths through the development of key scenes, moments, and tensions in your story. See more about theme in Chapters 13 and 14.
- » **Narrator:** The *narrator* is the reflective voice that guides the reader through your story, interpreting the past and revealing the deeper significance of your experiences. Your unique perspective, shaped by time and reflection, transforms your story from a mere recounting of events into a powerful exploration of what it all means.

Making the Necessary Revisions and Edits to Help Your Memoir Shine

A great memoir doesn't appear by magic, but rather it's the result of good revision (to get the big stuff under control) and careful editing (to get the little stuff under control). How often in life do you wish you had a Do Over button? With writing, you do. You get a second, a third, or a tenth chance if you require it, which is good news because you can improve the mistakes and poor decisions that you made earlier in the writing process.



REMEMBER

After you have a rough draft of either your entire manuscript or even just a chapter, you can begin the revision process. *Revision* is important because it is the part of the process where you focus on large story elements without worrying much about specific word choices or sentence-level issues.

While revising, you certainly look over all of the essential parts of a memoir (which I discuss in the previous section) to make sure each is functioning well on its own as well as connecting meaningfully to the entire book. You have another obligation, though. You need to think like a reader, not the writer. You handle revision first because you may revise and remove an entire chapter or scene from a book. You don't need to spend the extra time polishing those sentences that won't appear in the first edition. Stay efficient by revising first and then editing after. Refer to Chapter 13 for more on making revisions.

Editing asks you to reexamine every word choice, reevaluate sentence structure, and think about how you're using paragraphs. Editing is a sentence-by-sentence level of attention that can feel tedious, but it's often the difference between a promising book that gets published or not. Some of the things that occur at this level of editing are adding or improving imagery, cutting clichés, removing most adverbs and adjectives, and tightening language across the board. Refer to Chapter 15 for more on line-by-line editing.

Focusing on the End Goal: Publication

When I was in high school, an English teacher who recognized that I devoured F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (Modern Library), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Penguin Classics), gave me a copy of Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (Scribner). I was blown away by it as fully as I'd ever been by any work of fiction. This book had grace, excitement, lovely language, melancholy, and a nearly perfect sense of the extraordinary place Paris was in the 1920s. And most impressive to me? It was all true.

From that point on, I recognized that part of my goal of being a writer wasn't just to write a great memoir one day, but to have people read it and hopefully be swept up by that same kind of reaction I had to Hemingway. (A tall order, I realize, but it's okay to dream big!) I wanted others to experience the same deep sense of wonder and awe that I did about the past with Hemingway's book. And the way to do that is through publishing your book. It's your avenue to finding readers and inviting them into the magic of a story only you can share. These prospective readers won't be sneaking into your house at night, rummaging in your file drawers or peeking into your computer files in pursuit of great literature. You have to send it to them, and the best way to do so is publishing.

WRITERS' CONFERENCES TO CONSIDER

If you want to connect with people who understand your impulse to tell stories, consider attending a writers' conference. There are hundreds of these throughout the country to choose from. Some specialize in the type of books they talk about, and others are more general. Here are just ten of the many writers' conferences that might suit the needs of a memoir writer. Research each online for more information.

- Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference (location varies)
- San Miguel Writers' Conference & Literary Festival (San Miguel de Allende, Mexico)
- Santa Barbara Writers Conference (Santa Barbara, California)
- Sewanee Writers' Conference (Sewanee, Tennessee)
- Stonecoast Writers' Conference (Portland, Maine)
- Las Vegas Writers Conference (Las Vegas, Nevada)

(continued)

(continued)

- Pikes Peak Writers Conference (Colorado Springs, Colorado)
- San Francisco Writers Conference (San Francisco, California)
- Taos Summer Writers' Conference (Taos, New Mexico)
- Writer's Digest Annual Conference (New York City)
- Writers in Paradise (St. Petersburg, Florida)

Check out the website for the National Association of Memoir Writers (www.namw.org). Their "Writing Resources" link shows many online and real-world workshops and events all around the country.

Even if you decide your target audience is small — your family, or the people of your hometown — the idea of making something publishable quality is important. It means that it's the best that you can make it. It means you're understandably and honestly proud of it. It means that the writing you've labored over is likely to be engaging, memorable, and lasting for those special readers. And if you want to reach millions like Stephen King did with his memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Scribner), creating a well-written, publishable-quality book is your only way to approaching that size audience.



TIP

Before you seek a publisher, you may want to seek advice and feedback from your peers or even a literary agent to ensure what you have is the best that it can be. A writing critique group can be a great help in terms of getting advice on the quality of writing or receiving revision ideas — Chapter 17 can help with that. One step further, a literary agent can showcase this manuscript to publishing houses that have the infrastructure in place to print your book and distribute it to online and real-world bookstores throughout the world. Chapter 18 provides more insight about what an agent can do for you.

You have a few publishing options when you're ready to publish your book:

» **Traditional publishing:** For the last century or so, this is the main route that authors had to seek print book publication. You write the book, send a letter of inquiry (a query letter) to a publisher, and then hope for a positive response. If the publisher likes your letter, it asks for the manuscript. If the publisher likes the manuscript, it sends you a contract, and two years later (give or take), the memoir appears in bookstores. For more information on this time-honored option, Chapter 19 awaits.

- » **Self-publishing:** If you're interested in writing, printing, and selling your own memoir, then *self-publishing* is a fine choice. In the past few years, millions of authors have opted for this path. If self-publishing interests you as well, see Chapter 20.
- » **Hybrid publishing:** Partner with a specialized company that offers professional publishing services, combining elements of traditional and self-publishing models for a customized approach. This option allows you to retain more control over your work while benefiting from editorial expertise, design assistance, and distribution channels. Chapter 20 has more information on this option.
- » **E-publishing:** This subcategory of self-publishing has emerged as a viable outlet for books in the past few years. An e-book isn't a print book, but with so many people having e-readers or e-reader capabilities on their computers and phones, getting published in an e-book format is no longer a disincentive for an author. Chapter 20 has what you need to know about this new publishing option.
- » **Serialized content:** Release your memoir in serialized format, either through a blog, a dedicated website, or social media platforms. This can build anticipation and engagement with readers over time. It might be challenging to monetize it this way, but if the goal is to get your story out, this might be a fine option.
- » **Personal website or blog:** The only difference between this and the above option is how you choose to release your material. If you love it when Netflix drops an entire season at once, then this version could be for you — drop the whole story at once in a literary KABOOM! If you like making people wait for the next installment, maybe serializing the parts is best.

No matter what publishing method you decide on, you want to promote your finished work. If you don't promote your memoir (for example, with a website for your book, or with social media to alert people that your book is available to purchase), then people won't know about it and won't buy it. In today's publishing world, publishers do very little marketing and publicity for a book unless you're getting a huge amount of money from them upfront; this reality shifts the responsibility for book marketing and publicity duties to your shoulders. Chapter 21 offers some great suggestions for promoting your book, whether you do it on your own or hire a professional to help out with some or all of it. With more than a million new books (or new editions of existing books) published annually, you need to find ways to get the attention of readers.

Answering the Key Question: Why Write a Memoir?

People ask me all the time about why I ever chose to write a memoir. “Why put yourself through that? Why put your family through that?” They ask — sometimes by dancing around the topic, and sometimes saying it outright — why I’m interested in sharing pain and experiencing the potential shame of revealing secrets, mistakes, and transgressions.

If you’re serious about being a memoirist, be prepared to answer questions like these. You need to be able to answer them with conviction and clarity. Don’t duck the hard questions. Think them through and come to a sense of peace with your reasons, no matter what they are.

Here are some of the most popular and self-justifying reasons to write a memoir. See if you identify with any of them. You want to

- » Find some kind of meaning and order to the often-chaotic swirl of existence
- » Discover who you really are by confronting the truth(s) of your life
- » Be the star of the show versus remain someone who stands behind a curtain offstage, or worse, stays in the audience (or even worse, never arrives at the show at all)
- » (Re)witness the most important stages of your life
- » Overcome fear, guilt, shame, and regret
- » Reclaim your own story
- » Preserve your family’s history
- » Improve your ability to communicate with others
- » Build self-esteem through valuing yourself and listening to your own voice
- » Become a better thinker because good writing isn’t from the seat-of-your-pants; it’s from reflecting, making connections, and creatively engaging with your material
- » Learn how to forgive yourself (and others)
- » Create a deep empathetic connection with readers who will learn and be inspired from your life
- » Confess something — confession is, as they say, good for the soul
- » Defy the aphorism “it’s all been said before,” because you haven’t said it