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Memor Writing

FOR
DUMMIES[®]

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- Mine your past for great stories
- Choose the best structure to highlight your story
- Get your memoir published
- Market your finished memoir

Ryan G. Van Cleave, Ph.D.

*Award-winning author, international speaker,
and memoir writing teacher*



***Memoir
Writing***
FOR
DUMMIES®

by Ryan G. Van Cleave, PhD
Memoir writing instructor

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Ryan G. Van Cleave is the award-winning author of 20 books, including two creative writing textbooks, an illustrated humor book, and a memoir. Ryan graduated from Florida State University with an MA and PhD in English. He then taught at such places as Clemson University, Eckerd College, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as well as at prisons, community centers, and urban at-risk youth facilities. His literary honors include a Gold Medal in the Florida Book Awards, a Edward H. and Marie C. Kingsbury Fellowship at Florida State University, the Anastasia C. Hoffman Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Creative Writing, and the Jenny McKean Moore Writer-in-Washington Fellowship at George Washington University, among others.

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Dedication

To the many writing students of all ages who have ever entered my classroom, let *Writing Memoir For Dummies* serve as my answer to your two most common questions: Is my life worth writing about? Do I have what it takes to write a memoir? (The answers are yes and yes!)

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Introduction

A few years back, I worked with a twenty-something elementary school teacher who wanted to work on a memoir. We chatted a bit about the different themes in her life she was interested in exploring through writing. A coworker walked past and must've overheard us because he asked one of the big questions about memoir: "Why on earth would you write a memoir? You're so young!"

Her answer: "Last year, at my grandmother's funeral, I heard so many stories from my aunts and uncles that I realized I didn't know my grandmother at all. Each of us had a story or two about her, but it was always a different story. Together, we had more than a few tales about her childhood in Romania, her job waitressing on cruise ships, her violent first marriage, and her life as a nanny for a count's daughter, but we all realized that there were pieces of her life missing. Huge pieces. I can't stand the idea that my family and my future kids might not know me either."

What a great reason to write a memoir! It's true that she didn't cure cancer, survive a terrorist attack, nor did she inherit billions, but she found value and relevance in her own experiences. She thought that, properly told, her story could impact the lives of others, whether they're her immediate family or not. She's absolutely right.

Whatever the reason that you want to write your memoir, I welcome you. *Memoir Writing For Dummies* is ultimately an invitation to make sense of your life through writing. If you've ever felt the need for clarity or truth in this confusing, difficult world, writing a memoir may be the answer. To struggle with truth, honesty, and

history brings revelation and understanding. It can also bring closure and healing. Who doesn't need more of those things in his or her life?

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 20 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 the 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