



## Guidelines for Writing Life Stories

- Start by writing down the things most on your mind, and write them with as many details as you can. Don't worry about remembering things in chronological order, or about starting at your earliest memory. Capture the memories most on your mind in the order they come to you. Just put a rough time period or date to help with the organization, e.g. "When I was about 3 we moved..." OR, "This would have happened sometime after \_\_\_ ..."
- Keep a list of the ideas that come to you of things to write about. Memory is like a muscle. The more you work with your memories, the stronger your memory will get and the more you will remember.
- Include details that involve all the senses: what things looked like, what they smelled and tasted like. These are the things that make memoirs specific and unique and evoke an emotional response in the reader.
- Share how you felt about the things that happened to you. This helps others better understand your experience. How have your feelings changed about things that happened in the past?
- What is a life lesson or value you have learned? For example, seeing your father go to work when he was sick may have stuck as an early memory of what a work ethic is, or what it means to be a provider. Or perhaps some mistake for which you were punished caused a particular life lesson to stick in your mind. Life-learning experiences are different and specific for each of us.

- Include memories and stories of your parents and other family members, or familiar stories you were told.
- When you run out of the things to write about, use the *Ways to Get Started* and *First Sentence Prompts* to prompt you in another direction. One memory will lead to another.
- Use specific memories: Lots of our early memories are things we remember as composites. By that I mean, we say, "We would always...." These are good but they get even better if we can add to them with a specific memory. For example, someone might write: "On Sundays we would always go to have Sunday dinner with my grandparents..."

Describe those Sunday dinners. But make it more vivid by adding a specific memory. "One time I remember we got there before they had picked the corn, and I went out in the field with my grandfather. He showed me how to tell if the corn is ripe by...He gave me an ear to eat right off the stalk. I never tasted anything as sweet as that sunripened warm corn. It smelled like the field, and like my grandpa."

- Include dialogue in your story to make it more interesting. Exact recall of the specific words people said is not necessary as long as you write your true sense of the conversation and represent the speakers honestly.
- Start in the middle of a story: Instead of: "My brother and I always played cowboys in the trees behind our house. One time my brother tied me to the tree and forgot about me. I got cold and cried. It wasn't until Mom called us for dinner that the story came out..." Start here: "I was tied to the tree in the back yard. I knew my brother had forgotten about me. I was shivering and hungry. It all started when..."

- Start with the end in mind. Sometimes the hardest part of a memoir is finding a satisfying ending. Pick a pivotal event in your life as the conclusion of your story. Work backwards to an event or situation that started the chain of events leading to your story's conclusion.
- File your writings in a 3-ring binder or manila file. You can keep them in approximate date order or organize them later.
- **MOST IMPORTANT:** Pat yourself on the back for doing this. Don't judge, criticize, or compare your work. Stick to your writing plan even if it feels things are going badly.
- Wait to read your work. Don't revise anything till at least a month after you have written it. It is best to write everything you have to say before starting revision.