

How to Write Your Memoir

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5 Tips for Starting Your Memoir

1. Write memoir, not autobiography.

An autobiography is the story of an entire life, but a memoir is just one story from that life. You can only ever write one autobiography, but you can write countless memoirs. It's a much less intimidating project if you view it that way.

2. Diagram your life.

Some people have one burning story to tell. Others find it difficult to immediately pinpoint anything. Tristine Rainer, author of [Your Life as Story](#), recommends diagramming your life to gain perspective. To do this, get in a retrospective mood, enlist the help of a friend or spouse (martinis also work), and plot your life's six most significant moments. When you do it thoughtfully and honestly, there will usually be one pivotal event that stands out as particularly intriguing and/or meaningful. If there isn't, don't worry. There are many different ways to diagram a life. Try dividing yours by critical choices, influential people, conflicts, beliefs, lessons, even mistakes. Experiment until you find the one story that wants to be told, the one experience that really fashioned you.

3. Don't begin at the beginning.

Don't tell your story chronologically. That's too predictable. Think of your favorite books. Most don't start at the beginning. Instead they rivet you with instant action and intrigue. A good beginning is a tease. It gives readers just enough action to hook them without divulging the outcome. Then it flashes back to the real chronological beginning and fills in the background.

4. Use all your senses.

The best writers create vivid new worlds for readers to inhabit. Yet most budding memoirists produce first drafts that are flat. To transport readers (and yourself), write vividly. This is done through detail, by using all your senses to fully re-create a moment in time. You can teach yourself to do this. The next time you're waiting in a restaurant, a doctor's office, or even in traffic, notice the various sights, sounds, smells, and textures. It's what writers do, both in reality and in their stories.

5. Build your writing muscle.

You have a writing muscle, and it needs exercise to perform well. Set a daily goal of writing 200, 500, or even 1,000 words. Set aside a regular time, like early morning, and be disciplined. Don't worry about making what you write perfect. Just focus on getting the story out. (There will be plenty of time for polishing later.) Above all, relax. Memoir is the easiest type of writing to do well. You've already done the research and are intimately familiar with every character. Now you just need to tell it.