

Writing Memoirs

What are memoirs?

Memoirs are a type of autobiography. In autobiography the writer recounts her entire life. Memoirs, on the other hand, are often brief and offer a more specific, slice of life view of meaningful events. In this sense, memoirs are like scrapbooks or “photo” albums. They are, in contrast to autobiography, snapshot views of one’s life. While memoirs tell stories about one’s own life, they are occasions in which the writer reflects on her life, tries to make sense of it in the present. To this extent, memoirs are also like essays—they attempt to make a point. To have the reader care about the events in the memoir and their meaning, the writer must provide detail and description. Also, the reader must have a sense of the personality of the writer. This is what is meant by *voice*. Voice is created through what the writer chooses to describe and her attitude toward the events retold.

Do I have to tell the truth?

This is one of the key questions about memoir. Memoirs *are* autobiographical, but they don’t necessarily rely a great deal on memory. So, the question becomes, what is truth? Can one person know it? Of this we can never be sure. One could write a memoir, show it to someone else who appears in it and find that person remembers things quite differently. All one can do is attempt to be factual to the best of one’s ability. But there is another kind of truth, and that is emotional truth, and it is this truth that makes memoirs meaningful, for both the writer and the reader. The facts themselves may convey the emotional truth. For example, in your memoir, you may actually want to reorder the sequence of events to achieve a desired effect. While this may seem like a departure from factual truth, the effect may result in something more truthful. As the writer of the memoir, your job is to be honest, but that also means relating the essence of your experience and the experience of others.

Should I use “real” names?

Since the memoir involves interacting with real

events, you should use real names. But the question raises important issues you may have to struggle with at times. You must consider whether writing about certain people you know would cause them discomfort or even pain. If these people remember events differently, will they appreciate your perspective? Will you reveal events that were formerly unknown to a person in your memoir? These are questions the writer of the memoir must wrestle with. In short, to write a memoir, one takes risks. To be honest is to take risks. Sometimes the lessons, for the writer and the reader, are hard, but worth it in the end.

Who would want to read about me?

Many people. As human beings, we feel a connection with one another. We respond to a story that is honestly told, in enough detail that allows readers to participate in the story’s lifeworld. One doesn’t have to have led a particularly extraordinary life. There’s a reason why memoirs are so popular right now. We learn about each other by sharing with each other the circumstances of our lives. This act of sharing is what sustains us, particularly in a world that seems to have become very complicated. We read memoirs to help us make sense of our lives, to look for our common humanity. We write them for the same reasons.

- The Community Writing Center has several books that give examples of memoir and autobiography writing. They will provide you with questions to help you get started, examples of memoir writing and other useful information.
- CWC Writing Assistants are available to assist you at any stage of your memoir writing process. Just ask to sign up for an appointment.



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