How to write your Autobiography

How I should have written my autobiography!

VAL INCHLEY
Mummy says I should keep a journal. In 70 years time I might want to write my autobiography.
It helps if you have read a lot of (auto) biographies
It helps if you are already an experienced / published author.

Seminar

Work

Books

Handbooks

Simple

Text

Books

in

English
Autobiographical plus ‘faction’ information on Nepali ladies

Co-authored with my Nepali professor

Academic (from a research thesis) on Nepali Proverbs

Semi academic: facts & survey of scattered Nepalis
WHY my life? WHAT’S so interesting about me?

“Unless you're a celebrity or a household name, you will have to think very hard about what in your life is worth writing about if you want to publish your work for a wider audience.”

“You don’t need to be famous to write a valuable autobiography, family history, or memoir... everybody contributes to the history of the human race in his or her own way.”

We all have a story to tell, even if only for our family.
~99.9% of the things that happen in our lives are pretty boring!
White powder

Yellow powder
Asking the right Questions
WHY do you want to write it?

• Because you have a really exciting / unusual / interesting story to tell?
• To promote / inform about the company or organization you worked for?
• To promote your personal values?
• To thank your parents or others? To glorify God?
• To pass on information to the next generation of your family (or close friends)?
• Simply to document what has happened in your own life – to make sense of it yourself?
For WHOM do you want to write it?

- For your own interest and satisfaction only?
- For family & friends?
- For an organisation or company for which you have worked?
- For the general public?
- For one specific / specialised section of the general public?

The TARGET AUDIENCE will necessarily dictate the style & level of professionalism required.
HOW do you want to write it?

• As a linear (chronological historical) record of the events of your life?
• As a humorous story of your life?
• As a topic-based series of incidents from your life?
• As a description of some limited experiences in your life?
• As a ‘before’ & ‘after’ testimony to a personal transformation?
  – or as a spiritual journey?

You could even write it as an epic poem.
Autobiography or Memoir?

• An **AUTOBIOGRAPHY** is all about you & includes as many aspects of your life as you choose to reveal. Any other people and events are incidental. It generally highlights hatches, matches & dispatches & other important events. It is a comprehensive description of your life.

• A **MEMOIR** may be mostly about you (autobiographical) or may be more about others. It is a memory of one or more specific events. It is a limited description of a significant part of your life.
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Getting Started
Read the Stories of Others

“Reading different styles of writing can help you get a better feel for how to write an autobiography that will best suit your own story.”
You don’t have to write about everything that happened!

• Begin at the beginning and work chronologically forwards?
• Begin at the end and work backwards?
• Begin anywhere you like? Just start with 1 or 2 interesting incidents and see how it grows. Let it turn into a short MEMOIR or a full-scale AUTOBIOGRAPHY.

Most autobiography flows and reads more easily if presented chronologically, although an interesting (reader-grabbing) start may be taken from any time point.
3
Doing the Research
Don’t just trust your memory!
Research Sources

• Personal Memory
• Memory / Anecdotes from Friends, Family, Colleagues
• Diaries
• Letters / Articles
• Photographs
• Check any facts – dates etc.
• Research for any factual information sections
Jump Start your Memories

- Early (pre-school) Years
- Elementary School Years
- High School Years
- Tertiary Education Years
- Career / Work Years
- Retirement Years

- Family – Immediate & Extended
- Friends and Acquaintances
- Romance(s) / Courtship / Marriage / Children

- Hobbies / Vocational Activities
- Sports / Recreation Activities
- Travel / Vacations / Holiday Traditions
- Places / Homes Lived In
- Favourite Foods and Recipes
- Other Traditions / Customs
- Accomplishments / Awards / Honours
- Clubs / Associations / Organizations
- Military Service / Volunteer Activities
- Historical Events Lived Through
- Special Occasions
- Turning Points
- Spiritual Journey
Dig out the old Family Photos
Interview your Family & Friends

Travel & Talk to long-lost Relatives & Friends

Explore the Family Archives
Create a Memory List

• **A MEMORY LIST** is a list of everything you remember about a person, place, event etc.
• Write 3-5 words—enough to fix the memory so you can recall it in a month’s time or when you want to include it in your writing.
• It can be a big or a small memory.
• It can be important or seemingly insignificant. [E.g. The colour of the wallpaper when you were a kid or the death of your mother.]
• Do not worry about time sequence/order.

Create memory Lists for every topic you may decide to include
4
Getting
down to the
Planning
Map out your life - create a timeline, highlighting the critical / important dates.

BEGINNINGS
1944-1970

NEPAL
1970-2014

RETIREMENT
2014-2017…
Identify the main characters, not just family & close friends, but also those who are a bit offbeat (or famous).
Find the Key to the Story of your Life

i.e. the one main recurring theme that will give continuity and interest throughout your autobiography.

Find the Emotional Core of your Story

i.e. what changes your autobiography from being a boring ramble of points into a significant story of mundane, yet profound details.
Identify the Time(s) of Change or Crisis in your life

i.e. the time(s) when your life changed the most; or when you changed the most. These are the times of peak drama in your life.
Pull out the best stories – representing different periods of your life and which were interesting, quirky or life-changing.
Organise your Story

• Create an overarching plot – e.g. a structure as for a novel with a central conflict, leading to tension, suspense, climax & resolution OR a series of interesting topics...
• Decide where the story starts – childhood or at some other critical point.
• Weave in the major themes that have recurred in your life.
• Include some reflection on the lessons learned (or not learned!)
Choose the Scope

This will depend partly on the length of the life period being described or how many topics you decide to include.

- What to include?
- What to exclude?

- Not too long!
- Not too short!

“Mark Twain obviously led a short uninteresting life. His autobiography finishes up at only 736 pages!”
Decide on the Divisions (Chapters / Sections)

- Chronological / Historical
- Topical
- Geographical

There must always be a sensible or logical flow to the progression of chapters (as also the paragraphs).
Concoct a Catchy Title

- Intriguing but understandable
- Somehow related to the content
- Sub-title
- Not too long / not too short!

ON CALL
What me – A Missionary!
5
Doing the Writing
Make the Story Interesting for your Target Audience

“The trick to writing an autobiography is to treat it like any good story: it should have a protagonist (you), a central conflict, and a cast of fascinating characters to keep people engaged. You may want to think about a certain theme or idea that has been present in your daily life to revolve your story around.”

From Wiki HOW to do anything & A Writer’s Path
Write in your own voice
i.e. in your own style of humour,
spirituality etc.

Make it ‘you’.
Be revealing – be honest and open up, telling the bad as well as the good.

Make it ‘true’. 
Compose an Interest-Grabbing Introduction (1st Paragraph)

• The first few lines are arguably the make or break point and in my opinion the hardest part to get right.
• While you don’t have to write out an action-packed scene to keep your reader’s attention, you should be setting... the tone of the book... giving the reader an idea of what they can expect going forward.
• If the beginning fails to grab the reader’s interest soon, whatever interest they initially had will quickly fizzle out.

Scribe “How to Hook the Reader” (A Writer’s Path)
Autobiography is fact, not fiction!

- Honesty is the best policy – Don’t compromise your integrity.
- Don’t embellish the truth – Do show your feelings.

“There's a difference between cleaning up the messy details in your memory and straight-up making stuff up. Don't invent people, places, or problems. No outright lies.”

“Don't make up anything just to make your autobiography more exciting.”
Be nice to your Friends (& Enemies)

They may recognise themselves even if you change names or locations to try & protect their privacy!

- Don’t characterise friends or enemies as totally evil or unbelievably noble!
- Don’t write anything that you would not say face to face.
- If you are unsure, ask permission – or leave it out.
Capture the spirit of the times
i.e. include some cultural/historical details.
"Good writing is paced according to its ability to summarize periods of time in narration and at a distance, and to slow down certain important moments and display them in scenes."
Use Dialogue sparingly

“Writing dialog is very difficult, especially in an autobiographical project. Only use dialog when characters absolutely need to speak, and summarize all other spoken language.”
Keep it interesting: Keep it Flowing

- No awkward phrases.
- Not too many details.
- No unnecessary words and overly long sentences.
- Use descriptions rather than statements – “paint a mental picture”.
- Write specifically. Avoid abstractions.
- Use ‘strong’ words that will draw your readers.
- Be creative with your resources & how you include them.

But you know all that don’t you!
6
The Extra Bits!
(that we sometimes forget)
Quotations?

- Where I want to say the same as I previously wrote in a published article or book.
- Where I want to quote what someone else has written elsewhere about me or about Nepal (for example).
- General quotations / references.
- Bible quotations.

Plagiarism is the unforgiveable sin:
Never forget to acknowledge quotes.
Graphics & Other Inclusions?

- Colour Photographs
- B & W Line sketches
- Map(s)
- Time Chart, Family Tree
- Copies of Letter(s) / Document(s)

Everybody likes photographs

Other items depend on the content.
Footnotes¹, Endnotes or a Glossary²?

- Explanation of simple facts that the reader may not know
- Interpretation of foreign words

1. Footnotes are easier to follow than Endnotes in a non-academic book.
2. Some people don’t like foreign words but I personally think they spice up the text in a book that’s describing a foreign context.
Bibliography?

• Books that have helped you a lot in your life?
• Books from which you have quoted?
• Books that may give further detail on some of the information in the autobiography?
• Autobiographies of colleagues?

It may also be relevant to provide a list of other books that you yourself have written.
An Eye-Popping Front Cover

• It should relate in some way to the title / content
• It should be eye-catching
• Get it professionally designed.
• Unless you are famous, a photo of you is probably not a good idea!

Can you judge a book by its cover?
The Back Cover (& Inside)?

• Include a recent photograph & a few lines about yourself.
• Provide an intriguing ‘Taster’ synopsis of the book.*
• Maybe add recommendations?? (from friends, colleagues or an organisation, or even someone famous) – these may help to sell the book but don’t bank on it!

*I never buy a book if there is nothing to tell me what it’s about.
Make sure you have got your facts right.
Obtain permission (from people mentioned) where needed.
Share and get the opinions of others.
Don’t trust the spell-check & grammar check!
Hire a copy editor?

Edit the draft $\times n$ (where $n =$ any number more than 10)
8
Publishing – at Last

- Self-Publish?
- Use a Literary Agent?
- Go direct to a Publisher?
- Publish on line?
This is a virtual on-line ghost writer system so that anyone, no matter how good or bad at writing, is guaranteed to create a beautifully written, lavishly illustrated book of their life story for their family.
Today’s Assignment

- Concoct a title for your (auto)biography / memoirs.
- Write the first paragraph.
“It’s alright so long as you’re not a missionary!” was the considered (or perhaps unconsidered) opinion of Carina, my best friend from Guides and GCU Bible Class, somewhere back in the late 1950s. This was slightly disturbing as that was exactly what I was beginning to think of as a career, although I’m not sure that either of us really knew enough to pontificate about whether such an option would be alright or all wrong...

Born in central London in the middle of an air-raid, my life began with a bang. This fact, according to some of my ‘friends’, explains a lot. Maybe it does. Maybe it doesn’t. It certainly gives away my age.