**Memoir Writing For Dummies**

From [Memoir Writing For Dummies](http://www.dummies.com/store/product/Memoir-Writing-For-Dummies.productCd-1118414640.html) by Ryan Van Cleave

Writing a memoir means you’re author and subject, researcher and storyteller, narrator and audience. That’s a lot to ask of any writer, though a good way to begin the challenge of writing a memoir is to start a list of the most memorable events of your life.

**Knowing the Difference between an Autobiography and a Memoir**

Many people interchangeably use the terms “autobiography” and “memoir.” Although Amazon and many brick-and-mortar bookstores put them in the same category, they are quite different. Here’s how they are different.

**An autobiography**

* Focuses on the trajectory of an entire life
* Starts at the beginning and progresses chronologically to the end
* Feels more like a historical document; tons of fact-checking and very specific dates/information
* Strives for factual, historical truths
* Typically is written by famous people

**A memoir**

* Focuses on a key aspect, theme, event, or choice in a life
* Starts anywhere and can deftly move around in time and place
* Feels more personal; less intense fact-checking
* Strives for emotional truths
* Can be written by anyone

Both are based in truth, and both require a good deal of research, which can range from phone interviews and trips to places you once lived, to sitting back into a comfy chair and doing some deep, focused remembering. Yet as you can see, there are significant and crucial differences between an autobiography and memoir.

**Reader Expectations for a Memoir**

You’re writing a memoir to share your story, which means you obviously want people to read it. To write a memoir designed to satisfy and engage readers, strive to meet the following expectations:

* **A sympathetic main character:** A reader’s sympathy and interest doesn’t come for free. You have to earn it. Make this a priority for your main character to come across as sympathetic, and readers will appreciate it. (\*not always )
* **Vividly depicted scenes:** A vividly depicted scene has strong imagery that creates a movie in the mind of readers. Strong scenes like these are memorable and lasting.
* **Emotional tension:** An emotionally involved reader will keep reading. Find a way to create and heighten the emotional impact of your story. Every story has emotional tension. Make sure you have the distance or outside guidance to find it and fully explore it.
* **Increasing sense of drama/conflict:** A story that builds increasingly toward the climax comes across as purposeful. How do you build? Ratchet up the conflict. Show how the stakes are raised. Make readers know what might be lost.
* **A satisfying ending:** Note that this is a *satisfying* *ending* versus a *good* or *bad* ending. No matter how the main story of your memoir ends, it should wrap up the main story tensions and bring a sense of closure.

What is memoir? How do you write one? What if you can't remember anything, or worse, what if you remember it all? What do you put in?

**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*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0874779227?ie=UTF8&tag=rdcom-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=1789&creativeASIN=0874779227), recommends diagramming your life to gain perspective. To do this, get in a retrospective mood, enlist the help of a friend 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. 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.

**A Love Story**  
By Muriel Hartranft

Saturday football games were a big event during the fall months. The last game of the season was always Indiana-Purdue. As I got to know Art better, I told him about Alberto but said I hadn’t dated him for about a year. Well, much to my surprise, Alberto called out of the blue and asked me to go with him to the game. And still having a soft spot in my heart for him, I accepted. When I told Art, he was one unhappy young man. He essentially said that if I went out with Alberto, then he was out of here.

When the Saturday for Indiana-Purdue finally arrived, Alberto came to take me to the game and Art was standing in the background. Alberto walked up to me and gave me a big hug, then said, “Come on, let’s get going.”

But I hesitated and said, “Sorry, I have made other plans.”

And with that statement, I chose to make my life with Arthur E. Rowe.

–Muriel Hartranft, 90, and Art were married for 28 years. She will self-publish her memoir later this year.

**If the Boot Fits, Wear It**  
By Trish Sinclair

It was the first snow of winter—an exciting day for every child but not for most teachers. Up until now, I had been able to dress myself for recess, but today I would need some help. Miss Finlayson, my kindergarten teacher at Princess Elizabeth School near Hamilton, Ontario, had been through first snow days many times in her long career, but I think she may still remember this one.

I managed to get into my itchy wool snow pants. But I struggled with my jacket because it didn’t fit well. It was a hand-me-down from my brother, and it made me wonder why I had to wear his ugly clothes. At least my hat and matching scarf were mine, and they were quite pretty. Finally it was time to have Miss Finlayson help me with my boots. In her calm, motherly voice she said, “By the end of winter, you will all be able to put on your own boots.” I didn’t realize at the time that this was more a statement of hope than of confidence.

I handed her my boots and stuck out my foot. Like most children, I expected the adult to do all the work. After much wiggling and pushing, she managed to get the first one into place and then, with an audible sigh, worked the second one on too.

I announced, “They’re on the wrong feet.” With the grace that only experience can bring, she struggled to get the boots off and went through the joyless task of putting them on again. Then I said, “These aren’t my boots, you know.” As she pulled the offending boots from my feet, she still managed to look both helpful and interested. Once they were off, I said, “They’re my brother’s boots. My mother makes me wear them, and I hate them!” Somehow, from long years of practice, she managed to act as though I wasn’t an annoying little girl. She pushed and shoved, less gently this time, and the boots were returned to their proper place on my feet. With a great sigh of relief, seeing the end of her struggle with me, she asked, “Now, where are your mittens?”

I looked into her eyes and said, “I didn’t want to lose them, so I stuffed them into the toes of my boots.”

–Canadian Trish Sinclair recently self-published a collection of her life stories.