

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Chapter 1

Diving into Memoir Writing: Just the Basics

Writing a memoir used to be something done only by super-famous celebrities or retirement-home folks — like your great Uncle Fred from Boca Raton. Thanks to an explosion of exciting memoirs written by people of all ages and levels of fame, the memoir as a form has become a viable way for anyone to meaningfully share their story. It makes sense, because there's something incredibly rewarding to finding the leisure time to think, remember, reflect, and then write about your past. In doing so, you can discover the emotional truths that create the undercurrent of your life and share your wisdom with others.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Memoirs and autobiographies remain quite popular with readers, with almost 50 percent of nonfiction books on the *New York Times* bestsellers list being biographies or memoirs. Plus, memoirs and biographies are the number-one bestselling nonfiction category in hard-copy books on Amazon and come in second in the e-books category behind religion and spirituality. With numbers like that, it's clear that memoirs have a hungry audience, which is good news for you.

This chapter serves as your stepping stone to everything you need to know about writing your memoir. I cover the basics — from defining what a memoir is and how it differs from other types of life writing, to identifying the core components

of a successful memoir. You find out how to utilize revision and editing techniques to polish your work and how to incorporate impactful storytelling methods, even in the age of social media. And perhaps most important, you explore your motivations for sharing your story. No matter where you are in the writing process, this book will guide you every step of the way.

Understanding the DNA of a Memoir

The short answer for what makes a memoir a memoir is that like a novel, it tells a story, but unlike a novel, a memoir is 100 percent truthful. But that's an insufficient definition. A memoir also has other obligations that make it unique and distinct from other literary utterances. Understanding those differences is to understand the memoir's strengths. To know those is to know what areas you should play up when writing your own.

To be considered a memoir, your book needs to:

- » **Be book length.** Generally, a memoir is between 60,000 and 100,000 words.
- » **Limit what's included.** A memoir is focused on parts or elements of a life, whereas an autobiography strives to include everything about a life, from birth to death.
- » **Be truthful.** You can't play loose and free with the truth and still be called a memoir. Look up the hubbub around James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (Anchor) or Alice Sebold's *Lucky* (Scribner) if you want to see the fallout around a memoir that isn't truthful.
- » **Use the elements of narrative.** Fiction writers know how to tell a story and make it interesting. See the next section for more on this.
- » **Show desire.** A story gets interesting when the main character wants something — desperately so. Be specific and clear about what your main character wants, and readers will care.
- » **Have conflict.** If a character can just get what they want, who cares? That's not drama, that's grocery shopping. It's when a character *can't* get what they desire that things get interesting. Tell that story and you have the makings of a strong memoir.
- » **Reveal change and growth.** Show how your experiences, struggles, and triumphs shape you as a person. Demonstrate the transformation that takes place over the course of your story.

Check out Chapter 2 for more information about the concepts of a memoir in far greater detail.

Identifying the Essential Parts of a Memoir

Like any good work of art, numerous parts comprise a memoir. Getting the best end product comes from knowing and having control over all of those smaller elements. Most of what a memoirist needs are skills borrowed from the world of fiction writing, though those skills are used somewhat differently in the world of nonfiction in general, and memoir specifically. For instance, you can't generate more conflict to heighten reader interest in a chapter if the scene you're writing simply didn't have that level of conflict. You can't reinvent the past to make a better story. With fiction, you can (and should).

Some of the main elements that make up a memoir include

- » **Structure:** This is the shape of your story on the page. You may assume that the *structure* of your story has to be chronological to move forward in a very specific order like the days in a week, but you have far more options than that and you need to consider those options before defaulting to a chronological approach. See Chapter 6 to discover all of your structure options.
- » **Setting:** *Setting* is the where and when that a story takes place. A memoir may have 2, 3, or perhaps even 23 different settings if you traveled or moved around a lot. Setting matters because it has a direct influence on character. See Chapter 7 for details on how to create and utilize setting to best effect.
- » **Characters:** *Characters* are the people who populate the scenes and settings of your story. Yes, they're real-life people, but memoirists still call them characters, as novelists do. For more on why as well as how to make them come alive on the page, visit Chapter 8.
- » **Dialogue:** The conversations that your characters have are called *dialogue*. This is a particularly tricky thing to use in memoir because memory is imperfect. Who walks around recording all conversations in order to accurately quote people later? (If you actually do that, be careful — it's illegal in a lot of states.) You can discover more about the challenges and strengths of dialogue use in memoirs in Chapter 9.
- » **Voice:** *Voice* is the unique manner in which a writer writes. It comes from distinctive decisions, such as word choice, rhythm, and the way a writer says things. Taken together, voice creates a powerful effect on the reader. Interested in knowing more? Chapter 10 covers voice in depth.
- » **Point of view:** The perspective through which the story is seen is called *point of view*. This is an important choice because it can drastically change how your story is conveyed. Read more about point of view in Chapter 11.

- » **Theme:** *Theme* is what your memoir is about. It speaks to universal truths, core ideas, and emotional truths through the development of key scenes, moments, and tensions in your story. See more about theme in Chapters 13 and 14.
- » **Narrator:** The *narrator* is the reflective voice that guides the reader through your story, interpreting the past and revealing the deeper significance of your experiences. Your unique perspective, shaped by time and reflection, transforms your story from a mere recounting of events into a powerful exploration of what it all means.

Making the Necessary Revisions and Edits to Help Your Memoir Shine

A great memoir doesn't appear by magic, but rather it's the result of good revision (to get the big stuff under control) and careful editing (to get the little stuff under control). How often in life do you wish you had a Do Over button? With writing, you do. You get a second, a third, or a tenth chance if you require it, which is good news because you can improve the mistakes and poor decisions that you made earlier in the writing process.



REMEMBER

After you have a rough draft of either your entire manuscript or even just a chapter, you can begin the revision process. *Revision* is important because it is the part of the process where you focus on large story elements without worrying much about specific word choices or sentence-level issues.

While revising, you certainly look over all of the essential parts of a memoir (which I discuss in the previous section) to make sure each is functioning well on its own as well as connecting meaningfully to the entire book. You have another obligation, though. You need to think like a reader, not the writer. You handle revision first because you may revise and remove an entire chapter or scene from a book. You don't need to spend the extra time polishing those sentences that won't appear in the first edition. Stay efficient by revising first and then editing after. Refer to Chapter 13 for more on making revisions.

Editing asks you to reexamine every word choice, reevaluate sentence structure, and think about how you're using paragraphs. Editing is a sentence-by-sentence level of attention that can feel tedious, but it's often the difference between a promising book that gets published or not. Some of the things that occur at this level of editing are adding or improving imagery, cutting clichés, removing most adverbs and adjectives, and tightening language across the board. Refer to Chapter 15 for more on line-by-line editing.

Focusing on the End Goal: Publication

When I was in high school, an English teacher who recognized that I devoured F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner), William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (Modern Library), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Penguin Classics), gave me a copy of Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (Scribner). I was blown away by it as fully as I'd ever been by any work of fiction. This book had grace, excitement, lovely language, melancholy, and a nearly perfect sense of the extraordinary place Paris was in the 1920s. And most impressive to me? It was all true.

From that point on, I recognized that part of my goal of being a writer wasn't just to write a great memoir one day, but to have people read it and hopefully be swept up by that same kind of reaction I had to Hemingway. (A tall order, I realize, but it's okay to dream big!) I wanted others to experience the same deep sense of wonder and awe that I did about the past with Hemingway's book. And the way to do that is through publishing your book. It's your avenue to finding readers and inviting them into the magic of a story only you can share. These prospective readers won't be sneaking into your house at night, rummaging in your file drawers or peeking into your computer files in pursuit of great literature. You have to send it to them, and the best way to do so is publishing.

WRITERS' CONFERENCES TO CONSIDER

If you want to connect with people who understand your impulse to tell stories, consider attending a writers' conference. There are hundreds of these throughout the country to choose from. Some specialize in the type of books they talk about, and others are more general. Here are just ten of the many writers' conferences that might suit the needs of a memoir writer. Research each online for more information.

- Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference (location varies)
- San Miguel Writers' Conference & Literary Festival (San Miguel de Allende, Mexico)
- Santa Barbara Writers Conference (Santa Barbara, California)
- Sewanee Writers' Conference (Sewanee, Tennessee)
- Stonecoast Writers' Conference (Portland, Maine)
- Las Vegas Writers Conference (Las Vegas, Nevada)

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- Pikes Peak Writers Conference (Colorado Springs, Colorado)
- San Francisco Writers Conference (San Francisco, California)
- Taos Summer Writers' Conference (Taos, New Mexico)
- Writer's Digest Annual Conference (New York City)
- Writers in Paradise (St. Petersburg, Florida)

Check out the website for the National Association of Memoir Writers (www.namw.org). Their "Writing Resources" link shows many online and real-world workshops and events all around the country.

Even if you decide your target audience is small — your family, or the people of your hometown — the idea of making something publishable quality is important. It means that it's the best that you can make it. It means you're understandably and honestly proud of it. It means that the writing you've labored over is likely to be engaging, memorable, and lasting for those special readers. And if you want to reach millions like Stephen King did with his memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Scribner), creating a well-written, publishable-quality book is your only way to approaching that size audience.



TIP

Before you seek a publisher, you may want to seek advice and feedback from your peers or even a literary agent to ensure what you have is the best that it can be. A writing critique group can be a great help in terms of getting advice on the quality of writing or receiving revision ideas — Chapter 17 can help with that. One step further, a literary agent can showcase this manuscript to publishing houses that have the infrastructure in place to print your book and distribute it to online and real-world bookstores throughout the world. Chapter 18 provides more insight about what an agent can do for you.

You have a few publishing options when you're ready to publish your book:

» **Traditional publishing:** For the last century or so, this is the main route that authors had to seek print book publication. You write the book, send a letter of inquiry (a query letter) to a publisher, and then hope for a positive response. If the publisher likes your letter, it asks for the manuscript. If the publisher likes the manuscript, it sends you a contract, and two years later (give or take), the memoir appears in bookstores. For more information on this time-honored option, Chapter 19 awaits.

- » **Self-publishing:** If you're interested in writing, printing, and selling your own memoir, then *self-publishing* is a fine choice. In the past few years, millions of authors have opted for this path. If self-publishing interests you as well, see Chapter 20.
- » **Hybrid publishing:** Partner with a specialized company that offers professional publishing services, combining elements of traditional and self-publishing models for a customized approach. This option allows you to retain more control over your work while benefiting from editorial expertise, design assistance, and distribution channels. Chapter 20 has more information on this option.
- » **E-publishing:** This subcategory of self-publishing has emerged as a viable outlet for books in the past few years. An e-book isn't a print book, but with so many people having e-readers or e-reader capabilities on their computers and phones, getting published in an e-book format is no longer a disincentive for an author. Chapter 20 has what you need to know about this new publishing option.
- » **Serialized content:** Release your memoir in serialized format, either through a blog, a dedicated website, or social media platforms. This can build anticipation and engagement with readers over time. It might be challenging to monetize it this way, but if the goal is to get your story out, this might be a fine option.
- » **Personal website or blog:** The only difference between this and the above option is how you choose to release your material. If you love it when Netflix drops an entire season at once, then this version could be for you — drop the whole story at once in a literary KABOOM! If you like making people wait for the next installment, maybe serializing the parts is best.

No matter what publishing method you decide on, you want to promote your finished work. If you don't promote your memoir (for example, with a website for your book, or with social media to alert people that your book is available to purchase), then people won't know about it and won't buy it. In today's publishing world, publishers do very little marketing and publicity for a book unless you're getting a huge amount of money from them upfront; this reality shifts the responsibility for book marketing and publicity duties to your shoulders. Chapter 21 offers some great suggestions for promoting your book, whether you do it on your own or hire a professional to help out with some or all of it. With more than a million new books (or new editions of existing books) published annually, you need to find ways to get the attention of readers.

Answering the Key Question: Why Write a Memoir?

People ask me all the time about why I ever chose to write a memoir. “Why put yourself through that? Why put your family through that?” They ask — sometimes by dancing around the topic, and sometimes saying it outright — why I’m interested in sharing pain and experiencing the potential shame of revealing secrets, mistakes, and transgressions.

If you’re serious about being a memoirist, be prepared to answer questions like these. You need to be able to answer them with conviction and clarity. Don’t duck the hard questions. Think them through and come to a sense of peace with your reasons, no matter what they are.

Here are some of the most popular and self-justifying reasons to write a memoir. See if you identify with any of them. You want to

- » Find some kind of meaning and order to the often-chaotic swirl of existence
- » Discover who you really are by confronting the truth(s) of your life
- » Be the star of the show versus remain someone who stands behind a curtain offstage, or worse, stays in the audience (or even worse, never arrives at the show at all)
- » (Re)witness the most important stages of your life
- » Overcome fear, guilt, shame, and regret
- » Reclaim your own story
- » Preserve your family’s history
- » Improve your ability to communicate with others
- » Build self-esteem through valuing yourself and listening to your own voice
- » Become a better thinker because good writing isn’t from the seat-of-your-pants; it’s from reflecting, making connections, and creatively engaging with your material
- » Learn how to forgive yourself (and others)
- » Create a deep empathetic connection with readers who will learn and be inspired from your life
- » Confess something — confession is, as they say, good for the soul
- » Defy the aphorism “it’s all been said before,” because you haven’t said it

To deny the validity of memoir is to deny that the past powerfully affects the present. Whether your past is full of darkness, bright with joy, or a mixture of both, examining that and bringing the chaos of disarray (which memories generally are) into order can change lives for the better. I've seen it happen many, many times. Through the writing of a memoir, you can take full possession of your life — possibly for the first time. You don't have to be famous. You don't even have to be a professional writer. You just have to be honest, faithful to the past, and generous in the telling. That's memoir.

CELEBRITY STATUS DOESN'T SELL MEMOIRS

You don't have to be a famous person to write a memoir. Still, your memoir will probably sell more copies if you won *Dancing with the Stars* or if your face has graced a box of Wheaties — witness the smash hit that was First Lady Michelle Obama's 2018 memoir *Becoming* (Crown) or Prince Harry's 2023 memoir *Spare* (Random House). Celebrity status is no guarantee that your memoir will sell and be successful, however. See this for yourself from this list of celebrity memoir books that fell far short of expectations:

- *Jersey Shore* star Snooki's memoir only sold 4,000 copies during its first week. (She had more than a million Twitter followers at the time, and the premiere episode of season three of *Jersey Shore* drew almost 8.5 million viewers.)
- Wikileaks founder Julian Assange's "unauthorized autobiography" reportedly sold fewer than 1,000 copies in its first week despite his large advance (around \$1.5 million) in 2011.
- Actor Alec Baldwin's *A Promise to Ourselves: A Journey through Fatherhood* (St. Martin's Griffin) is reported to have sold only 13,000 hardcover copies.
- Former Spice Girl Mel C's *The Sporty One* (Grand Central) reportedly only sold 1,000 copies in its first week despite being heavily promoted.

Although having a famous person's name attached to a book can guarantee a few sales, a bad book is a bad book, period. After people figure that out, the sales will scream to a stop.

A well-written, honest, interesting memoir, however, can actually make you a celebrity. British journalist Dolly Alderton, the author of *Everything I Know About Love* (Harper Perennial), received international attention thanks to her unforgettable stories about the challenges of early adulthood. The book has been translated into dozens of languages and became a 2022 TV series on NBCUniversal's Peacock streaming service.

