

Writing a *memoir*

It's easier than
you thought

By Eva Shaw

YOU SAID YOU'D do it. You promised, "This is the year." When *will* you write your life story? Or help family members write the stories in their life? Or turn your life story into a novel? Here's how.

Discover your focus. As you begin, read other memoirs to see what formats you like and decide if you want to add photos or perhaps a DVD to accompany your life story. You can write your full life story or focus on amazing periods or events. Check out "year-in-the-life" books such as Kathleen Flinn's *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry* (Viking, 2007) or *The Know-It-All* by A.J. Jacobs (Simon & Schuster, 2005).

Write a page a day. If you write a page of your life story each day, in a year you'll have a book. Don't and you won't. Make an appointment with yourself, negotiate time with the family to write or ask someone to make you accountable to a writing schedule.

Start small. Write about your life in manageable increments, much like essays, and on topics, at least at the beginning, that are fun to remember. This will make the process easier. Make it a goal to write about each experience to its fullest.

Look at life's journey. The best life stories begin with a bang, typically a life-changing event. I call this the fork in the road, and it's a good place to start. What choices did you make to be who you are? Even negatives set us on unplanned paths, and if we had taken another direction we'd be in another place today. Where was your fork?

Bubble it. In the middle of a large piece of paper, draw a big circle (or bubble), and inside that circle write "MY LIFE." Draw 10 lines radiating out from the circle, like a child's drawing of the sun, and at the end of each line draw a circle. Fill in each circle (or sub-bubble) with experiences you want to write about.

These bubbles might be your chapters. Repeat the process with each sub-bubble in the middle of a sheet of paper, create an outline from your bubbles and your life story will be ready to write in an organized format.

Write the details. Listen to music, eat childhood foods, revisit places where you lived, reread letters and quiz family members. Old family photos are gold mines; look at the backgrounds, clothing and faces of the people.

Everyday essentials. Write about typical days from your past, the people who influenced you and especially everyday experiences. Write about life lessons, jobs, teachers, family, friendships and fears. Ask yourself questions and write out your answers.

Tell your truth. When three people see the same event, they'll relate three versions. In your life story, you must tell *your* truth. Don't fret about what might offend someone until you've finished all of your life story, and then make changes if necessary.

Let people talk. Dialogue will bring your story to life. I could write about how pleased Dad was to move to New Mexico. But see what happens when Dad speaks: "We're moving to Albuquerque," Dad said, rubbing his hands together. "Oh, the smell of roasting chiles and sagebrush. Oh, the salsa and sunsets. Did I mention food?" Simply note in the beginning of your book that you've written dialogue as you remember it.

Leave it in? Take it out? Will straight-laced Aunt May fuss or laugh if you reveal she was once a trapeze performer? Seriously, all families have secrets. We all have secrets we'd prefer not to share. It's OK to leave things out.

Editing is like furniture polish. When your book is done, put it aside. Then, a week or month later, read it out loud. What needs to be changed, added or covered in more detail? Expect to polish your writing enough

times to make it shine.

Are you done yet? Plan for a natural ending, such as completing a season in life or accomplishing a goal. Perhaps a final chapter might include your philosophies, hopes and dreams.

Just write. Don't worry about format. Write from your heart. This is *your* story, and you are the only one who can write it. [H]

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Get creative

WITH A BIT of thought you can create family heirlooms that will be treasured forever. Letters to grandchildren, written monthly, during their first year will be priceless. A family cookbook will bring joy to everyone. Scrapbooks will be adored.

You can use fill-in-the-blanks memoir workbooks that are like a much more personal job application. Or write out a legacy letter, in which you explain what you believe in and what you'd like to be remembered for.

Just for fun, ask kids to draw pictures of themselves while you write their life stories. Little ones love this, and grandparents gobble it up. And what of those Christmas letters you've had forever? Scan, print and bind them for everlasting family gifts.

You can do it. You can create heirlooms that will forever be appreciated.—ES

