

Telling It All

Learn How to Write a Compelling Memoir In Your Senior Years

By Charles Jacobs

Despite the notoriety caused by fabricated books like James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, memoirs are still a highly viable genre and a favorite category for those who are eager to try writing in their retirement years.

Reflecting on the highlights of your life is very fulfilling for most seniors. You may feel a great desire to inspire your children by relating how you overcame numerous obstacles to achieve success. Perhaps you take great pride in your family's history and want to leave them and your grandkids a permanent record of the accomplishments of generations of their predecessors.

The memoir can be an ideal starting point for novice writers because it gives them an opportunity to write about something they know intimately. That doesn't mean that you can sit down at your computer with any preparation. As it does for every other genre, writing a quality memoir requires a good deal of thought and careful research.

Memories can unintentionally mislead even the most honest memoirist. No one can accurately recall all of the pertinent circumstances of events that occurred years before. What you do remember is seen from your own particular bias, which may or may not be factual or match the recollection of others.

Planning Your Book

The first critical step in planning your memoir is to determine the audience you hope to reach. Will it be just family and intimate friends? Or perhaps you feel your life and the events you have experienced are so unique that they will be of interest to a multitude of readers. That decision allows you to determine the nature of the information you include in your story.

To shift your recall into high gear, take a full week and devote an hour each day to remembering people and happenings that were particularly significant to you as you moved through life. Much like when you meditate, you must clear your mind of every potential distraction.

Scour your memory for events like vacations, holiday dinners, school experiences, graduations, communions, bar mitzvahs and weddings both your own and those of friends and family. Try to remember the people who participated in those events. Think of significant accomplishments like learning to swim or drive a car or even tie your shoes...and of the people who taught you how.

That initial sorting out...the process of reliving memories and sifting through to cherry pick only the most revealing...is the key to creating a memoir that has real meaning. One that will engage your reader and ring emotional bells.

The Goal Is Integrity

It is essential that your memories be honest...or at least as honest as you can make them by talking with others and attempting to remain as objective as possible. Neither anger nor vengeance has a place in the honest memoir. However, that doesn't mean that everything you write must praise others.

If criticism of someone else is truthful and forthright and pertinent to understanding the circumstances you are reporting, then by all means use it. Similarly, if retelling of salacious material has a true relevance to your story, then it too may be included. What you must avoid is adding those juicy passages just to attract readership as has been done far too often in recent writings.

For an example of a well-balanced and honest memoir, turn to *Angela's Ashes*, one of the outstanding memoirs of recent years. Although author Frank McCourt states he loved his father dearly, he is honest enough to describe him in the book as a drunk who abandoned his family.

Verifying Your Facts

If you are intent on producing a highly factual and inclusive memoir, you will turn to family members and family friends who are still alive. If distance is a factor, interview them by phone or mail. Although face-to-face interviews will produce the best results, any of these three methods will reward you with information and impressions that have escaped you.

When you are in need of information that predates any living witnesses, public records of marriages and births are available, as are genealogical charts. The library and the Internet are also marvelous research tools. They can provide a great deal of information about the specific periods of time that you may be writing about.

If your predecessors arrived in the United States within the last hundred years or so, check the vast sources of immigration information available at Ellis Island. Perhaps a member of your family has already developed a genealogical chart. Use it.

Establishing a Viewpoint

Some careful thinking is now necessary to formulate the viewpoint from which you write the book. Ask yourself “Who is writing your memoir?” “Who is the narrative voice?” The answers will exert a profound influence on how you write the book.

These are not frivolous questions. The answers will set the tone and establish the theme of your memoir. They will allow you to determine more than just who is narrating the story. You have to make several other decisions before your head to the computer. Will the story center around you and your history? Or will it be about the family of which you are just one member? Will you be the martyr sacrificing yourself for the sake of the family? Or the hero who has overcome endless obstacles as he/she struggles to reach the top of the mountain of success?

Using Description Well

Expand the snapshots you recall from past years into full blown framed photographs. Strive to capture as many details as the long intervening years allow to help you better understand your predecessors and the events in which you all participated.

The richness of a memoir is in great part the result of the detail you are able to include. Be as specific, as you can. Your family didn’t live in an old house; it was a two-story farm house painted a soft yellow with contrast black shutters.

As in all writing, your challenge is to “show, not tell.” That means describing through action, metaphor, simile, dialogue and the other tools of description in a good writer’s tool chest.

In my latest book, *The Writer Within You – A Step-by-Step Guide to Writing and Publishing in Your Retirement Years*, and to all my students, I stress that the richness of a story is in the details the writer offers. Well done, description invites your readers into

your story. They come to know the characters intimately, as well as the environment with which the characters function. In essence, they become participants in the story because of the details you offer.

Share in the Benefits

As you move along through the writing process, you'll find that the benefits of a memoir are not restricted to your reader alone. You, the author, will benefit in direct proportion to the research you do and the detail you uncover. Writing a memoir should always be a fulfilling experience.

When discussing her book, *An American Childhood*, Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard said, "In the course of writing this memoir, I've learned all sorts of things...about myself and about various relationships." Give yourself this gift of self-discovery now that you've reached your senior years. The joy of the experience will remain with you throughout the rest of your life.