



A Guide to... writing 'Your Story'

Our own lives and experience are a huge source of stories that we can draw on and write about. The saying goes that everyone has a book in them, and I definitely believe that everyone has a story to tell. Also, the more life experience you've had, the better stories you'll have! So don't worry if it's been a while since you picked up a pen. Your stories are all the better for it!

START SMALL

When thinking about writing a story from your own life, start small. Write down your memories of these kind of events, and see what stories come out:

- Your first kiss
- A memorable birthday – yours, or someone else's party you attended, for instance
- A vivid memory from before you were 5
- The birth of a child
- Your first day at work
- A uniform you once wore, if you wore one for any job, school or occupation
- A time when someone really made you laugh
- A memorable journey.

LIFE VS FICTION

Remember that as a writer, you can use your own memories and stories in fiction as well as life writing. Most writers will tell you that they constantly go back to personal experiences and draw from them, even if they aren't actually writing about themselves or that kind of event in particular. So writing about your own life is also a good practice for writing made up stories, because it exercises your memory and connects you to your emotions.

COLLECTING INFORMATION

A great place to start thinking about the story of your life, or a series of stories, is with photo albums, diaries, journals, memory boxes, scrapbooks: whatever you have. One lady has been a faithful diary writer all her life as well as a keen photographer. Now she wants to write the story of her life and put them together – story and picture – for her grandchildren. It will be a great project when she's finished, and she's got plenty of material to work from.

Have a look at your photo albums, diaries, maybe letters, and see what memories they spark. Had you forgotten some things even happened? Do those photos or letters bring it all back? Perhaps you'll find a story you didn't know. Some letter between a grandmother and her sister revealed they had had an argument over the grandmother moving to another country. A very interesting story!

YOUR WHOLE LIFE

The idea of writing your whole life story could be a bit intimidating. There's so much in it, for one thing! Where would you start? Would you start at your birth and go on from there, like Charles Dickens in *David Copperfield*, or would you perhaps decide on a collection of stories from different times in your life that say something about you?

The earlier list might help with some ideas for these individual 'chapters'. You might find also that as you start writing about one thing, you remember another. Let it happen and let the memories come out.

Alternatively, you might decide that you want to write something which includes how you felt at a particular time, rather than a simple retelling of events. Examples of these kinds of topics might be:

- Strength through adversity – the story of you or a family member dealing with something difficult
- A fine romance – the story of a courtship or relationship, perhaps with its ups and downs!
- A proud moment – the story of something you're really proud of
- Dreams – what were your childhood dreams? What are your dreams now?

SEALED WITH A KISS

If you could write a letter to yourself at age 18, 30 or 45, what would you write?

Remember what you wanted at those ages, and what you were doing with your life. Write a proper letter to yourself. Tell yourself (at whichever age you choose) what you're like now, what your life is like now. Give your younger self advice. Tell your younger self what you've learnt, or what you wish you'd done. You might be surprised at what you say!

STRUCTURING YOUR STORY

After you have been doing some smaller bits of life writing, you may well find that there are a particular set of events that your writing has focused on, or a particular feeling or theme. These initial writings and stories can help you identify the structure for a longer story, if you want to write one. Some ideas are as follows:

- You could identify five important points in your love life – write the story of how they connect together, or how they do not make any sense together at all!

- Your life story as written in letters. Decide to write a letter at key points of your life – i.e. when you were 10, 15, 20, 25, 30... The letters can be to different people, but they will speak in the voice of you at that age and express the concerns and joys you had at that time.
- Use the title 'What I've Learnt' and write your life story focusing on things you've learnt – about yourself, about the world. The second half of the story could be 'What I Haven't Learnt'.
- Write the ten conversations you had in your life that were really important, good and bad. Write them in detail, with what you and the other person said and thought as you talked / argued / celebrated / planned for the future.
- Find ten photographs that mean a lot to you and show an important event in your life. Write about what was happening in the photo and at the time.

Lastly – enjoy writing, and enjoy rediscovering your stories. You contain a whole library. Get that pen going!