

Griffith Publishing

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Publishing consultants since 1988

Writing the story of your life

The most frequent request we receive at Griffith Publishing for our ghostwriting services is to help a person tell his or her life story. These books often end up as treasured documents that are passed on to succeeding generations. Others are packed with helpful information that make them practical as well as interesting. Still others reveal fascinating insights and experiences that would otherwise be unknown.

This short document gives you tips for setting realistic goals for your autobiographical book.

Levels of success

Unless you have a truly amazing story to tell, such as sharing secrets of your intimate sex life with a famous world leader or your insider eye witness account of the fall of a major corporation, your autobiographical book is not likely to be a best seller. Think realistically and check the level of success you expect for your book—

- No expectation of financial success.** The book is your gift to the future.
- Break even.** You would like to recover the cost of writing and producing your book.
- Career boosting.** You see this book as a way to build client credibility or win new clients for your business or career.
- Handsome profit.** You believe you have access to enough people who need or want this book so that if only 5 to 10 percent of them purchase it, you will cover your costs and realize a profit.
- Fundraiser.** You will share promotion and sales with a worthy cause and use the book to raise funds for the cause.

Ingredients of success

With even one of the following elements, your book can be successful. The more elements you can check as relevant to your project, the more success you are likely to have.

- Many family members and friends are urging you to tell your life story.
- You are well known in your community or region.
- You are a survivor of unusual circumstances.

- You have achieved recognized success in spite of huge obstacles.
- You are willing to share the secrets of your success.
- Your experiences reveal facts and information that could be valuable to others.
- You see yourself as human with common faults and foibles.
- Other: _____

Creating a page-turner from your life story

The dulllest books in the world are autobiographical accounts of ordinary lives told in a boring, factual manner. Don't do that to your book! Here are some essential points to keep in mind in crafting your book:

You cannot tell your entire life story

Even one day in your life could be told in hundreds of pages. You are hoping to capture the essence of all of your days so far on this planet, and you can't tell it all. Think of your book not as "the" story of your life but as a collection of stories.

Select a key point

Like a novel, your book must have a central conflict, challenge, or weakness that is dealt with in the book. Without a theme and a single, driving purpose, your book runs the risk of being a rambling account that will put your reader to sleep.

Choose stories

People like stories, and they like them short and to the point. Make a list of interesting stories in your life that relate to your key point, above. Determine that you will tell each of those stories in two or three pages or between 750 and 1500 words. If it's a longer story, break it into smaller pieces.

Don't pretend to remember everything

Your story is yours to tell the way you want to tell it. You may not remember all of the facts accurately, and you may make assumptions that are not warranted by what actually happened. That's OK. Stick to what you remember. That's what the book is about—you and your memories.

Invite people into your life

Introduce people involved in your life not by boring descriptions but by putting them stage center in your stories. Use dialog liberally. Provide visual descriptions of people and places to add an air of authenticity and interest.

Advance your key point

Every story should in some way support or deal with the primary purpose of your book. If it doesn't, rewrite it or toss it.

No bragging

Be careful not to come across as bragging if your book focuses on your success. Emphasize how other people or overriding principles have helped you achieve success or, better yet, how you have learned from hard experience what works. Be humble, and your reader will love you.

No begging

Your reader picks up your book to be entertained or inspired, not to feel sorry for you. People have enough problems without being bogged down by yours. Don't tell stories designed to draw the reader's pity for the main character, you.

Adding validity to your book

Instead of writing a boring chronological account ("We moved to San Mateo in 1947 and two years later after our third daughter was born we moved to Houston..."), we suggest including factual information that later generations or historians will need without slowing down your stories with too many facts about names, dates, and places. For example—

Chronology

List key events by dates in a single table in the back of the book. That way the reader can refer to the list to provide an anchor in time.

Another idea is to make a list of all of the stories with the approximate date when each one occurred. Include this list in a separate place in the back of the book.

If history and dates are important to your book, include them in the heading for the chapters or place them in the margin outside the text. Be sure that exact dates are necessary before placing them in the text of the book.

A tip: Don't include facts in the chronology that aren't mentioned in the book.

Family ties

A family tree can be hard to draw if the relationships are complicated, but if you can do it, a table of branches showing the family tree back to your great grandparents and forward to your great grandchildren can be very helpful to future generations.

If that is too much work, provide factual information about each member of your immediate family (usually your birth mother and father and full siblings, but possibly step parents and half and step siblings) one at a time and then add a paragraph for each of their families.

A tip: Try not to include too many "other people" stories in your book. For maximum interest, it should be *your* book about *your* memories of *your* life.

How to start

The best way to start writing the story of your life is to think of all the experiences that taught you key lessons or that introduced you to new ideas or achievements. Be sure to include adventures and unusual events in your life, but focus on how these happenings affected you.

Write a title for each story as you make the list. Let the title reflect the excitement or suspense or urgent lesson learned.

When you have a list of 25 or 30 stories, choose the 5 or 6 that you think are closest to target. These are the stories that will do the most to support your key purpose, and you will want to spend the most time and effort on these. Start with the “gems.”

From the best “gems” on the list, select one story and begin telling it as if you were watching it happen for the first time. If you are working with a ghostwriter, tell the ghost the story or share what you have written. Be sure to include vivid details that put the reader in the story—watching, hearing, feeling, and anticipating.

Repeat this with every story you’ve selected. You or your editor will put the stories in the best order, polish them, and your book is done!

We can help

For assistance in writing the story of your life, call us any time and ask for an information packet and a proposal.

We can write your story for you, or we can give you advice about telling the stories that go into your book. When your book is written, we can edit and design it, including illustrating it with photos you may want to include.

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