

Writing your autobiography: 10 TOP TIPS

Many of us regret not knowing our parents or grandparents well enough and that it is now too late. If you don't want your descendants to feel the same way, it may be time to write your autobiography. **Jackie Sherman**



Sherman suggests top tips to help you achieve your goal.

1 Be clear why you are writing. Motivation is key if you want to complete a complex task like this, so make sure you know why you are writing and have a positive attitude that will see you through.

2 Use memory joggers. Like learning, people remember in different ways and you may find that not just word association but working pictorially, using sounds, smells and tastes or handling concrete objects can help to trigger those far-off memories.

3 Keep a notebook handy. Memories come at awkward times, like in the bath, during a film or hearing background music in a lift. If you keep a notebook close by, you can jot them down immediately rather than wait until you get home when it might be too late.

4 Don't worry about every detail. The most enjoyable autobiographies allow the personality of the writer to shine through. It is your opinions and values that your readers will find interesting, as well as mishaps and funny or sad moments – not a long list of facts and figures covering every day of your life. In particular, your family or future generations will want to learn about the decisions you made and how they affected your life.

5 Create a time line. You may not tell your story in date order when it comes to organising the material, but this is an excellent way to start what can be a daunting task – and useful to return to whenever writer's block threatens! Just fill in a few more events and the memories as well as the desire to write should start to come back again.

6 Improve your writing. Many autobiographies are badly written, so even close relatives find them hard to finish reading! Work on your writing to bring it to life, for instance, introduce similes and metaphors, mention different senses, and make sure it is clear to your readers who are the people involved and when and where events took place.

7 Add dialogue. This may be difficult at first, but it is an excellent way to 'show not tell' and adds immediacy to your work.

8 Plan the book's structure. Once you decide how to tell your story – whether chronologically, in themed chapters or as a multimedia pack – be ruthless about what to include or leave out so that each chapter includes the important events, turning points or conclusions and leads on to the next in a readable way. In particular, decide where to start (use flashbacks if you want to cover earlier parts of your life in later chapters) and where to finish.

9 Be original with titles. Some ideas for book or chapter titles include family sayings, quotations, alliteration, catchphrases or spoonerisms.

10 Don't give up. If you're flagging, set a straightforward, measurable and achievable goal (such as writing one paragraph by the end of the day, or researching one part of your history by the end of the week). If you keep setting new goals, you will get there in the end. 🐾

Read up on it

● Memory joggers, advice on creating a time line and improving your writing, as well as goal-setting techniques and even an exercise on finding time to write are all included in *Writing your autobiography* by Jackie Sherman. Emerald Publishing, 2011 (ISBN: 9781847162168). See *FT's* review, p61.

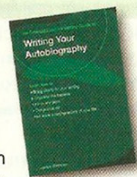


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