



» HOW TO WRITE A
MEMOIR

SEVEN PRACTICES FOR CREATING A MEMOIR THAT SINGS.

by SHIRLEY HERSHEY SHOWALTER



What did your parents want most when you were born?

When I was born, my mother was 21, and my father was 23. Here we are on the family farm, winter, 1948:

My mother was a writer, dreamer, mystic, and speaker in addition to being a make-everything-from-scratch cook, gardener, and all-around farmer's wife. My father was a hard-drivin' man, the John Henry figure of my life. After 1960, when he bought the family farm, he had a mortgage to pay off, and that meant grueling work from dawn to dusk seven days a week all year long.

Out of this combination of opposites in personality but stability in faith and rootedness, I came bounding

onto the scene in 1948, the first of six children, five of whom lived to adulthood. I married in 1969, went on to a career in teaching, became an English professor at Goshen College, had two children, and then, at the age of 47, became the 14th president, and first female president, of Goshen College. After eight years as president and six years as a foundation executive in Kalamazoo, Mich., I returned to Harrisonburg, Va., to live in the place where my husband grew up and where we met and fell in

love in 1967. I am now a writer, speaker, blogger, and consultant.

Moving 625 miles in December 2010 was a big change. Yet we turned right around after our first grandson was born in March 2011 and moved again. In July 2011, we became nannies for a year to baby Owen in Brooklyn, N.Y. We are now taking care of our grandson during the day and exploring the city by night. We're keeping up with our other work during the early morning and on weekends, I'm back to farmer's hours



again!

My favorite literary genre is memoir — personal stories about real people. In second grade, my favorite book was called *Heroes and Heroines*, featuring real people in American history. These folks took whatever circumstances their birth had given them and made something beautiful out of it. Reading biography and autobiography fascinated me as much as any novel or short story.

The relevance to my own life seemed more immediate: “If Benjamin Franklin could become a great statesman even though he walked down the streets of Philadelphia chewing on the only food he could afford as a young man —hard rolls —

SINCE YOU ASKED FOR “HOW TO WRITE A MEMOIR,” YOU TOO MUST RESONATE WITH THE LIFE STORIES OF OTHERS AND HAVE AN INTEREST IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT WRITING MEMOIR.

I’M HERE TO BE YOUR CHEER-LEADER AND “GUIDE BY THE SIDE” AS YOU SET OUT ON A MEMOIR JOURNEY.

who knows what amazing things could happen to me? If Amelia Earhart was afraid before she became brave, or brave and afraid at the same time, perhaps I can learn to conquer my own fears!”

How have I prepared myself to act as a memoir coach? My short memoir essays have been honored by the renowned Santa Barbara Writers Conference, the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, and the Soul-Making Literary Contest in San Francisco. My blog, www.100memoirs.com,

has been helping writers and readers of memoir since 2009. I am under contract with Herald Press to publish my childhood memoir with this working title: *Rosy Cheeks: A Mennonite Childhood*. As I share snippets of my life story, I will ask you questions that stimulate your own memories, probably very different from mine.



BECAUSE OTHER READERS AND WRITERS HAVE ASKED ME
WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT MEMOIR BY READING AND
WRITING ALL MY LIFE,

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I boiled down my experiences with life stories into six practices (and a bonus) to share with you. I am confident that if you follow these, you will leave a wonderful legacy with your own memoir. Sing it!

Seven Practices for Creating a Memoir that Sings

1. CREATE A DAILY RITUAL ASKING FOR HELP, DISCIPLINE, AND GUIDANCE AS YOU WRITE.

Select some practices that speak to you from the list below. Which ones call to you?

- **Pray, meditate, and read** sacred or inspirational texts. Mary Karr, one of the best memoir writers of our time, begins each writing session with a prayer for guidance. Choose touchstones — literal stones, candles, or other objects from the place and time you want to write about — to help you meditate.
- **Movement. Yoga. Walking.** Jogging. Biking. Unclutter the mind and involve the body. I recently learned about chi walking and am trying to practice it. I have a list of upper- and lower-body exercises to do around the house when I take breaks.
- **Set a timer** to remind you to stop and do something else after 20-25 minutes of writing. By doing so, you concentrate the mind for a short time. (It's amazing how fast we can write when we feel the urgency of a timer). And, equally important, you don't get sucked into permanently bad posture and Internet rabbit holes.
- **Accountability partner.** Find another writer, preferably one who lives close by (but Skype can work, too). Share your goals with each other. Start with 90 days from now. Then 60. Then 30. Then break down that month into weeks and days. As you enter a new week, declare your top three commitments, using your larger goal list. Share your commitments to number of pages or hours of writing — and hang tough with each other.

1. CONTINUED

- **Create a sacred writing place** or places. For some, it's a huge desk and a view of the mountains, fields, or water. For others, it's a closet with no sensory stimulation.
 - **Go through old photos**, one per day. Find something in it you have never seen before. For example, in the 1948 photo of my mother and me on page 1, the shadow of my father's head can be seen in the foreground. Noticing that in the photo gave me a little shiver.
- I think I could write an essay now on the father's shadow on a young girl's life. As thanks for signing up for this booklet, you will be receiving short weekly "magical memoir moments" to stimulate your own search for clues to your past.
- **Visit the place** you want to write about. Walk the land with intent to let in the memories and spirits from the past while consciously enjoying the present moment.

2. READ, READ, READ! YOU SHOULD EVENTUALLY READ 100 MEMOIRS. START WITH ONE YOU LOVE. THEN READ ANOTHER.

(Here are my own favorites: <http://ShirleyShowalter.com/2011/05/06/shirleys-top-five-memoirs/>). Read them not just for the story, but also for structure, characterization, mix of reflection and action, dialogue, tone, and theme. Write a book review (on a website such as www.goodreads.com or your own blog), using a grid of whatever you want to study most in the work of others. A few sentences of summary about what you discovered in each of these areas will accumulate as your own graduate curriculum. Mary Karr says, "Read above your station. Read the best there is."

- **Develop mentor authors.** Select five good memoirs – your favorites. Re-read these as you write. Underline. Fold down pages of each section. (Or use Post-It notes.) Make the book look like it has been in a hiker's backpack all summer. If the authors are alive, write them each a handwritten fan letter.
- **For technology enthusiasts.** If your mentor authors are on Twitter, follow them. Offer them ideas. Respond to their questions.
- **Take notes on what doesn't work**, as well as what does.
- **Read memoir blogs.** Here are a few to consider. These will help you develop a sense of the kind of memoir you are writing. My blogger friend Richard Gilbert has a great blog roll. Check it out here: <http://richardgilbert.wordpress.com/> And here's a list of Top 50 Memoir blogs: <http://www.adulteducationcourse.org/memoirs>
- **And, of course**, I would love to have you subscribe to my own memoir blog, if you have not done so already. And don't just sign up. Comment. Use the blog as a way to engage other writers, as well as me.

3. KNOW YOUR PURPOSE: WHY DO YOU WANT TO WRITE?

There are many good reasons to write and a few not to. Think hard about the why of your memoir. Keep that purpose posted in places where you write or where you will see it during your daily routine. You cannot transform others who read your book unless you yourself have been transformed. Writing a memoir is active participation in your own transformation. From haphazard and unfocused memories, you can create a work of art. Your life will never be the same.

- **Leaving a legacy** for children and grandchildren.
- **As a challenge.** Some people run marathons. You want to write one.
- **Fulfilling a life goal** of writing a book.
- **Healing old wounds** by bringing them to consciousness – and light. But not whining about them or seeking revenge.
- **Preserving memories** likely to fade with age or disappear with death
- **To discover hidden mysteries** of your own life and the world in which you have lived.
- **To tell YOUR side** of a complex story while trying to understand other perspectives.

Connect your memoir to your mission in life. Have you written a mission statement? Now would be a great time to do so. If you have a driving purpose, you have tapped into the reason you are here on earth. When readers detect this kind of devotion and focus, they are attracted because they want some of this energy in their own lives. They also want to know how you found yours.

HERE'S MY MISSION STATEMENT: I WANT TO PREPARE FOR THE HOUR OF MY DEATH BY LIVING ONE GOOD DAY AT A TIME. AND I WANT TO HELP OTHERS TO DO THE SAME.

4. WRITE ABOUT THE PROCESS AS YOU WRITE YOUR MANUSCRIPT.

- **Start a blog** (optional, but easier than you may think). Check out www.Posterous.com and www.Blogger.com for the easiest platforms. You can be blogging in minutes. The best value of a blog is that you can learn by doing and engage with an audience as you write. Warning: blogging takes up brain space and writing time. Don't do it unless you have the time. It could distract from memoir writing rather than enhance it.
- **Keep a memoir writing journal.** See # 6 below.
- **Become an observer** of your own creative process. It will help you uncover where you “sing” and where your voice falls flat. When you lose track of time and are not thinking about yourself at all but rather about your purpose, your love for this world, your

sheer amazement – that's when you sing. The rest is just preparation. You might have to let it go and start over.

5. CREATE A TIMETABLE FOR YOUR WRITING PROJECT, STARTING WITH THE END IN MIND.

Make the goal challenging – six months or a year, depending on how much work you’ve already done. Then do a little simple math. Can you do 1,000 words/day or 5,000 words/week? Even if you only have a few hours to write each day, this goal is quite possible. At the end of a year of producing 5,000 words/week, you would have more than 250,000 words! The average book length is 60,000-100,000 words.

6. BUY YOURSELF A SMALL NOTEBOOK AND KEEP IT CLOSE BY. USE IT FOR TWO THINGS:

- **Keep track of your process.** Make it your goal to do five things every day that help you write or sell your book. Jack Canfield did this and became the world’s best-selling author with his *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. Record these five things in your journal.
- **Capture memories,** ideas about structure, or any other random thought you have while doing laundry, taking a walk, or rocking the baby.

I LIKE SMALL, BRIGHT, WRITERSBLOK BAMBOO NOTEBOOKS AND MOLESKINES, BUT ANY SMALL NOTEBOOK WILL DO.

7. BONUS PRACTICES. YOU MIGHT WANT TO PUBLISH YOUR MEMOIR.

(You don’t have to! This one is optional.) But if you do, spend some time every day building your platform as a writer:

- **Attend a good writers conference** in your area and get to know the authors close to you. Your local independent bookstore may be a good connecting point for networking.
- **Social media:** Here’s where activity on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn can help – especially if you already have built relationships there. Twitter, especially, can help you learn from agents, authors, and publishers. You can comment on their blog posts, “like” their Facebook pages, and feed them stories and ideas they can use. They will get to know you as you offer ideas of value. Blogging is probably the best way to build a platform if you are not famous. Of course, if you are famous, you have a platform already.
- **Self-publishing** is a viable option. I’m not an expert, but if you follow publishing experts online, such as www.janefriedman.com or www.michaelhyatt.com, you can learn a lot!
- **If you choose mainstream publishing,** you need to find an agent first, which means writing a great query letter. My blog offers critiques of query letters from www.marlamiller.com



THESE SEVEN PRACTICES, IF FOLLOWED FAITHFULLY, WILL HELP YOU CREATE A WONDERFUL MEMOIR! HERE IS A PICTURE OF WHAT MOTIVATES ME — MY GRANDSON OWEN, WHO APPEARS TO BE WAITING TO HEAR A GOOD STORY. I SUGGEST YOU PUT UP YOUR OWN MOTIVATIONAL PICTURE. SING ON!

As a thank-you for signing up for “How to Write a Memoir,” I will be sending you “Magical Memoir Moments” each week to help you continue to sing your story. These are sent to you with love so that all stories may be told. I invite you to subscribe to my blog, <http://www.shirleyshowalter.com>, and I look forward to meeting you and continuing this discussion in the comments section.

— Shirley Hershey Showalter