

Life story writing

Writing about your life, especially the significant events you have experienced, has many benefits. It can help you understand better how those events have affected you. Writing about those events gives you the opportunity to revisit the meaning of good events and, if you chose, to find silver linings in the difficult events. Writing about your life will can you strengthen your sense of self and clarify what your gifts and talents are. Writing about your life will provide insights about when you have been at your best, and point to places where you can grow and develop further. And, it can help you clarify and solidify your core life values and beliefs.

A few guidelines

First, we encourage you to write for yourself. For now, plan that you will be the only person who sees what you write. You can decide later whether or not you want to share it. Second, be kind to yourself. Try not to critique what you are writing, or to over think what you are writing. Lastly, be generous with yourself. Sure, like all of us you have flaws. You have probably done things you regret. You can write about those, but please also write about the good things you have done, the wonderful memories you have. We all have rich, complicated lives. Writing openly, and candidly about yours is the best way to find the insights that will be of greatest benefit to you.

A place to start

Begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book. Like all books, your life story book has a table of contents containing the main chapters of your life story. Each chapter is about a significant time in your life. Some chapters may cover several years, others may focus on a specific event. Sketch out the table of contents for your life story. Try not to over think this draft, but rather give yourself permission to accept the thoughts that come first to your mind. Write a title for each chapter, here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters in the book might be.

Please give each chapter a title, and write a brief description of what that chapter is about. Remember, this is a draft, so you can change it at any time.

Exploring key events

Now, you will take a slightly different approach to writing about your life, one that you will eventually bring together with your table of contents. Here, you will write about specific events that have happened in your life, like a major turning point and a peak experience you have had. For each of these key events, try to write about the following things:

- When did this event happen, in terms of your life. Were you a child or did it occur during your early adult years?
- What happened? What were the most important aspects of this event? You might want to write about where it happened and how the event unfolded.
- Who else was part of this event and what role did they play in it?
- What were you doing, thinking and feeling before, during and after the event?
- Write anything else about the event that you think is important.

Be descriptive! You are writing to learn and understand your life better, so details are important. When you are finished write about why this event was important in your life story. Write about what this event means for who you were then, how you have developed over time, and who you are now. How did this event matter in your life?

Here are the key events to consider, and please know you can write about more than one event from each category:

- **A positive memory for childhood:** For many people, a great place to begin is to write about a happy, wonderful memory from childhood, especially one that is about someone who really loved you.
- **A peak experience:** These are events that are especially positive, events in which you experienced joy, inspiration, wonder, excitement or something very positive. You might think of these as “life at it’s best” moments.
- **A low point:** These are events that are especially difficult or challenging. They can be moments of sadness, fear, despair, anger. You do not have to write about events that were traumatic—you can be careful here—but do write about a difficult event that affected you in some important way.
- **A turning point:** Turning points are moments in which your life moved in a new direction, moments in which an important decision or experience led to a change in yourself or in the direction your life was going.
- **A difficult memory from your early life.** It is important to revisit experiences from your formative years that were negative, difficult or challenging. Think about an event that happened sometime between when you were a child and teen-ager.
- **Receiving wisdom experience:** These are events in which you gained some profound new insight about yourself, about life, about how to live well.
- **Being wise:** These are events in which you acted in a way that was wise, in which you made an especially profound and good decision, or offered important

counsel to another person, or in some other way acted in a particularly prudent, sage, or insightful manner

- **Experiencing of agape:** These are times in which someone loved you in a way that was genuinely kind, compassionate and caring.
- **Offering agape:** These are times in which you were able to love another person in a way that was genuinely kind, compassionate and caring.
- **Transcendent, religious, or spiritual experience:** Write about a time in which you felt especially close to the sacred, to God, to nature, a time in which you experienced a profound sense of wonder, awe or inspiration.

Revise your table of contents

It might now be a good time to update your table of contents. Here you are mapping out at least some of the most important events from your life. As you revise your table of contents, what insights are emerging about how you became the person you are now?

Writing the details of you

You are now ready to write more specifically about yourself. As was the case with the other writing activities, take your time here. Be kind and generous to yourself. Write drafts that you can revise and update. And, try to be detailed and specific.

1. Your important capabilities. What are your strengths, gifts, talents, and aptitudes? What can you do well? What skills and abilities do you have? Claim them! Embrace them! Be grateful for them!
2. Your defining characteristics. Here, write about your personality, your important preferences, your interests, and anything that, for you, is central to who you are: gender, race, ethnicity, group affiliations, life passions, etc.
3. You core convictions. What are beliefs are most important to you? What are your core life values? How do you define what it means to live a good life, to be a good person?
4. Your shadow side. What are your important flaws, negative tendencies, your more negative characteristics? What are the things about yourself that you must guard against, those things most in need of change, redemption, forgiveness?

Once you finish writing about the details of who you are, you will have a much deeper, clearer and complex understanding of who you are. None of this writing will be fast, and much of it will take concerted effort. But science makes clear that engaging in this

process is good for us. And our religious and wisdom traditions echo that sentiment. So, an important gift you can give yourself, the people you love and serve, and the world is to know yourself better. In so doing, you can grow more fully into the best person you can be.