

Life Story Writing for Seniors

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I was born on March 22, 1904 in Tecumseh, Oklahoma -- Indian Territory. I am the youngest of ten children -- five boys and then five girls. I had two very wise and wonderful parents. When I was 18 months old, my papa and mama each filed a claim on adjoining land farther up near the Panhandle of Oklahoma. We must have been traveling in covered wagons because we had an organ and all good things of Mama's. Mama was taking her side saddle. Later she cut off the leather flaps and half-soled us kids' shoes. She was a very efficient lady.

So begins the "memoirs" of Goggie, who, at age 86, began writing her life story at the urging of her granddaughter. Over the next several years, Goggie wrote or told dozens of vignettes that described homestead life in the Wild West -- her father's accidental death, carving out a settlement in the midst of Indian country, her toys and playmates, holiday celebrations, the courtship and marriages of her siblings, her own marriage at the age of 17.

By the time Goggie reached her 90s, dementia had stolen her ability to write or even tell her own stories. Her daughters and grandchildren filled in the gaps, writing and telling those stories most familiar and beloved from their own experiences, and scribing Goggie's faltering reminiscences. When Goggie died at 95, her eulogy was crafted around the "memoirs" that had become a family heirloom. Her granddaughter fashioned the stories into a booklet, and this hand-made treasure will follow 13 great-grandchildren through the next generations.

One of the markers of a life well lived must surely be the stories, experiences and memories that are told, retold, remembered and re-experienced throughout the life span. Life story writing captures the priceless and the poignant, the truly memorable and the quirkily remembered, the historic and the unique. It leaves a legacy of living history for future generations. And it can bring enjoyment, satisfaction and closure in the last stage of life.

Of the many excellent books on autobiographical writing, perhaps the best for seniors is Lois Daniel's *How to Write Your Own Life Story*. Originally published in 1980, it came out of the author's sense that she had "completely failed" a 75-year-old student in a creative writing class:

When I asked each student to state his or her reason for joining the class, this lady's reason was that for several years her children had been begging her to write the story of her life. "I don't know how to do it," she said, "and I thought you might be able to help me." Frankly, I had no idea how to help her... I hadn't the faintest idea how to help a non-writer write the story of her life.

Daniel suggests writing in small sketches, tiny vignettes of a few sentences. In addition to genealogical and family life stories -- circumstances of birth, favorite toys, stories about siblings and grandparents -- she suggests topics such as:

Where were you on important days in history?
Accomplishments of which you are the most proud
Children and the things they say
Inventions
Brief encounters

The thought of writing a life retrospective can daunt even the most experienced writer, so it is small wonder that it might feel too huge to even start. Goggie's granddaughter engaged her through correspondence, writing letters that asked a specific question. She included a piece of stationery and a

self-addressed, stamped envelope, and most often received her answer within the week.

You asked me how we spent our Sunday afternoons. We went to community Pie Suppers, and we also had Box Suppers. The boxes were decorated with pretty paper and Mama made a handle on it with a big bow. We put lunches, doughnuts, cake or whatever we had -- goodies in the bag and it was auctioned off to the highest bidder to raise money for something. I'll never forget how Jim Rodgers never failed to get my oldest sister's box. He always paid the most. The auctioneers would see to that.

Life story writing is an excellent way to build community with other seniors. Anne Flaxman, a certified instructor with The Center for Journal Therapy, teaches memoir writing for seniors in Fairfield County, Connecticut, as well as traveling around the country seeding new life story writing groups. Benefits of writing in a structured class include the guidance of a writing prompt, the coaching of a trained facilitator, the enjoyment of hearing the stories of others, and the power of writing and sharing one's own story to a listening audience. Writing groups also decrease isolation, reawaken dormant interests, offer purposeful activity and hone cognitive skills.

"One of the most important thing that happens in a seniors memoir group," says Flaxman, " is the way these people begin to see their lives as jewels that have been polished through time and experience and living. They begin to see the beauty and uniqueness that their life has represented."

Flaxman's course, divided into 8 "chapters" or sessions, follows a chronological pathway through personal history. Seniors begin with "Before My Story Starts" (reflections on family history and ancestry) and end with "Before I Go" ("ethical wills" and other last words). The "ethical will" writing process begins with a list of 10 Things I Want My Loved Ones to Know - ethics, beliefs, mottos, other things seniors want others to know about what they have learned in their lifetimes. "From there," Flaxman said, "the ethical will evolves into a document that acknowledges and passes on the qualities, causes and values that an individual life has stood for. Lady Bird Johnson, for instance, might include in her ethical will the importance of natural beauty in everyday life, and the legacy of a more beautiful America."

Overall, Flaxman says, the seniors who pass through her classes learn to see themselves as part of a historical landscape that spans an entire century - and they are frequently awed at the way their individual lives have intersected and almost touched. "Three people in one class saw the Hindenburg on its last day," she said. "One saw it fly overhead, one saw smoke in the next field, and one's father was a doctor who was called to the scene."

Sometimes fragile bones or faltering senses make physical writing difficult or impossible. Family members or support persons can assist by scribing "spoken poems." To maintain authentic voice, preserve language exactly as it is heard, including phonetic spellings and idiosyncratic grammar:

*I played by myself a lot.
Up in the orchard, playing with the frogs and the birds.
One time I got too close to a scissor-tail bird's nest in the orchard
and it swept down and touched my hair on top.
Maybe you think I didn't scam from the orchard
hollering "Mama! Mama!"
Once I caught a big frog and a little frog
and I tied the little frog to its mother's back
so it wouldn't have to walk.
I learned to whistle up in the orchard.*

Family members can also be encouraged to contribute their own memories for additional perspective. Goggie's daughter writes:

She made all our clothes. We can't remember ever having seen a store-bought pattern in the house, but we do remember fidgeting impatiently while she begged us to stand still long enough for her to take our measurements. Then she would lay newspaper out on the table and cut out the patterns for our puffed

sleeve, full-skirted dresses.

The compiling of the stories, often done by a grandchild or great-grandchild who can self-publish the family's limited edition from his or her computer, is its own process and deserves its own article. Goggie's granddaughter spoke her eulogy, compiled of stories chronicled over the years, and continues the story for another generation:

I did not fully see the beauty in my grandmother's life until I delivered her eulogy. I did not see the enormous tapestry of creative threads. All manner of craft. Nothing left out -- sewing, fabric art, macrame, pillow tufting, embroidery, rug hooking, crocheting, knitting, jewelry-making, singing, recording, painting, sculpting, woodworking, rock polishing, gardening, dancing. She did it all, with the possible exception of writing, and she did that at the end. This original voice, this pioneer woman educated for nine years in a one-room schoolhouse lived a brilliantly creative life. What an honor it is to be her grandchild.

Writing Your Life Story: Six Suggestions for Seniors

- 1. Write in small sketches** of 5-10 minutes on specific topics, such as a favorite holiday, the first job, a memorable world event.
- 2. Engage family members in the process.** Invite correspondence, or ask nearby relatives to scribe "spoken poems" by writing down everything that is said, in your exact words.
- 3. Join a life story or memoir writing group.** Ask at your senior center, library, or doctor's office. If a writing group doesn't exist, see if you can get one started.
- 4. Tell the stories of how you participated in world history.** Where were you when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? How did you and your family spend the Great Depression years? Where were you when President Kennedy was assassinated?
- 5. Write your "ethical will."** What life learnings, personal philosophies, mottos, and core values do you want to leave as legacy to your descendants? How did you learn these lessons or acquire these philosophies?
- 6. Ask someone** in your family with computer skills to compile your stories into a self-published memoir. Scan in family photos and memorabilia for illustration.