

**How To Write A Memoir**  
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While it may be true that everyone has a story to tell, it's not true that anyone can write a professional memoir – at least not without some help. If you're interested in writing a memoir geared toward mass publication, the following tips can help you strategically consider your steps, organize relevant material, and create an income-earning story of life.

I'm going to use my first memoir, *[Overlay: One Girl's Life in 1970s Las Vegas](#)*, as one of the examples to illustrate memoir story structure. I'll also reference several other books:

*[The Splendid Things We Planned](#)* by Blake Bailey, which is about a family devastated by the eldest son's addiction.

*[Angela's Ashes](#)* by Frank McCourt (my favorite memoir of all time) which is about the effects of a father's alcoholism upon his family.

*[Another Hill and Sometimes a Mountain](#)* by breakout author, Tim Green (whom I coached on writing his memoir) is NOT about alcoholism or addiction, but surviving the foster care system and HIV.

For this structure section, I'm going to be borrowing from two books by Kenneth Atchity, which I've recently read. Mr. Atchity is an American producer and author who has worked in the world of storytelling as a literary manager, editor, speaker, writing and career coach, columnist, book reviewer, brand consultant, and professor of comparative literature.

The two books I will be referencing include:

*[Tell Your Story to the World and Sell it for Millions](#)*

*[Sell Your Story to Hollywood: Writer's Pocket Guide to the Business of Show Business](#)*

**Story Structure**

Every story has five primary ingredients. While you may be hearing this for the first time, you have no doubt been conditioned by Hollywood to expect to see what I'm going to describe.

- 1. Character: a protagonist and an antagonist;**
- 2. Conflict: what would happen if ...**
- 3. Scene: the setting where the action expresses the conflict;**
- 4. Overall Structure: 3 acts, which include the beginning, the middle, and the end;**
- 5. Theme: the point – which is usually deduced at the end.**

Let's briefly dive into each element of story structure.

**First, you must have strong characters which include a sympathetic protagonist and a challenging antagonist.**

Today's stories usually include an ally for each, as well as a love interest for the protagonist.

The protagonist is generally introduced right in the beginning, and it's around this character that you will build all the action.

Your protagonist is your hero who performs the actions and undergoes the experiences that create the story's conflict. Your audience needs to know what the protagonist is about, understand their motivation, and experience their growth as they move through the story.

You also need a challenging and worthy antagonist to act against the protagonist as the conflict created between the two is what moves the drama forward and keeps your reader engaged. As with the protagonist, your audience also wants to understand who and what the antagonist is and experience their changes as the story progresses.

The antagonist does not need to be a specific villain.

In *Overlay*, *The Splendid Things We Planned*, and *Angela's Ashes*, for example, the antagonist is alcoholism or addiction, and secondarily, poverty and mental illness.

I expressed the antagonists through the characters, as there were several primary alcoholic characters such as my father, mother, stepfathers, etc. as did Blake Bailey through his brother and Frank McCourt through his father. Tim Green's antagonist was being parentless and growing up in foster care and how he developed specific survival patterns to survive.

### **The second element of a story is conflict.**

We are conditioned to see some level of conflict in every scene. There are two key questions to ask to see how you are expressing conflict:

*"What would happen if X or Y happened?"*

*"What would happen if the person in my book faces a crisis?"*

In *Overlay*, the young protagonist, me, faces the crisis of her parent's continuing alcoholism, and the variety of problems created by their addiction. The protagonist versus the family alcoholism is the conflict, and all the other conflicts are just the myriad of awful misfortunes due to the primary conflict.

The same pattern is in *Splendid Things* and *Angela's Ashes*.

### **Third, you must have scenes, rather than one long vomit.**

We need ups and downs to keep us engaged.

The scene is where the action expresses the conflict. Scenes can also be called 'the stage within the stage,' where conflict occurs between characters.

Each scene, or unit, should ideally follow a specific pattern:

- Set in a particular place which is essential to dramatizing the story;

- Has a beginning, a middle, and an end;
- The beginning places a character in a setting with an obstacle;
- In the middle the character deals with growing complications of the obstruction;
- The character is extracted from the scene with a hook to the next scene.

The adage for constructing a scene is:

*Act one, get your character up a tree*

*Act two, throw stones at them*

*Act three, get them down.*

In *Another Hill*, author Tim Green must confront the reality of his second foster home, which places him up the tree. The stones thrown at him are the various challenges of living in foster care with a revolving door of 14 brothers and sisters. Getting down from the tree is aging out of the system and moving on to college. Each scene must have a beginning, middle, and end, as well as what we'll discuss next.

#### **Fourth, you must have structure throughout the entire story as well.**

The clear structure that must exist in a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, or what is often called the three acts. Again, this is the structure of the book itself.

**Act 1:** Introduce the protagonist and their weak spot, which should hook the reader. Some authors start with a flashback. *The Glass Castle* opens in this way as the adult protagonist, Jeannette Walls, is in a taxi and happens to look out the window and see her mother digging through the trash. She then transitions into telling the story of her childhood.

The first act should get our attention immediately, as you establish your protagonist in a forward direction and an antagonist who will become the obstacle. Bring them together in a scene that turns the protagonist away from his obstacle. In *Overlay*, I established myself as a young child in a home with a mother who doesn't pay attention to my drunk father or me.

**Act 2:** The set up is complete once the audience is hooked into the protagonist's situation. Next, you challenge the protagonist with a mission – which all too often in a memoir is to survive the antagonist's obstacles.

The mission includes all the crazy-making that generally happens in a memoir — the roller-coaster ride of mayhem and stuff that children in unstable homes experience. Act 2 ends when you've brought your characters to climax point – where all is resolved one way or another.

In *Another Hill*, Tim Green, after having lost so many dear friends to AIDS, accepts his HIV status and begins medical treatment.

In *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt has finally saved enough money to get the heck out of Ireland and moved to New York City.

**Act 3:** Conclude the mission decisively in a satisfying way. Note: this does not mean a happy ending,

but it should be compelling.

This climax should satisfy the audience's expectations for a conclusive ending, whether happy or tragic.

In *Overlay*, my parents do not stop drinking, so the antagonist isn't beat. However, my character does leave home and move to California, and that's where the story ends. Same with *Angela's Ashes*, as Frank McCourt ends his memoir having moved to New York.

In *Splendid Things*, the book ends with the death of the author's brother. It isn't happy – as Scott doesn't reach sobriety – but it is conclusive. We know that with Scott's passing, that portion of the family's suffering is at an end.

### **Finally, you must have a theme.**

The theme is the moral, or the takeaway from the story, which is revealed once we know how the story ends. There are the typical themes that are revealed once you resolve the conflict. We tend to expect happy endings, but most of us know that won't be the case.

In *Splendid Things* – you can't beat Mother Nature. The author's brother, Scott, was destined to die from his disease.

In *Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls' parents don't have happy endings. Only she does, via her escape from childhood.

## **Questions about writing memoir**

### **Question: Where do I start?**

**Answer: Begin with the action. Keep in mind that you are writing a memoir - not an autobiography.**

#### **A memoir**

- Is about an aspect, theme, event, or choice in a life
- Can start or end anywhere in a life
- Is personal, not entirely factual
- Can be written by anyone

#### **An autobiography**

- Details an entire life
- Starts at the beginning and progresses chronologically to the end
- Is historical, factual and date-specific
- Is usually about famous people

Consider the aspect, theme, event, or choice that will be the heart of your memoir, and focus on the relevant material.

Our birth usually isn't relevant to the action, but in *Another Hill*, Tim Green begins with his birth

because it provides an interesting opening clue to the story. “I was a blue baby, having been born with what's called a nuchal cord. The umbilical cord – my sole source of oxygen – was wrapped tightly about my neck.”

He concludes this section with, “Strike one against my birth mother, Lenore.”

We're hooked. Tim's opening drives curiosity: *What else did Lenore do to Tim? What were the other strikes?*

In *Splendid Things*, Blake Bailey also begins with his brother's birth: “My brother Scott was born in 1960 and screamed a lot as a baby, until one night my parents left him in their dorm room at NYU and proceeded to the roof, where a locked door prevented them from splattering themselves on a MacDougal Street sidewalk.”

We're hooked: From birth, Scott was painful for his parents. *What else did he do?*

In *Overlay*, my birth wasn't relevant so I begin with foreshadowing, by saying to my mother, “I will never drink or smoke.”

We're hooked: *why would a four year old child say such a thing?*

### **Question: Do I tell the truth?**

**Answer: Memoir writing is a skilled form of storytelling based on fact.**

Did you know the word 'memoir' has its origin in the French word for 'memory' or 'reminiscence'? Memory certainly doesn't have a reputation for being infallible. Like memory, a memoir isn't fool-proof either. A common criticism by memoir readers is that they doubt the details of the story without understanding it as the art form it is.

Some earlier reviews from *Overlay*, read:

*“How could anyone remember these details?”*

*“A great deal of literary license taken unless we are to believe such detailed recall by a child.”*

*“I imagine she did keep journals but I am sure some of the events were embellished.”*

Those looking for factual accounts of life should be reading autobiographies.

Memoirs are personal collections of memories told from a life that can cover aspects, themes, events, and choices in a life. They can start or end at any point.

Anyone considering their memory will see they can and have been wrong in their impressions when compared to factual reality. I think while we can safely assume all the characters in a memoir existed, it is the memoirist's impression of them we are committed to read.

A memoir will contain impressions of people, circumstances, and places, and no one can argue with a person's perception. (Or at least we shouldn't.)

As an aside, one rule I teach memoirists is never publish anything you don't feel comfortable reading to

the person you're writing about.

In *Angeles*, my second memoir, I ran a chapter by an ex-boyfriend whom I dated for quite a few years. He didn't even want his family mentioned, so they are absent from the story.

**Question: “How do I make it sound more like a story and less like a diary entry?”**

**Answer: Weave storytelling elements around the facts.**

While there is no mathematical equation for how many facts should be in a memoir, it is understood that a memoirist is going to weave a story around the facts. A memoirist doesn't generally claim that every single word in a memoir happened as written, as total recall is rare indeed.

A story written in entirely recalled chronological action would be kind of boring.

The act of weaving memory and story will likely affect recalled conversations, impressions, and periods. You can also omit material when it comes to keeping a story exciting or for other reasons.

In *Overlay*, I omitted some of the darkest material in order not to overwhelm the reader. The first few beta readers couldn't finish the book and said it was too dark, like walking off a cliff. People had a hard enough time believing what I did leave in the story!

**Question: Can I take creative license and make stuff up?**

**Answer: Yes!**

My latest memoir, *Rest In Places: My Father's Post-Life Journey Around The World*, tells the story of my experience taking my father's ashes on a healing journey with my 16-year-old son. I've included chapters that my deceased father 'wrote' when I sat before my laptop and asked him aloud what he thought about the latest place where we had disseminated his ashes. My father had passed and did not write these chapters. However, in my mind, he did. That, to me, is the point of memoirism.

Being a memoirist requires skill in weaving, and if you don't have it to start, you'd be wise to develop it during the course of writing your memoir. Creating art from real life requires storytelling talent, a good memory, and skill in combining the two.

While it's easy to record events, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations in a diary or journal, the recording of actual events and people isn't necessarily impressive. You must weave the threads of reality into a tale that others will find exciting and compelling. You can interlace facts with creative description and events with ring-side interpretation. Characters and action can be presented and sometimes shaded as the memoirist sees fit. You needn't necessarily tell the reader anything in particular, and can merely present, or partially describe without definition.

I feel we should collectively appreciate the genre of memoir for what it is – storytelling woven around a foundation of fact. This way, we can enjoy the ride the memoirist provides without picking apart the details and evaluating our impression of their truthfulness. Let's appreciate the memoirist's effort to deliver a product that has the power to teach, enlighten, illuminate and just possibly – change the way you view the world because you've experienced the viewpoint of another.

**Question: What are the benefits of writing a memoir?**

**Answer: Aside from sharing the depths of your soul, your experience will help others.**

When I was a child I read a story by Richard Bach in which he wrote that the only way for the creator of the universe to experience all there was to experience was to create enough people to live out all the varieties of possibilities.

One person and one lifetime wouldn't be enough to do it all, see it all, or live it all. This concept has stuck with me all these years, and colors the way I look at the things people do, the way they choose to live their lives, and as well the things that inexplicably “just happen.”

Since we are all living different lives and experiencing different ways of being, we like to know the stories of others: this is how we experience humanity as a whole, outside of our lives. It's obvious how stories help a reader, but how does sharing our stories help a writer?

From the age of 10, I was a diarist. Then a journalist. Then a blogger. My adult blog posts led to more in-depth analysis of my personal experiences. My posts then became noticed by others who could relate. This in turn led to friendships, deeper self-analysis, refined writing skills, noticing my part of humanity, and the subsequent desire to transcribe crucial parts of my life into a book which became *Overlay*.

My years of blogging and interacting with others endowed me with an insight as to what others might think and feel about similar experiences. This knowledge helped me shape my final draft of *Overlay* into a form I felt would appeal to others. I believe this appeal is because I spent so much time writing as personal therapy. I was able to craft a memoir that was honest, straightforward and lacked pity and blame. I'd worked all the feelings, emotions, thoughts and blame out years before in prior writing. *Overlay* is now a powerful story that stands on its own, rather than a whispered, unsure confession of the not-yet-healed.

**Question: What can I do to help tell the story?**

**Answer: Use your setting as a tool to tell your story.**

Consider the time, place, house, city, country, and world where your memoir takes place. Growing up poor in California would be a completely different story if the character grew up in a wealthy family in Dubai. Explore unique flavors by considering what is particular about your account and using it to help you speak.

The era matters too. The world of our grandparents was different from that of our parents, and our period is different from that of our children's. How were people expected to behave in your setting/era? What can you suggest with your characters keeping with or breaking from the norm of their time?

**Question: What if I can't remember certain things?**

**Answer: Get creative in locating extraneous material.**

I keep an informal computer journal, just as I kept a handwritten diary for thirty years. No one reads it

but me, and it's not fancy or eloquent. When I'm ready, I copy the entries into what will become a memoir. Then I rewrite, delete, or decorate the words, ideas, and thoughts as needed. Very few entries, if any, are interesting as initially written. They have no style in the beginning: they take form and develop substance as the style of the memoir develops itself. Only sometimes (okay, never) is the style initially and consistently apparent in a first draft.

I also copy emails and letters and diary entries I've written into my memoirs.

Letters and photographs are also good sources of material and of great help in finding your voice.

Google anything and everything. For my mother's memoir, [\*Miss Perris Valley\*](#), I googled:

- *popular 1940s toys*
- *1950s sayings*
- *Morenci, Arizona*
- *1940s Burbank California businesses*

**Question: How do I write dialogue?**

**Answer: Include dialogue to 'show' and not 'tell.'**

It's unlikely you'll be including the exact wording of conversations as they happened, so designing conversations is a fantastic opportunity to be creative. Once you've written your conversations, read them aloud to ensure they make sense.

Pay particular attention to the following:

The use of the character's names should not be used any more often than one does in real conversation (which is usually only upon greeting, trying to get someone's attention, or departing.)

The use of slang should be realistic and not overdone unless it's essential for character development.

The use of verbs such as said, hinted, whispered, etc. should not be included unless they're vital to a scene.

Using any word other than says or said should be very limited. Words such as exclaimed, shouted, emoted, pouted, cried, yelled, screamed, whispered, etc. should only be used when necessary.

For example, two children are hiding from a bad guy. Naturally, any communication is going to be *whispered*.

**Question: Any other advice on how to write a memoir?**

**Audience: Consider your audience as you're writing.**

What do you want to communicate? What are your goals? Imagine the emails you'd like to receive from your readers. Are they thanking you or identifying with you? Have you taught them something? Did you make them laugh or cry?



It's never too early to start thinking about your audience. Consider who will buy your books. Who is the typical reader you have in mind? Is the reader male or female? Young, teen, middle-age, mature? Where do they live? What do they do? What is their history? What is their economic status? Consider their daily lives. Their hobbies. Hopes. Dreams. Fears.

How will reading your book affect your reader? Are you teaching or enlightening? What would your reader like to get from your book: lessons, sympathy, empathy, inspiration, healing, entertainment, skills?

Now write directly to them.

**Question: How do I tell a terrible story about a bad person?**

**Answer: This is the tough one, but I suggest you err on allowing your characters their privacy.**

Don't publish anything you couldn't read aloud to the very person you're discussing. Think of the adage 'you can't unring a bell.' Once you've put the words out into the world, they are there forever.

The biggest challenge I've found as a memoirist is hiding a character's identity. This issue has proven so impossible in several instances that I've had to cut some juicy story material from my book for fear of exposing someone I did not wish to identify. Unfortunately, burying a character in another period or another country doesn't prove to be enough of a disguise at times.

**Question: What should be in a first draft?**

**Answer: Just write it all down.**

Think of the draft as the fun part of planning a memoir. It's where you get to lay out your ideas about how you think your story will progress. Think is the keyword, as you will undoubtedly need to make some changes along the way - so be easy on yourself. Consider this draft a rough-sketch of how you plan your story to be. Don't be afraid to dream: your draft is your private playground where no bullies exist, and you will win every game, run the fastest and be chosen first for every team. This is your field of victory – so be wild, go big and lay it all out there.

For example, once I'd completed my first draft of *Overlay*, I deleted the first three chapters as they didn't add to the story. I also deleted people that didn't add to the action.

**Question: How long is a book?**

**Answer: As long as it needs to be.**

According to my research, books, in general, tend to be approximately 70,000 – 79,999 words on the short end to 110,000 words on the longer end. Memoirs tend to run around 70,000 – 80,000 words. Of course, there are exceptions. If your memoir is one of them, make it worthwhile.

Don't fall into the trap of including absolutely everything that happened just because it did and you feel you need to be truthful. Don't think you need to mention everyone you ever met. Remember, you are creating a work of art with your life story, and it should be compelling and entertaining to your readers.

**Question: Should I do all the work myself?**

**Answer: NO!**

The final and most important step will differentiate 'the story everyone has inside them' from a professional memoir: hire other professionals to do what they do best.

When I was in the marketing consulting business, we called this, 'Pay others to do their best and highest good.' In other words, don't waste your time trying to do less than an excellent job.

These professionals include:

- Developmental/content editor
- Line editor
- Proofreader
- Cover designer
- Formatter

I hope these tips will be helpful as you set out on your memoir journey. Keep in mind that there is no right way to tell a story. Although *Overlay*, *The Glass Castle*, *Angela's Ashes* and many other memoirs deal with an alcoholic father, each story is entirely unique.

Your voice is your own.

Congratulations on sharing your version of your story!