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Senior Wellness Series

Creating an Autobiography: A Family Keepsake

FACT SHEET 09-03



References:

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Creating an Autobiography: A Family Keepsake



An autobiography is the history of a person's life told or written by that person. Everyone has an interesting story to tell, whether they enjoyed a wonderful life or experienced hardship. Writing an autobiography is a great way to capture those stories as well as define the times you lived in. Life-story telling can also be in the form of diaries, personal journals, memoirs, family history through genealogy, novels, historical documents, even songs and comics.

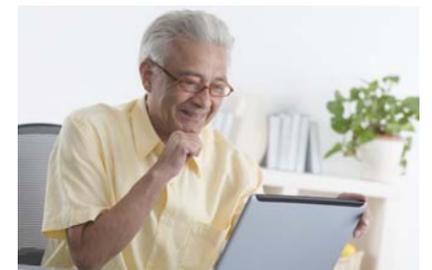
A body of literature identifies the importance of personal narratives to improve memory and promote self-esteem that can lead to extended independence and more successful aging. The life history process is comprised of four incremental action steps: thinking, talking, writing and sharing. The process offers a way to tell your stories, both as a means of being heard and as means for providing your family with a document of historical value.

Get Writing

To begin writing your autobiography, refer to the *Creating an Autobiography: Starting the Process*. Writing tips include:

- ▶ Choose a format for your story—one page sketch to book length manuscript in the form of traditional writing, poetry, artwork or even a cookbook.
- ▶ Think about an aspect of your life you would like to memorialize—a family tradition, favorite vacation or how you met your spouse.
- ▶ Include dates, places, names, sights, smells, emotions and consider using photos.
- ▶ Don't be discouraged by a naysayer or painful memories and never discard any of your writings.
- ▶ Remember, we all have a story to tell and it is important to our family and friends.

Consider typing your autobiography using a computer. This will offer you the opportunity to easily view, edit, save and print your story. Plus the document can be readily available to your computer-savvy family! Public computers are available at senior centers and libraries for such projects. If you do not use a computer, consider asking a family member or friend for assistance.



Get Sharing



During the writing process you may want to share your story with others. Friends or family can sometimes offer suggestions after reading or hearing your story. This may help you expand on a particular event, develop another story idea, continue with your project enthusiasm or simply keep your creative juices flowing!

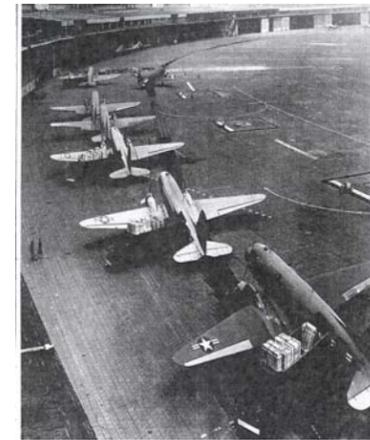
- ▶ After reading or hearing your story, have others ask you further questions. This will help to draw out more details so that the word pictures they present are even more clear. Remember feelings, smells, tastes and other descriptive details that make the story come alive. However, don't get carried away by adding unimportant details as this will bog down your story.
- ▶ Ask your family members if they have anything, like a photo, that could be included in your autobiography. Perhaps they may even have a family-related item, an old toy or holiday ornament, that will spark a story idea. Adding treasured photos, letters or other memorabilia will produce quality final products that can become family heirlooms.
- ▶ Use this story sharing time, and eventually your completed autobiography, to connect and build relationships with close neighbors, new and old friends, siblings, children and grandchildren. This is an opportunity for people to learn about you and the people, places and things from your life. Grandchildren will love stories about 5-cent candy bars, life before television and that day you got into trouble at school!
- ▶ During the writing process consider copying your short stories on decorative paper and share them with your family and friends as special occasion gifts.
- ▶ When sharing your stories with others, never give them the original copy. Make sure that you too have another copy of your autobiography.
- ▶ Be careful to share your stories only with people who are supportive of the process. (See "Beware of Boo-birds" in *Creating an Autobiography: Starting the Process*.)
- ▶ If you are unable to write or do not have someone who can write your story consider an oral or video personal history. The advantage is that your voice and image will be recorded as well as your story. The disadvantage is you will need special equipment and materials, and making copies to distribute will be more difficult.
- ▶ And finally, enjoy the autobiography writing process.

Useful Tools



- ▶ Three-ring binder notebook. Use one with a see through view pocket on the cover so you can print and insert a cover page.
- ▶ Legal sized note pad. The note pad should fit the binder and be hole punched. This will allow you to start each topic on a new page and have the ability to move pages around.
- ▶ Pen.

"At Christmas we always put up a green tree and decorated it with ornaments, chocolates, peppermint candy sticks and strings of colored paper. One Christmas I received a doll which I loved and also some new clothing. We had a good Christmas. Though that Spring, when I was around 12 years old Adolf Hitler was always news on the radio and the newspaper. He was now our Reich's Fuehrer and we had to greet each other by raising our arm and saying 'Heil Hitler' instead of 'Good Morning'."



"I was so happy when the war was over in 1945 and I received a job as an interpreter (German/English) at the airbase at Tempelhof, Germany. Unfortunately, I thought a lot of the soldiers were speaking a different language and it took me several weeks to learn and understand the different English dialects from where they came from in the United States. During the day I worked in the payroll office doing the officer's pay vouchers and their flight pay. In the evening I worked in the officer's club. There I met my second husband and would soon come to the United States."



Autobiography Example By Edith, 83

For additional autobiography writing information review *Creating an Autobiography: Starting the Process*.