



NEW WRITING
NORTH
YOUNG WRITERS



Introducing Life Writing and Memoir

You don't have to be a celebrity to write your life story. Every person on earth is unique, with their own experiences, their own failures and successes and their own wisdom to impart. Many of the world's most successful memoirs have been written by very 'ordinary' people - and even if you don't show your life writing to anyone, it can influence how you develop characters in your fiction, or the issues you might want to explore in poetry, song lyrics or scriptwriting.

Don't forget: in life writing, the 'life' doesn't have to be yours! You may realise that you want to help record the memories and experiences of friends or family members.

Key elements of life writing

- Honesty – life writing should be, as far as you can manage, a true account of something that happened. However, this doesn't mean that you can't be creative in them, using lots of the techniques you would normally find in fiction.
- A theme – it would be impossible to condense every single memory you have into one piece of writing. That's why memoirs often centre around a theme, location or a particular family member.
- Emotion – This is true of anything you write, but it's particularly important for readers to feel emotionally connected to a piece of memoir or life writing.

Important definitions

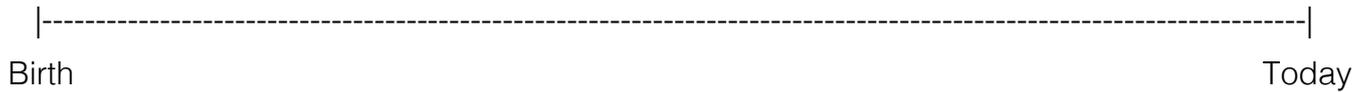
Life writing: An umbrella term covering is the recording of memories and experiences, whether our own or somebody else's. This can include autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, and letters.

Memoir: A book that you write about yourself or someone who you have known well. Memoirs tend to focus on a specific time, issue or theme rather than detail somebody's life from birth to death.

Biography: An account of somebody's life that is written by somebody else.

Autobiography: An account of somebody's life that they write themselves.

Warm Up:



Copy the timeline above, and use it to record four or five significant moments in your life so far, in chronological order. Don't be shy about writing about your own life, but if you'd rather not, you could ask a friend family member about their memories, or even pick a fictional character you know well.

Examples: starting school, moving house, becoming an older brother or sister

Then, draw the timeline again, but this time record four or five moments in your life that are still valuable to you, but might be considered 'smaller' or less significant.

Examples: the first time your dad took you fishing, learning to ride a bike, going on a great holiday, a meal you particularly remember.

Take a second to think about all of the above memories and how they made you feel. Are there any words that strike you straight away? Any overriding feelings of happiness or sadness? Have the memories above opened the door to other memories?

Life writing doesn't have to cover the most monumental events in a person's life. Some of the most effective pieces explore what happens outside of that event, like a camera panning around to look at what nobody else is focusing on. You may zoom in on tiny details, or tell the story from the perspective of the most unlikely person in the room. You can experiment with the order that you tell the story, with what you don't say being just important as what you do.

Get Inspired:

Novelist, poet and Scots Makar (the National Poet of Scotland) Jackie Kay was raised in 1960s Glasgow by her adoptive parents, John and Helen. 'Red Dust Road' is a book about her 20-year search to find her birth parents and understand more about her identity.

Read through chapter one via the link below, in which Kay meets her father for the first time in a hotel in Abuja, Nigeria.

<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/red-dust-road-a-world-book-night-book>

Some things to think about

- What tense does she begin the chapter in – past or present? How does this affect the pace or the sense of urgency?
- What do you learn about Nigeria and about the Hilton Hotel in this chapter? Can you describe the location in a sentence or two?
- How does Jackie Kay use humour in this chapter? Can you pick out a couple of funny moments?
- What do we learn about her adoptive parents?

Give it a Try:

Spend approximately 30 minutes writing about somebody you met that has changed your life. You can interpret this in many different ways: you could be meeting your baby brother for the first time, meeting your best friend on your first day at school, or even a teacher who has had a really positive influence on you. How did this meeting alter the course of your life?

Some things to think about

- Create a sensory experience. What did the street, hospital or classroom smell like? Were you drinking a syrupy Coca Cola in McDonalds at the time? Was it cold or hot outside? Was your heart beating rapidly?
- Use dialogue if relevant. Try to recreate the phrases, slang words or other unique qualities of that person's speech. Do they have an accent? Is their voice gruff, or smooth and inviting?
- Don't start at the beginning – drop us right into the thick of what is happening. Don't worry, we'll catch up!
- Show vulnerability. Talk about your emotions. Work out ways of showing us how you feel without saying it – for example, if you are nervous, are your hands shaking? Are your eyes darting around the room?
- Don't give everything away – make sure the reader understands enough of what is happening, but leave them wanting to find out what comes next.

Challenge Yourself:

You've written your first piece of life writing. Well done! So what next?

Follow up exercise: Fast Forward

If you're enjoying this piece of writing and want to carry on with it, try this: fast forward to a time where you put what you learnt from this important meeting into practice. For example – if meeting your football coach taught you about determination, did you use that determination to improve your grades at school? If you wrote about a friend that taught you kindness, did you remember that when you saw somebody being bullied, and stood up for them?

You might only fast-forward a couple of days, but it could be months or years. Whatever works for your story.

Editing your work

Nobody – not even a bestselling author – writes the perfect story on their first try. Editing your work is just as important as writing it, so take some time to go back through what you've written and think about the words you have used, the feelings that your piece creates, the pace of the sentences, and whether anything should be added or taken away to make it even better.

Trying something different

Fancy another life writing exercise?

Head over to <https://www.behindthename.com/> and type your first name into the search bar. Which country does your name come from? What does it say about you? Is it common or rare in your community?

Now, begin a piece of life writing with the phrase 'My name means...'. You could work this into the piece you started earlier, or start something brand new.

Explore Further:

Here are some great memoirs and biographies to read to learn more about this fascinating genre.

'Boy: Tales of Childhood' by Roald Dahl

Beloved children's author Roald Dahl describes his boyhood in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, including the experiences that inspired him to write some of his most famous books.

'I am Malala', by Malala Yousafzai and Patricia McCormick (Young Readers' Edition)

The story of the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize winner, Malala Yousafzai, and her fight for an education whilst growing up in Pakistan.

'Hidden Figures' by Margot Lee Shetterly (Young Readers' Edition)

The amazing true story of four African American female mathematicians at NASA whose dedication and drive for equality helped launch some of the first rockets into space.

'The Diary of a Young Girl' by Anne Frank

The diary of thirteen-year-old Jewish girl Anne Frank who, along with seven other family members and friends, spent two years hiding from the Nazis in a cramped annex in Amsterdam.

'Educated' by Tara Westover

Tara Westover's family is so isolated from mainstream society that she never went to school or to the hospital, and many of her siblings didn't even have birth certificates. This is a great coming-of-age memoir about the consequences of breaking family ties in the quest for an education.

'No Summit out of Sight' by Jordan Romero

The truly inspiring story of the youngest person to climb the seven summits – the highest mountain in each continent, including Everest and Kilimanjaro.

This workshop was devised by Bridget Hamilton for New Writing North Young Writers.



Bridget Hamilton is a non-fiction writer and audio producer from Newcastle, who works with New Writing North on our Young Writers' City programme.

New Writing North Young Writers is a programme for young people aged 12-19. We run creative writing groups, masterclasses and programmes in schools across the North East. We support young people to express their ideas, to work with professional writers and artists, to create and share new work, and to meet other young writers.

We would love to read your writing! Share it with us on social media using #writingfromhome or by emailing youngwriters@newwritingnorth.com. Search for New Writing North Young Writers on Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, where we will also be sharing regular writing prompts. Each week we will select a Young Writer of the Week whose work will be shared on our channels.

Find other writing workshops and much more on our website www.newwritingnorth.com

**NEW WRITING
NORTH**



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**