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About the Author

Mary Wallman has written a few short stories. She had some [sales](#), but she was interested in trying new types of [writing](#).

She heard some stories of older members of her family which few in the [family](#) knew much about. Mary thought that the stories should be recorded for later generations before many of the details were lost.

People often suffered [memory](#) loss through ill [health](#) or their written records were lost.

Mary contacted some of the older family members and recorded their stories for sharing, if they agreed, with the wider family.

Mary said, "This was a great idea. It benefitted so many people! The subjects were happy that their lives would be read by later generations and the other people were able to read and know more about family members of the past."

"This is a great form of writing which anyone can do. You don't need any [training](#), just a sincere interest, a [pen](#) or laptop and a recording device."

"People had young [children](#) who could read about their ancestors' lives and [thoughts](#). The older people were pleased their stories were to be shared."

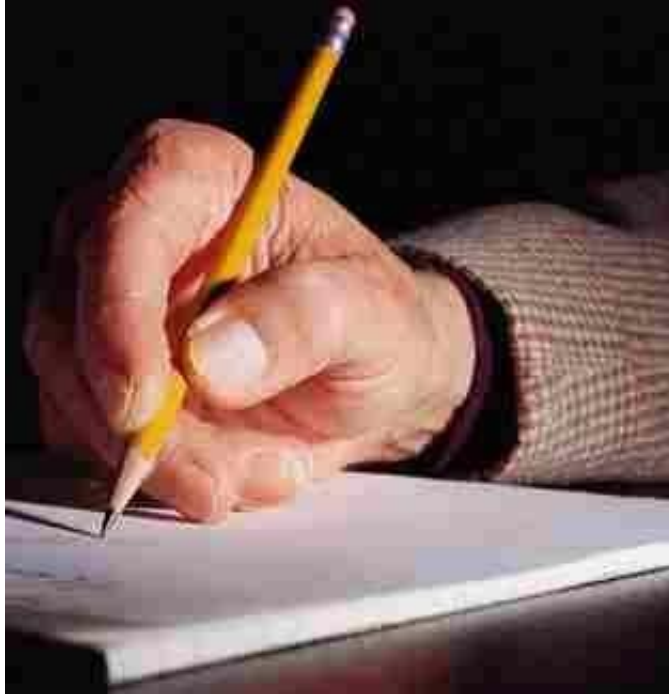
"This made for better understanding of each other and encouraged more contact as well."

Mary said that her writing improved because she wanted to get the best possible results for them.

After Mary had helped do a couple of memoirs, other people wanted to pay her to do a memoir for their families.

Introduction

In every family, there are people with very interesting stories which they never [talk](#) about, let alone record for others to read and learn from.



Common examples are the stories of the family members that served in the military forces. Many will not share the full details of those experiences with anyone except their ex-service friends who also had some of those experiences.

A lot of valuable information is uncovered when diaries and other

documents and [photos](#) are found when their effects are collected by their grieving families.

But, those documents often have gaps or are hard to relate to because so the background to the events and the reasons for their actions were not included in any sort of record.

This is one reason behind the growing interest in recording family members' [life](#) stories. Their times and experiences can be shared with and better understood by later generations.

Almost anyone can do this task. But, few do because they have busy lives and many competing demands on their time.

I wrote my [book](#) to help you do this for your own family members.

This can be a [source](#) of [income](#) if you offer it as a service to other people.

When you have some experience, people will want you to do this for them and their families.

The costs are low to start. The heaviest demands are on your time and commitment to complete a [project](#).

The rewards can be many. People recognize the effort required to produce a good memoir more easily than they understand the achievement of [writing](#) a good short story.

When you produce a great memoir it gives you great satisfaction and a unique legacy for the person whose [memories](#) it contains.

There are people who already do this work but the field is wide-open.

You don't need special writing or other [skills](#).

You can hire an experienced person to edit it.

But a memoir gets much of its effect from being a record in the subject's own words, so you must get an experienced editor who has done similar work before.

You will benefit in many ways even when you do the memoir without payment.

Your name will become better known as people read the memoir.

The contact with family members will give you more interesting experiences and [knowledge](#) about human nature.

This can lead to other writing assignments with memoirs or other projects.

After you have your first memoir produced, you will be recognized as a writer who can handle important work.

Hurry Slowly

It takes some time to get even a little professional polish.

Although you might become a great memoir producer after some time, don't be too eager to put up your sign and seek some professional work in the area.

Listen to the recording of each [interview](#) you do for a memoir.

At first, they will seem almost perfect.

But, after a while, you will start to recognize bits, particularly in the first few, which you could have done much better.

This ability to review and learn from your own work only comes with time and experience.

Getting Started

The best way to learn to write a memoir is to read through this [book](#) and then follow the stages from writing a short version using material gathered from just one interview with a relative to where you might consider offering the service to other families outside of your own,

The main factor which will decide your potential [success](#) is the sum of your personal qualities. Respect in your dealings with all types of people and trustworthiness will be more significant for your success with memoirs than any paper qualification.

The rest can be learned from your apprenticeship doing free short memoirs for relatives and even friends’ families.

After all, memoirs are intensely personal and all the interactions you have when preparing them will have a lot of emotion behind them, even if they are not talked about.

Each step to producing a memoir needs to be done with [care](#) for the arrangements and consideration for the people involved.

You may want to start by [writing](#) your personal memoir. That can be a good choice because you are already motivated and know the story better than anyone else.

But, you are probably too close to the subject.

You don’t have to depend on the material from the interview to prepare your memoir. Your subconscious [mind](#) will fill in any gaps and paper over any mistakes. It’s not a good indication of your ability at this stage.

Starting with a memoir of someone else gives you the opportunity to learn some facts and stories which you don’t know and judge accurately how well you can make something from the material which you only get from them.

A Trial Interview

The first discussion will help you to understand and use the various stages of producing a memoir better than trying just to understand it from the words I’ve written here.

Start with a session involving a relative that you can easily contact.



But, do as much of the detail work like you were doing a genuine memoir.

Ask them to tell you the story of an incident so that you can put it into words that they accept.

Even if you have already heard the story from them before, treat it as something new to you.

Write their details into a folder which is only for the material you get from them.

Include information such as:

- The [date](#) of the incident
- Who was present
- When and where it happened
- Any other relevant [background](#) details

Fill that part in after your discussion. Having the headings on the form will help to remind you to make sure you get all the information while you are discussing it with your relative.

Set up the discussion in a setting which is convenient and familiar to them. Their [home](#) is ideal.

Your usual session with a relative will be about one or two hours.

But, the trial can be as short as half an hour.

You are interested in the atmosphere which your relative felt on the occasion, not just the bare facts.

The details will help the [readers](#) understand and appreciate its impact on the various people involved.

Feedback

This point is when you will get some feedback on your first attempt at this highly personal sort of writing project. Remember what you feel like when someone asks you for honest criticism.

The person you interviewed was a relative and possibly a friend. They may not want to hurt your feelings or their [relationship](#) with you. So, the feedback may be all positive and almost useless, even though you asked for their true opinion.

This will sometimes occur with people that review the drafts of your professional memoirs later on. If that happens, you may unexpectedly get some disagreement about the quality of the final draft.

You need to [develop](#) your own ability to review your work in progress.

[Check](#) the material against the guidelines and stated requirements you discussed with the subject or the family. Another way to get more independent opinions is to ask to interview a relative of some of your friends. They may know and like you but they will be more likely to be critical than your own close relatives. Treat all criticism as valuable.

Remember, the critic is your ally. Learn from their criticism but don't react personally.

If the criticism is not accurate, you learn more about the critic. You will not gain anything by arguing with a critic.

Just thank them and find someone else to do this same experiment with.

Starting Your First Memoir

For Your first memoir, the best way to start is to ask an elderly relative to give you some time to chat about their [life](#).

How you choose which one to approach first is up to you.

You may have a relative who always had good stories to tell. Another good possibility is the relative who never told you much at all about their life experiences though you know they also had very busy lives.

Emphasize that their wider family is interested in their experiences too.

This is a great way to let the other family members know about the most enjoyable and important [events](#) in their own words without any disruption to their regular routine.

If you are very nervous about this sort of thing, remember that they will not be expecting a great deal anyway. They will want the experience to be a [success](#) just like you do.

You can use the [tips](#) and [methods](#) in this [book](#) to make a good impression and avoid any major problems.

Always assure them that no-one else will know what you talked about until you send them their own copy of the chat.

You should not [worry](#) about their comments to you after they get your write-up.

It is a valuable review. If there is any criticism, thank them for it.

Then, ask them if you could have another session later on.

This will be an opportunity for both you and the subject to see how much you improve over that time.

You will also get some new stories and insights into your subject's life.

Some of the stories might be repeated and sometimes details get changed.

Use your judgment about whether to ask about the change. They might think you are challenging their truthfulness.

I usually find another way to ask a question about the difference so I can

get the preferred version for the memoir.

Remember that the person you most want to be happy with the memoir is the person it's about.

But, it is also very important to get the facts into it wherever possible.

How to Capture Other People's Memories

The critical point about a memoir is that it is someone's own personal account.

These are some points which can help you get a better memoir from almost any person.

It's Their Story

Your first hurdle to producing another person's memoir is to let their [voice](#) and feelings show clearly.

You must remove your feelings and views from the words.

Get as close to the person as possible. That means emotionally as well as physically.



While you listen to them, you notice the effects on their emotions which come from talking about those times.

That isn't always obvious to a reader or even someone [listening](#) to a recording later on.

The recording device can replay their words clearly but could miss the tremble in their fingers which you saw at that moment.

Don't Criticize

When they tell their story, you may hear things which annoy or even offend you.

Any reaction by you could upset the subject and affect everything they say afterward. It may even spoil the whole project. Your [job](#) is to make a true record, not be a judge.

Be Grateful for the Opportunity

Remember that you only have the opportunity to make the memoir because of their invitation. Respect their generosity and be careful to remain supportive and professional.

Often, they are very reluctant to be interviewed. This may be the first time they have let someone do this with them.

They have agreed because they see that their family wants it done. They never expected to be interviewed and are unprepared.

They want the project to be a [success](#) but [fear](#) that they could cause problems or even ruin it altogether!

So, it is up to you to make the session an enjoyable experience as well as to find some good [stories](#) and points to other information. This is not as difficult as you might think.

You are privileged to get the opportunity to hear and write this project.

They are taking a chance on you instead of using a more well-known [writing](#) service.

Recording the Interview

There are more options for recording the discussion than ever before.

I use a medium-priced recorder that I have had for two years. I will upgrade at some time but this is getting the results me and my [clients](#) want.

But, your smart-phone or your [laptop](#) may have a recording quality which is suitable for this purpose. Do a test recording with a family member to check that you can get a good recording with you both a little distance from the device.

It is important that you have tried the equipment before you start using it for real discussions.

If you [show](#) nervousness or doubt when you use the equipment during your discussion, it will unsettle the person you are talking with.

I [trust](#) my recorder and always [check](#) it thoroughly each time.

Despite that, I always have a backup recording being made as an interview can never be repeated exactly and every machine fails sometime.

Take time to set up and test the equipment before you settle down with your subject for the actual interview.

When we [talk](#) with people every day, we don't take much notice of many background noises which we hear every day. Unfortunately, they can be very noticeable on the recording when picked up by your sensitive microphone, sometimes even ruining it.

Transcription

However good the quality of the recording you make, it should be transcribed so that you have a text version for reference.

It is better to let an experienced operator do it and pay them their fee. They can do the transcription at a much faster rate and with greater accuracy than you.

This will be an extra expense which you must cover with the fee you charge, but it is also a great time-saver so you can concentrate on those

parts which you are more experienced with.

Sometimes, you may do the session by [phone](#) or even over the Internet.

These can be good but there is less of an emotional connection between you and the other person. But, they will be necessary at times.

The services can provide a video link which helps give you both more information about the others reactions during the conversation.

Make sure that you are both happy with the recording being made and mention the fact shortly after the beginning of the session.

Always write an outline for the session but don't [try](#) to stick to it if the subject has other priorities.

If they get side-tracked or keep repeating the same story, you have to bring them onto the other sections of their [life](#) which you need to cover.

It's important that the subject is willing for the equipment to be used.

Ensure that you have their [confidence](#) on that.

Interviewing People for the Memoir

The TV hosts make it look easy but interviewing people is an art and needs careful attention for the whole period.

Arrange a session for whatever length of time the person you talk with can handle comfortably. You both will need breaks to be comfortable and alert.

The first step must be to get the other person’s agreement about the subject of the [interview](#).

Ask them before the day of the session if they have any questions about the arrangements or content of the session.

Some people may have concerns but feel they should not mention them. Encourage them to ask any questions so that you will both be as comfortable as possible during the recording.

Always do a short recording with both of you and play it back before you start the formal recording. This will give them an idea of how they [sound](#) and the sort of question you have for them.

Give them an assurance that you will pause the recording if they raise their hand. They may want something done again with a different answer or not used in the memoir. Or, they may just need a break.

Your file for the person needs their contact details and some information about who they are most closely related to in the family.

When you contact them before the interview, ask for some information about the highlights of their [life](#).

Ask for a list of the events or periods they want to focus on for the session.

One or two might be all you cover even in two hours if they have a lot of interesting information. But, it’s best to have several listed to fill the time if they are not inclined to speak much.

Sometimes, they may need to have someone else with them during the conversation.

That may mean they won’t discuss some of their private information

because of that person’s presence.

You might ask if you could have a few [minutes](#) alone with the subject. If not, you may be able to follow up at a later session by asking if they will have another session later.

Always be considerate of a carer or other person who is there. They are doing an important [job](#) for your interviewee.

The Subject is the Center of the Story

When you are interviewing the subject or researching other material about them, look for stories which put them in a good [light](#).

Although some things in their [life](#) may not be agreeable to you, that must not affect your treatment of their story.

No-one is all bad or good.

Sometimes, the subject will not be able to tell you about some things which affected them deeply.

This can sometimes be overcome by approaching that episode from other angles which take away the direct focus on their part in it.

A question like, “Were other people affected by that incident?”, might switch the focus to other people who were affected. But, when they talk about the other people, they may give you more information about their involvement and its effect on them.

Their story will probably jump around.

This is not a formal autobiography.

They tell it their way and you handle any problems with that.

Although other family members may be paying you for the work, the most important opinion about the final [product](#) and the preparation period is the subject’s.

You may also get a better reaction from the subject during the interviews if you have done some research about the subjects which your contacts say he or she is interested in.

If you show you have some general knowledge about their [hobby](#) or profession, it will resonate and help you both connect. They will know you’re no expert but have showed some initiative to get some background.

A Memoir or something Different?

The memoir is just one [way](#) to record some significant times or events in someone’s life.

This page will explain the differences between a few of the options.

An **autobiography** covers the whole [life](#) of the person. Events are in the order they happened. If it will be published and widely circulated, it is usually checked for accuracy, especially where the subject made an important contribution to that period. Many autobiographies are written with less emotion than other forms listed here.

A **biography** is a record of someone’s life written by someone else, with or without their approval.

A **journal** is a daily record of a period in someone’s life. It probably is not meant to be shared with many people.

A **memoir** is a record of a period or some [events](#) in someone’s life and is in the person’s own words. It usually has a significant amount of emotion. The order of the events will be whatever the subject feels is right for their story.

Some of these types of documents have electronic versions on the Internet. They may have less or more public access.

But, access to the memoir is controlled by the subject which makes it specially personal.

The Importance of their Memoir

The importance of the memoir to the subject includes the benefits I have listed below.

They [control](#) the content: This may be the only opportunity for them to give their story without interference and ensure that it is available to the people they most want to understand who they were and what they did – their family.

An opportunity to gain some inner peace about past problems and the future:

People often worry and keep thinking about old disappointments long past. Some people use their memoir to settle any of those lingering emotional worries they still carry.

Many people [worry](#) about the approach of their own death.

Seeing their memoir written can help some accept where they are on their life [journey](#) as another stage and not just the end.

Their memoir is an opportunity to relive past good times in reasonable detail and know that other people in their family will also read their account for years to come.

They can give the facts as they saw them about major events in history or their personal experience.

Another benefit of memoirs is that it is likely to increase contact between the subject and other members of their wider family for the rest of their [life](#).

What You Need to Start

You don't need many accessories beyond those listed in a previous chapter.

It's the personal qualities which will get you the opportunities and make you a [success](#) in this unique type of writing.

Patience is probably the most valuable characteristic when you start writing a memoir.

Recognize that your subject is [making](#) you part of one of the most important tasks they have ever taken on.

After that, I would take good organizational skills.

You will be the holder of precious [memories](#) and, possibly, unique mementoes which cannot be replaced.

Good [health](#) is important because you may encounter people with various ailments and also be subject to stressful situations.

Some disappointments are inevitable.

You might get poor feedback about some work you really did your best on.

Someone may not keep their word about something which you were depending on to complete an urgent project.

You have to be able to deal with the situation and get on with your other work without missing a step.

If you show negative attitudes when you [meet](#) people, your discussion will never survive because that will affect the [confidence](#) of the other people in your professionalism.

Better Listening

Being a good listener is imperative. It’s a skill which you can improve by consistent [practice](#) and watching the best interviewers doing the same interviewers doing one interview more than once.

They set up different approaches for each interview. So, just watching them on a regular [program](#) will entertain but not educate you so much about their methods.

But, if you watch the same interview more than once, you will work out some of the strategies they are using.

However, don’t to use [body language](#) or similar [systems](#) unless you are very experienced.

The details of those [methods](#) are widely known and people may notice that you are using them to connect with them, instead of relying on your actual personal qualities.

Always focus on the person’s face.

Don’t let your expression become fixed.

Repeat some of the [information](#) they tell you back in slightly different form.

Use questions which focus on their feelings and [thoughts](#) about particular events or what other people said to them.

This will help you develop some insight into their outlook now and at the time they are talking about.

This can be a great help when you are preparing the memoir itself.

Handling a Request

When you [start](#) to accept memoir writing assignments, you need to be [business](#)-like at all times.

Although you will often have close contact with family members, you must remember that you are providing a service and don't push yourself into their lives more than necessary.

The early discussion will set out what areas of the person's [life](#) will be part of the memoir, how many sessions you will get with the subject and how you will contact other members of the family or their associates.

You need to have a written contract for the work. This protects both parties and lays out the responsibilities which each agree to.

Get professional legal advice on the documentation. This is a necessary expense and precaution where [money](#) and reputations are involved.

Your fee should reflect the level of work and parts of it should be due at different stages of the project so that you don't have to carry all the costs during the preparation of the memoir.

Usually a third or a quarter is paid on signing of the contract, and the other payments are due at specified stages in the progress toward completion. That may be when each draft of the document is delivered to the subject and at completion of the [document](#).

The family will get progress reports from you and the subject. They will not usually see the part-finished document without the subject's consent.

This will ensure some dialog about the progress will occur.

The important things for you to remember are not to make any undertakings to anyone that are not required by the contract and to make progress ahead of the specified levels so that you have some cushion to allow for unexpected delays or problems.

Most memoirs are produced to be read by family members. The writing has to be to the satisfaction of the subject but is not required to be ready for publication by a major publisher. But, you can prepare it for publication through private firms that do short-run printing.

Creating the Memoir Outline

These [tips](#) will help you create a skeleton for your memoir.

The particular items can be changed to more closely reflect the material in any particular project and the [goals](#) of the subject and their family.

What is the goal for the subject?

Does he or she want to:

- Give their family a description of the times they lived through and some experiences they had?
- Correct the record about some part of their life?
- Give advice based on some of their experiences?
- Find relief from worries they’ve carried for years?
- Give more information about family members that have passed on?

Their goal will drive the project and must be one of the factors which the final memoir is judged against.

Its literary merit or value to the wider [community](#) are not as important.

What time period or periods will the memoir focus on?

- An incident in their life or of public importance which they were involved in.
- A broad overview of their [life](#).
- A relationship or a [job](#)

What do they want as the final form of the Memoir?

- A private family document
- A printed [book](#)
- Some other form?

Writing Fast and Well

The memoir puts a lot of pressure on new writers because of the demands for several drafts, accuracy and constant minor problems like conflicting claims about an incident .

These tips will get you through a lot of the normal problems and help to improve most other [writing](#) you do as well.

Writer’s block doesn’t stop you from writing anything, just what you are supposed to be concentrating on.

So, if you’re stuck in front of a blank screen, write any rubbish and keep going and your [mind](#) will start to shape up, ready for the real work.

Sometimes, the reason we don’t start writing is because we have doubts about our ability to write well enough for a major project like a memoir.

Just remember that the memoir is an important document that will become a keepsake but the judges of its worth will be the [loving](#) family of the subject. If it represents the subject truthfully, even a bit favorably and is easy to read, you’ve done a good [job](#)!

I know some writers are awed by the size of the task. Reduce this [panic](#) button by focusing on one segment, say 500 words for the session.

When you reach that point, you will find it easier to focus on the next 500 words or so and keep going. You will have an almost fully productive day.

But, the next day, you continue to focus on just 500 words at a time and you are on your way to eating the work like you would eat an elephant, one [bite](#) at a time.

Don’t write for more than 45 minutes without a physical break. Get up and go to the kitchen or office cooler for a cup of [water](#).

The walk will stir your physical system out of the chair-bound feeling and the water will refresh your [brain](#) first, and then other systems.

I suggest not having [coffee](#) because it can cause a rise in [blood pressure](#) and other bad effects. But, it’s your choice.

Remember that you are writing and don’t touch the editing pedal like most do when they starting writing something.

Stopping every line or so to fix an error makes you think you’re really observant. But, you are actually not concentrating fully on your [writing](#).

Train yourself to ignore the errors you [spot](#) and just focus on getting the words into a file.

That way, you can use all your skill on the writing and later concentrate on editing it.

I guarantee the two-step approach will improve all your writing and productivity. Your ability to concentrate will also improve. But, don’t expect to [change](#) a [habit](#) that’s ingrained in less than two weeks. It’s probably been part of your writing since [school](#).

Important Steps to a Good Memoir

Some simple things can add a lot of readability to the memoir.

While most [books](#) demand a significant subject, a memoir can focus on little things which are important to the subject.

Consistency is important. Check that the subject’s views don’t change from section to section unless the reason for the change is [clear](#) or they will not be as credible.

The average reader is fair-minded if you do not give them reason to doubt the subject’s [claims](#).

Be Careful

Although the document may be meant for private circulation, any memoir with something potentially controversial can cause trouble when a copy is inevitably leaked.

If there could be legal issues involved in the matters in the book, get a lawyer to check it. Remember that a court case may be started in some other countries about the content of your book unless your laws prevent that.

Many references have spawned legal action over just a few paragraphs or a single picture in the large book.

It’s important and fair that each person who is named and participates in the stories is told that a memoir is being prepared.

Let Family Members Help: Make the [family](#), or at least selected members of it, part of the editing process.

They can [check](#) it for accuracy about the flow of events and names and other small but critical details about other people in the story.

This may seem like they’re doing part of your [job](#), but you can say their help will reduce the need for you to hire a research assistant at extra cost. And, it also means the project stays in the family.

Millions of Questions

There are millions of questions which might get you answers which could be interesting to other family members.

Your first conversation will be your best chance to find some which you feel relate to the subject's interests. So, start with general and personal questions and follow where their answers suggest they could be fruitful.

Get them telling their views about the events and people that were important to them:

- How they felt about their closest family members?
- What was their earliest recollection?
- What was the most vivid [memory](#) through their whole life?
- What was the main thing they learned from their parents which helped them later in life?
- Why did they take up the work they did?
- What was the happiest time in their [life](#)?
- What major event made the greatest impression on them?
- Can they remember when they learned of it?
- What effect did it have on their life afterward?

These questions won't suit all your subjects. They're just a few idea starters.

Look for subjects which relate to what you already know about the subject's life and views where they are relevant to the memoir outline.

You don't know what questions will be best for each interview.

The best questions will [develop](#) from what the subject says and how they react to your questions.

Happy Memories and Great Stories

Thank you for getting my [book](#).

I hope it will help you with your family memoirs and perhaps inspire you to help other families to enrich the knowledge and [pleasure](#) of family members in the future when they read the memoirs you develop for them.

Mary Wallman

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