

MEMOIR WRITING QUICK LOOK...

By Ryan Van Cleave

Writing a memoir means you're author and subject, researcher and storyteller, narrator and audience. That's a lot to ask of any writer, though a good way to begin the challenge of writing a memoir is to start a list of the most memorable events of your life. Don't start on the actual book manuscript until you have at least a page filled with things that seem worthy of sharing — moments from your past that have universal significance, emotional resonance, or high drama. Add another half page of small moments you treasure. Those can speak surprisingly well to those larger themes, too.

KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND A MEMOIR

Many people interchangeably use the terms “autobiography” and “memoir.” Although Amazon and many brick-and-mortar bookstores put them in the same category, they are quite different. Here's how they are different.

An autobiography

- Focuses on the trajectory of an entire life
- Starts at the beginning and progresses chronologically to the end
- Feels more like a historical document; tons of fact-checking and very specific dates/information
- Strives for factual, historical truths
- Typically is written by famous people

A memoir

- Focuses on a key aspect, theme, event, or choice in a life
- Starts anywhere and can deftly move around in time and place
- Feels more personal; less intense fact-checking

- Strives for emotional truths
- Can be written by anyone

Both are based in truth. Both are highly marketable in the publishing world. And both require a good deal of research, which can range from phone interviews and trips to places you once lived, to sitting back into a comfy chair and doing some deep, focused remembering. Yet as you can see, there are significant and crucial differences between an autobiography and memoir.

READER EXPECTATIONS FOR A MEMOIR

You're writing a memoir to share your story, which means you obviously want people to read it. To write a memoir designed to satisfy and engage readers, strive to meet the following expectations:

- **A sympathetic main character:** A reader's sympathy and interest doesn't come for free. You have to earn it. Make this a priority for your main character to come across as sympathetic, and readers will appreciate it.
- **Vividly depicted scenes:** A vividly depicted scene has strong imagery that creates a movie in the mind of readers. Strong scenes like these are memorable and lasting.
- **Emotional tension:** An emotionally involved reader will keep reading. Find a way to create and heighten the emotional impact of your story. Every story has emotional tension. Make sure you have the distance or outside guidance to find it and fully explore it.
- **Increasing sense of drama/conflict:** A story that builds increasingly toward the climax comes across as purposeful. How do you build? Ratchet up the conflict. Show how the stakes are raised. Make readers know what might be lost.
- **A satisfying ending:** Note that this is a *satisfying ending* versus a *good* or *bad* ending. No matter how the main story of your memoir ends, it should wrap up the main story tensions and bring a sense of closure.

