

A POCKETFUL OF WRITING TIPS FOR GUIDED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1. Use active, not passive verbs. This keeps the action and the readers' attention moving forward.

Instead of: *The ball was thrown into left field by Rick.*

Write this: *Rick threw the ball into left field.*

2. Use all the senses.

Instead of: *It was thundering all night.*

Write this: *The thunder boomed through the night, and static electricity in the air made the hair on our forearms stand up straight.*

Instead of: *Grandma made breakfast in the morning and gave us strawberries as an afternoon snack.*

Write this: *In Grandma's kitchen the sweet smell of fresh strawberries in the afternoon mixed with the lingering aroma of bacon grease and coffee from breakfast.*

3. Give each writing all the best stuff you have. When you go back to the well, miraculously, there is always more to work with, so there is no need to save it for later.

Instead of: *I was born on a farm in Iowa.*

Write this: *The yellow corn was ripe for picking in the Iowa sun, but Papa was pacing nervously in the kitchen while Mama was upstairs giving birth to me with the help of the local midwife.*

4. Show, don't tell. Paint a picture with words.

Instead of: *Uncle Abraham was honest.*

Write this: *Uncle Abraham was so honest he would walk five miles to return the correct change to a customer.*

5. Use concrete detail and avoid abstractions. The facts won't change over time. Your interpretations might.

Instead of: *Like hundreds other families, we moved to California during the Great Depression.*

Write this: *Uncle Ed, Mom, Sissy and my brother Joe were all in the Model A, already pointed west. Dad and I brought out the last box, Grandma's china wrapped in rags and towels so they wouldn't break on the way to California. Mom wanted to hold the dishes on her own lap. So Dad handed them to her, turned to spit in the dust and climbed into the driver's seat.*

6. Write straight to the emotional core of things while adding rich details about your feelings. You are writing about your childhood, the time when you found everything so intensely interesting and felt things so deeply. You are writing about your adolescence with all its roller coaster emotions, idealism and realizations, and about your continuing development as an adult. Don't be too distant. Write with care and truth and with empathy and understanding for that child, that young person, the person you are now. Try to understand what he or she was feeling. Help others to learn from that child's experience, from the experience of a human being trying to make sense of life.

Instead of: *When we heard the tornado, Grandma told us to run down into the cellar where we stayed until the tornado passed.*

Write this: *Curiosity at the strange dark shape in the distance turned to gut-wrenching fear when I realized it was growing bigger--and coming our way. I heard Grandma holler, "Get down to the cellar fast!"*

My legs were trembling so badly, I almost tripped on the rickety wooden steps as I bolted into the damp darkness below followed closely by Dan and Ma. Dan was clutching our hound dog Buster who was moaning woefully. Grandma came last slamming the cellar doors shut with a loud thud and securing the heavy latch.

We huddled in the darkest corner, Ma holding onto Dan, and Grandma cradling me tightly in her strong arms. The roar outside became louder and louder and the house started to shake violently. I held my breath, terrified that our sanctuary would be ripped from its foundation exposing us to the deafening monster above.

"It'll be all right," Grandma shouted into my ear as she rocked me back and forth. I buried my face into her chest. Amid the crashing sounds, I thought I heard the cellar doors being sucked from their hinges. Slowly the dreadful noise subsided and I began to breathe again. The cellar doors were still there and, for several moments, we continued to sit stunned in the silence. Finally, as I gripped Grandma's hand with both of mine, she lead us up the steps into the daylight to see what devastation the sadistic entity had inflicted.

Exploring your life in great detail, and understanding the child that you were, will give you insight and compassion. You will see your experiences in a different light. You may notice things you hadn't before. And when you share vividly, you will turn on a light for others so they can see the significance of your life—and their own lives—more clearly.

"Adapted from *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups* by James Birren and Kathryn Cochran, p. 158. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001."