

On Memoir, Truth and 'Writing Well'

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William Zinsser, author of the classic guide *On Writing Well*, talks to Michele Norris about the challenges of writing personal history. He says that since the 1990s, many memoirs have focused on victimhood, rather than forgiveness.

In May, HarperCollins will release the 30th-anniversary edition of *On Writing Well*, including a new chapter on memoir. The release comes in a tough year for the form, following revelations that author James Frey fabricated significant details in his best-selling personal history *A Million Little Pieces*.



William Zinsser, author of the classic *On Writing Well*.

Photo Credit: Skip Weisenburger

(Zinsser passed away on May 12, 2015.)

Excerpt: 'How to Write a Memoir'

WILLIAM ZINSSER

Most people embarking on a memoir are paralyzed by the size of the task. What to put in? What to leave out? Where to start? Where to stop? How to shape the story? The past looms over them in a thousand fragments, defying them to impose on it some kind of order. Because of that anxiety, many memoirs linger for years half written, or never get written at all.

What can be done?

You must make a series of reducing decisions. For example: in a family history, one big decision would be to write about only one branch of the family. Families are complex organisms, especially if you trace them back several generations. Decide to write about your mother's side of the family or your father's side, but not both. Return to the other one later and make it a separate project.

Remember that you are the protagonist in your own memoir, the tour guide. You must find a narrative trajectory for the story you want to tell and never relinquish control. This means leaving out of your memoir many people who don't need to be there. Like siblings.

My final reducing advice can be summed up in two words: think small. Don't rummage around in your past -- or your family's past -- to find episodes that you think are "important" enough to be worthy of including in your memoir. Look for small self-contained incidents that are still vivid in your memory. If you still remember them it's because they contain a universal truth that your readers will recognize from their own life.

That turned out to be the main lesson I learned by writing a book in 2004 called *Writing About Your Life*. It's a memoir of my own life, but it's also a teaching book -- along the way I explain the reducing and organizing decisions I made. I never felt that my memoir had to include all the important things that ever happened to me -- a common temptation when old people sit down to summarize their life journey. On the contrary, many of the chapters in my book are about small episodes that were not objectively "important" but that were important to *me*. Because they were important to me they also struck an emotional chord with readers, touching a universal truth that was important to *them*.

One chapter is about serving in the army in World War II. Like most men of my generation, I recall that war as the pivotal experience of my life. But in my memoir I don't write anything about the war itself. I just tell one story about one trip I took across North Africa after our troopship landed at Casablanca. My fellow GIs and I were put on a train consisting of decrepit wooden boxcars called "forty-and-eights," so named because they were first used by the French in World War I to transport forty men or eight horses. The words QUARANTE HOMMES OU HUIT CHEVAUX were still stenciled on them. For six days I sat in the open door of that boxcar with my feet hanging out over Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. It was the most uncomfortable ride I ever took -- and the best. I couldn't believe I was in North Africa. I was the sheltered son of Northeastern wasps; nobody in my upbringing or my education had ever mentioned the Arabs. Now, suddenly, I was in a landscape where everything was new -- every sight and sound and smell.

The eight months I spent in that exotic land were the start of a romance that has never cooled. They would make me a lifelong traveler to Africa and Asia and other remote cultures and would forever change how I thought about the world. Remember: Your biggest stories will often have less to do with their subject than with their significance -- not what you did in a certain situation, but how that situation affected you and shaped the person you became.

As for how to actually organize your memoir, my final advice is, again, think small. Tackle your life in easily manageable chunks. Don't visualize the finished product, the grand edifice you have vowed to construct. That will only make you anxious.

Here's what I suggest.

Go to your desk on Monday morning and write about some event that's still vivid in your memory. What you write doesn't have to be long -- three pages, five pages -- but it should have a beginning and an end. Put that episode in a folder and get on with your life. On Tuesday morning, do the same thing. Tuesday's episode doesn't have to be related to Monday's episode. Take whatever memory comes calling; your subconscious mind, having been put to work, will start delivering your past.

Keep this up for two months, or three months, or six months. Don't be impatient to start writing your "memoir," the one you had in mind before you began. Then, one day, take all your entries out of their folder and spread them on the floor. (The floor is often a writer's best friend.) Read them through and see what they tell you and what patterns emerge. They will tell you what your memoir is about and what it's not about. They will tell you what's primary and what's secondary, what's interesting and what's not, what's emotional, what's important, what's funny, what's unusual, what's worth pursuing and expanding. You'll begin to glimpse your story's narrative shape and the road you want to take.

Then all you have to do is put the pieces together.

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On Writing Well

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William Zinsser