

Top 10 Reasons to Write A Woman's Memoir

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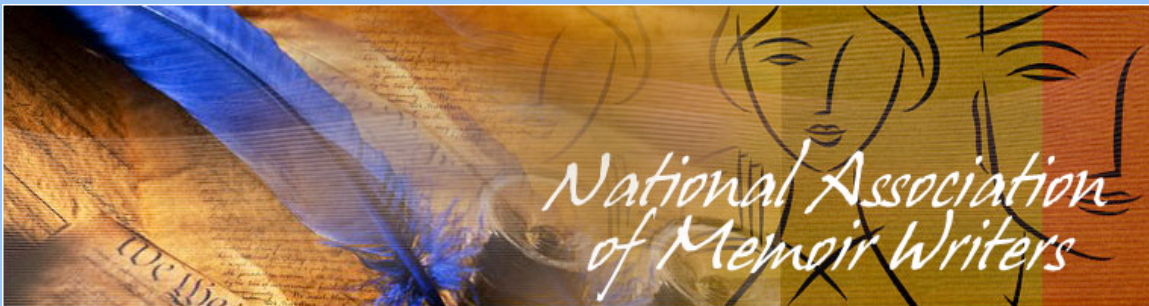
10 Bonus Writing Prompts to Get You Started

Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett

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Why write about your life?

For some people, the answer is obvious. They have stories to tell and want to share them with family, friends, or even the world. Others, however, think it is narcissistic to write about themselves. Besides, they go on, who would want to read about their lives?

There are many reasons to write about your life. We think all of them are valid. But we narrowed the number in order to create our list of the Top 10 Reasons for Writing Your Memoir. Our list is compiled from reasons mentioned by our students and instructors alike. We tabulated their reasons and have presented the 10 most frequently cited. Don't worry if

your reason isn't listed. Each life is unique, and your reasons to write may also be unique. And, no, we don't believe it is self-centered or egotistical to write your personal narrative. If we do not claim our stories, who will? Only we know our own stories. No one else can tell them. Others can try, but the result will be their story, their version of our lives. But, wait, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

In our classes and on our website (www.WomensMemoirs.com), we are often queried about the reasons women write their memoirs. We hope the list that follows will show you how diverse and multi-faceted the reasons are and how important it is to start telling your life story now.

Here are our Top 10 Reasons for Writing Your Memoir:

R **Reason #10. Write to remember.** While this may not seem intuitive, it's a fact that the more you write, the more you remember. Of course, you know the story you want to tell. However, once you begin to write, you'll find yourself remembering more details. Sometimes you just tap into a storehouse of memories that



were there all the time, but were covered in mental dust. The details may be recalled while you are writing, or you may remember them in the days that follow. Then you can go back over your draft and add to it. Alternatively, you'll read a journal you put away years ago and suddenly recall the favorite dress you wore on your first date, the color of wallpaper in your childhood bedroom, or the smell of burning apple pie (the one you left in the oven when your children lured you outside to play ball with them). So many details that seemed long forgotten will suddenly fill your mind.

Embrace all that you recall. We say this because sometimes your memories will bring back the heartaches of life as well as the beautiful moments. Perhaps your mother emotionally abused you. Maybe you had an affair you regret or an affair that changed your life. A loved one died and left you feeling hollow. It is all of our experiences—the good and the bad—that create the person we are today.

What's with the rosemary?



It might seem odd that we show rosemary along with Reason #10. But rosemary's association with memory is centuries old.

In ancient Greece, for example, students kept sprigs in their hair when studying because they believed this would help them better remember the information.

The plant, a native to the Mediterranean area, was eventually cultivated in many countries, including England. Shakespeare, in *Hamlet*, even retells its meaning through the words of Ophelia as she says to Laertes, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance."

A corollary to **Reason #10** is: you **write to learn**. Perhaps you are telling a story about your close relationship with your grandmother. Once you start writing, you realize you need to do some research. Where was she born? In what year? What did she do to help her family survive the Depression? What happened to her siblings, the ones you never met? How did she make that rich hot chocolate that always made you feel better?

You may start your research by finding family records, by searching the Internet, or by interviewing your mother to find these details. At the end, you'll know more than you did when you started writing, and the stories about you and your grandmother will be fuller, more detailed, and probably more interesting.

Bonus Writing Prompt: Find a photograph of when you were young. Write a story based on the memories it triggers. Where were you? How old were you? What did you like to do at that age? What was your favorite toy?

R **Reason #9. Write to tell your side.** Have you ever listened to someone tell a story and want to correct them? Tell them how they have the story wrong?

- Perhaps your older brother loves to tell what a brat you were.
- Maybe your husband tells guests about the wonderful family camping trip while all you remember is the effort it took to cook decent meals over the wood fire.
- Your sister may describe your life as one filled with lemons. You, on the other hand, may take pride in the way you took those lemons and turned them into lemonade and made the most out of what you had.



Imagine your life as a written story. Then imagine putting the pages through a paper shredder and jamming them into a waste basket. Others, even those who know you, could try to put the pages back together. However, only you know how your life story fits together. By writing your memoir, you get to tell your side of your story. You get to say how the pieces fit together. After all, only you know how life's experiences affected you. Your siblings, your parents, your friends might tell the same story, might try to tape the strips of life back into the right order, but the resulting story is guaranteed to come out differently.



Bonus Writing Prompt: Close your eyes and recall a holiday or special event. Write it first from your perspective. Then try to write it from the point of view of your sibling or your mother. Compare the two stories and you begin to understand what your unique perspective brings to the story.

R **Reason #8. Write to celebrate your life.** Some people have especially interesting lives. Perhaps you’ve traveled to fascinating destinations. Lived on a farm or ranch. Raised your younger siblings after your mother died. Maybe your career has caused you to make decisions that influenced the lives of others.

If so, one primary reason to write may be to celebrate your life—to share your experiences—to rejoice in a life well lived. You might even write to join your story with others of a similar nature. For example, there are a number of “country life”

memoirs already published. You might want to write your story to enrich the set.



Make writing your memoir a priority. It may be tempting for you to think that while your life has been interesting, it is not dramatic enough. You may think, “I just did what anyone in my position would have done.” Your life is worth celebrating. Your life story is worth writing.

Bonus Writing Prompt: Write a letter from your current self to your ten-year-old self. What would you like to tell yourself about how your life is turning out? What has happened that you could not have imagined at that young age?

R **Reason #7. Write to share your wisdom.** Simply living a number of years teaches us lessons. The longer we live, the more lessons we have learned. Writing a memoir is one way to share your wisdom and be a guide for others. This reason lets you call on your reservoir of experience. You might think about different domains of experience:

Relationships
Love
Work
Faith
Survival

Learning
Finance
Health
Sexuality
Friendship

What about the lessons passed down to you from your parents? Did they teach you about unconditional love? Compassion? Honesty? Thrift? Beauty? Why did you think those lessons were important to your parents?

Write about the lessons life has taught you. Write about the lessons your parents taught you. Or write about the combination of these. By writing, you will remove that lock on your life and make your treasured lessons available to others.



Bonus Writing Prompt: Write about the first time you left home for any length of time. Did you go away to college? What kind of experience was that for you? Or, did you move to an apartment and go to work? Was it work that influenced your life? Who were some of the people you met at college or in your first major job? Have you stayed friends?

R **Reason #6. Write to bear witness.** By being a witness to your life, you give it value. The way you live is a reflection of what is important to you and how you manage to balance the different life elements. That “outside” manifestation is important and stands as a signpost to others. But what about the “inside” view of your life?



Imagine there are two tickets to your life. The person with one ticket follows the manifest or external version of your life. However, the ticket is only good for one hour or one day or one year. In other words, no one is there to witness your life hour after hour, 365 days, year after year after year. Furthermore, someone with a ticket to your life will only see you in one role such as daughter or lover or friend or mother or wife or co-worker.

But what about the second ticket? The ticket to your internal life. Only you know about the internal struggles and joys, about the integration and balancing of roles, about the self-fought battles with depression or the strength to overcome illness.

Experiences become real when witnessed by others. You can create that “witness” by writing your life memoir.

Bonus Writing Prompt: Imagine that your life, or some piece of your life, is a movie. What is the primary plot line? How does the movie open? How do you let the audience know both the internal and the external story? Who plays your role?
Write the opening scene of your life’s movie.

Reason #5. Write to heal. Some lives are marked by tragedy. Is yours? Tragedy, of course, assumes different shapes and sizes. There could be emotional or physical abuse, alcoholism, financial ruin, disease, or other catastrophes and major life hardships.

Women, it seems, especially feel guilt and self-blame associated with many traumatic situations. In some, these feelings lead to depression and a downward spiral in which more self-blame is heaped on prior feelings of guilt leading to greater depression. Healing is needed and necessary and can take place in many ways. Intense therapy is vital for some people. Others may find they are managing all right but would like to heal the deep wounds. Writing your memoir is one way of seeking a healing process.



Writing is a solitary activity. You reach inside yourself to examine what happened, why it happened, who was responsible, and what have been the outcomes. In the process of writing, you will have new insights and understandings of what happened. There are a number of books that specifically focus on writing as healing. We list a few in the **Resources** section at the end of this Free Report.

If the wounds are deep and especially painful, you may want to work with a counselor or therapist who can talk with you about the emotions brought up in your writing.

Even if you are not writing to heal, we can assure you that the process of writing your memoir will change you. An examination of your life will bring new self-awareness.

Bonus Writing Prompt: Think of a time when someone put you down, belittled you. A parent who seemed to love your sibling more? A friend who knew how to hurt you? A teacher who ridiculed you in front of the class? Your spouse or partner who seemed oblivious to your feelings?

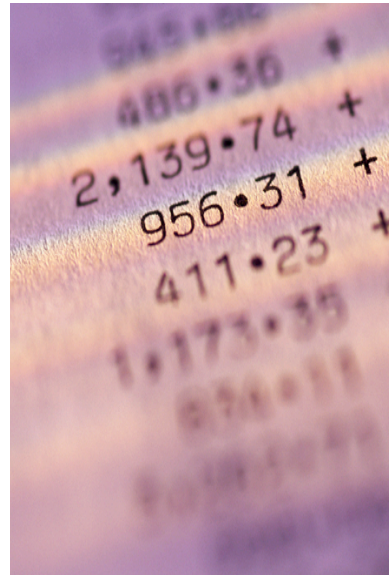
Write about the remembered episode. What was the situation? What was said? (Dialogue in a memoir helps bring the reader into the story.) How did you feel? What did you do? Looking back from this time in your life, how would you now handle the situation? What strengths do you have today that you didn't before?

In this exercise, you'll reach deeply inside your memories and emotions.

R **Reason #4. Write to leave a legacy.** We often read about a financial legacy. There are advisors who can help you determine your goals and make sure that you have adequate money to achieve them. You are asked if you want to leave money to your children, to your church, to your college or high school, to a favorite charity.

But a life, fortunately, is considerably more than a bunch of numbers or a stack of bills. Elsewhere we have written about what we call the Seven Life Capitals (*Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells Its Story*) and believe that each of these can become a legacy. These seven legacies of each life are: Emotional Legacy, Physical Legacy, Cognitive Legacy, Spiritual Legacy, Social Legacy, Financial Legacy, and Temporal Legacy.

Saving a full description for another time, let's just consider the first of these—Emotional Legacy. The types of feelings you have are not always under your control. One event may make you happy and another may make you angry or sad. Having the full range of emotions is important in a well-rounded life.



How you handle these emotions is a gift you give to others, for that is the only part you have control over. Do you nourish your emotional health? If so, how? Do you acknowledge your feelings or do you deny your emotional needs? You want your family and friends to take care of themselves emotionally, but if you don't help yourself,



how will they have a model for their own lives? Consider an Emotional Legacy of a well-balanced emotional life that fully acknowledges both your feelings and your need to express feelings to those you know. When you create a living legacy from your awareness of your own emotional needs, you are also investing in your Emotional Capital. The more you invest, the more you have to give as a legacy.



Write your memoir as a legacy for your family and friends. Consider the variety of elements of your life that you want to include. Often the written story of a life is more valuable than a check or other monetary asset. Your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, etc. can know what your life was like, what was important to you, and what times were like when you lived. As a commercial might say, “Priceless.”

Bonus Writing Prompt: Choose one of the Seven Life Legacies mentioned above—such as your Spiritual Legacy. How do *you* work toward an understanding of life? Is it through prayer, meditation, literature, music, art, or nature?

Independent of the specifics of your religious or spiritual beliefs, you do have this particular life to live.

Write a letter to a grandchild that explains your legacy of values. Tell your grandchild where these values come from and give examples of how they have shaped you.

R **Reason #3. Write for connection and community.** Some of us write our memoir to connect. These connections can take place on multiple levels. First, you might want to connect with your life experiences on an emotional

level. How do you feel about your childhood? How do you feel about your chosen career path?



Next, you might want to connect with history. What was going on in the world during your lifetime? What are some of the big changes you see between the way the world was and its influence on your life versus the way the world is now and its current influence on you?

Third, and perhaps most importantly, you might want to connect with others and help create or expand a community. Perhaps you would like to motivate a community to take some

of the same actions that you have taken. For example, you may be active in your church group. One summer you flew to Russia or Mexico or Africa to work with people in a small village. Maybe you helped build a home or plant crops or teach English. If you write your memoir about those experiences and share it with others in your church and in nearby churches, you might encourage people to give of their time to help in other countries. You would be building community.

These days, it is fairly easy to communicate across space. Just pick up your cell phone and punch a button or two. Or you might regularly send emails to family and friends to connect. If you want to share your experiences, it seems like such an easy step. However, we need something more formal, like a memoir, to help us communicate across time. A carefully thought through description of our experiences lets us share the multiple levels of our lives now and in the future.



Bonus Writing Prompt: Think of the groups you belong to and choose one where you would like to build a stronger sense of community. What actions and experiences could you document so that others might follow in your footsteps or create their own helpful journey? Are you working to help protect the environment? Are you reading to school children? Are you taking care of an elderly relative and feel your experiences might help found a group? Write about your experiences and consider how to share.

Reason #2. Write to find direction for your life. There are many ways to describe this second most frequently mentioned reason for writing a memoir. Some women say that they are looking for ways to focus the rest of their lives. Others say they are looking for their life purpose. Occasionally we hear women say they are on a journey to find their passion. All these women want to write about their past in order to better understand their future.



If you don't know where you have been, it is difficult to know where you are going. We like the idea of the mythological bird that Robert Benchley called the Killeyloo-bird. The bird began each new flight by going backwards first, because it could not tell where it was going until it had seen where it had been.

Your future is like a new flight, a new journey. Although fun to laugh about, you don't want to fulfill Yogi Berra's statement, "I may be lost, but I'm making good time." Instead, a memoir provides you the opportunity to chart your future.

For many years, we are so busy that we don't have time to contemplate what we want, what will make our soul sing. In those years, we're getting an education, pursuing a career, adjusting to marriage and probably to children. Who has extra minutes to think about the journey? If there are any spare moments, we would probably aspire to nothing more exotic than taking a nap or indulging in the pleasure of silence. But then there comes a time in life when many of the daily responsibilities are lighter and we realize we're ready to make the most of the years ahead. Writing your memoir is an excellent way to do this as it lets you reflect on the past, be present in the moment, and awaken your dreams for the future.

Bonus Writing Prompt: Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle. On the left, make a list of the 10 things that create stress in your life. These are the parts of your life that you really do not like. On the right, make a list of the 10 things that make you feel happy or strong, or valuable.

Write about what you can learn from the difficult parts of your life listed on the left. Then write about how you can spend more time on the items listed on the right that encourage, excite, please you.

Reason #1. **Write for self-revelation.** The number one reason that women write their memoirs is, in fact, not one reason. It is a cluster of reasons we call self-revelation. Women mention that they write for awareness, personal growth, self-knowledge, and understanding. They often want to restore personal power over their own lives and realize that one way to do this is to look at the themes in the stories of their lives.



Taking a measure of your life. That's another way of expressing this important reason to write your memoir. Deciding how you are going to measure your life is the first step. If you use the verbal equivalent of a metal, self-retracting pocket tape measure then you will examine your life as if it has a starting point and a current point that are in a straight line. Some people do lead lives that could be described in this way.

Most of us, however, need to use the verbal equivalent of the plastic or cloth tape measure that lets us adequately account for the sudden turns, the unexpected hurdles, the hills, and the valleys of life. We need to be ready to examine different aspects of our lives and that means using the memoir to look for patterns in what we have done. We remember so clearly one woman we interviewed for our collective memoir (*Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells Its Story*): At the end of the three-hour interview she said, "Now I get it. I keep repeating the same pattern. Each (marital) situation ended badly, but I never realized how I allowed the same circumstances to happen over and over. Now that I get it, I can change. I just won't do that again."



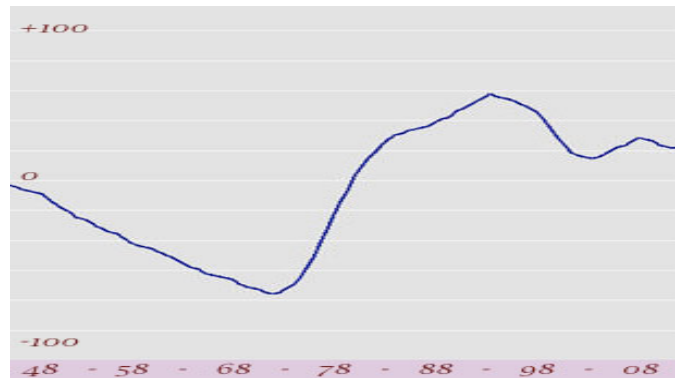
Writing a thoughtful memoir is the first step in achieving personal insight. You may not "get it" after just three hours, as happened during our interview. However, as you write, you may begin to see themes, reasons, explanations. Even if these do not initially become apparent to you, re-reading your vignettes and story may provide new insights. Just as our lives evolve, so does our understanding of them. Writing your life story is one important step in both recording what has happened and in learning from your past as you move forward.



What is your reason to write your memoir? Based on our experiences, it will probably be one of these **Top 10 Reasons** or a unique twist on them or perhaps a combination of them.

Whatever your reason, we hope you'll pour yourself a cup of steaming hot tea, open your journal or turn on your computer, and begin to write. Your life matters.

Bonus Writing Prompt: Take a piece of paper. On the bottom left, write the year in which you were born (e.g. 1948) and on the bottom right put the current year (e.g. 2008). In roughly equal spaces, indicate each five year period between your birth and now. Measure the space between the top and the bottom of the page. Assume the middle is zero or neutral, the top of the page is +100 or perfect, and the bottom of the page is -100 or disaster. Draw a line from your birth to now. Let the line reflect the changing highs and lows of your life.



Write about one of those five-year periods. What was happening in your life at that time? What was it like at the beginning of that period and then five years later? What were your emotional, physical, spiritual, or relationship challenges during that time? Is your line going up between those two points or down? Is the line straight or curving? How did those five years influence the person you have become?

Everyone Has a Story to Tell



Selected Resources

Books. There are two types of books that will help you write your memoir.

First, we recommend that you read memoirs. The more, the better. We regularly update our list of memoirs on www.WomensMemoirs.com. In our brief annotations, we describe elements of each book that may be useful to you as a memoir writer. Our collective memoir illustrates a new type of memoir you might like to consider.

Butler, Matilda and Kendra Bonnett. *Rosie's Daughters: The "First Woman To" Generation Tells Its Story, Second Edition*. Milbridge, ME: Knowledge Access Books, © 2012.

Second, there are books about writing memoirs that can be useful as you get into the actual process. Below are a few of these.

Alderson, Martha. *Blockbuster Plots*. Los Gatos: Illusion Press, © 2004. [Note: Not exclusively about writing memoirs but helpful in understanding how to manage the development of your story.]

Barrington, Judith. *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*. Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press, © 2002.

Butler, Matilda and Bonnett, Kendra. *Writing Alchemy: How to Write Fast and Deep*. Milbridge, ME: Knowledge Access Books, © 2012.

Conway, Jill Ker. *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf © 1998.

DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, © 1999.

Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, © 2001.

Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing a Woman's Life*. New York: Ballantine Books, © 1988.

Murdock, Maureen. *Unreliable Truth: On Memoir and Memory*. New York: Seal Press, © 2003.

Myers, Linda Joy. *Journey of Memoir: The Three Stages of Memoir Writing*. Berkeley, CA: SheWrites Press, © 2013.

Myers, Linda Joy. *The Power of Memoir: How to Write Your Healing Story*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, © 2010.

Albert, Susan Wittig. *Writing from Life: Telling Your Soul's Story*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin. © 1996, 2004.

Zinsser, William (ed.). *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Boston: First Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Company, © 1998.

Other. In addition to books, memoir writers may be interested in:

National Association of Memoir Writers: www.NAMW.org
Memoir writing “how to”, helpful products, classes, resources:
www.WomensMemoirs.com

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