

Journal Prompt 1: Prompts for remembering – your life cycle

Pick any of the prompts below to brainstorm ideas for your Major Manuscript.

I. Childhood

The goal here is to portray the world you lived in as a child. Even if you do not plan to include your childhood in your life story, write your feelings about what these topics provoke. Make the notes in your writer's journal, on the computer or on note cards. It may be helpful to take out your family photo album to "see" yourself in your own childhood.

For our purpose, "childhood" focuses on birth to age 11. Describe:

- Earliest memory
- Earliest place you lived
- Yourself at three, five, seven, ten and eleven
- Friends and neighbors
- The neighborhood
- Crazy/weird people or relatives
- Parents and siblings and what they looked like then
- Where you were born? Hospital? Home?
- Did anyone say what you looked like? Who you looked like?
- Siblings, cousins, friends?
- Being a caretaker to siblings
- Pets
- Secret places/hideouts
- Games and clubs
- Trouble you got into
- Arguments/fights/scrapes with the law or school officials
- Discipline
- Religious/spiritual training
- Strange or secret experiences
- First school experiences
- Chores and responsibilities
- Bedtime stories, ghost stories
- Ambitions as a child
- Childhood illnesses

- Home remedies, scariest remedies
- Diseases people were afraid of
- Doctors and dentists
- Holiday celebrations
- Typical school day, typical Sunday
- Deaths
- Biggest fears

II. Growing Up/Coming of Age

In this section, focus your thoughts on age 12 through early twenties. This covers junior high school through college, your first work experience, your first date, the first time you drove a car. Maybe you got married or went off to war during this time. Maybe a parent or friend died and their passing changed your life.

These topics are a jumping-off point for the thoughts that will surely end up in your writer's journal and your life story. Describe:

- Your twelfth birthday
- Becoming a teenager
- Best/worst memory of junior high, high school and college
- The buildings and how they looked
- Your house and how it looked, including appliances and the decor
- Your teachers, what they looked like, strangest habits
- Teacher's nicknames
- Teenage ambitions
- Favorite subjects
- Your report cards and your parents' opinion of them
- Punishments/rewards
- Your friends, nerd-iest kids, the bullies, yourself
- The craziest kid in your crowd
- Most shocking thing you or your crowd did
- Your biggest success, biggest fear, biggest failure
- The funniest moments
- A tragedy you witnessed
- The bad kids
- Your heroes
- A secret you've kept all these years

- Drinking, smoking, forbidden habits
- First kiss, first date
- Dating behaviors
- First sexual experience or when you noticed the opposite sex
- Attitudes toward sex, what you knew of the facts of life
- High school prom
- Teenage hairstyles, music, dance crazes, fads, slang
- Sports or extra activities
- Social class in your town, in your school
- Books you read
- Radio you listened to
- Movies you saw
- Ambitions as a youth
- Thoughts of your future
- How you thought you looked

III. Turning Points

Every life has a time when the story teller senses the fork in the road. Turn left and a certain decision will be made. Turn right and life could be altered forever. Stay still and a decision is made, too.

Do you remember one that affected you? What are your cross roads? Do you see one in the future?

What have been your turning points? Have you chosen the road less traveled? Did you decide to stick with a job, marriage or doctrine because it was easier than taking a chance on the unknown?

In this section, you'll find topics to spark your memory. Describe:

- Political movements
- Daredevil behaviors
- Clandestine relationships
- Secrets
- Religious experiences, ceremonies
- First job, first reprimand, first period of unemployment
- House chores and home responsibilities
- Biggest trouble you got into
- How you declared your independence
- College, military, marriage, career

- Adjustments you made
- Stupid things you did
- Smart things you did
- Fears and failures
- Relationships
- Closest brush with death
- Meeting your future spouse
- Courtship/wedding
- Best/worst things about college, employment, marriage
- How you thought you appeared to others
- How you looked to yourself

IV. Hurdles of Life

These are the obstacles everyone goes through. Even good stress, such as the birth of a perfect baby brings about difficult experiences from dealing with sleepless nights to worrying about who might get the baby should something happen to you. Some hurdles stretch for years. Describe:

- Pregnancy
- Children
- Children's illnesses or accidents or deaths
- Becoming a parent
- Spiritual questioning or deepening involvement in church
- Separations, divorce, death, sending kids off to college
- Menopause
- Midlife crisis
- Adultery
- Biggest changes after forty, after fifty, after sixty
- Friends, family, parents
- Dealing with feelings of lost youth
- Best and worst times
- Pets
- Secrets
- Most shameful behaviors
- Most positive achievement

- Main concerns during these times
- Silliest times
- Stupidest things you did
- Concerns and worries as an older adult
- Most unusual thing about you

Journal Prompt 2: More areas of remembering

Pick any of the prompts below to brainstorm more ideas for your Major Manuscript.

I. Family Traditions

Every family has traditions. Was Christmas a happy or hateful event in your family as you were growing up? How was it in your family as an adult? In the family you married into? Did those times when the family celebrated traditions become nightmares, complete with arguing, hurt feelings, slamming doors? How do you feel about the traditions now?

How did you family members react to the traditions? What are your traditions? Keep in mind that traditions do not necessarily mean holiday celebrations, but you can begin to look at those as a starting point to trigger memories. Describe:

- Births
- Deaths and funerals
- Holidays
- Birthday parties
- Religious and/or cultural initiations
- Graduations
- Vacations
- Buying a first house, first car
- Promotions
- Seasonal events

II. The Clothes You Wore

As you look through and ponder the topics in the last prompt, refer to the list and jot down the types of clothes you wore and the fashions that were in style. This is an important part of the process of writing your life story. You can talk about who you were or those who affected your life, yet if you make "clothing optional" your reader will not see them as clearly.

These are the types of memories a "clothing list" can rouse in your life story. And if you don't make the clothing list or think about the clothing you and others wore? Your life story will be incomplete, and you'll miss great, fascinating opportunities when telling your story.

If you need to remind yourself of styles and fashions from days' past, use a search engine for fashion, clothing or clothing design and see what comes up. You may want to go to the library and access the micro fiche of ancient magazines to refresh your memory of what people wore in the past.

Be sure to look at old photos and describe what you're wearing in them, too.

III. Photographs

Speaking of old photos, they're an incredible resource when writing your life story.

Sometimes photos bring back sad, bittersweet or terrifying memories. Sometimes after you've looked at photos, you'll want to ponder what you've seen. You may need some quiet, mulling time. Go back to work on something else, take a walk, play with the dog. Suddenly your feelings of that memory will return. As you're writing your life story, you'll want to capture these feelings in your words, too.

Photos can be one of your best resources to help bring back memories.

Remember, the pictures don't have to be from your photo album or even family photos. Search online for the photos you need to refresh memories. Go to a bookstore or library and review the travel books. Contact historical societies if you're looking for out-of-date photos that you can't find anywhere else.

IV. Music, Movies and TV

As you chronicle the times of your life, listen to the music of that period. Locate this music and listen to it again.

As you consider the music of your life story, don't forget that you can learn more about various times in your life by watching television and movies.

Let old TV shows and old movies transform you to a time in your life that you want to write about. Let them provoke images of who you were and what you were feeling.

As you write parts of your life story, do your research by watching old movies and especially those that affected you in some way. Jot down the thoughts and memories they inspire. I think you have a few surprises in store. I always do.

V. Food and Families

For many of us these two are so tied it's impossible to think about one without the other. Re-visit various times of your life through your taste buds. Our senses of smell and taste are powerful when it comes to bringing back memories. Take a trip back to another time by eating the foods associated with the periods you're writing about.

If you are a person who feels a strong mental and physical comfort to food, you'll want to re-sample the comfort foods of your past. Chicken soup, tea, macaroni and cheese, tuna salad, and a host of ethnic foods may be personal soothers. Taste them and then write down your memories.

You may be surprised at what a peanut butter and grape jelly sandwich, lunch in a diner or a breakfast of gravy and biscuits could do to spark memories.

VI. Places

Describing the locations in which your life story occurs helps the reader to know you, know your feelings and attitudes. The reader can picture the action. Don't be afraid to surprise or shock the reader by busting a preconceived notion of a location.

Describe your location in a way that comes alive to your reader. Look for details that tell it all. It's okay to shock your reader too by destroying a preconceived image of a place. Every place you mention in your life story is there for a reason. Use the details of the place to show how you felt and show how your life is evolving.

VII. Using Your Senses

To spark even more ideas, think about your human "sense" of direction. As you look over the ideas and topics from the previous prompts, think of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting, but also think of speaking and the intuitive or spiritual forces in your life. Make notes about your senses as you organize material.

VIII. Reading Material and Field Trips

Other sources for information on the times and tastes and morals that play in your life story may be found books, newspapers or magazines of that time. To access a newspaper shouting the news of VE Day (the end of World War II in Europe), you may have to go to a major library and scan the micro fiche, but it'll be there.

To learn about life struggles your grandfather faced in early California, you may want to read nonfiction accounts by Mark Twain and the biography of Levi Strauss (the famous maker of Levi jeans). The Internet will connect you to some material but you probably won't be able to get everything you need online. You'll most likely have to visit a library, cultural center or museum to get a real feel for the history you'll want to include.

Summary

Allow the senses and your feelings stir more memories from your past that you want to include in your life story. Use photos, foods, television, movies, books, and music to provoke a time that has touched you.

Journal Prompt 3 “Your Cast of Characters”

Use any of the techniques below for your Major Manuscript, especially “III. The Other People.”

I. The Roles You Play

We're not just people. We're mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, wives and husbands. Describe your roles and include:

- Feelings
- Fears
- Secrets
- Failures
- Successes
- Confusions
- Frustrations
- Most embarrassing time
- What you're most afraid people will forget about you
- What you're most afraid people will remember about you

II. Your Voice

The words you choose and the way you write them are an example of your writer's voice. The voice reflects the feelings, ideas and desires you include in your life story.

Think a moment about your favorite writer. He or she has a specific way of producing prose. One would never mistake the scary work of horror writer Stephen King for Danielle Steel, the romance writer. Your writing most likely sounds different than another person in your critique group—even when you're writing on the same topic.

We capture the writer's voice by instinct and by not censoring the prose. My writer's voice is casual. I like to use contractions such as it's, that's, what's. I try to make my writing reveal Eva Shaw and then give information.

When you finish writing your life story you may want to go back to the beginning and modify the style. For now, I urge you to keep notes and write in the voice that feels best to you.

III. The Other People

You may want to make copies of this form below: fill them out for your cast of characters and keep the completed character sketched in alphabetical order in a three-ring binder or in a computer file.

You may alter this form however best it works for you. You may want to attach a photo of the person you're talking about or something that will instantly help you recall the time in your life when this person was part of it.

1. Name:
2. Nickname:
3. Appearance:
4. Hair (including style, color, type, texture):
5. Eyes (Glasses? Contacts?):
6. Weight:
7. Coloring:
8. Height:
9. Build:
10. Facial features (lips, eyebrows, lashes, jaw line, nose):
11. Voice (accent/way of talking):
12. Family:
13. Connection to you:-
14. Best friends/enemies:
15. Ethnic/cultural background:
16. Schooling:
17. Occupations (present and previous):
18. Hobbies:
19. Political preferences:
20. Likes/dislikes:
21. Movies/books/plays:
22. Foods:

23. Sports:
24. Fears/phobias:
25. Quirks:
26. Character flaw(s):
27. Favorite expressions/typical gestures:
28. Childhood/teen memory:
29. Role model:
30. Ten words to sum up of what you thought/think of this person:
31. Ten words as to how this person affected your life:
32. What you'd say to this person if you met today:
33. What you wish you hadn't said to or done to this person:

IV. The Voice of Others

When you're discovering and working with the voices of your cast of characters, use the character sketch provided above.

Make notes about each person's speech pattern, slang that they use, and even the look in their eyes when they speak. It's said that the eyes are the window of the soul. Think back to the people you're writing about and look deep within your memories to help define their personalities.

If you're writing for another person or working from letters, a diary or stories told by other family members, look for clues about the person's speaking and writing style.

Everyone has a unique speech pattern and word selection and your job is to discover the voices and include them into your life story.

Journal Prompt 4: Narrative and Dialogue

Readers love to read dialogue. Steer clear of page-after-page of narrative. Narrative is what you tell the reader is happening rather than show what is happening through action and dialogue. Here's an exercise in how to balance a narrative with dialogue.

Part 1: The Picture

Take a picture from your family album. Find one where you are prominent and preferably when you were younger or as a child. Maybe it's a class photo, a birthday party, or maybe you're a teenager and posed against your new car. However, make sure there is someone else in the picture with you.

Part 2: The Narrative

Study the photo for about five minutes. Set the timer if you think you'll have trouble with this requirement. Your job is to use the photograph as a vehicle to time travel back to the memory of that exact day. Make some notes on paper or on the computer. Continue to look at the picture. Feel the moment.

Trust me, you'll remember everything once you stare hard enough at the photograph. Don't be surprised if you once again feel anger, hurt or bliss. These are some of the emotions you'll want to use when writing your life's story.

You may even want clear your mind and to close your eyes. Meditate so you can relive some of the same emotions as that time of your life.

Make some more notes about how you will write the narrative (personal essay), but don't start yet.

Need ideas? You can tell about the day, what happened, what didn't happen, why you were there or how it feels to see yourself as a child.

Spend a half hour or more writing about you and the other person in that photo. This assignment may take you a few hours. You may have to put it down, think about what you're feeling, and return later. Don't be concerned if this happens; you're experiencing the creative process.

Write at least 100 words and no more than 500 about your picture. Write in a way that makes you feel good. Don't censor your thought. Don't go back to read what you've written until you've finished.

Part 3: The Dialogue

Now for dialogue. When writing your life story, you'll want to repeat conversations and stories. Readers love to read dialogue. Too often, new writers shy away from writing it because it seems complicated.

Not true—and not any more.

Just remember: Always make a new paragraph for each change of speaker. It's the "he said" "she said" stuff.

So, in 100 words or less, insert a very short scene, written mostly in dialogue, in your narrative essay.

Remember: If you've taken any writing classes or remember back in school as teachers talked about writing techniques you remember the words: Show don't tell. As you work on your life story, keep the adage in mind. It does make a difference.

Capture the details rather than tell readers what you want them to know. Also, let your characters speak what you want your readers to know. And know your reader well.

You may want to make a mental picture of a "typical reader" and as you write your life story concentrate on this person. You may want to pretend that the person is sitting across the desk from you. Every time you write something look up to make sure the imaginary person understands and is interested.

Journal Prompt 5: Narrative and Process Explanation “I Learned It Myself”

For the next half hour, set an alarm if you want to, write about something you taught yourself how to do. Tell why you wanted to learn it in the first place. Describe how you went about learning it. Explain what you learned from the learning process.

Make sure you include why or how learning this thing affected you. You'll probably want to use the Bubble Method to come up with ideas.

Here are the rules to writing this assignment. The most important is self-editing your essay. The word limit for this assignment is at most 500 words:

1. Give it a title.
2. Start the first paragraph with a question or a quote from a famous individual. (Questions instantly hook the reader. Quotes get people to notice what you're saying.)
3. Use the middle to describe the “who, what, when, why, where and how” of the experience.

4. Sum up the piece by rewriting your opening paragraph. Or write a twist at the end.
5. Read it out loud.
6. Savor your words.

Journal Prompt 6: The Interview

Conduct a short Interview (up to 15 minutes) with a person relevant to your life story (either an expert, participant, or witness – suggestion: friend, family member, or acquaintance) and take notes as research. The info below is the Eva Shaw's "How-To":

I. All Writers Interview

If you write you will have to, at some time, get information from another person. This is especially true when you're writing your life story.

Yes, I know, all the information is in your head. Or is it? Let's say you want to include how you and a grandparent share the same features, or so you've been told. By "interviewing" or asking another friend or relative who also knew this person, you can get so much more detail. That's what interviewing is about. It's asking questions to get information.

If you're helping another person write a life story, most of the information you get will be through interviews. If you need research information from a historical society, a civic organization or a corporation about methods, procedures or news reports, you'll get them through interviews.

Interviewing can be intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. An interview is just a focused conversation.

You ask questions of an expert (that is a person who has more or different information on a topic than you do) and the answers you receive will help you write your book.

Sometimes the interviews that are necessary during the research portion of a book are not included in the actual book and sometimes they are. For instance if you interview the head of the historical society about life in your area fifty years ago, you'll get information, but you probably won't quote this person within the pages of your life story.

II. How To's of Interviewing

Here are some recommendations I've developed over the years. Following my own advice keeps me on track and out of trouble.

1. Get yourself ready to listen. Even before you contact the individual you want to interview remind yourself that you're going there for the interview to listen. Even though you've been given permission for the interview, you are intruding on this person's life. He or she is doing you a favor. Unless you're going to interview someone of questionable integrity, writers are not charged to interview others.

2. Make an appointment. Make that appointment even if you're interviewing the person over the phone. This will save you time and it lets your expert know you're a professional.

3. Prepare adequately for the interview. Before you ever leave your office, find out as much as possible about the topic or the individual you'll be speaking with. Nowadays, you can research many topics online using various search engines. Depending on your topic, however, you may have to consult with historical societies, medical groups, or back issues of the local newspaper for material that's not on the Net. Really do your homework or you may end up putting your foot, inadvertently of course, in your mouth.

Be sure to prepare yourself personally for the interview. If you suffer from sweaty hands--and who doesn't when nervous--a thin film of clear antiperspirant--rubbed well into your palms will stop that. Try it before the big interview however.

Avoid drinking too much coffee before the interview. You don't need to seem extra nervous, do you? And ditto for alcohol. I can put my foot in my mouth without drinking and I sure don't need to do it when I'm jittery about meeting an expert for the interview.

Remember to eat and take care of other bodily functions. Sounds basic doesn't it, but sometimes things get so hectic we writers forget this.

4. Write a list of questions, even when doing a telephone interview. This lets you focus on the responses rather than trying to think up pithy questions as your expert is speaking. Should anything unforeseen happen and your expert needs to handle it, you'll be able to glance back down at your list of questions and start the interview again. I always write out my questions. People expect writers to have them and I figure if it's good enough for Barbara Walters and Stone Phillips, it's good enough for me.

5. Check your equipment. Do the batteries in your tape recorder work? Do you have an extra set in your brief case for emergencies? Do you have a map should the highway be ripped up or there's a traffic jam and you have to find an alternate way to your appointment? Did you get gas before changing into your "grown-up clothes" so that you won't smell like a gas station should the nozzle slip? Do you have two pens? Have you packed your reading glasses? Do you have coins or bills for the toll road, money for the parking meter, a tip for the parking attendant?

6. Confirm your appointment. This is one of my cardinal rules. People are busy. If you traipse across town or sit in traffic for heaven-knows-how long only to be disappointed because the expert was called away, you may twist an ankle kicking yourself. This happened to me three times before I caught on that it's important to confirm the interview. Confirming your appointment saves time and reminds your expert that you're there for a purpose.

7. When you arrive introduce yourself and explain your purpose for the interview, if you and the expert are not already friends. Do this immediately after the introductions because, contrary to what your mother may have lead you to believe, you are not the center of the universe. Your goal is to get the point of your interview quickly but you must also make the person you're interviewing feel comfortable.

Small talk helps.

Be aware that you may be the first writer that the expert has ever talked with and we all know how "different" writers are--just joking of course. Seriously, your expert might not be comfortable. Awkward interviews are not successful.

I interviewed the spouses and loved ones of women who didn't survive their battles with breast cancer, for a book called *Diana's Gift*.

During the process I had to stop interviewing so that these people could get themselves together. I could feel my questions turning knives in their hearts, many openly cried, yet they bravely continued.

Another time and for a different book I interviewed the parents of children who had been murdered by a serial killer. I asked questions about how these moms and dads coped with the media and their tremendous shock and loss. As a parent and a writer, these heart-rending interviews shook me so deeply that I couldn't face transcribing my own tapes and notes for weeks.

Small talk helps your expert feel comfortable and will help you too.

8. Start by asking simple questions. Although some writers and journalists warn that yes and no questions are fruitless, I use them to help an expert "warm up." You want him or her to be comfortable in your presence. Move in slowly.

9. Once you're into the interview change the tone of your questions. Again, all questions are written down before the interview so that you're prepared for this switch. Ask questions that have to do with the senses, such as "How did you feel the first time you." "In your opinion." "When did you think." You may want to look over the questions you used to spark memories and incorporate them into your interview.

10. Your most powerful tool to get a great interview may be silence. Periods of silence need to be designed into the interview time. These allow the expert to fill the silence with valuable quotes and information. Feel weird doing so?

Pretend you are studying your notes or simply look away for a bit. Don't be surprised if your expert is waiting for you to stop talking in order to give you insightful information or add details you didn't even know enough to know you needed. It happens a lot.

11. Make sure your body language reflects that you're interested. If your arms are crossed tightly over your chest, if you're frowning, if you're flipping change in your pocket or twisting a strand of hair, guess what? Your expert will notice instantly and give you a mediocre interview. Smile. Make eye contact. Sit forward when the expert speaks. Throughout the interview stay connected.

12. Take notes of what's going on around you while you're interviewing. As you ask questions, watch the tape recorder swirling around and take notes, jot information about the expert's surroundings, i.e., color of the office, what he/she is wearing, notable accent, anything that will make him or her come alive when you include the interview in your work.

13. Begin to wind down as your time comes to an end. Then ask THE most important question: "Is there anything you'd like to add or other topics you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered?"

Without a doubt the expert has been patiently or impatiently waiting for this moment and this question nearly guarantees you a great topic sentence or bit of information to include. However, you cannot ask this question until the end.

14. When you finish the interview, mind your manners. Thank your expert by sending a thank you note, written in your very own handwriting, to tell him or her that you appreciate the time and information. This is good manners and that's always in fashion. Additionally, sending a thank you note has a possible and bigger payoff. You'll be remembered. Should you need more information most likely this person will remember your good manners and agree to talk with you again.

15. Finally, leave a business card or name/phone number/e-mail address with your expert. You should do this so your expert can get in touch with you with additional information or to provide another expert to talk with. Let's say I neglect to give the expert my card and he or she remembers a wonderful detail about my father's childhood. Without a doubt, I'll never know about it.

If you do not have business cards, print them up on your computer or go to the office supply store to order them. You can have 500 cards printed for about the cost of a nice restaurant dinner.

Summary

Interviewing is easy and enjoyable if you remember some simple techniques. First of all, relax and smile. Second, come prepared and remember you're there to listen.

Journal Prompt 7: Titles

Some people simply call their life stories by their own first name, such as *Mary*. Others title them with *My First Twenty Years*.

Quite a few writers select a theme that gives a hint of what the memoir is about, such as David Owen's *Around the House: Reflecting On Life Under a Roof* (Villard, 1999). It is a collection of stories about domestic adventures in and around a 200-year-old house in Litchfield, County, Connecticut.

Many of my students start brainstorming titles using the Bubble Method we talked about earlier and this system works. They keep title lists in their writer's journals or in a file on their computer.

As you consider a title for your story, keep these tips in mind.

1. Titles are labels, headlines and calling cards
2. Too often, readers, editors and agents (unfortunately) only read titles before selecting what to read

3. Key phrases, lists (i.e., "Ten Reasons Why I."), snappy word twists, provocative questions can become great titles
4. A title, like an idea, cannot be copyrighted
5. Sometimes the title just doesn't "happen," but once the book is complete, it appears
6. Come up with several titles. Print them out. Tack them on the wall in your office or kitchen or bathroom, much like you'd do if you were selecting new wallpaper. One of the titles will "speak" to you and shout, "Hey, you know you'll choose me—so do it now."
7. If your tongue can't make it through a title, an editor's won't either.

Journal Prompt 8 (and the Very Last One): Writing Project Outline as a Letter

Submit a letter to me about how you will write your life story (memoir, novel or other writing projects) and how you plan to continue with it now that class is moving on to the real work of writing your manuscript. Refer back to the tools and resources offered here in the class, including how to punctuate dialogue.

Outline steps you'll take to achieve realistic objectives, especially focusing on time management.

Explain to me what will be included in your life story (or other writing projects) as if you were telling a good friend or a publisher.

Before you officially "give" the letter to me, let it chill for at least 8 hours, give it a polish, let it sit for another few hours and then read it out loud.

Final Writing Topic, from Eva Shaw: Self-Editing

Here are some self-editing tips:

- Use the thesaurus function on your software to liven your word choices.
- Read your work out loud. Some life-story writers read into a tape recorder. Those words or sentences that sound awkward probably are. These are the ones to change.
- Take out unnecessary "qualifiers," that is words like *very*, *almost*, *rather*, *many*. What do these really add? Nothing.
- Give enough details to make your ideas come across to the reader. What does it mean when we write: "I had many jobs before I became a firefighter." Okay, we know this person had worked at other jobs.

Now read this and you'll have a clear idea of the diversity of the writer's life. The writer now says, "Before joining the Riverdale Volunteer Fire Brigade in 1938, I sold encyclopedias door-to-door. For a time I worked at a drug store. After I got fired for giving too many free sodas to too many pretty girls, I taught harmonica and played the banjo at a dive in Nashville waiting to be discovered. When I didn't get discovered for my charm or talent, I traveled with a small-time circus. The food was always cold and greasy. I was more used to a flashier life. So I change professions again and ran a numbers racket in Brooklyn at the same time I waited on tables at the Russian Tea Room, which was fancy back then. Yeah, I was a traveling preacher for a time, too."

More interesting? Give the reader the whole story.

- Don't expect you can do all your editing on your computer's screen. I do the first two edits on the screen, then print a copy of the manuscript and work from that. Then I input those changes and do another screen edit. We're up to four now. Depending on the story, I may continue to self-edit for four to six to eight more drafts.
- As you're reading your manuscript, don't try to find the perfect word. On a printed copy of your work-in-progress, simply highlight or circle words you'll want to change later. Make the first reading of the draft time to find grammar

errors, spelling errors not caught even by the best spell-check software, and just strange stuff that manages to get into your life story. Then go back and fine-tune your manuscript.

- Consider the topics you'll include. They must have a reason for making it through to the final draft. There's an old story writing teachers pass around that tells it all. If you're going to write in detail about a Revolutionary War firearm that's hanging over the fireplace, then that gun better be fired in the story. Otherwise, don't include it. Eva's warning: Watch out for hanging guns.

- Be careful not to tell your reader something twice even if you do it in two different ways. Readers are smart. Redundancy makes a story boring.

- Today, gender-specific writing, that is only using the male gender pronoun, is out of style. At one time it was okay to write, "Everyone thought his own house was the best on the block." Today we restyle that sentence, because females probably lived on this block, too. You could say, "To all the kids on the block, their house was the best home."

- I am a champion of your right to freedom of speech. However, before you include racy or X-rated material or language in your life story, determine who your reader will be. If you're sharing your experiences at the Los Angeles shipyards in the forties with your grandchildren, you may want to keep the language clean.

You will still want them to know that the dockworkers swore, but you don't have to use the words themselves. Here's how. You could say, "Some of the stuff that was shouted by the workers as they unloaded the cargo ships would have curled my mother's hair, but once they walked into the front office where I worked as a typist, they left the colorful terms at the door."