

Tips for Writing Memoirs by *Linda C. Wisniewski*

author of
OFF KILTER
*A Woman's Journey to Peace
with Scoliosis, Her Mother,
& Her Polish Heritage*



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Writing the stories of our lives is one of the most valuable things we can do for ourselves and future generations, but it's not always easy to get started. Here are some things I've learned along the way.

- ◆ Buy blank notebooks from the “dollar store” and fill them up as fast as you can. Don't use anything so pretty you feel you have to put only your best work in it. Get your words out of your head and onto the paper so you have something to work with.
- ◆ Set aside a time and place, and write freely for half an hour a day. Don't edit or censor what you write in this first draft. Think of yourself as a sculptor with a lump of clay. The work of art can't appear until you set the clay—your words—in front of you.
- ◆ Use props to jog your memory. I like to use keepsakes, photos, even articles of clothing. Put one of these items in front of you on your desk and let yourself go back in time to when you got it. Why do you keep it? What emotions does it bring forth in you?
- ◆ Make lists. Even when you can't think of an opening sentence, you can still write a list. Here are some examples:
 - Make a list of historical events that happened in your lifetime and write about where you were then. Include people, scenes, colors and sounds -- everything you can recall. How do you feel about the event today, looking back on it?

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- List the people dear to you. Then list their best and worst qualities, i.e., what makes them unique?
- List the addresses where you've lived or the places you've visited.
- List your hobbies or the jobs you have held.

The more you list, the more you will remember, and the more you will have to write about.

- ◆ Make a chart of your life in decades. Under each decade, list the turning points or times of transition. Then write a brief story about each turning point. When you're done, you'll have a very good outline of your life which you can expand on.
- ◆ Use an index card for each person important to you and write a few words on the card about what you want them to remember about you. Then write that person a letter about why these things are important to you.
- ◆ Think about your favorite recipes. Who gave them to you? When do you make these foods?
- ◆ Stop writing and stare into space! After you have set down a rough draft, ask yourself these questions. What is my point here? Why am I telling this story? What do I want my reader to understand? What does this episode remind me of in my current life?
- ◆ Take a break. Put the story aside for a few days or even longer. Work on something else or take a walk outside. When you come back you'll have a fresh perspective.
- ◆ Be specific. The more detail you can add to your story, the more you will remember. But you have to do the work to get there. When I wrote about my first time in the hospital, I let myself go back to the sterile white room, the blonde hairs on the arm of my nurse, the books she gave me to read, the darkness outside the window, my loneliness and fear. It was only then that I remembered the name of the girl who was my hospital roommate forty years ago.

Try one of these tips with your own memoir writing. And send me your own ideas as well! I'll post my favorites on my website with your name attached. Happy writing and reminiscing!

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