

## COMPOSING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

### WHAT IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

The term *auto* comes from the Greek term meaning “self” or “directed from within.” While the Greek term *bio* refers to the idea of “life.” Finally, the root, *graph* simply refers to the idea or practice “writing” or “something written.” Essentially, autobiography means “self/life writing”

An autobiography is a piece of discourse (or writing) which is directly about the author by the author. An autobiography differs from a biography, since a biography is written about another person.

Autobiographies can take the form of memoirs, life histories, and other forms of writing. They are qualitative in nature, since they record life events and give regard to the qualities of life (such as life events, stories, and reflection).

Autobiographies are slightly different from autoethnographies, since autoethnography is concerned usually with the study of people. Autoethnography focuses on ethnographic information within a particular space and time, and such discourse is written by an ethnographer (e.g., a sociologist, an archaeologist, or other scholar). Autobiographies generally cover a time span from birth to current age, and they can be written by anyone.

Autobiographies are sometimes thematic. That is, they have a theme. For example, some autobiographies by musicians are concerned with one’s development of a particular talent. Autobiographies by heroes in our culture may be situated towards a particular event, but generally cover the individuals entire life previous to the event. Autobiographies may also be situated towards the acquisition of one’s skills with literacy. We tend to call these sorts of autobiographies, Literacy Autobiographies. Such exercises are common in the college culture, since they offer a unique glimpse into a student’s past experiences in learning to write.

### EX: Autobiography (Condensed Sample)

I was born in downtown Boston, Massachusetts to a wealthy aristocratic family. However, my home life was so miserable and my parents so focused on work, I ended up being raised by a high-society mentor. I spent most of my days with my Auntie Fey. Fey was not really my aunt, but over time she basically adopted me into her home and lifestyle. She and I would take trips to museums, see the opera, and ride the ferries across the river. We would travel to the “North End” and eat Gelato with the Italian mafia, and play bridge games with the wealthy old ladies of Cambridge. We would visit her Harvard professor buddies who specialized in art, and they would teach me things which I did not even realize were present in paintings. She was my first lesson in love and kindness. I idolized her. I adored her. She was essentially my adopted mother. She was more than an aunt and more than just a friend.

About ten years into our relationship as friends, she died from a rare form of cancer. She had no children and very few other friends. So, I ended up receiving all of her assets. In my mind, I never realized how much she loved me. Yet, when her lawyer was reading her will to me, it said, “To Jennifer, my wonderful companion and student, I leave everything to you. I hope you will sell most of my belongings at auction and use the money to attend Harvard. Tell those boys to help you to be a great artist and art critic. Take my paints, my oils, and all of my studio belongings, and make a career. Do this in memory of me, and I will be with you always.” I remember crying for days after. But, I took up her command. I followed her instructions.

I applied to Harvard, and I was accepted. I majored in Visual and Environmental Studies, learning directly from Fey's professorial colleagues and peers. Since they remembered me as being dear to that wonderful woman, I think they stretched their willingness to help. They seemed to extend to me every courtesy available, working beyond class with me, and pushing me harder and harder. As a result, I became a professional artist and critic. And, everyday, I remember the generosity of my good friend and mentor, Fey.

## STRATEGIES

Strategies for composing autobiographies:

1. Consider chronology. Start at the beginning and end at the ending.
2. Try to have a conclusion which seems sufficient.
3. Use "I" as much as you like.
4. Use specifics about places, people, and things. Description is your friend when you write an autobiography.
5. Do not forget to develop your theme.
6. Talk to others who experiences things with you to help to remember times, dates, and circumstances/conditions.
7. Make a timeline (timelines help us to stay organized, so that we do not have to return to something which was already written).
8. Reflect on experiences. Answer the question: How did particular events make you feel?
9. Leave out generalities, and explain the most important items related to your theme/focus.