

Facilitating a Lifewriting Group is Easy

First Edition

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Published by

Capturing Memories

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Introduction

FOR OVER FIFTEEN YEARS, they have gathered at the Senior Center on Vashon Island, Washington on Monday mornings to share their lives. It started as a creative writing class, but one day, leader Joyce Delbridge read an article about how much easier it is to write what is *already* in your head, and she introduced the group to memoir writing. Together they discovered that personal experiences are the sources of the best story material. Joyce says, “It is easy to know the beginning, middle, and end of your story when it’s yours.”

The Senior Center group was ahead of its time. Today, memoir and family history writing has experienced a revival. As our modern culture has become increasingly fast-paced and the extended family more separated, the opportunities to pass on traditional family stories have diminished. However, we humans have a great desire to leave a legacy of some sort to our children’s children’s children.

Memoir writing is the easiest kind of writing. You do not have to be an experienced writer to begin putting your stories together. However, as you write, magical things happen—your writing improves and you think of more stories to write.

Writing personal histories is a solitary kind of hobby, and it is easy to put it off. Joining a writing group is a way to find support and inspiration. Over the years, people have e-mailed me from around the country asking how they can find a lifewriting group in their area. I usually suggest the local community college or senior centers or retirement homes. I also encourage people to form their own group. I know that can be intimidating, because when Joyce Delbridge suggested that to me, my first reaction was, “Oh I could never do that!” But when I was not a part of a lifewriting group, I did not write as much. So one day I decided to start a small group. And I found that it was not so hard. Shortly afterward, I wrote a short

When an elder dies, it is as if
an entire library burns down.
—African saying

article telling others how to begin their own group. As the years went by, I collected dozens of ideas to help group members kindle memories they thought were long lost. Over time, I developed these ideas into memoir-writing workshops, lectures, articles, newsletters, and books. This knowledge has now been gathered together in this guide so that anyone can facilitate their own lifewriting group.

Whether you already are a part of a writing group, or intend to form one, you will find the process rewarding in many ways. You will keep writing your stories for your family and descendants, your writing will improve, you will inspire others, and they will be very appreciative of your efforts.

Best of luck!

Cathy Fulton

October 2003



Getting Started: Steps to Success

SO, YOU ARE CONSIDERING STARTING a memoir-writing group. Before you begin, I suggest that you think through some of the logistics: When and where should you meet? How often? Do you need to charge for the meetings? How much? How can you publicize your group? And maybe the scariest question: Once the group is meeting, how do you help other members to write their stories—even if you are new to lifewriting yourself? This chapter will help you answer those questions, so you can get on with the fun part—actually meeting with other lifewriters and sharing your stories!

Step 1: Is There Enough Interest?

The first step is to determine if there is interest in your community to start a group. Ask your friends; check with the local senior center and retirement centers. Put up posters and send notices to the local paper to encourage people to attend an introductory meeting. (A sample poster and press release can be found in Appendix D.)

One possibility is to plan a series of six to eight initial meetings and then survey members at the end of the last session to see if there is interest in continuing with ongoing meetings. A detailed guide for six initial sessions can be found in Chapter 3.

You should have a commitment from at least six people before you begin the group. You need at least that many to achieve good group dynamics.

Step 2: What should we charge?

There are a couple views on charging members for being part of the group. I prefer that the meetings cost little to nothing in order to make the group accessible to anyone, without regard to their level of income. Seniors, in particular, often have fixed incomes, and they are in the age group which tends to be most interested in memoir

The wise man must remember that while he is a descendant of the past, he is a parent of the future.

—Herbert Spencer

When we share memories and stories, we celebrate the most human part of ourselves—we give the gift of ourselves.
—Vera Rosenbluth, author of *Keeping Family Stories Alive*

writing. Sometimes, you have to charge in order to pay for a meeting space.

Another view of charging says that unless you charge a fee, people tend to think that the writing group has no value and won't even attend one meeting to find out. Some writing groups charge as much as \$12 per two-hour session so that the facilitator can be paid.

If you do decide to charge, collect the fee in advance for four to eight sessions. Otherwise, attendance is likely to fall off as time goes on. The fee commits the member somewhat. Some groups have a pay-as-you-go plan—members pay a set amount each time they attend. Another possibility is to have a punch card so members can pay for five to ten sessions in advance and attend when they can. This works well if the exercises you offer each session stand alone and do not depend on information learned in a previous session.

Whatever your view, it is important to establish up-front what the charge will be and include that information in all your publicity.

Step 3: Where will we meet?

Find a place to meet that charges little or nothing for the use of the facility. Possibilities include churches, libraries, senior centers, local history museums, bookstores, park and recreation facilities, and schools. If the meetings will be free to members, make it clear that you want a free place to meet *and* that you *won't* be charging attendees. Libraries usually require that you not charge for meetings and that the meeting is open to the public if you use their meeting rooms. Sometimes these organizations will even help you with publicity.

Step 4: How often should we meet?

I encourage groups to meet weekly in order to maintain the writing momentum. However, meeting every other week works well, too. Some groups meet monthly, but I consider this to be too infrequent.

Step 5: How do we publicize?

Display posters in libraries, senior centers, retirement complexes, and bookstores. Ask pertinent organizations if they will help with publicity in their newsletters. Contact genealogical societies, local history museums and groups, senior centers, bookstores, and libraries.

Put announcements in local newspapers each week before your meeting. Emphasize that workshops are free and open to anyone anytime.

Senior citizens are particularly interested in writing memoirs. Be sure your publicity reaches them. If your local senior center holds lunch programs or other meetings, ask if you can make a 5–10 minute presentation to their group. Take examples of your writing. Explain the format of the meetings and hand out flyers.

Sample posters and press releases can be found in Appendix D.

Step 5: How do I facilitate the meetings?

The goal of this book is to make the facilitation of each meeting easy. Read Chapter 2, “Meeting Formats that Work,” thoroughly and adapt the ideas found there for your group. Prepare introductory handouts that tell newcomers about your group and how meetings are run. In our group, since we allow members to join anytime, I always bring copies of these handouts to each meeting so I don’t have to repeat the information each time. I include my own contact information, so members can call me between meetings if they have questions.

At the first meeting, lay out a display of books on memoir writing and examples of your own and others’ work if it is available. Suggested resources can be found in Appendix C. Give members time to browse through the materials at the beginning and end of the first meeting. During the meeting, mention some of the resources; point out your favorites and tell why you like them. (You don’t have to buy all these books. Many of them are available from your library.)

At the first meeting, hand out workshop guidelines, a schedule of topics for the next 4–6 sessions, and a list of books available from your local library on the subject of family history and memoir writing. Sample guidelines and other handouts can be found in Chapter 2.

If someone is holding a memoir-writing workshop nearby, this would be a great kick-off for beginning a writing group. Or, arrange a workshop yourself especially for this purpose. The Association of Personal Historians includes members who have experience conducting stimulating lifewriting workshops. See Appendix C for contact information.

Step 6: How do I help members tap into their memories?

This is the easy part! It does not take much prompting to get people to think about their past. This book is filled with enough ideas for more than a year’s worth of meetings.

Chapter 3 provides exercises I have found to be especially popular and which result in lots of memoir writing. They are a good way to kick off your group and generate continuing interest.

After the first few meetings, the exercises in Chapters 4–7 can be done in any order—choose those you feel most comfortable facilitating and which will work well with your group.

You can present the exercises as they are written. You can modify the exercises in any way that works for your style and the needs of the group. (Handouts are included in word-processor format on the CD-ROM for you to edit as you wish.) Or, you can make up your own exercises based on your experiences.

Choose an exercise before each meeting. Know what you are going to discuss for the first six to seven meetings. If you have done some lifewriting yourself, pick topics that you have experience with. In

I have no money to leave to my grandchildren. My stories are my wealth.

—Angela Sidney, from
Life Lived Like a Story
by Julie Cruikshank

other words, if you have used journaling, timelines, and photo-captioning successfully, then those are good topics to start with. This will give you confidence as a group facilitator.

It really does not take a lot of energy to facilitate a writing group, but if you have a partner who will share responsibilities with you, so much the better.

Index of Lifewriting Exercises

LSWS A List/Share/Write/Share exercise (See Chapter 4)

AFP An Annotated Floor Plan, Bird's-Eye View, or Map (See Chapter 6)

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