

Six Great Tips to Write Your Life Story

1. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Legacy books cannot be rushed. This project demands adequate time and attention. Think of your tasks on a given day: shopping, laundry, texts, and phone calls. All important, but how does that stack up in importance to the legacy—your stories, values, faith traditions, lessons learned, family history—you leave for your loved ones, children and grandchildren?

Commit to the project, it is important. Take time to celebrate your decision to pursue a consequential and meaningful journey for you and your family.



2. Immerse yourself in the past.

It's time to dig out the old photo albums. Watch old family movies. They're a great resource to help us remember the people, places, and events of the past.

I witnessed the power of family movies when I worked on my first legacy book. Bless her heart, my mother-in-law offered to be my "guinea pig." In her late 80s at the time, she was experiencing some memory issues during our initial interview sessions. I thought it might be helpful—and fun—to watch family movies from the late 1950s. We saw aunts, uncles, and cousins at family celebrations and the beautiful birthday cakes she made for her seven children. The next day, her recall increased significantly.

Talk to your family and friends. They will remember stories and people you haven't thought of in years. A legacy book project is an excellent opportunity to connect with your children, grandchildren, family members, and old friends.

Resist the temptation to start writing until you've completed this step. You will have so much more perspective from this dive into the past, and it will be incredibly helpful when you start creating your life story narrative.

3. Build a timeline of your life.

Start at birth and create a list of all the significant dates in your life, such as birthdays and major life events in a Word or Excel document. Some examples of what to include: your date of birth and location, schools you attended and graduation dates, meeting your spouse and wedding, careers, birth dates of your children, anniversaries, retirement, and historic events.

Assembling this level of detail is time-consuming, but ultimately, it will be a *time saver* and invaluable resource when you start writing. It's almost magical: this process can spark memories of things you haven't thought about in years.



4. Time to start writing (and don't stress out about this!)

When I speak, I ask everyone in the room who thinks they are a great writer to raise their hands. Very few, if any, hands go up. The problem is that most people don't consider themselves great writers, which keeps them from tackling what is arguably one of the most important tasks of their lives.

Let's get real. You don't have to be a great writer. Your life story book doesn't have to read like a *New York Times* bestseller. It can be as long or as short as you like. Just take a deep breath, and start writing. And if you draw a blank on where to start, you don't have to start at the beginning. You can start with a story you love to tell, something familiar.

When I started learning about life story writing, I attended a workshop where we were given two weekly writing assignments. One was to write about elementary or middle school days. At first, I was stumped, and then I remembered how I met my best friend in seventh grade. It was amazing. In about an hour, I had completed a short essay. I marveled at how easily the memories streamed out of my head onto the screen.

Let your thoughts flow; worry about editing and revising later. Remember, you can always bring in a professional editor if you need that extra help.

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5. Understand your audience.

Having spent a big slice of my career in public relations, this is second nature to me. But it may not be on your radar and is important.

Who will be reading your book? Are there difficult or sensitive issues or situations involving others you would be writing about, such as a former spouse, an estranged child, or a family member? Alcoholism, long-simmering family disagreements, or other sensitive family issues? You must tread carefully here for moral, ethical, and legal reasons, even if you only publish your book to family members. (Publishing on Amazon or to the general public is another layer of consideration.) Consider these matters carefully and weigh the pros and cons of sharing sensitive issues with your family or others who will read your legacy book.



My recommendation: if you mention other people in your book in a way that could be problematic, bring them into the loop before publication and let them review the content. This can be helpful to confirm the accuracy of your recollections and potentially avoid any hard feelings that could arise after publication.

6. The time to start is now.

One of the biggest mistakes people make when thinking about writing their life story is waiting too long. This is especially true in the case of capturing and preserving the memories of an elderly loved one, whose health can change quickly, and their ability to recall the past can be impaired or lost.

Our lives offer a wealth of memories, wisdom, family history and insights to our children, grandchildren, and future generations. You'll never regret starting this journey filled with love, joy, and laughter!

— Linda Abbott