

UNIVERSITY FELIX HOUPHOUET-BOIGNY
Faculty of Languages, Literatures and Civilizations
Department of English
American civilization

Master 1
(Theoretical class)

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Pr. N'GUESSAN KOUADIO GERMAIN
E-mail: nguessankouadiogerman@gmail.com

Definition

A literary genre, the **Autobiography** is an account of important facts and life events of someone – the author – who lived them. It aims to give the details of the author's entire life, in a factual, historical context, focusing on how the events shaped his/her character and individuality.

If you write an autobiography for professional publication, the publisher would expect you to observe these distinctions. However, when you learn how to write an autobiography for personal reasons, your primary objective is only to provide a few answers to questions others may not know they have. If you want to write your own biography, however informal, you may find it easier if you focus on an overall theme.

Create a unifying story theme

The more the autobiography follows a **traditional story structure**, the more it captures and sustains attention. The easiest way to create a story structure is to focus the story on a major life goal, and the successes and setbacks related to the goal. This might be anything from your need to survive an illness to the desire to raise a happy family. You may recognize these goal-oriented themes:

- The struggling artist
- Overcoming hardship
- Following a calling
- Love that conquers all
- Rags to riches

If you want to write your own autobiography, any one of these, or something similar, will make an interesting and inspiring theme.

A story by definition is about overcoming obstacles. Others learn more about you through your management of setbacks than through your ultimate successes, and it is human nature for readers to want to learn how others have overcome obstacles. Everyone has goals that may be financial, familial, and spiritual. This natural human desire interests and engages readers, which is why professional autobiographies of historical figures focus on difficulties the individuals faced. The successes are secondary.

- 9 simple steps in writing an Autobiography

Whether you are writing your personal autobiography or are helping someone else write his/her, the following steps offer a practical way to begin, with a particular focus on narrative structure. When writing an autobiography, as when writing anything else, it is good to begin simply and add details as they come to you. If you go easy on yourself, you will recount more memories each time you sit down to write. The topic sentences in the paragraphs below provide enough information to proceed. The rest of the paragraph elaborates on how to accomplish each step.

1. **Before writing an autobiography, read a variety of autobiographies already published.** These books have been shaped and polished by

professional editors, and it is possible to learn much from them. When you know how others have successfully presented their stories, writing your own life story will be easier. Find a style you like, and notice the life events other authors include, the order in which they present the facts, the level of detail they provide, and the length of each tidbit, scene, or chapter.

2. **Choose the focal point or theme** to be discussed in detail on the page about learning how to write an autobiography. Success with this step will provide your story with the critical push that hooks readers and keeps them reading. Whatever your goal, think of it as the unifying thread that drives your life, shows the failures and complications you overcame, and demonstrates how you achieved to become the person you are today. If you can complete this part of writing, your story will not be a vague writing "about you." It will instead be about the yearning that shaped your life.
3. **Create an outline of the key obstacles in your life.** This can be a simple list of the key moments in your story, with a focus on the challenges you have faced and your response to them. Readers are more interested by obstacles than by a catalogue of happiness and success. However tempted you are, remain positive. This is not to say that you should ignore the happy moments. It is only that the main story thread will be more interesting if it is supported by your movement toward a goal and the difficulties encountered as you attempted to achieve it. This dramatic movement is crucial to any story and particularly useful when writing an autobiography.
4. **Once you have your initial list, work on each key event in your outline.** Fill in the blanks, and then write anything you remember about that point as it springs to your mind. Later, you might choose a single event that best illustrates each point in the outline and describe the event, using your theme statement to guide your description. For example, suppose you wrote: "From the age of ten, I knew I would become a singer." What specific event triggered this determination? Can you describe that event in a paragraph or two, using all the senses available to you: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell? Using all five senses will help readers imagine the moment as if they were present with you. This vibrant act of reliving events arouses more emotion in readers than simple summary. And if you can master it, you are well on your way to writing an autobiography. Let us take the following situations:

➤ **Sensory description:** *The house was dark, cold and fearful. The atmosphere was one of horror. I quickly ran in the other room, thinking that I would find an exit. In the meantime, the roaring was coming nearer while my companions were screaming. Suddenly, I heard another noise. I caught a piece of metal laying on the floor and put on the light. Just in front of me, at about two meters, a man, almost 2.45 meters tall, was standing with a hoe in his hand. I did not have time to ask who he was when he struck me. I fell down, bleeding when he disappeared in the dark.*

- **Summary:** *That night I was transported to the town hospital with a finger cut and the hurt went through my arm.*

Being transported to the hospital is disturbing, but the description likely causes to cringe more than the summary. Writing an autobiography is not easy, but it should be enjoyable.

5. **Train yourself to use concrete details rather than abstract concepts.** Take another look at what you have written. Highlight abstract phrases such as “I was afraid,” or “we had a pleasant time.” Replace these abstract words or phrases with something concrete, such as “my hands shook and my mouth felt stuffed with cotton” or “We ate seafood during the ceremony and as the sun set my fiancée and I walked hand in hand along the seashore.” Was it “a hot day,” or “a cold day”? You might go back to the professional autobiographies you are reading and type out a few passages from the books for practice. If you are watching for it, doing so will focus your attention on the concrete. Most ordinary readers will not think about whether or not you have used abstract or concrete terms. They will know whether the writing is boring or interesting. Writing an autobiography with concrete specificity will only improve it.
6. **Review your outline again and imagine that it is a web becoming more intricate.** Every spider web begins with a single supporting thread that anchors all others. Then the spider lays key connecting threads, to which it attaches many smaller lines. Watch an animated video of a web being built. Your initial scenes of obstacles and failure make up the supporting threads to which all others in your story web connect as you are expected to answer several questions at the same time. What else happened after each of these main events? What was important to you at this time? Did you have any special friends? A pet? A romantic partner? A spouse? What specific event will best show the relationship you had with this person or animal? What actions and dialogue can you relate in concrete detail to help readers understand that relationship and its importance? Do you remember any other challenges you had to overcome that relate to each main point in the story? What high points and low points do you recall? Was a specific holiday or celebration memorable? Etc.
7. **Organize what you have written according to cause and effect and action and reaction.** Organizing events according to cause and effect is a natural process.
 - Cause/effect: You were sick, so you went to the hospital.
 - Action/reaction happens paragraph by paragraph. Example: He said “No,” so you said “Why?”

If one part of the set is missing, readers will sense an awkwardness. If you are writing an autobiography, or anything else, action/reaction sequences will make your writing lively and natural. As you expand your ideas, write in action/reaction pairs. This one-two approach provides balance. Your chances

of writing an autobiography that easily engages readers is greatly increased when you systematically alternate between an external action that motivates action, and an internal or external reaction to that action.

8. **Allow time each day to read through your work and tighten it.** Read what you wrote aloud to better notice repetition and awkward and unnecessary phrasing that can be edited out. In the early stages of your writing, you might seek to reduce each paragraph by 50%, without losing any important information.

Example: I have reduced the word count in the two preceding sentences from 40 words to 20 with this edit: Read your writing aloud to better notice awkwardness, repetition, and unimportant information. Initially, aim to reduce each paragraph by 50%.

Removing words is a frightening prospect for the writer trying to build up pages, but better a slim, concise volume than a long, wordy one.

9. **If the project becomes too much for you at any point, remember that writing an autobiography takes time.** Take the pressure off. Relax. This is your life story. You can make it as brief or as complete as you like, but do not expect to write it quickly. It may take years.

Types of Autobiography

An autobiography tells some or all aspects of the author's life story. The type of autobiography depends on her overall intention for writing the piece. There are so many types of autobiographic writing that it is difficult to decide which type is appropriate for one's story.

Full autobiography

A full autobiography is the most comprehensive type of autobiographical work in that it covers the author's life from birth to the moment he/she writes. A writer may write a full autobiography for three main reasons:

- He/she may wish to leave his/her life story behind for his/her future offspring to read
- He/she may want to jot his/her full life story down as a means of self discovery.
- He/she is a famous individual and knows that people are interested in the story of his/her entire life and that a full autobiography by him/her would be published. Most full autobiographies that are published are on the lives of famous figures; it is very difficult for a non-famous individual to find someone willing to publish his/her full autobiography.

Memoir

A memoir is a type of autobiography that is limited to a certain topic or period in the author's life. There are several subtypes of memoirs:

- The coming of age memoir: focuses on the author's journey through childhood.

- Example: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*
- The memoir of place: chronicles the author's experiences while living in a particular region.
 - Example: Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*
- The ecological memoir: combines the memoir of place with a spiritual theme to convey the idea that every person has a certain place where he/she is destined to live and thrive. The new Ecological Memoir carries the sense that there is a place on the planet which is right for each person and expresses one's true self.
 - Example: Tempest Williams' *Refuge, an Unnatural History of Family and Place*
- The occupational memoirs: focuses on the writer's days working in a certain career.
 - Example: Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley*
- The relationship memoir: autobiography dealing with the writer's relationship with a particular person or group of people.
 - Example: Simone de Beauvoir's *Adieux, A Farewell to Sartre*
- The historical memoir: form of autobiography in which the importance of factual accuracy and chronology supersedes the creative imperatives of inner truth. Heavily influenced by journalism and reportage, historical memoirs are often authenticated by quotes from newspapers, letters and other verifiable, external records.
 - Example: *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*
- Philosophic memoir: form of autobiography where a world view is demonstrated through the writer's own story.
 - Example: Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea*

A **Memoir** generally refers to a personal account of a particular period in the author's life, often his/her career, a traumatic event, a particular challenge, or other special circumstances. A Memoir aims not to encompass the author's entire life, but to provide insight into a specific aspect.

Religious/ New spiritual autobiography

In a religious autobiography, the writer details his/her experience with a particular faith while simultaneously promoting that faith. Meanwhile, a new spiritual autobiography describes the author's individual spiritual journey without making any claims that his/her spiritual journey is the only correct path for anyone else to take.

- Example: The Bible

Dealing with adversity

In dealing with adversity autobiography, the writer describes his/her struggles with some form of physical or psychological obstacle. Dealing with adversity

autobiographies used to almost always have an inspirational quality and end with the author overcoming her hardships. More recently, however, writers have begun writing dealing with adversity autobiographies that do not end on a positive note and merely serve to document the intensity of their struggles.

- Example: Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story*

Conceptual autobiography

In a conceptual autobiography, the author seeks out to accomplish something particularly unusual with intention to later write about the experience. To write the autobiography, Orwell intentionally allowed himself to become poor so he could write about the lives of men in poverty. The conceptual autobiography is a good choice for a non-famous writer who wishes to get an autobiography published.

- Example: George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

Autobiographic novel

An autobiographic novel rides the line between fiction and nonfiction in that it is based loosely on the author's life but contains fictional characters and some fictional circumstances. The characters in an autobiographic novel may have their own stories but also go through many of the same hardships as the author. Writing an autobiographic novel is a good choice for an author who wants to write about some aspects of his/her life but does not want to deal with people trying to pry further into his/her life later on. It allows his/her the security of claiming that the work is merely fiction and not to be overanalyzed.

- Example: Pat Conroy's *The Great Santini* and *The Prince of Tides*,

Family History or the family saga

A family history or saga is often considered a form of autobiographic narrative because it is a person's exploration of self-identity. But it is not "I" writing about "I." I have noticed that writers who try to record the stories of ancestors along with their own life often end up with two works instead of one. Family histories can fall into the dutiful and often laborious tracing of the family tree and the telling of disconnected anecdotes, unless enlivened with fictional devices and an ever-present narrator's voice. If you wish to publish a work about ancestors, you will have to write it like a novel with all the devices and drama of fiction.

- Example: Alex Haley's *Roots*

Travelogue: The memoir of a journey can be a particularly entertaining form of autobiographic writing if it doesn't fall into simply describing "what the writer saw" in dutiful chronological order. The form is as old as Margery Kemp's thirteenth century "as told to" account of her travels through England as an eccentric single older woman. In contemporary time, Peter Mayle's *A Year In Provence* demonstrates that it is not so much the journey or place, but the character, feelings and reactions of the author which is of interest. Somewhat irascible narrators seem to write the most compelling travel memoirs, probably because their exacting personalities put them into constant conflict with their foreign surroundings.

- ❖ In addition to the above recognizable types, there are some important American traditions of autobiographic narrative. For example, within the **African-American**

Tradition, there can be found some outstanding examples of autobiography, memoir and autobiographical novel. The tradition begins with slave narratives told to white writers, but freed African-Americans quickly recognized the need to write their own stories. Early their quest for freedom was linked with their quest for literacy. One of the most outstanding examples of these narratives is the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*.

Other examples of African-American are:

- Richard Wright's *Black Boy*
- James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name*
- Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*

❖ **African-American Women** have created their own tradition with its own archetypes. Critic Joanne Braxton points out that articulateness is important for African American female hero, too, and she identifies two common figures: the sassy female "trickster" and the "outraged mother." Both of these heroines rely on invective, impertinence, and ritual invocation for protection. Contrary to the solitary black male hero, she participates in a collective wisdom of courage, ingenuity and love handed down from a beloved female figure, often her grandmother. In almost all examples of African-American women's autobiography, there is a period of perilous adolescence in which the heroine becomes aware of gender difference as well as racial prejudice. Often it is motherhood, no matter how early or difficult, that opens the pathway to her greater self-awareness and self-respect.

Other examples are:

- Harriet "Linda Brent" Jacobs's 1861 account, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*
- Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes: or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*
- Angela Davis' *An Autobiography*
- Alice Walker's *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*

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Assignment: “In an essay of 6 pages maximum, write your life experience as a secondary school student.”

Instructions

- ✓ Presentation of the document
 - a. Cover page must bear your name, institution, faculty, department, level, name of teacher, and title of assignment
 - b. Essay must be 6 pages maximum
 - c. Formatting: 2.5 cm all sides, Times New Roman 12
 - d. Double spacing

Deadline: Students are required to leave their works at the Department secretariat on October 16, 2020. No extension after that deadline.