

Writers CAFÉ

How to Use Journaling to Write Your Life Stories

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Introduction

Are you a journal writer who also dreams of writing your stories for others to read? Or maybe you are a life writer and wonder how journaling can support you to write your stories? Some people naturally live in both writing worlds – engaging in the personal practice of journaling and the act of writing to publish for others to read.

About Journaling

Journal writing is ultimately a storytelling practice. It is also a form of expressive writing where you explore your thoughts, feelings, and life experiences on the page. Journaling, in some ways, is about making sense of and meaning from our lived experiences. It is a tool for personal growth, self-awareness, and creative self-expression.

About Life Writing, Autobiography & Memoir

Journal writing is personal and for yourself. Life writing is also done for yourself but is aimed at sharing with others. There are many different styles of life writing including such things as personal essay, autobiography, and memoir. There is a difference between these as well; for example, an autobiography is a story of a whole life, whereas memoir is about a piece of your life (a particular time frame, theme, turning point, etc.). A memoir can happen during a defined period of time (i.e. 6 weeks as is the case in Hope Edelman's memoir, *The Possibility of All Things*) or around a specific theme or turning point in life (i.e. *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert), etc.

What is the Difference Between Private and Public Writing?

Journal writing = private writing

- Writing for an audience of one, yourself.
- Writing craft is not that important, whatever you write is right.

Life story writing = public writing

- Writing for an audience of many, your readers.
- The craft of writing matters.

Sometimes these various types of writing blend together for great effect. For example, someone might include excerpts of their journals or private letters within a memoir. This is the case with the current book your group is reading – *Between Two Kingdoms* by Suleika Jaouad.

“ Writing is not simply self-expression. Writing is a way to seek lines of connection and intersection with others, to compose creative and lively possibilities for living stories, for making up stories, for revising stories, for turning stories inside out and upside down so they are always transforming and transformative.”

~ ERICA HASEBE-LUDT, CYNTHIA M. CHAMBERS & CARL LEGGO

5 Ways Journaling Can Help You Write Your Life Stories

1. Get better at noticing what matters most

Journaling writing is about noticing. Through regular journal writing you learn new things about yourself, discover patterns of thoughts, feelings, and ways of being. This self-awareness and capacity for noticing both your inner world and outer world, offers important awareness to inform your life story writing. *All stories are about noticing what matters most.*

2. Develop your personal point of view

Journaling is a process of writing in an uncensored way to know, grow and care for yourself by putting pen to paper. By doing this over time, you discover your point of view about life, various circumstances, relationships and more. You can hone, change, and sharpen your point of view and opinions, including about yourself, through regular journal writing. *All stories need to have a point of view.*

3. Explore the core themes and the message of your personal essay or memoir

A theme includes the subject(s) being covered (for example, in my adoptee memoir-in-progress, themes include adoption, mother loss, mother love, Catholicism, identity, family, healing the abandonment wound, nature vs. nurture, chasing losses, Alzheimer's disease, empowerment and the power of letting go) while your message is the main learning or take away that you want your reader to have. Ask yourself, *what do you want your reader to learn from reading your life story?* This can make a great journal prompt! *Get curious, write without needing to know the answer. Journal to discover what might emerge as answers and possibilities. All stories need to have a core theme, message, and purpose.*

4. Re-read your journals for raw material for your life stories

You can re-read your past journals looking for things that are relevant to the specific topic of your memoir. Maybe you are writing about a time in your childhood, your journey with cancer, a divorce, a life-changing trip, etc. – whatever the topic or focus of your memoir, you can find relevant content in the pages of your journal. For example, I was writing in my journal in the moments just before the doorbell rang when I met my birth mother for the first time. All the raw material in the pages of my journal, from that significant moment in time, now is informing and integrating into my memoir. All stories need material, memories, and moments to work with.

5. Become a better writer through journaling

All writing matters. Journal writing. Life story writing. The more we engage in the act of writing, the better we become at writing. I have learned through 4 decades of being a journal writer, as well as through various life writing projects, that the writing itself, whether in our journals or otherwise, often teaches us where the writing (the story of our lives) needs and wants to go. Journal writing helps us cultivate our authentic voice as writers. It helps us know and trust the unfolding story of our lives. *All stories require our unique and authentic voice as writers and storytellers.*

When you write in your journal, keep these tips in mind...

- Whatever you write is right. You are always the expert of your own experience.
- Date your journal entries.
- Write about your thoughts and feelings, not just the events of your days.
- Journal as a life story writer, capture moments, dialogue, scenes and more.
- Write from the heart.



Words that come from the heart, enter the heart."

My friend, Merle Saferstein, told me this is a Jewish expression.

I think it is perfect wisdom for us as writers.

About the International Association for Journal Writing – IAJW.org

We are an inspirational and learning community for journal writers worldwide. We offer online journaling courses, retreats, tools, ebooks, journal prompts, writing circles, guest interviews and more. We are a caring and creative membership community *where journal writers belong*. Whether you are a new journal writer, trying to get back to journaling, or have been an avid journal writer for years, the IAJW can help you deepen your journaling practice to get more out of it and stay inspired to go to the page and write.



IAJW.ORG INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
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Enrich Your Life Through Journaling

The IAJW exists to support and inspire you to enrich your whole life with journaling!

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“*Journal writing makes a difference!*”

LYNDA MONK