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Writing a Memoir?

Don't Make These 10 Mistakes

By Daphne Larkin



Karin Bar-Zeev (left) shows Daphne Larkin (right) the map of the road trip she and her partner, Mimi Francis, took in their converted ambulance during Larkin's fall Memoir Writing Class at the Blue Ridge Community College. Their ambulance is now for sale to some intrepid travelers. (Courtesy photo)

If you've decided to write your memoir, congratulations! You're about to embark on the personal journey of a lifetime, a journey of self-discovery that will surprise, vex, entertain, empower and transport you to an important part of your remembered life. To make your memoir the best it can be, you'll want to avoid some of the most common mistakes new writers make, mistakes that can make or break your story. Here are 10 of them.

MISTAKE #1: Write the story of your life. Memoir is a slice of life, not a whole life. It's a window into a moment, a stated period of time.

MISTAKE #2: Open with a dull beginning. Unless you hook your reader from the first sentence, she will not turn the page. In fact, no one will read your memoir, except your family. (Maybe – and only to find out what you wrote about them.) Consider how Jeannette Walls opens her best-selling memoir, "The Glass Castle." She's in a New York City cab wondering if she's overdressed for the evening when she looks out the window and sees "... Mom rooting through a dumpster." Talk about a compelling lead.

MISTAKE #3: Tell, don't show. My memoir writing students at the Blue Ridge Community College often begin by summarizing what happened. However, nothing is more boring than reading a laundry list of events. So, go ahead and summarize those events, then find meaning in them. The way to do this is to show the reader what happened, not just tell the reader. And that's done by interweaving description, dialogue, emotion and scene into your story.

A student in my fall memoir writing class opened her story telling how she and her partner converted an old ambulance into a house on wheels and took off for a 10-month, cross-country road trip during the height of the Covid pandemic. Just about the time I was about to suggest Karin Bar-Zeev "show" the reader something, suddenly she was taking us with her as she relived a heart-stopping childhood memory. In just a few words, she'd accomplished what the novelist Joseph Conrad wrote as the task of the writer: "... to make you hear, to make you feel and to make you see."

MISTAKE #4: Avoid being emotional.

Emotional tone – or lack of it – can make or break a memoir. You must create an emotional connection with your reader, so get inside your experience and dive to the bottom of the ocean. Your gut and heart will know when you're there.

MISTAKE #5: Depict yourself as flawless. In memoir, you must confront your weaknesses and then show us how you became a more wonderful person (than you already were). Nothing is less believable than a narrator who is perfect while everyone else around him is making terrible mistakes.

MISTAKE #6: Don't create a narrative arc. Good stories have a clear beginning, middle and end. Often, they will open with the narrator in a jam. Then, as events move forward, they build to a dramatic moment (the climax) before the story begins to resolve and ends with a satisfying conclusion.

MISTAKE #7: Take a break when the writing gets tough. So, you're typing away having a good time writing your memoir and suddenly you're stumped. Resist the urge to get up. If you stop writing now, you can kiss your breakthrough goodbye. Stay put and chances are good that your best writing will come in the next few minutes.

MISTAKE #8: Make stuff up. In memoir, you must be truthful. You cannot fabricate, exaggerate or embellish like James Frey did in his memoir “A Million Little Pieces.” You may remember that when Oprah discovered the author had made stuff up, she fired him on national television – with millions watching.

MISTAKE #9: Write for revenge. Don’t do this! It will backfire one way or another, including the very bad possibility that you’ll be sued for libel or invasion of privacy.

MISTAKE #10: Don't edit or rewrite. Good writers draft their story, then edit like crazy, ruthlessly taking out every extraneous word – even the ones we hate saying goodbye to. We love to cut and rewrite (and rewrite) until we have a story we like and one the reader will, too. So, future memoir writers, don’t dally! Start your engines and begin the important work of writing about your life. Just don’t make these 10 mistakes and you’re on your way.

An award-winning book author, columnist and magazine writer, Daphne Larkin will be teaching Memoir Writing at the Transylvania County Library (Adult Programming) in April and May of 2023 and at the Blue Ridge Community College on the Brevard campus in June and July. For more information, contact Larkin at daphne@daphnelarkin.com.