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# Autobiography.

**Authors:** Castaneda, Kay, MA

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**Abstract:** An autobiography is a book about a person written by that person. The word comes from the Greek words autos (self), bios (life), and graphein (to write). An autobiography often begins with the birth of the author, or the author's parents, and then follows the time line of the author's life. Facts, research, and interviews, along with letters, certificates of birth, and school or employment records, may be used by the author. The writer may situate the story with history, place, and setting. Autobiography is generally a more formal style of writing, although the author may use his or her own voice and other writing devices. A memoir, on other hand, is usually written from memory and does not necessarily require extensive research. Memoir writers often use an informal style and may recreate scenes, people, or events in a creative manner.

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## Autobiography

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An autobiography is a book about a person written by that person. The word comes from the Greek words *autos* (self), *bios* (life), and *graphein* (to write). An autobiography often begins with the birth of the author, or the author's parents, and then follows the time line of the author's life. Facts, research, and interviews, along with letters, certificates of birth, and school or employment records, may be used by the author. The writer may situate the story with history, place, and setting. Autobiography is generally a more formal style of writing, although the author may use his or her own voice and other writing devices. A [memoir](#), on other hand, is usually written from memory and does not necessarily require extensive research. Memoir writers often use an informal style and may recreate scenes, people, or events in a creative manner.

## Brief History

The *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (2013) attributes the word “autobiography” to British essayist and literary critic William Taylor of Norwich (1765–1836). Taylor coined the term in his 1797 review of *Miscellanies; or, Literary Recreations* (1796) by [Isaac D'Israeli](#), which discusses, among other topics, the emergence of “self-biography”—writing by people who wanted to record their lives for posterity.

Traditionally, autobiographies were written by religious leaders, royalty, philosophers, writers, or artists. Advances in printing and the publishing field fueled the popularity of the genre during the eighteenth century, when restrictions on printing were lifted. The proliferation of public libraries gave increased access to books, and as education became more available to the public, a greater number of readers, and therefore more writers, emerged. [Virginia Woolf](#) (1882–1941), author of *A Room of One's Own* (1928), asserted that the rise in literacy began when middle-class women began to write and publish their autobiographies.

Debate in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has centered on the numerous autobiographies available to readers, the worth of topics, and the qualifications of the people who write about themselves. [Edward Gibbon](#) (1737–1794), author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), wrote in his autobiography, *Memoirs of My Life and Writings* (published posthumously as part of *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon*, 1796), that readers identify not with someone's great works but with minor traits attributed to all. One advantage of reading autobiographies, both for the general reader and for students of history, is an increased awareness of the world. [Mark Twain](#) (1835–1910) compared his own autobiography to a mirror in which he looked at himself all the time (Courtney 2013).

Another debate concerns censorship. Closed societies may view autobiographies of certain people as a threat and may forbid their citizens to be exposed to historical or current events. On the other hand, global citizens may discover old or forgotten biographies online or in bookstores or libraries. The invention of [electronic books](#), which can be downloaded and viewed on tablets, computers, and cell phones, provides readers with autobiographies that might otherwise be difficult to access.

## Overview

Writing an autobiography gives an author the opportunity to examine his or her life and find answers to common human questions, such as who the author is and where he or she comes from. To write an autobiography, one must search for information about one's personal history and, sometimes, that of one's ancestors. Once that history has been located, the author is able to situate his or her own story by place, time, setting, and other literary devices.

The motivation to write an autobiography may be to uncover secrets, such as personal or family scandals; to locate oneself within historical events; or simply to leave one's story for posterity. Classical subgenres of autobiography reflect different authorial intentions. An apologia is a defense of a person's beliefs and actions. Orations are autobiographies that are addressed to the reader and intended to be read aloud in privacy. A confessional autobiography reveals the author's transgressions and mistakes in life.

Psychologists view autobiographies as valuable for personal identity and psychological well-being. J. Lenore Wright, in her book *The Philosopher's "I": Autobiography and the Search for the Self*, writes that autobiography is a method for reinforcing our unique existence among others, communicating ourselves to others, giving continuity to ourselves, and making ourselves and our identity transparent to others. [Autobiographical memory](#), events and experiences that we remember about our life, can be divided into episodic and semantic events. Wright states that our [episodic memories](#) are recollections of people, events that happened to us, and where those events happened, and we are able to remember emotions experienced during such events and the context in which they occurred.

Neuroscientists associate encoding, the storage and retrieval of autobiographical memories, with the medial temporal lobe. There are three types of autobiographical memories: general events, focused memories of an event; lifetime periods, memories of certain periods of life; and event-specific knowledge (ESK), highly detailed memories of events and people (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000), including originating events, turning points, anchoring events, and analogous events (Pillemer 2001). Such events often appear in the narrative of autobiographies as well.

The study of autobiography has many applications in scientific fields. Research has uncovered that writing one's autobiography can be beneficial people who are being treated for mental illness, are in elder care, or have disabilities. In the educational field, universities have begun offering majors in autobiographical studies. In the community, writers conduct classes and seminars in the study of autobiography. Life-story researchers, centers for biographical research, and guided autobiography groups are a few types of organizations involving autobiography.

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