



Welcome to Write Your Life Story.

In this six-session course you'll wrangle the stories you want to share into a manageable project by following a theme roadmap. This roadmap clarifies where to begin and what to write next. You'll also write five, two-page themes and make a plan that will guide and support you to the very last word of your life story.

### **In One-to-One Meetings:**

We'll discuss your goals for your life story project

We'll talk about writing techniques that engage readers

Identify supports that facilitate your writing

Find solutions to obstacles that hinder your writing

Create a plan to guide you in completing your life story project

### ***Through Articles and Videos***

You'll explore Writing Craft Basics that Engage Readers, such as:

Choosing Specific, Concrete, Sensory Words

Clarifying Vague, Abstract Words with Examples

Creating Vivid Portraits of People and Places with Figurative  
Language and

How to Incorporate the Factual and the Emotional Truth

Step-by-step, session-by-session you follow a roadmap that provides the knowledge, skills, and support necessary to reach your goal of completing your life story project.

Let's Get Started

### ***The Theme Roadmap for Writing a Life Story***

Imagine this: You sit down to begin your life story project. As you think about what to write, it begins: There is the story about how you won the trophy. There is the story about the night your house caught fire and was gutted. There is the story about working as a prop master for a summer theater in the Catskills. Then there is the story about how your mother and father met, when you were born, when your siblings were born, and all those stories about vacations, birthdays, holidays, graduations, weddings, and the list goes on and on and on.

Which story do you write first? How do you weave it all together to make sense? You could write it chronologically event by event. But you've lived many years and that's a lot of events. How do you decide which stories to tell?

To wrangle writing a life story into a manageable project, a possible project, a doable project; it's helpful to have a roadmap such as the one offered by Guided Autobiography which is a theme approach to writing life stories.

### ***Guided Autobiography***

Guided Autobiography was developed by Gerontologist James Birren, Ph.D. In his book, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography*, Birren states,

*The word “guided” refers to preparing a personal history with the help of a tested plan that uses a series of life themes. The themes help us gain access to memories and to organize them in a way that honors the complex threads that shape our lives so that we can present them as a unique and richly woven fabric of life—which indeed they are.*

The nine core themes developed by Birren tap the most important and universal aspects of any life story: Branching Points, Family, Work, Spirituality, Health, Money, Gender, Death, Goals and Aspirations. For each theme there are twelve questions related to the theme that help people write a two-page story about an experience that had meaning to them and influenced the trajectory of their life and who they became.

### ***Guided Autobiography and Memoir Journals***

To grasp the broad and deep coverage this approach to life story writing provides, it's helpful to contrast it with memoir journals in bookstores which are usually divided into sections: Early Years, Childhood, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Middle Years, and so on. The questions, lists, and dates of

important events in each section enable people to write for short periods of time knowing not just where to begin, but also that they'll cover a broad range of information about their life *within* specific developmental periods.

Guided Autobiography also enables people to cover a broad range of information about their life. However, this theme approach to writing a life story connects life experiences *across* developmental periods. For example, in a memoir journal there might be questions about work:

***What*** was your first job? ***When*** did you start this job? What type of work did you do? ***Where*** did you do this work?

List all the jobs you've worked. ***What*** job did you work at the longest? ***What*** did you enjoy about this job? ***What*** did you dislike about this job?

These questions focus on what happened, when it happened, and where it happened. Occasionally, the questions probe thoughts and feelings about the topic. The Guided Autobiography theme approach taps all this information, but extends it to explore *how* and *why* events occurred. More importantly, it fosters reflection that connects experiences across more than one chronological period in life. You can see this in a few of the Guided Autobiography questions related to the theme of Work:

*How did you get into your major life work? Did you seem destined to follow it, or did you stumble into it?*

*Were family models important in the work you chose? Who influenced you the most?*

*Did any childhood interests or experiences influence your path?*

*How did the place where you grew up and the times in which you lived influence your choices and the way in which you think about your life work?*

Notice how this approach enables the writer to include the *how*, *who*, and underlying *why* about selecting a major life work while also connecting different time periods in life.

The difference between memoir journals and Guided Autobiography is essentially the difference E. M. Forster described as the difference between story and plot in his book *Aspects of the Novel*:

*Let us define a plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the Queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the Queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it...If it is in a story, we say “and then?” If it is in a plot we ask “why?”*

## ***The Theme Roadmap for Writing a Life Story***

The theme approach to life story writing is effective because it focuses more on plot than story. And it is plot that keeps readers turning the pages. They turn the pages not just to know what happens, but also to know how and why it happens. They want to understand why the writer took one path and not the other. They want to know the joy and warmth of special moments and the humor that can be found looking back at embarrassing moments. They want to grasp life's sometimes absurd and unexpected curves, to understand how the writer coped with sorrow and loss and how the writer achieved his or her goals despite obstacles. They want to know why the writer believes what she believes and how she came to those beliefs. Essentially, they want to understand the writer's journey to understand the writer, life, living, and their own journey.

While I present a Theme Approach to organize and prioritize stories, I've modified Birren's themes and the questions associated with them. I've retained the suggestion of writing just a few pages about each theme. This prevents writers from becoming overwhelmed and provides a sharp focus for each piece. The nine themes below tap the universal and significant aspects of life stories:

### Turning Points

Childhood Family Influences

Impact of Place

School Days

Work Life

Family and Friends, Today

Spiritual Matters

Historical Influences

Plans and Dreams

You'll begin your life story project by writing a Turning Point Theme. So, mute your phone, decide when you'll write, and where you'll write. Be specific about the days of the week, the time, and the place. Have all your materials organized and readily available. Then begin, remembering the wisdom of Lao Tzu an ancient Chinese philosopher who wrote "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

In this lesson we discussed The Theme Approach to life story writing which goes beyond what happened, when it happened, and where it happened to explore *how* and *why* events happened. In the next lesson,



you'll explore how to engage readers by incorporating the factual and the emotional truth in your themes and stories.