

Writing Your Story Program SESSION GUIDES

Introduction

Always start with paper and pencil in hand (or computer, if you wish). It's a good idea to have a new notebook such as a school exercise book to keep all your jottings in one place.

Try to work in silence (or talk to yourself!). If you need background music, make it instrumental only.

Please don't skip any of the activities. Everything will be valuable.

There are five sessions in the program. You may move through them at your own pace.

Spend as much time as suits you on each session. However, try to get up and move around for a few minutes every 30-40 minutes.

It's a good idea to give yourself "mulling", reflecting time, between sessions. Don't overload yourself too much at once.

You will NOT be asked to share what you have written. Everything you write will be *just for you* until you want to share it with others or with your personal intended reader/s.

If you wish to raise anything for discussion with Fran at any time, you may do so by email: franlaneuse@gmail.com

If you do that, please put in the email subject heading: WRITING – followed by your first name.

Anything you choose to share with Fran will be held in strict confidence.

If at any time, you want to start again or change tack, do so. Follow your instinct. But don't give up. Just do more reflection.

A reminder: please let Wendy know that you are starting the program. This helps her to assess the level of interest in this type of activity.

When you decide you have finished, please answer the **feedback** questions at the end and send your responses to Wendy. We hope this program might provide something fresh in your life during the coming difficult weeks.

The session topics are:

- 1 – Getting started
- 2 – Fleshing it out
- 3 – Finding a shape
- 4 – Bringing it to life
- 5 – Refining and revising

SESSION 1 – Getting started

This session covers:

- Who are you writing for?
- Why are you writing?
- Exercises to trigger your thinking ...

1 Thinking:

WHO are you writing for? A family member, a particular friend, a partner, grandchildren or great-grandchildren not yet born, all your descendants, yourself (just to get it out?) ... ?

When you think about the key people in your life, who is the one (or who are the ones) you most want to have strong memories of you?

Are there key things that those important people wouldn't know about you, and you'd like them to know?

2 Writing:

Jot down your answers and those key things ... as you see them so far.

3 Thinking:

WHY are you writing? To record information – events, experiences, profiles of family members – that might otherwise be lost, to share your feelings, to give advice, to answer questions people have asked you (For example, my eldest grandson recently asked me to write down every job I have ever done since I earned my first income. It was selling ice-creams from a dry-ice bag at the local fishing competition when I was twelve. I earned five pounds for a long day from dawn to dusk!) ... ?

How "honest" do you want to be, and why? Think about the implications of someone other than your intended readership ever reading anything you'd rather not have them know. That decision is yours alone.

4 Writing:

What do you want your reader/s to think or feel when they've read what you write?

Tip: If you're sure about that, what you write will head you in that direction. If you're not sure, you may work that out as you go along.

5 Thinking:

If you had half an hour to live, who would you want to talk to and what would you want to tell them?

6 Writing:

Jot down the answers to that question.

7 Writing:

Don't think too much first. Write down five words that describe the type of person you are.

8 Thinking:

What factors have influenced what type of person you are?

What factors have influenced how you've led your life so far?

9 Writing:

Write down those factors.

10 Doing:

Dig out some old photos.

Choose a few you'd like to talk about with your reader/s if you had the chance.

11 Writing:

Write a description of each photo, how it makes you feel and why it matters.

Tips:

During the coming week, it's quite likely that memories will come flooding in.

Reflect on what you've done, and jot down anything that occurs to you.

Take a notebook and pencil when you go for a walk, or use the Notes function on your phone.

These days, some of us can't trust our memory to retain ideas for more than a few seconds!

SESSION 2 – Fleshing it out

This session covers:

- Dredging your memories
- Recovering moments

This will help you to find potential content for your writing – what's it going to be ABOUT?

1 Thinking and writing:

Get a big piece of paper (maybe tear a length off a roll of baking paper or tape together several A4 sheets end-to-end in landscape format to create a long document) and draw a **time-line** showing the **key turning-points** in your life.

For each turning-point, make a mark on the time-line, give the event a **name** and jot down:

- What was the **trigger** for that event?
- What **decision** did you need to make?
- How did it **change** your life?

It's likely that you'll need to make those notes in your notebook because space on the actual time-line will be limited.

2 Reflecting:

Read everything you've written down so far, in both sessions, and reflect on it.

Can you decide at this stage what parts of this you want to focus on for your writing? For example, will it be a mini-memoir of a slice of your life, or a piece about particular people or events in your life, or how you faced a particular challenge, or a letter to a particular person, or the start of a whole life memoir, or ... ?

3 Writing:

If yes, make notes on that decision. If no, continue to reflect and jot as ideas come to mind until your next session.

It may be that at this stage you need more time to reflect before you move on.

SESSION 3 – Finding a shape

Tips:

This may be the most difficult phase of your exercise.

If you're not written much before, or if you've not written personal stuff before, you may decide to start with something very small, to see how you go. For example, writing a profile of a little-known family member, relating a particular key moment in your life that made a huge change, or describing how important a key person has been in your life and why.

Remember, if you decide to change your mind, do so. Follow your instinct. In writing, nothing is ever wasted. Everything you have thought about and written so far will feed into and enrich what you end up with.

1 Thinking:

Go back to your last notes from the last session and read through them.

When you've decided what part of your life will be the focus of your writing ... think about how you want to **shape** it.

For example, will it be:

- a mini-memoir of a slice of your life
- about particular people
- about a particular event or events in your life
- about how you dealt with a particular challenge
- about your greatest passions
- a letter to a particular person
- a list of advice for someone
- a series of special moments you want to describe
- the start of a whole life memoir
- ... or something else?

You might decide to shape it in short chapters, each with a particular focus.

You need a beginning, a middle and an end for the piece you write.

In that way, you'll give your readers a satisfying reading experience ... maybe even an intriguing one.

If you write chapters, do the same for each chapter: a beginning, middle and end.

How might you **START** the story?

You might start by posing a question, creating a mystery or a doubt about a person or event, relating a conversation, expressing a powerful emotion you feel about something.

For example, I recently wrote something that started with a conversation in which my niece questioned me about whether her (long deceased) grandmother had told the truth about a particular incident, but not revealing what that incident had been.

How might you **CONTINUE** the story and develop it towards the end?

The middle of my story followed my memories of my mother's behaviour, while dipping back into the conversation with my niece – each time revealing a bit more information about the incident she had queried.

It then moved into tracing a more recent event with the potential to prove or disprove my mother's believability.

How might the piece **END**?

No surprises here: my ending asserted that she told the truth.

You're likely to struggle a bit with finding your shape. If you find it far too frustrating, it might be best for the time being to revisit the notes you've made and find a different idea that has more natural structure.

Now might be the time to get in touch with me by email and float your thinking, if you wish.

SESSION 4 – Bringing it to life

Tip 1:

It's important that you don't get hung up at this stage on rules of grammar and vocabulary usage.

Just let your writing flow.

Focus on your memories and your feelings, and on creating images and feelings for your readers.

However, the following tips are important to help your writing connect better with your readers.

Tip 2:

You need your future reader/s to become **engaged** in reading what you have written.

Simply listing facts will not achieve that – not even for readers who genuinely want to know.

You need to create images in the minds of your reader/s and evoke their emotions, in order to trigger their engagement.

Therefore, you need to think about your **style** of writing. You need to bring it to life.

When relating a real event, jot down what was happening at the time. You might use any of the following ideas:

- What can you see in your mind?
- What sounds were there?
- What sort of light?
- Weather?
- Smells?
- Sensations?
- Anything you were touching that influenced how you felt?
- How did your body feel?
- What was the context of the event, in terms of what was going on in the community, the world, your family?

Tip 3:

If you are writing about conversations, use direct speech most of the time, rather than indirect speech. That is, put the words into the mouth of the speaker. This connects much more effectively with the reader.

For example, rather than write:

The day I was awarded Top Girl at school, Mum and I were watering the front garden when a neighbour came over to the fence, smiled and congratulated me. I was pleased and proud. He told Mum she must be very proud that both her daughters had won the award. Mum told the neighbour she would rather have had her son's name on the school honour board than both her daughters.

It's more powerful to write:

The day I was awarded Top Girl at school, Mum and I were watering the front garden when a neighbour came over to the fence.

He smiled at me. "Congratulations on being Top Girl," he said. I beamed with pleasure and pride.

He turned to Mum, "You must be very proud that both your daughters have won that award."

Mum said, "I'd rather have my son's name on that school honour board than both my daughters."

In this way, readers can more easily put themselves in the shoes of the person listening to the dialogue, and feel its impact.

Tip 4:

When you want to convey how crucially important a moment was, give it **weight**. Slow down time, suspend it. Make the reader slow down, take notice more because this moment really matters.

You can do this by adding more detail (as in tip 2 above).

Also, you might do it by changing the rhythm and suddenly making sentences shorter, sharper.

For example, from the piece I recently wrote:

Helen gives me an ancestry DNA test for my birthday. "Something for you to look forward to, Maman," she says. "See if we can track down your French genes." Weeks later, what sublime elation, what triumph, quelle joie, when the results do indeed reveal French ancestry, probably from the Cherbourg area. Ah, next time I go, I'll take a train up there, stand on the port with a scarf snuggled around my throat and gaze out across the channel, the way my ancestors would have done.

But. As I scan the screen – there's something else. And I know immediately. Even if she hadn't been still using her maiden surname, I would have known. I haven't thought about this for decades. Jane is long dead. But here is our imagined half-sister.

You can see how at the beginning of the second paragraph, the rhythm suddenly changes: the sentences become shorter, more abrupt. This gives weight to the moment of discovery.

You might notice in this piece that I use present tense, rather than past tense. This is something I like to do with a short piece when it's very intimate material. It feels to me as though the events might come across to the reader as being more immediate. But that's entirely a personal choice I make on some occasions.

Tip 4 – no hard-and-fast "rules", but ...

Generally speaking:

Writing is stronger if you use *active* rather than *passive voice*.

For example, rather than:

We were frequently bullied by our uncle.

Write:

Our uncle frequently bullied us.

Even better, be *specific* rather than *general*.

For example, rather than:

My drunken father often embarrassed me in front of friends when I was young.

Write the details such as:

On my tenth birthday, my father came home drunk during my party. He staggered up to the party table and smashed his fist into the cake. Some of my friends ran out of the room, terrified. Others laughed. I wished I could just evaporate into the air and be invisible. This type of behaviour had become far too predictable.

This approach is likely to more strongly convey the impact of the behaviour, and of the relationship.

So, when you're ready, get busy and bring your piece to life.

Start writing your first draft.

Try to let it flow as naturally as possible.

SESSION 5 – Refining and revising

Writing is mostly **rewriting, revising**.

HUGE Tip 1:

Read it aloud to yourself. If it doesn't **sound right**, it won't **read well**.

Make changes in response to your reading aloud.

Tip 2:

Often, fewer words are better.

Tip 3:

If you feel it's not working, go back to your purpose: who is it for and how do you want them to think or feel when they've read it? Perhaps – for that intent, you've not got the **tone** quite right, and you might need to revisit that.

I wish you all the best with your reflections and your writing.

I hope these exercises have provided you with something of value during these challenging times.

Yet again, if you hit a wall, get in touch by email.

Fran

FEEDBACK

When you've finished these sessions, please send Wendy an email and tell her:

1. Did you write something that has given you a degree of satisfaction?
2. How did you feel when you were doing these exercises?
3. If you "dropped out", why?

Thank you!

Fran