

College Guild
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Biography

~Intro to Autobiography ~

Unit 3 of 4

An autobiography is a document a person writes about himself or herself. Throughout the world, people find enjoyment and inspiration reading about the accomplishments, trials, and tribulations of other people. In this Unit, we'll learn about types of autobiography and look at notable examples.

Journals

Journals, also known as diaries, are autobiographies written at the time of the events described.

1. What are three reasons why someone would keep a journal?
2. Have you ever kept a journal? Would you consider trying journaling? Explain.

The Diary of a Young Girl is the title of a book consisting of diary entries written by a Jewish girl named Anne Frank during the Holocaust. Because she was Jewish, she and her family had to go into hiding in a secret annex in the back of an office for over two years with four family friends. Friends on the outside brought them food and other necessary items. Anne and the others were discovered by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp where Anne died at age 15. After the war ended, Anne's Father, the only surviving member of her family, arranged for her diary to be published. The diary documents the ordinary emotional ups and downs of a teenage girl, despite the extraordinary circumstances that she lives in. Below are a handful of excerpts from this diary.



The Diary of a Young Girl by Holocaust victim Anne Frank

June 20, 1942: *Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone like me. Not only because I've never written anything before, but also because it seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I feel like writing, and I have an even greater need to get all kinds of things off my chest.*

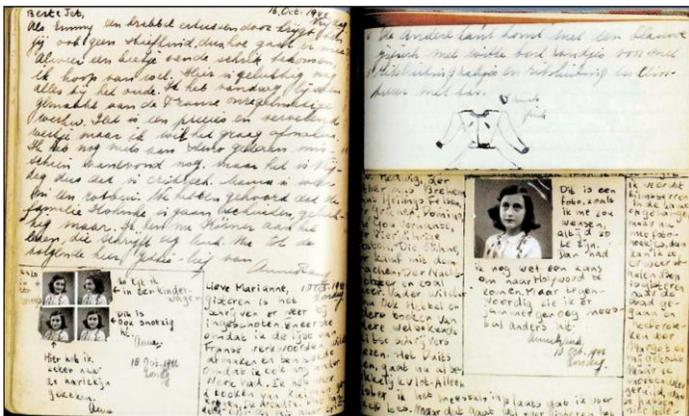
"Paper has more patience than people." I thought of this saying on one of those days when I was feeling a little depressed and was sitting at home with my chin in my hands, bored and listless, wondering whether to stay in or go out. I finally stayed where I was, brooding. Yes, paper does have more patience, and since I'm not planning to let anyone else read this stiff-backed notebook grandly referred to as a "diary," unless I should ever find a real friend, it probably won't make a bit of difference.

Now I'm back to the point that prompted me to keep a diary in the first place: I don't have a friend.

Let me put it more clearly, since no one will believe that a thirteen-year-old girl is completely alone in the world. And I'm not. I have loving parents and a sixteen-year-old sister, and there are about thirty people I can call friends. I have a throng of admirers who can't keep their adoring eyes off me and who sometimes have to resort to using a broken pocket mirror to try and catch a glimpse of me in the classroom. I have a family, loving aunts and a good home. No, on the surface I seem to have everything, except my one true friend. All I think about when I'm with friends is having a good time. I can't bring myself

to talk about anything but ordinary everyday things. We don't seem to be able to get any closer, and that's the problem. Maybe it's my fault that we don't confide in each other. In any case, that's just how things are, and unfortunately they're not liable to change. This is why I've started the diary...

July 9th 1942: "Here's a description of the building... A wooden staircase leads from the downstairs hallway to the third floor. At the top of the stairs is a landing, with doors on either side. The door on the left takes you up to the spice storage area, attic and loft in the front part of the house. A typically Dutch, very steep, ankle-twisting flight of stairs also runs from the front part of the house to another door opening onto the street. The door to the right of the landing leads to the Secret Annex at the back of the house. No one would ever suspect there were so many rooms behind that plain grey door. There's just one small step in front of the door, and then you're inside. Straight ahead of you is a steep flight of stairs. To the left is a narrow hallway opening onto a room that serves as the Frank family's living room and bedroom. Next door is a smaller room, the bedroom and study of the two young ladies of the family. To the right of the stairs is a windowless washroom with a sink. The door in the corner leads to the toilet and another one to Margot's and my room... Now I've introduced you to the whole of our lovely Annex!"

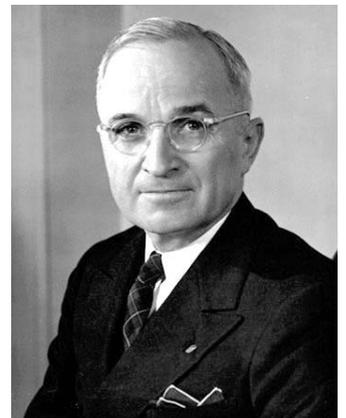


October 20th 1942: "My hands still shaking, though it's been two hours since we had the scare... The office staff stupidly forgot to warn us that the carpenter, or whatever he's called, was coming to fill the extinguishers... After working for about fifteen minutes, he laid his hammer and some other tools on our bookcase (or so we thought!) and banged on our door. We turned white with fear. Had he heard something after all and did he now want to check out this mysterious looking bookcase? It seemed so, since he kept knocking, pulling, pushing and jerking on it. I was so scared I nearly fainted at the thought of this total stranger managing to discover our wonderful hiding place..."

November 19th 1942: "Mr. Dussel has told us much about the outside world we've missed for so long. He had sad news. Countless friends and acquaintances have been taken off to a dreadful fate. Night after night, green and grey military vehicles cruise the streets. They knock on every door, asking whether any Jews live there. If so, the whole family is immediately taken away. If not, they proceed to the next house. It's impossible to escape their clutches unless you go into hiding. They often go around with lists, knocking only on those doors where they know there's a big haul to be made. They frequently offer a bounty, so much per head. It's like the slave hunts of the olden days... I feel wicked sleeping in a warm bed, while somewhere out there my dearest friends are dropping from exhaustion or being knocked to the ground. I get frightened myself when I think of close friends who are now at the mercy of the cruelest monsters ever to stalk the earth. And all because they're Jews."

3. What could people learn from reading Anne Frank's diary that they couldn't learn from reading a detailed history of the Holocaust?
4. Write three diary entries from the point of view of a child living in a different historical period than Anne Frank.

Another notable diary from the World War Two era comes from Harry Truman, United States President. Truman became President just before the end of the war in 1945 and made the decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan in August of that year. Below is his diary entry from less than two weeks before the first bomb was dropped.



The Diaries of Harry S. Truman by US President Truman

July 25th, 1945

We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.

Anyway we “think” we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexico desert was startling — to put it mildly. Thirteen pounds of the explosive caused the complete disintegration of a steel tower 60 feet high, created a crater 6 feet deep and 1,200 feet in diameter, knocked over a steel tower 1/2 mile away and knocked men down 10,000 yards away. The explosion was visible for more than 200 miles and audible for 40 miles and more.

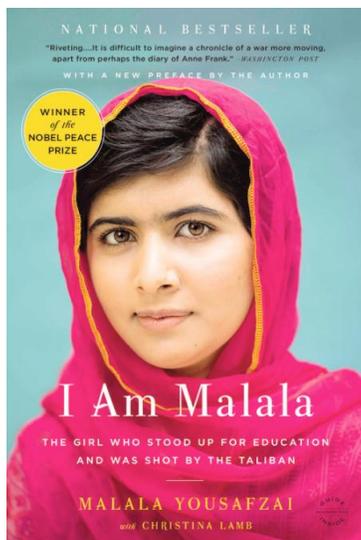
This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new.

He and I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I’m sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler’s crowd or Stalin’s did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful...

5. The majority of people killed by these bombings were civilians. Truman justified his decision by arguing that he did it to save lives on both sides by bringing the war to an end. Do you agree with this logic? Why or why not?
6. How is Truman’s style of writing different from Anne Frank’s? Which did you find to be more interesting?
7. Was your emotional reaction to Truman’s diary different than your emotional reaction to Frank’s diary? Explain.

Memoirs

Memoirs are books in which writers tell stories looking back on their lives. A memoir is a series of personal anecdotes, usually focusing on one aspect of or one period in an author’s life.



The first memoir we will look at tells the story of a young Pakistani girl named Malala Yousafzai who fought for girls’ education. On a school bus in 2012, she was shot by the Taliban because of her activism. She was 15 years old. She survived the shooting, though the bullet went through her head, neck and into her shoulder. After going to England for medical treatment, she continued to fight for education. In 2014 she became the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

I Am Malala by Education Activist Recipient Malala Yousafzai

I woke up on Oct. 16, a week after the shooting. I had been flown from Pakistan to the U.K. while unconscious and without my parents. I was thousands of miles away from home with a tube in my neck to help me breathe and unable to speak.

The first thing I thought when I came around was, ‘Thank God I’m not dead.’ But I had no idea where I was. I knew I was not in my homeland. The nurses and doctors were speaking English, though they all seemed to be from different countries. I was speaking to them, but no one could hear me because of the tube in my neck. To start with, my left eye was very blurry and everyone had two noses and four eyes. All sorts of questions flew through my waking brain: Where was I? Who had brought me there? Where were my parents? Was my father alive? I was terrified. Dr. Javid Kayani, deputy medical director of University

Hospitals Birmingham who had been in Islamabad when I was shot and was the reason I was now in Birmingham, was there when I was brought around and says he will never forget the look of fear and bewilderment on my face.

He spoke to me in Urdu. The only thing I knew was that Allah had blessed me with a new life. A nice lady in a headscarf held my hand and said, "Asalaamu alaikum," which is our traditional Muslim greeting. Then she started saying prayers in Urdu and reciting verses of the Quran. She told me her name was Rehanna and she was the Muslim chaplain. Her voice was soft and her words were soothing, and I drifted back to sleep.

Malala's book was published in two versions. One was for adults and the other was for young readers, under the title: I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World.

8. What do you think young readers would get out of Malala's story? How about adults?
9. When Malala was shot, she was the same age that Anne Frank was when she died. Imagine Malala and Anne met. Write a conversation between them.

John Krakauer's memoir, Into Thin Air, tells the story of a climb to the highest point on Earth gone terribly wrong. In the following excerpt, Krakauer explains why he felt compelled to tell his story in a book.

Into Thin Air by Writer and Mountaineer Jon Krakauer

In March 1996, Outside Magazine sent me to Nepal to participate in, and write about, a guided ascent of Mount Everest. I went as one of eight clients on an expedition led by a well-known guide from New Zealand named Rob Hall. On May 10 I arrived on top of the mountain, but the summit came at a terrible cost.

Among my five teammates who reached the top, four, including Hall, perished in a rogue storm that blew in without warning while we were still high on the peak. By the time I'd descended to Base Camp nine climbers from four expeditions were dead, and three more lives would be lost before the month was out.

The expedition left me badly shaken, and the article was difficult to write. Nevertheless, five weeks after I returned from Nepal I delivered a manuscript to Outside, and it was published in the September issue of the magazine. Upon its completion I attempted to put Everest out of my mind and get on with my life, but that turned out to be impossible. Through a fog of messy emotions, I continued trying to make sense of what had happened up there, and I obsessively mulled the circumstances of my companions' deaths.



The Outside piece was as accurate as I could make it under the circumstances, but my deadline had been unforgiving, the sequence of events had been frustratingly complex, and the memories of the survivors had been badly distorted by exhaustion, oxygen depletion, and shock. At one point during my research I asked three other people to recount an incident all four of us had witnessed high on the mountain, and one of us could agree on such crucial facts as the time, what had been said, or even who had been present. Within days after the Outside article went to press, I discovered that a few of the details I'd reported were in error. Most were minor inaccuracies of the sort that inevitably creep into works of deadline journalism, but one of my blunders was in no sense minor, and it had a devastating impact on the friends and family of one of the victims.

Only slightly less disconcerting than the article's factual errors was the material that necessarily had to be omitted for lack of space. Mark Bryant, the editor of Outside, and Larry Burke, the publisher, had given me an extraordinary amount of room to tell the story: they ran the piece at 17,000 words -- four or five times as long as a typical magazine feature. Even so, I felt that it was much too abbreviated to do justice to the tragedy. The Everest climb had rocked my life to its core, and it became desperately important for me to record the events in complete detail, unconstrained by a limited number of column inches. This book is the fruit of that compulsion.

10. How could an autobiographical piece affect people other than the author? What responsibility do you think an autobiographer has to other people involved in his story?
11. Write the first paragraph of a memoir about a dangerous adventure (climbing a mountain, sailing around the world, going to outer space, etc.).

Full Autobiographies

Full autobiographies present a picture of one's ancestry and an account of the writer's life from childhood to the present. They are often more formal in tone than memoirs and journals.

One example of a Full Autobiography is a book written by a woman named Helen Keller. When Helen Keller was less than 2 years old, she came down with an illness that left her both deaf and blind. Learning about the world was a major challenge, but Keller learned to communicate by touching peoples' hands as they spoke sign language. She learned to speak and to read braille. She was the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree.

The Story of My Life: Helen Keller's Autobiography by deaf-blind author, activist and lecturer Helen Keller

I was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, a little town of northern Alabama.

The family on my father's side is descended from Caspar Keller, a native of Switzerland, who settled in Maryland. One of my Swiss ancestors was the first teacher of the deaf in Zurich and wrote a book on the subject of their education—rather a singular coincidence; though it is true that there is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a king among his.

My grandfather, Caspar Keller's son, "entered" large tracks of land in Alabama and finally settled there. I have been told that once a year he went from Tuscumbia to Philadelphia on horseback to purchase supplies for the plantation, and my aunt has in her possession many of the letters to his family, which give charming and vivid accounts of these trips.

My Grandmother Keller was a daughter of one of Lafayette's aides, Alexander Moor, and granddaughter of Alexander Spotswood, an early Colonial Governor of Virginia. She was also second cousin to Robert E. Lee.

My father, Arthur H. Keller, was a captain in the Confederate Army, and my mother, Kate Adams, was his second wife and many years younger. Her grandfather, Benjamin Adams, married Susanna E. Goodhue, and lived in Newbury Massachusetts, for many years. Their son, Charles Adams, was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and moved to Helena, Arkansas. When the Civil War broke out, he fought on the side of the South and became a brigadier-general. He married Lucy Helen Everett, who belonged to the same family of Everetts as Edward Everett and Dr. Edward Everett Hale. After the war was over the family moved to Memphis, Tennessee.



I lived, up to the time of the illness that deprived me of my sight and hearing, in a tiny house consisting of a large square room and a small one, in which the servant slept. It is a custom in the South to build a small house near the homestead as an annex to be used on occasion. Such a house my father built after the Civil War, and when he married my mother they went to live in it. It was completely covered with vines, climbing roses and honeysuckles. From the garden it looked like an arbour. The little porch was hidden from view by a screen of yellow roses and Southern smilax. It was the favorite haunt of humming-birds and bees.

The Keller homestead, where the family lived, was a few steps from our little rose-bower. It was called "Ivy Green" because the house and the surrounding trees and fences were covered with beautiful English ivy. Its old-fashioned garden was the paradise of my childhood.

- 12. How would reading Keller’s book help you relate to someone who was deaf and/or blind?
- 13. Do you think it’s important to include family history in an autobiography? Why or why not?

Our second excerpt from a full autobiography comes from that of Nelson Mandela (1918-2013). Mandela grew up in South Africa and became a leader in the fight against apartheid, a government program of racial segregation and discrimination against black South Africans. He spent 27 years in prison for trying to overthrow the government, but when politics changed, he was released. He then won the Noble Peace Prize and the 1994 South African election and served as president of the country for 5 years. The following excerpt is from early in his autobiography, describing how he went to live with a regent (political figure) and get a solid education.

Long Walk to Freedom by Civil Rights Activist and South African President Nelson Mandela

I learned later that, in the wake of my father’s death, Jongintaba had offered to become my guardian. He would treat me as he treated his other children, and I would have the same advantages as they. My mother had no choice; one did not turn down such an overture from the regent. She was satisfied that although she would miss me, I would have a more advantageous in the regent’s care than her own. The regent had not forgotten that it was due to my father’s intervention that he had become acting paramount chief.

My mother remained in Mqhekezweni for a day or two before returning to Qunu. Our parting was without fuss. She offered no sermons, no words of wisdom, no kisses. I suspect she did not want me to feel bereft at her departure and so was matter-of-fact. I knew that my father had wanted me to be educated and prepared for a wide world, and I could not do that in Qunu. Her tender look was all the affection and support I needed, and as she departed she turned to me and said, “Uqinisufokotho, Kwedini!” (Brace yourself, my boy!) Children are often the least sentimental of creatures, especially if they are absorbed in some new pleasure. Even as my dear mother and first friend was leaving, my head was swimming with the delights of my new home. How could I not be braced up? I was already wearing the handsome new outfit purchased for me by my guardian.



I was quickly caught up in the daily life of Mqhekezweni. A child adapts rapidly, or not at all—and I had taken to the Great Place as though I had been raised there. To me, it was a magical kingdom; everything was delightful; the chores that were tedious in Qunu became an adventure in Mqhikezweni. When I was not in school, I was a plowboy, a wagon guide, a shepherd. I rode horses and shot birds with slingshots and found boys to joust with, and some nights I danced the evening away to the beautiful singing and clapping of Thembu maidens. Although I missed Qunu and my mother, I was completely absorbed in my new world.

- 14. Mandela tells of how he saw his mother’s goodbye as very matter-of-fact and emotionless. Looking back, he realizes that she probably behaved that way that to make it easier on him. Why might autobiographers gain new insights about the past as they write?
- 15. Which of the examples of autobiography captured your interest the most? Why do you think that is?
- 16. If you could choose anyone, whose autobiography would you most want to read and why?
- 17. British writer W. Somerset Maugham once said, "No one can tell the whole truth about himself." Write an essay explaining whether you agree or disagree with Maugham.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Sources: <https://alphahistory.com>, <http://time.com>, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com>, <https://www.amazon.com>, <http://www.dannen.com/decision/hst-jl25.html>, <https://www.wikipedia.org>