Many writers of personal history have discovered that the easiest, most enjoyable, and effective way to write their personal histories is in the form of a number of short, separate pieces of writing—essays, individual stories, reflections, descriptions, even poetry and other types of creative efforts.

The advantages of this “bits and pieces” approach to writing a life story are more obvious than one might suppose.

**What kinds of topics can be dealt with in short essays?**

Virtually all that we remember of our personal lives is in the form of separate recollections. That is how the mind stores life happenings—in single experiences or dominant impressions. Long biographies are usually closely linked sequences of thoughts and events. This means that everything one might want to include in a long story could be written in the separate-essay format—200-1000 or so words.

**Summary of recollections of certain periods of your life**

- a summer
- a holiday
- a school grade
- earliest recollections
- turning 16
- courtship
- reaching age 40
- the first year of retirement

**Specific events**

- an illness or accident
- a birthday party
- a frightening or embarrassing experience
- induction into the military service
- a trip
- a public performance

**Vivid recollections of places you have lived in or visited**

- the town(s) you grew up in
- a city in which you did military service
- notable places you have visited
- your parents’ hometowns
- a vacation spot
- your least or most favorite town

**Turning points in your life**

- a moment of special insight
- a lesson well learned
- a brush with death
- a class or other learning session
- a period of marked spiritual or mental growth

**Memorable or influential people in your life**

- grandparents
- parents
- colorful characters
- friends
- teachers or employers
- co-workers
- neighbors
- leaders

**Notable achievements**

- striving for or reaching goals
- completion of training or schooling
- awards, recognitions
- fulfillment of a dream
Reaction to major world events in your lifetime
• wars, especially their endings
• assassinations
• inventions, discoveries, etc.
• natural catastrophes
• deaths of leaders
• notable “firsts”

Humorous incidents and favorite family stories
• personality quirks
• practical jokes
• habits
• embarrassing incidents
• unusual responses to situations
• family get-togethers

Vocations and avocations
• different jobs held
• hobbies and pastimes
• special skills
• reading habits
• vocational goals

Trends and fads
• popular pastimes: dancing, recreation, sports, etc.
• family games and other competitions
• typical celebrations: weddings, receptions, parties
• peer conformity
• dress, grooming and other fashion trends

Important possessions
• homes and other real estate properties
• vehicles
• household furnishings
• heirlooms
• objects used in hobbies or pastimes
• prized possessions
  A description of each item, with emphasis on its role in your life at a particular time.

The easiest way to generate topics for writing is to obtain a fairly comprehensive list of potential topics. Reflection on such topics will bring to mind many impressions, ideas, stories and events that will lend themselves to treatment in a short piece of writing.

Personal portraits
• physical appearance at different times in your life
• dress and grooming habits
• philosophy of dress and grooming
• handicaps or other limitations
• your personality, and its effect on others

Learning Activity
A. Ask each lesson participant to spend 5-10 minutes writing down a family memory or story on a specific topic selected by the leader or the class (such as “How I Learned to Swim” or “My Earliest School Memory”) or ask each lesson participant to brainstorm a list of family memories or stories they would like to record and then have them write on one of them for 5-10 minutes.

B. Have lesson participants share some of the family memories that they wrote with each other for 5-15 minutes. Encourage them to complete a list of 25-50 family memories or stories and to write an essay on one of them each day, or once a week, etc.