

Your Story, Your Life:
Ronni Sanlo's
Easy Memoir Writing Method



by

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Other books by Ronni Sanlo

- The Soldier, the Avatar, and the Holocaust: WWII Germany, Jan.-May, 1945. (2016).
Available on Amazon and at www.ronnisanlo.com
- Intersections of Identity and Leadership: Informing Our Lives, Informing Our Practice. (2013). With Alicia Chavez. Available at NASPA.org
- The Purple Golf Cart: The Misadventures of an Unconventional Grandma. (2010)
Available on Amazon and at www.ronnisanlo.com
- Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: Research, Policy, and Personal Perspectives (2005). New Directions for Student Services, No.111. Jossey-Bass
- Our Place on Campus: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Services and Programs in Higher Education. (2002) with Sue Rankin and Bob Schoenberg. Available on Amazon
- Inspiration for LGBT Students & Their Allies. (2002) Easton, PA: The Collegiate EmPowerment Company, Inc.
- Unheard Voices: The Effects of Silence on Lesbian and Gay Educators. (1999). Available on Amazon.
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Table of Contents

Welcome

Writing Routines

Some Tips to Consider

Developing your Timeline

Identifying Turning Points

Mind-mapping or Outlining

Writing Essays, Poems, etc. from your Timeline

Organizing your Essays

To Publish or Not to Publish?

Ethics and Legal Issues

References

About the Author



Welcome

Everyone has a story to tell, whether it's a particular event in your life or your entire life. The important thing is that your life is documented so that your voice is not lost. It's the DASH, that space between your year of birth and year of death. My sister Sherry's dash is in between 1949 and 2016: 1948-2016. Her dash. In that dash space, she lived a life filled with joys and challenges, exciting travel and a soul-mate marriage. Our stories share that which has impacted our lives, changed the course of our lives, and made us who we are today.

The problem, though, arises when you sit down to write. Nearly everyone gets stuck right after "Once Upon a Time." I know. It happened to me as I began, or attempted to begin, my memoir. After numerous restarts, I "got" it, and my memoir, *The Purple Golf Cart*, was finally finished. I want to share my "IT" with you.

Your story is one only you can tell, and I look forward to knowing of your excitement when you finish. I wish you well.



Ronni

Sequim, WA



Writing Routines

There are no writing rules...well, not really. Most writing rules have very little to do with writing (some of which I'll give you anyway, even though I don't believe in most rules). If you want to write, write! Just do it, to quote that great author NIKE!

Writing is a habit. It's important to schedule time to write (That's one of the rules for my own writing.). You're finally motivated and you truly want to write your story, but you're concerned about having the time to write. You live a busy life. Squeezing in one more thing doesn't sound appealing. But making time to write is the only way to start, research, and finish your story. Make time, preferably every day, even if it's for only 15 minutes at a time.

The important thing to remember, says memoirist Anne LaMotte, is that no one cares whether or not you write. Well, there may be folks in your life who have been encouraging you to *finally* write that story! Schedule time. I write first thing in the morning, before my wife Kelly and our dog Dooney awake and activities of the day begin. Finding time, and even doing the work, may feel uncomfortable, especially around your time commitments. The other thing that may cause discomfort is that you don't have your entire book laid out in your head. Lean into the discomfort. There is a reason for it just as there is reason for your desire to write your story.

Writing is deeply personal. There is no magic bullet or a one-size-fits-all step-by-step formula. Believe in what you're trying to accomplish, get your BIC – butt in chair – and start writing.



Some Tips to Consider

It helps to understand the realities of writing. I remember feeling better when I first discovered these writing tidbits.

Some of my self-publishing clients ask if they need to be brutally honest in their writing. One of the fundamental rules of memoir is that it's a true story. That said, over the years our memories fail us or at least change some of our perspective about the past. I once heard an author say that he doesn't let truth get in the way of a good story. Feel free to invent. It's your book. Write what you wish but try to come close to the truth.

Be careful about writing your emotional drama. Are you writing for catharsis or do you plan to allow others to read your work, or even to publish your story? The rule is not to vomit on the page. Don't feel obligated to include every single detail of your life. You'll bore yourself and you'll certainly bore your readers.

As you get into your story you might find that it gets a bit painful. Consider sharing it with a therapist. I did. My book was nearly finished so I took it to a writing retreat for feedback. All agreed that it was good story but that it felt like *reportage*, or newspaper reporting. There was no emotion. Of course not! I wasn't going to go there! But that's exactly what I needed to do. I called my therapist and worked with her on leaning into my discomfort to add the needed emotion. I once heard Dorothy Allison say, "Go toward the truth that hurts."

Write as though you were never going to show your story to anyone. Write it with the liberation of complete privacy. You can always change your mind later. When you feel comfortable, share your manuscript with trusted friends for feedback, not so much about your story but about how your story is read by others.



Research dates, places, people, and events as needed. Although my memoir emerged from my head and heart, there were many items that needed to be researched for accuracy. I suspect I spent more time researching than actually writing. Online services are plentiful so you have the option of researching in your jammies. But also go to the library and/or visit locations as well. There were some places I lived earlier in my life that I needed to visit for perspective and memory-jogging.



Developing your Timeline

A timeline is a way of displaying a list of events in chronological order. I'm a visual learner so when I see items on a timeline, it helps me understand how they played into my life. There are probably a variety of ways to create a timeline. I made mine linearly. Some people begin a timeline with their own birth. I began mine with the immigration of my grandparents into the U.S. from Poland. I added a couple of pre-birth items then added events that directly affected my life, placing them on the accompanying year.

Here is a template of a timeline similar to what I use.

Title _____ Date _____ Name _____

The diagram shows a horizontal timeline line. Above the line, there are five empty rectangular boxes, each with an upward-pointing arrow from the line. Below the line, there are four empty rectangular boxes, each with a downward-pointing arrow from the line. The boxes are arranged in a sequence from left to right, representing chronological order.



Identifying Turning Points

Primary turning points are those events that deeply affected and changed your life. They include events such as marriage, births, deaths, and events that were celebratory or horrifying. I mark these primary events on my timeline in **red**. Secondary turning points are important events that also affected life but not in the same way as the primary turning points. I mark these in **purple**.

Ronni's primary turning point

Secondary turning points

Grandparents arrive in US 1915

Parents marry 1943

I'm born 1947

Grandma dies 1958

Attracted to girls 1958

Colitis 1958

Away to college 1965

Married to man 1971

Kids' births 1973-76

Come out, divorce 1979

Lost custody of kids 1979

AIDS job 1987

Michigan job 1994

UCLA 1997

Retired 2010

Married 2016

Fell in love with a woman 1967

began speaking out about being gay 1980, FL Task Force 1981

homeless 1983, live-aboard boat 1985, Fired 1986

Relationship, colitis cured 1991

Doctoral degree 1996, first publication 1996

first book published 1998, faculty in res 2001, full professor 2008

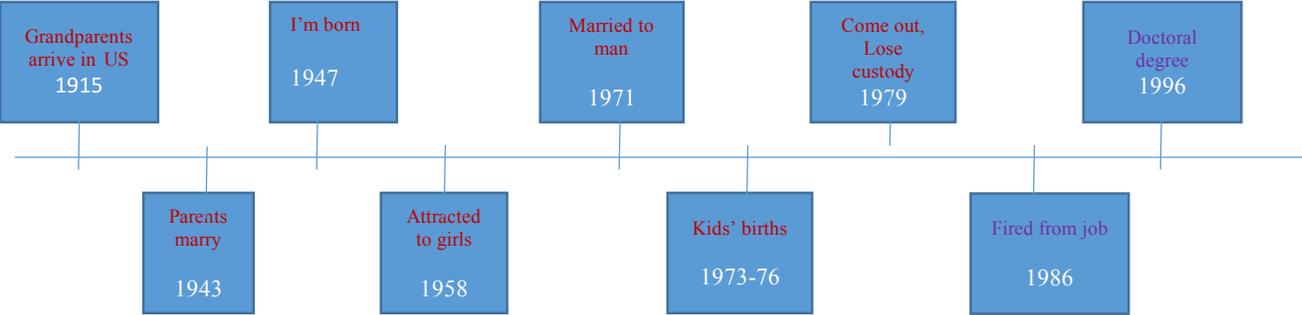
memoir published, 2012

sister dies 2016, Holocaust book published 2016

After I make these lists, I place each item chronologically on the timeline below. You may use this timeline, find a different one on the web, or create your own. The important thing is to take your time as you do this self-brainstorm.



An example of Ronni's timeline:

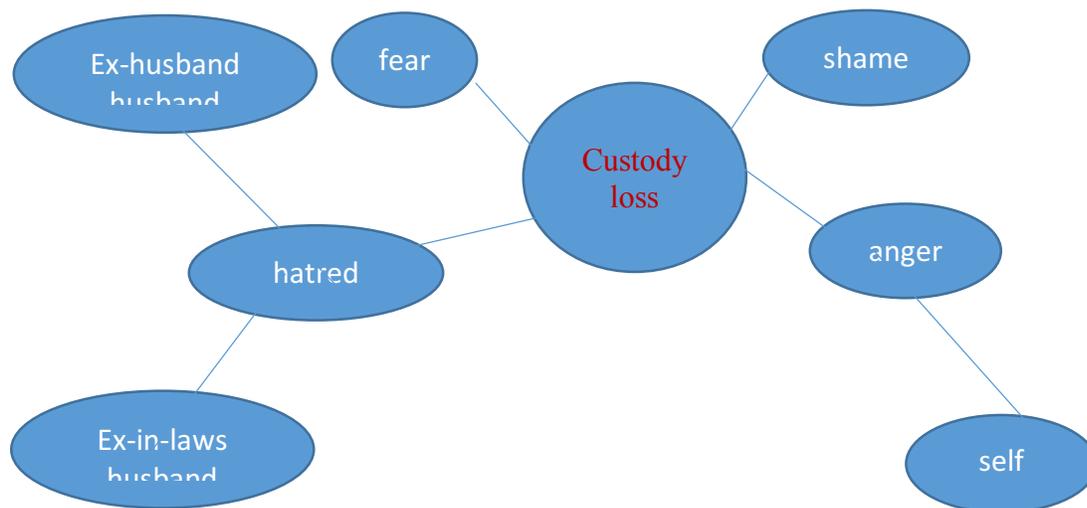


Mind-mapping or Outlining

I prefer mind-mapping to outlining but some folk would rather outline. Use whatever method with which you're most comfortable. Meggin McIntosh, Ph.D., hosts workshops on mind-mapping. I suggest taking one of her outstanding online classes for a deeper understanding of how to mind-map. Below is what I do when I'm working with my timeline. I use Dr. McIntosh's method.

First, decide on an item on your timeline. While your timeline is chronological, you need not do this work chronologically.

Next, place that word in a circle on the center of a full page of paper. As you look at the word, what comes up for you about that item? I'll use the loss of custody of my children as an example. The words around that event include shame, anger, fear, hatred.



This process helps jog your memory and shows how events are related. You generate ideas and make connections of events in your life that you had not considered. Be prepared for other turning points to emerge as you do this work.

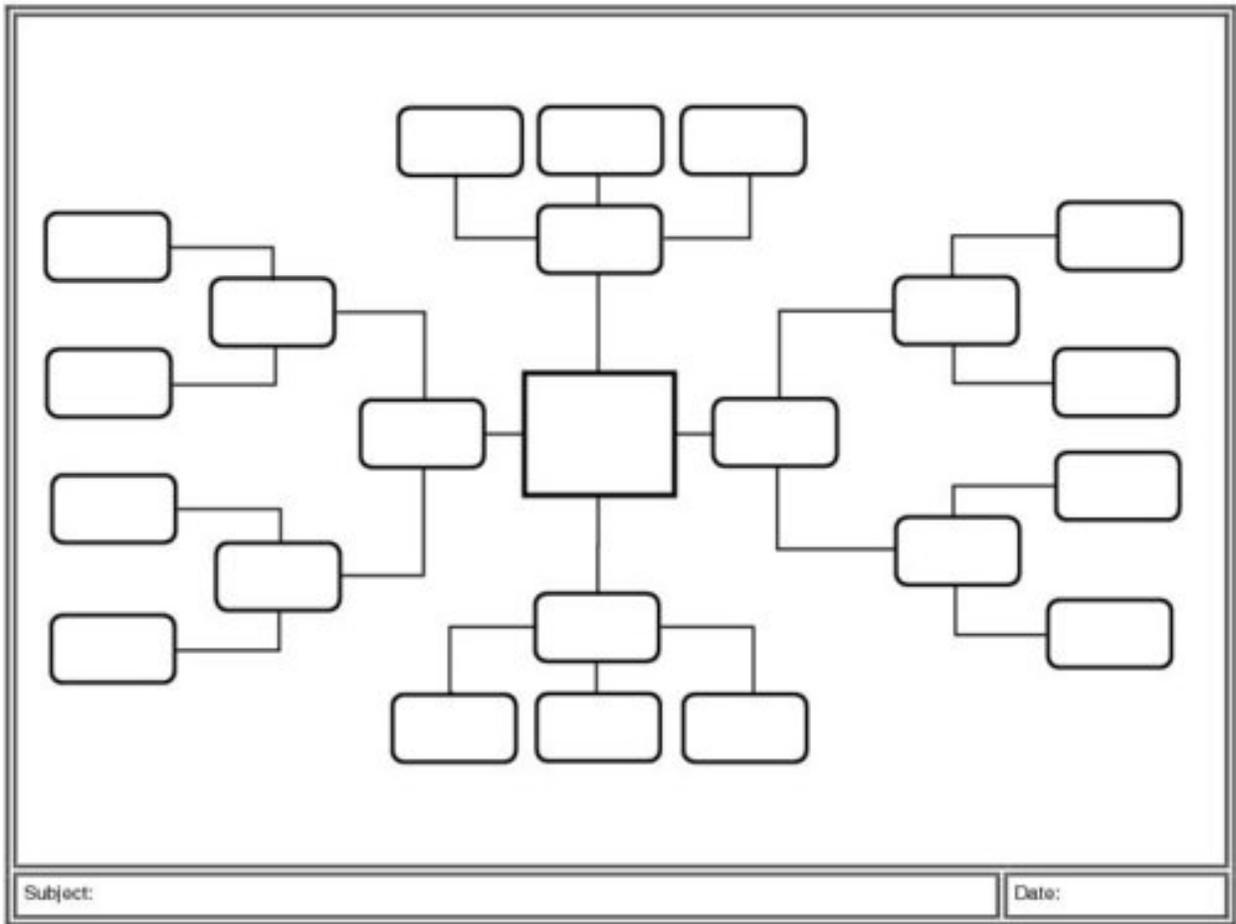
Some questions to ask yourself as you do this: What is your point? What did you learn? How did the incident affect or change you?

Your mind-map, as with your time-line, is never finished. Your life is ongoing. You may find later that something that happened decades ago is affecting you or an event today.

Take your time. If you spend the time on this, writing your book will not be so challenging. And don't worry about how your mind-map looks. As long as it makes sense to you, you're set!

Here's a blank template for you. You may use this or find one on the web or take Meggin McIntosh's mind-mapping class.





Writing Essays, Poems, etc. from your Timeline

After you've brainstormed and mind-mapped the items on your timeline, it's time to write. For each item, write an essay. Essays may be long or short or something in-between. In my memoir *The Purple Golf Cart*, there are several ten-page essays, some half-page essays, and even some poems instead of essays. You may write whatever you wish in whatever style you wish...it's your voice. Don't worry about doing it well or making it perfect or brilliant. Just start writing. You can edit for perfection later.

To offer an option for writing, some folks prefer to write structured essays, so I provide some guidelines for you. The classic format and useful model is the five-paragraph essay. The essay is constructed of:

- an introduction
- a First Paragraph
- a Second Paragraph
- a Third Paragraph
- a Conclusion

The Introductory paragraph is a kind of mini-outline for the essay. It tells the reader what the essay is about. It opens the discussion and contains some comment on the topic of the essay, perhaps definitions, or an explanation of your meaning. The last sentence of the introduction usually contains a transitional "hook" which moves the reader to the first paragraph of the body of the paper.

The First Paragraph should contain the strongest argument, the most significant example, the cleverest illustration, or an obvious beginning point. The first sentence of this paragraph should include the "reverse hook" which ties in with the transitional hook at the end of the introductory



paragraph. The topic for this paragraph should be in the first or second sentence. The last sentence in this paragraph should include a transitional hook to tie into the second paragraph of the body.

The Second Paragraph should contain the second strongest argument, the second most significant example, the second cleverest illustration, or an obvious follow up the first paragraph in the body. The first sentence of this paragraph should include the reverse hook which ties in with the transitional hook at the end of the first paragraph of the body. The topic for this paragraph should be in the first or second sentence. The last sentence in this paragraph should include a transitional hook to tie into the third paragraph of the body.

The Third Paragraph should contain the weakest argument, weakest example, weakest illustration, or an obvious follow up to the second paragraph in the body. The first sentence of this paragraph should include the reverse hook which ties in with the transitional hook at the end of the second paragraph. The topic for this paragraph should be in the first or second sentence. The last sentence in this paragraph should include a transitional concluding hook that signals the reader that this is the final major point being made in the essay. This hook also leads into the last, or concluding, paragraph.

The Conclusion is a summary of the three main points from the body of the paper. Summarize the main ideas. Finish with an interesting or thought-provoking, but relevant, comment.

You need not follow this traditional guide, of course. And you need not write chronologically. Select whatever item on your mind-map that strikes your fancy and write your essay. Each item could be a paragraph, a full page, many pages, or a poem. However you choose to write, it's yours. Enjoy!



Organizing your Essays

After you've written your essays, poems, etc., decide how you want them to appear in your book. Do all of them need to be there? Do you want to focus on just a few of them and save others for another book? If you're thinking of publishing, most books these days are 6 x 9 in size with about 200 pages and between 60,000-ish words. (A book this size with a color cover and black and white interior will wholesale for about \$3.50 and retail for about 14.99. Just an FYI.)

You need not start at the beginning of your life. Some people start in the present and "look back." Some start, as I did, prior to birth to set a foundation for the family in which one grew up. There is no right or wrong way.

Many memoirists have numerous books. Anne LaMotte is a great example of one who has written many memoir. She writes about a particular topic in any given book. It's likely, as you examine your entire life, that you have several memoir to write. Consider selecting a topic or a period of time of the focus of your first memoir.



To Publish or Not to Publish?

Elizabeth Sims notes that to publish a book is to make it public. Is that what you want to do? The good news is you have options including deciding NOT to publish.

Writing a book is such a personal endeavor. Some people write their memoir to leave for their families without ever thinking of publishing their work. My mother, who is 90, is a good example. She's written her personal story over the years, perhaps a diary of sorts. She's not shown it to any of her children but she wants it available to us after she's gone. It's her story and she wants her children and grands and great-grands to know that her life had meaning.

Other folks, like myself, choose to publish and make our stories widely available because we have lessons to teach. I chose to publish because I believe others would feel connected to, and benefit from, my story, to know that they're not alone.

There are several ways to publish. If you want to keep your work to yourself and with your family, you need not do anything. If you want to create a book for your family and/or to place on Amazon, you might work with people like myself who help people create beautiful books of their good work.

If you want to publish traditionally, you'll want to search for an agent who can get you connected with mainstream publishers. To find an agent, go to your public library and locate the book called *Literary Guide to Agents*. That book has names of agents and their firms, what genre they represent, and information about how to contact them.

If you wish to self-publish, you should explore many of the companies, or vanity presses, that do the work for you. My company, Purple Distinctions (www.purpledistinctions.com), is one such company. The differences between the big companies and myself are:



- You work directly with me and not a team of people.
- A real live person (moi!) answers the phone when you call.
- You own 100% of your copyright. Period.
- You receive 100% of the royalties from your sales on Amazon and Kindle.
- You pay a set fee that doesn't change.
- You will not be hassled into buying expensive after-products. I have none.
- You'll deal directly with the owner of the company.

You may choose to do the work yourself to get your book onto Amazon and Kindle or to simply have a lovely book to share with your family. Amazon's Createspace.com walks the author through the entire process. Createspace is free though an author will need to pay for the ISBN number and the cover, both of which are included in the vanity press processes above. For example, my flat-rate fee includes both the ISBN number as well as a beautiful full-color cover.

A good resource to learn about publishing options is *Writers Digest*.



Ethics and Legal Issues

There are several things you can do to make sure you're not setting yourself up for libel issues. I knew I was going to publish my memoir, so I shared drafts to those whose names were going to be mentioned. Only one person asked me not to include one particular story. I honored that request because it would be too painful for her and too embarrassing for others. For those who might not be thrilled about being in my story, I changed their names and anything that could identify them. I didn't ask them (because they probably hated me!); I just made the changes. Ask, or change names and identity sufficiently so that they aren't recognized.

Don't copy other people's work without permission or citation. This little book is useful example. I used information from several brilliant memoirists and cited them in the reference section.

To insure immediate copywrite of your work, send the finished manuscript to yourself via certified mail. When the package arrives, don't open or unseal it. Just put it away. It's your dated proof that the work belongs to you.

Memoir is about how you got from there to here. Life can be full of surprises when we examine our journey. Find your surprises and write. As Anne LaMotte says, the act of writing is truly its own reward.

Good luck, and write ON!



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About Ronni Sanlo

Dr. Ronni Sanlo is a frequent keynote speaker and consultant on LGBT issues in Higher Education. Now retired, Dr. Sanlo was the Senior Associate Dean of Students and professor/director of the UCLA Masters of Education in Student Affairs and on the higher education faculty at California State University Fullerton. Ronni is the originator of the award-winning Lavender Graduation, a commencement event that celebrates the lives and achievements of graduating LGBT college students. Ronni continues to research and write with a focus on LGBT history which is the foundation for her award-winning documentary *Letter to Anita*. Ronni's memoir is *The Purple Golf Cart: The Misadventures of a Lesbian Grandma*. Her most recent publication is *The Soldier, the Avatar, and the Holocaust*, an historical novel about the last five months of WWII. She lives in Palm Springs, CA and Sequim, WA, with her wife, Kelly Watson and their Yorkie Dooney.



