

Suzanne Fox's Writing Starters for Memoir and Family History Writers

PROCESS STARTERS

These suggestions are designed to help you get some writing flowing if you feel blocked or "cold." Try a couple of the ones that seem appealing.

1. Write exactly one hundred words a day for one month. You can do this by writing a paragraph or so, then counting and adjusting. Once your hundred words is finished, stop.
2. Write one thousand words a week for four weeks.
3. Write a piece that evokes a single color but does not mention the color's name.
4. Write seriously about a character with writer's block and how they deal with it.
5. Write humorously about a character with writer's block and how they deal with it.
6. Take three hundred words (about one page of typing in most fonts) to write about a single bite into an apple.
7. Take no more than 15 words (the length of a fairly meaty sentence) to evoke an entire and specific life. By specific, I mean, no generalities such as "She was born and then she died." You want to evoke a specific life.
8. Try writing in pen or pencil if you usually use a computer, or on computer if you usually use a pen or pencil. Does the change inspire any new thoughts?
9. Go to a park, coffee shop or other location away from home and try to write there. See if it feels easier or more difficult than writing at home.
10. Put a pad and pen or pencil on your kitchen table or breakfast bar. Set the oven timer for five minutes. Write without stopping until the timer rings. No pausing, no thinking, just writing, even if what you are writing is gibberish for some of the time.
11. Bring a pad and pen or pencil to a relatively crowded public space such as the food court of a mall, a playground, a coffee shop, etc. Sit someplace you can overhear conversations unobtrusively (we don't want to get you arrested). Write down one of the first random sentences you hear. Write a paragraph or two of story using that sentence. You may use the people who said it as your characters, or invent an entirely different situation in which it might be said.
12. Do some writing about exactly *why* you would like to write. See if what you come up with helps motivate you.

13. Write about one or more people who criticized your writing when you were a child, a student, and/or an employee. What did they say? Did it hurt? Do you think, today, that it was valid?
14. Write about the people you fear may be offended by your writing.
15. For one week, try to sit down and write at least a page first thing when you get up.
16. For another week, try to sit down and write at least a page last thing before you go to bed. Which writing time is easier? Which one seems to make your writing flow better?

MEMORY STARTERS

These little questions are designed to give you starting places for writing about yourself, your family, and your life. Simply scan the list and pick one that feels fun. The next time you write you can continue to write on that same subject, or scan the list again to pick a new one.

1. Write about something you anticipate eagerly.
2. Write about something you fear.
3. Write about the gift that meant the most to you as a child.
4. Write about a gift you wanted as a child, but did not get.
5. Write about an object you treasure that you got from your mother.
6. Write about an object you treasure that you got from your father.
7. Write about your favorite teacher in grade school.
8. Write about your least favorite teacher in grade school.
9. Write about a class bully from grade school.
10. Write about going to the dentist's as a child.
11. Write about a classmate who was bullied in grade school.
12. Write about your first house.
13. Write about what it is like to be the oldest, youngest, middle, or only child.
14. Write about what it is like to have, or not to have, siblings of the same sex as you are.

15. Write about how your relationship with one or more of your siblings changed from your childhood to your adulthood.
16. Write about your first part time job.
17. Write about your first full time job.
18. Write about your father's garage and/or tool shed.
19. Write about your mother's kitchen and/or closet.
20. Write about one or more favorite family jokes.
21. Write about some favorite family sayings.
22. Write about something technological you do not understand.
23. Write about something technological you learned to understand but that now no longer exists.
24. Write about one or more of the following: 33 rpm records, 75 rpm records, a record player, a set of speakers, and/or your first black and white and, later, color television.
25. Write about something you feel angry about.
26. Write about where you were and what you were doing when you heard about one of the following: the attack on Pearl Harbor; the first step on the Moon; the assassination of John F. Kennedy; the 9/11 attack.
27. Write about the birth of each of your children (treat each birth and child as a separate text).
28. Write about a favorite piece of furniture. Could be the chair you relax in, a dining room table around which the family eats, a roll top desk, or anything else you love.
29. Write about a book you loved as a child.
30. Write about a book you love as an adult.
31. Write about a part of school you hated as a child.
32. Write about your first bicycle.
33. Write about your first car.
34. Write about the store you liked best or visited most as a child.
35. Write about a board game your family played.

36. Write about a card game your family played.
37. Write about your best friend when you were a child.
38. Write about the chores you were expected to do as a child.
39. Write about the chores you expected your children to do.
40. Write about at least one episode of dramatic weather (thunderstorm, snowstorm, heat wave) you experienced as a young person.
41. Write about the first family death you remember.
42. Write about the first funeral you attended.
43. Write about a family mystery. It could be a relative that lost contact or any other unresolved relationship or issue.
44. Write about a vacation your family took as a child.
45. Write about some cousins you rarely got to see.
46. Write about your most memorable pet.
47. Write about a moment of deep embarrassment from your teens...your twenties...your thirties.
48. Write about a family story you are not sure is true.
49. Write about a museum or other indoors "attraction" you love.
50. Write about a park or other outdoor place you love.
51. Write about a sport or sporting event you enjoy.
52. Write about a particularly memorable Halloween, and/or Christmas, and/or birthday.
53. Write about a movie theater you went to as a child or young person. Be specific: location, size, colors, services such as food, and so on.
54. Write about something you have never told anyone before.
55. Write about a yard or garden in which you have spent considerable time.
56. Write about a musician, group or band you loved when you were younger but no longer want to listen to.

57. Write about three smells or scents that you love.
58. Write about three smells or scents that you hate.
59. Write about your three favorite foods.
60. Write about three foods you cannot bring yourself to eat.
61. Write about a quotation that moves you.
62. Write about a writer or television show that makes you laugh.
63. Write about the first visit you made to a foreign country.
64. Write about the first wedding you ever remember attending.

VALUES-SHARING STARTERS

These questions are designed to help you think and write about your values, and as such may be especially helpful for those hoping to pass down wisdom to grandchildren or other descendants. They are not in any special order, nor are they intended to help you write a comprehensive explanation; as with all questions and suggestions in this handout, they are here just to help you get started.

1. Write about a mentor who helped shape your life.
2. Write about a hero you have tried to emulate.
3. Write about something you wish you had known at 15...at 25...at 40.
4. Write about the good qualities you have that you believe you got (through genetics, or through teaching) from your parents.
5. Write about the bad qualities you have that you believe you got (through genetics, or through teaching) from your parents.
6. Write about the famous person you would most like to be.
7. Write about a difficult decision you are proud of.
8. Write about a difficult decision you regret.
9. Write about the one trait you would choose if you could pass on only one quality, trait or value to your children and grandchildren.
10. Write about a value you are afraid you have not communicated fully to your children or grandchildren.

11. Write about the kindest person you've ever met, and how their kindness was or is expressed.
12. Write about the biggest challenge in your life.
13. Write about the motto or slogan you would choose if you had to choose one.
14. Write about the time in your life you felt most alone, and what happened to change that feeling.
15. Write about a hobby, interest or pastime and what it gives to you.
16. Write about a church or charity you support, and why.
17. Write down ten rules of life from which you think your grandchildren (or other descendents) would benefit.
18. Write about something you had to save for before you got.
19. Write about something you spent money on that turned out to be or feel like a waste.
20. Write about something really big and important you would change in the world if you could.
21. Write about something fairly small and simple you would change in the world if you could.
22. Write about a mistake you want to help your children, grandchildren, etc. *avoid* making.
23. Write about something that your parents told you that turned out to be true.
24. Write about something your parents told you that turned out not to be true.
25. Write about some things that have surprised you about being an adult.
26. Write about a life challenge that has been easier than you expected.
27. Write about a life challenge that has been harder than you expected.
28. Write about three things you hope that others will remember about you.
29. Write about a single person who helped you in some important way.
30. Write about a single person you have helped in some specific way.
31. Write about someone you regret not asking more questions of when they were still living. What do you think you missed? What would you like to know or to discuss if they were alive today?

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

These are just a few of the ways in which you can collaborate with other family members to write about and preserve family memories.

1. Invite each of your siblings to share three memories of your grandmother and/or grandfather. Request a picture as well if they have one.
2. Invite everyone in the family to write about one family recipe they love, asking them to send the recipe itself if possible, along with their explanation.
3. Invite family members to each write a little about some place (such as a summer cottage, a grandparents' home, a town, or a camp) where many if not most of you have spent time.
4. Invite others in the family to write about one family ritual they remember most fondly from childhood.
5. Invite each of your grandchildren/nieces and nephews to write to you about something they would like you to know or learn.
6. Make arrangements to record, or have someone who is geographically closer than you are record, a brief "interview" with your family's oldest living member using a video recorder. Have the video backed up on computer for storage and sharing.
7. Scan some or all of the family photos you have. Copy the digital files on CD and send them to your siblings.
8. Invent a "coming of age" ritual and package for your grandchildren, nieces and nephews, or other young people you care about. Choose the time of life you want to mark: their sixteenth birthday, their eighteenth birthday, their graduation from high school or college, their marriage, their first child, etc. Then, have fun "cooking up" a package to pass on at that time. It could include a letter that imparts some wisdom you'd like to share or some memory of them you think they might enjoy; a special book; one or more family possessions; one or more photographs; a small gift of money; and/or anything else that you feel might be meaningful as they move into the next chapter of their lives.
9. Go through your albums or shoeboxes of old photos and try to identify the date of and/or people in each important image or group of images. If you can't, see if you can think of another family member that might be able to provide this information. Mark the photos with the information (be sure to use pen or ink that will not damage the image).