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# Methods of Discovery: A Guide to Research Writing

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## Chapter 8: Creating Autobiographies, Family, and Community Histories Through Research

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### Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to research for autobiographical, biographical, and family writing. You may be surprised to find a chapter on personal writing in a book about research because, according to a view popular among students, when creating personal essays, writers do not need research. At first glance, such an opinion may seem natural and logical. According to this view, all the material for personal writing comes “from within,” from your memories, experiences, and impressions. Therefore, research is not needed for such projects because you already know all you will need to know about your subject. You know it from your memories, observations, and conversations with the subjects of your writing. This chapter is an invitation to a new kind of research. In it, you are offered three research projects which are autobiographical and personal in nature. In the past, research-based writing assignments have discouraged students from using personal topics or personal experiences. But things are changing as more and more writing teachers understand the value of research for personal writing.

On the other end of this “researched vs. personal” spectrum is academic writing, which, according to a popular view, always relies on research. After all, academic writing is not supposed to be about writer him or herself. Instead, it is supposed to be about serious and controversial topics. Moreover, in personal writing, the theory states, the writer is not arguing a point. In other words, personal writing is not argumentative and therefore it does not require research. Such views of writing and research are restrictive because they relegate research to the status of a “fact-finding” activity designed to help the writer shore up support for a thesis.

At the beginning of every new semester, I ask student writers in my classes to tell me about their previous experiences with research writing. I do that because I believe in the importance of research for all writers, but also because I suspect that most of my students think of research as an impersonal activity. They usually tell me that they had written many research papers in high school. Many of them also work on a research-based assignment in an other class.

From my conversations with students, I know that not many of them dislike research assignments. The rest usually tolerate research writing because they consider it easy and more formulaic than other kinds of assignments. Such students have mastered the requirements of the research paper genre and do not mind doing the work. Many of such writers have become efficient research paper writers who can produce a researched text and receive a decent grade. But they are far from enjoying the research or the writing of the paper.

I am far from suggesting that research writing on academic or controversial issues is not

important. In other chapters of this book, I discuss how to conduct research for those types of writing projects. At the same time, all writers need to know that research is not incompatible with personal writing. It belongs not only in academic prose but also in personal writing, such as autobiographies, or family histories. As a result of years of training in the traditional research paper genre, many students develop an aversion to research, to the point that they give up writing as soon as they find out that research will be involved. Writing teachers and authors Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (2004) tell a story of a student who signed up for a non-fiction writing class, but dropped it immediately after finding out that a fair amount of research would be involved in all the assignments (59).

This chapter invites you to consider ways in which research can benefit the kinds of writing projects that you would otherwise call "personal." Specifically, you are invited to work on three projects: an autobiography, a family history, and a hometown or community history. In addition to these three project, this chapter contains other research and writing activities as well as discussion of the best ways to use research for personal writing.

Before we begin, one caveat is in order. Many writing theorists and practitioners are unhappy with dividing writing into "personal" and other categories. They argue that all good writing is, in a sense, personal since it is informed by the writer's ideas, interests, and passions. In general, I tend to agree with this argument, but that is perhaps a topic for another text. In this chapter, however, I will use the term "personal writing" for the sake of convenience.

## Benefits of Personal Writing

Although the primary goal of this chapter is not to make a case for personal writing, I think that, since we are about to embark on a series of researched personal writing projects, it is useful to remember some of the benefits and uses of personal writing, especially benefits of personal writing informed and enriched by research.

- Personal writing fulfills and enriches the writer. By composing personal pieces, writers get a chance to reflect on their own lives and the lives of other people who are close to them. Personal writing allows us to re-consider the events of the past and to see them in a new light. Thus, such writing is a powerful tool for learning about your own life and the lives of others.
- Personal writing helps to create history.
- By researching and writing about past and present events in your life and in the life of your family, you create family history. In many cases, you may be the only person in your family to ever create written documents about your family's past and present.
- Personal writing is a lifelong activity. Your college career will be over in just a few short years, but knowing how to write and the enjoyment of writing will stay with you for the rest of your life.

## How to Use Research in Personal Writing

You have probably done personal writing in the past. Perhaps you have written autobiographies or told stories about important events from your life. Perhaps you have even kept a personal journal. However, a typical student writer rarely gets the opportunity to

incorporate research into personal writing assignments. This is not surprising since relatively few school writing assignments encourage them to combine the researched and the personal.

But is the distinction between personal and research writing all that pronounced? Don't all writers who want to produce interesting and convincing texts use some form of research? Isn't writing about asking questions and finding answers to those questions as much as, if not more, than about proving a point to your audience? I answer all these questions with a "yes." Autobiographical and other personal writing often helps its author to learn something important about his or her own life. It also tells others the story of this life. And to find answers to life's questions, it is necessary to do research using a variety of sources and methods.

In their 2004 essay "Researching Like a Writer: The Personal Essay as Research Paper," writing teachers and authors Paul Heilker, Sarah Allen, and Emily Sewall state that all writing is necessarily research writing. According to Heilker, Allen, and Sewall,

Every text [you] write is a research paper. A grocery list is a research paper (emphasis in the original). If you are writing a grocery list, your research involves looking in the pantry, the refrigerator, and the freezer to find out what you have and what you need. An e-mail message is a research paper (emphasis in the original). If you are writing e-mail to a friend about what happened last week, your research involves accessing that database of gray matter between your ears to call up the appropriate events to discuss. And since grocery lists and friendly e-mails are research writing, every essay our students have ever written is research writing, too (50).

Heilker, Allen, and Sewall advocate a definition and understanding of research which may differ to the one you are used to in writing school research papers. The following activity invites you to explore the role and purpose of research in autobiographical and biographical writing projects.

## Writing Activity: Recalling Past Personal Writing Experience

Individually or with a partner, recall a personal writing project that you have recently completed or attempted. It can be a school assignment, or something you wrote outside of school, such as a diary entry or a letter to a friend or relative. It can be a formal or an informal project. As you think about that piece, consider the following questions:

- What was the purpose of that writing? Were you reflecting, informing, persuading, or entertaining? Or, were you doing something else?
- Who was the intended audience for your piece? Were you writing to a friend, or relative? Or, were you, perhaps, writing for yourself?
- Try to recall as best as you can the kinds of details that you used in your piece. If you were telling a story, did you write entirely from memory? Did you wish you had additional information?
- In what ways could having external research have helped you fulfill your writing purpose better?

- After completing your reflection, consider this: would your writing have changed at all if you added external information and details to it? Although all writing is argumentative, keep in mind that when composing an autobiography or a personal history, you may not be working with a thesis statement or other elements of a traditional argument. Think of external information and details as enhancements for your story that add an extra dimension and extra texture to it.

## What Counts as Research in Personal Writing Projects

When creating researched personal texts, such as autobiographies or family and community histories, it is important to take a broad view on what counts as research and what constitutes a research source. You may already know that research sources can be of two kinds: secondary and primary. When you wrote traditional research papers, you probably primarily worked with secondary research sources. Secondary sources are published text, such as books, journals, newspapers, Internet sites, and so on. They are called secondary because in order to create these texts, their authors had to read, reflect upon, and integrate into their writing other research materials. So, for example, if you are reading a book examining the problem of underage drinking in America, and if the author of this book cites studies which show the nature and extent of the problem, then as a reader, you are getting the view on underage drinking of that author who used other writer's theories to create and express that view.

Primary sources are different from secondary one because using them allows the writer to gain a first-hand perspective on the topic or problem he or she is researching. For instance, if you are researching the history of the Vietnam war, interviewing veterans may give you a different perspective on the events than reading published accounts of the war. So, primary research sources include interviews, surveys, even direct observations of people and events. Observation, by the way, is one of the most important research methods in ethnographic research about which you can read in detail in Chapter 7. More discussion of primary and secondary sources is included in Chapter 11.

In addition to such popular primary research methods as interviews and surveys, consider what else is available to you as a researcher creating an autobiography or a family history. Do, for example, family photographs and documents tell a story? And what about that old ring or dress which has been in the family for generations and whose origin no one really knows? All these research sources can provide you with invaluable information and insights into your own history, the past and present of your family, or of your community. They all have a story to tell, and by finding out the background behind them, their histories, and their roles in the history of your family, you are, indeed, conducting research.

## Writing Activity: What is Important for your Family?

Either by yourself or with a partner, make a list of at least ten items which are important to you and your family. Include photographs, family heirlooms, family documents, such as birth and marriage certificates, letters, house deeds, and so on. After you have completed your list, consider the following questions:

- What are the stories behind these items?
- Do you know the whole story, or just fragments?
- If you don't know the whole story, who in the family would know it?
- Choose one or two items from your list and freewrite about each for a few minutes. For more on freewriting, see Chapter 2 of this book.
- Read the freewrite. Do any interesting topics for research and writing emerge from it?

After exploring the above questions, consider whether any of the ideas you have generated can provide you with topics for a writing project.

## Research in Autobiographical Writing: A Self-Study

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Next, I would like illustrate how research can be used in autobiographical writing by telling you a little bit about myself and walking you through the initial stage of the research process which I might undertake during a such a project. As you read this short version of my autobiography, notice not only what is already there, but also what is missing: details, names, dates, and stories. Think also about where I, as a writer, would need to turn and what would I need to research in order to make this story more interesting and vivid.

### Pavel Zemliansky's autobiography, Draft 1.

I come from Ukraine, a country in Eastern Europe that used to be a part of the former Soviet Union. I was born and grew up there; I went to college and did my military service there. After graduating from college, I took a job with the British embassy in Ukraine. I stayed in that job for about three years. I came to the United States in 1996 to attend graduate school.

My grandfather on my mother's side fought in World War II and was wounded. Both of my parents' mothers had to be evacuated away from the war zone during WWII, so both of my parents were born in evacuation, my father in a little town in Siberia, and my mother—in Turkmenistan, in Central Asia.

### Forming Initial Research Questions

This is a very short version of my autobiography. I covered over thirty years in two short paragraphs. As it stands now, the story lacks texture and detail. Of course, I can begin the revision by adding details to the story and expanding on the first paragraph. But in large part, the story lacks texture and depth because it lacks research. It is through revision and research that this early draft has the potential to become a complete and interesting story.

As you read the story, what questions do you have for me? As a reader, what other information and details do you wish I had included. While the first paragraph could certainly use some development through adding details and explanations, it is the second paragraph of this short piece that would benefit most from research. Here are some questions which I would ask myself and which I could answer better through research.

The first group of questions has to do with my grandfather's military service during World War II.

1. Where did my grandfather serve during the war? What did he do?
2. Where, when, and under what circumstances was he wounded?
3. What happened to him after he was wounded? Was he sent home, or did he stay on the frontline?
4. When did his military service end?

The second group of questions deals with my parents' births and early childhood while living in evacuation.

1. When did my grandmothers (my mother's and father's mothers) leave the war zone?
2. The story mentions my maternal grandfather but says nothing about the paternal one. Where was he at the time? What was he doing?
3. Why was my father's mother evacuated to Siberia while my mother's mother went to Central Asia?
4. How long were there in evacuation for?
5. How did evacuation of civilians from the war zone work?
6. Did all civilians get to leave?
7. If not, who did and who did not?
8. Where did the majority of them go?
9. What was their life like for the evacuees?

## Choosing Between Primary and Secondary Sources

Consider the types of questions I am asking in these two lists. Some of these questions deal with the lives of my family members (all questions in the first list and four questions out of the second), and some (questions five through nine in the second list) go beyond the immediate situation of my family and attempt to put that situation into a historical and social context. Although not directly about my parents, my grandparents, or myself, these questions, if answered, would help me as a writer tell a better story about family by showing how social circumstances and historical events helped shape that story.

Notice also that all the questions in the first list are about the life of one person, my grandfather. So, what research methods would be best to find answers to these questions? If my grandfather were still alive, I'd interview him. The next best person to interview would be my grandmother who is still living. I could also talk to my parents and find out what they had heard from their parents about that period of their lives.

So, what research methods and what kinds of research sources would suite me best in finding out the answers to these questions. Since at least one half of my questions deal directly with the lives of the members of my family, it makes sense to interview them.

As I noted earlier, however, some of my questions on my list cannot be answered completely or at all by using only primary sources and research methods, such as interviews. This is why secondary research is so important for autobiographical and biographical writing. To begin my secondary research for this project, I would first look at various family documents. I know that my maternal grandmother has kept letters that she and my grandfather exchanged during the war. I also know that she has a large collection of photographs from that time that depict both my grandfather during his military service and her life with her two small children, one of

whom is my mother in evacuation.

After completing the study of family documents, I am going to study published accounts of the times about which I am writing. I will look at books, journal articles, and Internet sites that may tell me whether all civilians were evacuated from the war zone. Such sources might also tell me how the process of evacuation worked and in what conditions the evacuees lived. I will also look for information on why different families were sent to different parts of the country and on who decided where they would go. In selecting my sources, I will want to carefully choose only reliable ones. You can read more on the reliability of sources in Chapter 11.

## Focusing Research

In the first stage of the project which I have just finished describing, I moved from specific to general. After forming some initial research questions I went on an information-gathering mission. My research began with interviews, after which I studied such family documents as letters and photographs. Finally, I consulted published secondary sources to obtain a bigger picture of the society in which my family lived decades ago. In the course of this research, I have collected lots of information. By now, I have interview transcripts, photographs with accompanying notes and descriptions, notes that I took while reading family letters and published secondary sources, and so on. Some of this information will be more useful and interesting than other, and I will need to decide what to keep and what to discard.

During the next stage of the project, I need to decide what, among all the research that I have gathered stands out. I need to sift through my research data and see if any of the facts, stories, and perspectives that it gave me particularly interest me and are likely to interest my readers. In other words, I need to focus my research and my writing. Early on in this section, I pointed out that I tried to cover too large a time period in short first draft of my autobiography. Such a broad view of the subject is not a problem at the early, invention stage of a writing project, but there comes a time, usually some time towards the end of the research paper of the project, when the writer needs to decide which events, people, and details stay in the story and which ones will have to wait till the next project. As the famous Columbian writer and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez once said, it is better to write a story that is "a mile deep and an inch wide" than vice-versa. In addition to the very important consideration of keeping the reader interested, there is a purely practical concern. To tell a good story which spans many years and covers many people, one needs a book-length manuscript and the time to create it. Relatively few writers, and probably no student writers, have such a luxury.

You can read more about focusing techniques in Chapters 1 and 2 of this book. But for now, let us return to our research project. Let us say, for example, that after sifting through my research and deciding where to focus my research and writing, I have decided to further investigate my grandfather's wartime military service. Now armed with my research, I know much more about his life as an individual and the circumstances under which he joined the military and fought in the war. I can start my second draft by focusing on these events and discarding everything else from the first draft.

## Working with family documents and other secondary sources

In the preceding section, we discussed ways in which family documents and heirlooms can become research sources. Here are three activities you can use for working with these items as research sources. As you work through these activities, remember that in research writing, as in all writing, it is important to be creative and use your imagination when working with sources. Let your curiosity and desire to learn more about your family's history guide and drive you. These activities can also be used as "springboards" for larger research projects.

NOTE: If you need to obtain these documents from your parents, other family members, or friends, give yourself extra time before the start of a research project.

### Activity 1: Researching your Family History through Written Documents

Most families keep various written mementos that are important to them. Such documents may include copies of house deeds (past and present), old bills and receipts for important or symbolic purchases, and, of course, family letters. For example, I recently discovered that my parents had kept, neatly in a box, all the letters that I wrote to them when I was serving in the military, almost twenty years ago.

If you know about the existence of any such or similar texts, select one or two of them for further study. If you are not sure what is available, ask your parents or other relatives. It is important to have copies of these documents in your possession during your research so you can study them closely. Read them carefully. What interesting facts, details, and stories stand out? Do they add anything to what you already know about the life of your family? Or, perhaps, they contradict something? Do they add anything to your understanding of your own and your family's histories?

### Activity 2: Researching Family History through Photographs

Attention to detail is an important element of all good writing. The basis for good research writing is critical and creative work with your sources. Each photograph tells a story, but only to those who are willing to read it attentively, critically, and creatively. Most families keep collections of photographs featuring people and important events. Therefore, family photographs are excellent resources at the beginning of any researched autobiography or biography project because they provide a kind of a bridge to other sources and other ideas.

### Activity 3: Reading a Photograph

Photographs are rich texts that can reveal a lot not only about the people and places depicted on them but also give a writer leads into the circumstances surrounding the photo. Select one of the family photographs that you plan to use for your research. Consider these questions and be sure to record your answers:

- Who or what is in the photo?
- What do you know about this person or event?



- What would you like to know about them?
- Through what other research methods or sources can you find out?
- Try to describe the person or event on the photo in as much detail as you can. Be attentive to facial expressions, clothing, gestures, settings, and so on.

## Activity 4: Reading and Writing “Around” the Photograph

Now that you have learned what the photograph tells you, try to look for what it does not tell. The purpose of this activity is to go beyond the description of the photograph and to discover what the person, people, or events depicted on the photo may mean for the subject of your research in general. Ask yourself how the person or events depicted on the photograph may help you understand other issues, people, or events. Asking this question is important because broadening the scope of your investigation from specific details to general reflections and conclusions is, in a way, the essence and purpose of research. So, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is not shown on the photograph? Are there any events or details beyond the photo that may help you and your readers to illuminate its meaning and significance?
- What other research (both primary and secondary) do you need to conduct in order to find out and describe those events and details?
- After conducting such additional research, what new observations and conclusions can you make about the photograph you have been studying?
- What new light do your research and conclusions shed on your personal and your family’s history?

## Reading a Family Photograph: An Example

The following is my reading of a photo from my own family’s archives. On the photo (Figure 4.1), taken in the early 1950s, are my father and my grandmother. I will now go apply some of the questions from Activities 3 and 4 to this photo.



Figure 4.1

- My father was born in 1944. He looks around nine or ten years old on this photo. His mother raised him by herself. She died of cancer in 1978.
- The history of my father's side of the family is complicated. He barely knew his father who left the family when my father was a small child. My father also had an older half-brother with whom he lost touch many years ago. To find out more, I will have to look through whatever family documents. There is not much, though. I know that some years ago my estranged grandfather sent my father a letter in which he promised to leave him all his property when he died. I don't think my father ever replied to it. In any case, I could try and find out.
- Why is my father wearing what appears to be a sailor's uniform? Is it for some special event, or is it that boys are boys, regardless of the country and the time?
- How old is my grandmother on this photo? I don't know how old she was when she had my father, but she looks like she is in her mid to late-thirties on this photo.
- I know that my father was born during World War II when the family was evacuated to Siberia. I wonder when they came back to Ukraine and what their life was like? Perhaps, secondary sources will be of help here. I can look up books and other documents recounting the experiences of people who returned home after being evacuated during the war.

You get the idea. Your task as a writer is not only to describe what or who is on the photo but

to go beyond the image and research its context and its history.

### Activity 5: Connecting Family History with Local and National History

- Look back at the results of your research in Activities 1 and 2. Do any of the documents that you have studied in those activities mention any important events in the local community, in your state, or in the nation as a whole that were happening at the time?
- If no such events are mentioned directly, think about what you yourself know about the time in which the family documents you are studying were produced, and about the events in your community, or in the country.
- Try to find out about those events and how they may have influenced your family and, by extension, you. Visit your college or local library, or a local archive. For more information on searching secondary sources, see Chapter 11.
- Reflect on the connections between the life of your family then and now and those events.

Here is what you might do to connect personal and family histories with broader contexts.



Figure 4.2

The man in the middle of this photo is my Great Grandfather on my mother's side of the family. Just about the only thing I know about him is that he was an officer in the Russian Imperial Army during World War I when this photo was taken. In addition to trying to learn more about my Great Grandfather, I want to ask the following questions that would connect his life to the events in his country.

- How did one become an officer in the Russian Imperial Army, and what was my Great Grandfather's military rank? If my relatives or family documents cannot provide answers to these questions, I will have to research World War I uniforms and the military laws and regulations of that time.
- Was the photo taken on the front, and if so, was it taken before or after a battle?
- What was my Great Grandfather's role in the events immediately preceding and following the time of the photo?
- If he took part in military action, what was the outcome of that action and what were its effects on my Great Grandfather, his unit, and his country?
- What were his personal views on the war?

## Research Writing Projects

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In the next section of this chapter, I would like to offer you three research projects based on the strategies and methods that have been discussed so far in this chapter. You can try all or just some of them—this will probably depend on the structure of your course. These projects call on you to use both primary and secondary sources. As you work on these projects, remember that whatever you end up researching and writing about should be connected to your own life and the life of your family or community. Your objective is not to produce a detached generic research paper in which you never talk about yourself or use emotions, but an interesting, engaged, and energetic text through which both you and your readers can learn something new about your life. Your teacher may modify and supplement these projects depending on the purpose and structure of your writing course.

## Researched Autobiography

### Purpose

The goal of this project is to create a researched autobiography. Right now, you are probably thinking that you know enough about yourself and your life and that you can write an autobiography without conducting any or much research. In part this is true. You do, indeed, probably know where you were born, where and how you grew up, and how your life has progressed so far. You know this from parents, other family members, and people you were close to as you were growing up.

On the other hand, do you know what went on in the world around you as you were born and growing up and how it may have influenced you and your family? Do you know what life was like in your town, city, community, neighborhood when you were born and grew up? If your parents moved from place to place when you were growing up, do you know why? If your family moved because of better economic opportunities available elsewhere, how do you think this fact impacted your life?

The only way to find answers to all these questions is by interviewing your family members, studying a variety of documents and items from and about the times you are writing about. In other words, the only way to find answers to these questions is to conduct research.

## Audience

If you are writing this project for a class, your immediate audiences will be your teacher and your classmates. They will enjoy reading your autobiography and will probably be able to offer useful suggestions long the way. Your teacher and your classmates should not be your own only, or even the main audience for this project. Consider also the your family and friends. Research into family histories also known as genealogy has become especially popular in recent years, and this tells us of the value of the kind of research projects described in this chapter. Also, consider yourself as the audience for this text. After all, one of the most powerful capabilities of personal writing is that it allows you to explore and better understand you own life.

In Chapter 2 of this book, we discussed the importance of seeing research as a means to an end of creating the most complete and interesting text you can possible create. Although this needs to see research as a means towards a bigger end is true for all types of research projects explained this book, it is very important for all writers to remind themselves about it constantly.

Unlike some traditional research paper assignments which treat research merely a practice in information gathering and compiling, research in this project should be used as a means of achieving a rhetorical goal—creating an interesting and engaging autobiography through a combination or narrative, reflection, and research.

## Special Features of the Project

This project has several special features which make it different from the kind of traditional research paper assignment or a personal writing assignment most students are used to.

While working on this project, you will need to learn to combine personal narratives, recollections, and reflections with research. Learning to do this involves not being afraid of using the pronoun “I” in your writing. After years of training in the kind of impersonal and voiceless writing that the generic research paper assignment promotes, many student writers have serious reservations towards using the first person pronoun.

You will also need to learn to use research to enhance and enrich the personal elements in your story and vice versa. Keep in mind what you learned about the relationship facts and

fiction, between researched and creative writing about which you learned in Chapter 2.

You will need to use both primary and secondary research methods, such as interviews, observations, and analysis of texts. This chapter offers you some advice on working with these different kinds of sources. In addition, you can learn about them from Chapters Six, Eleven, and Twelve.

## Two Options to Try

As you know from the chapter of this book dedicated to the writing process, when working on a relatively short writing project, such as this one, it is not a good idea to try to cover too big of a period of your life. Even those of us who consider their lives to be relatively uneventful have plenty of interesting stories to tell. Good writers always isolate the most interesting events or time periods and develop their pieces around those. So, unless you plan on writing a book-length autobiography, it is a good idea to concentrate on a short time period of your life or on one, important event.

The following are two options you can take while working on your autobiography. These are suggestions to get you started. Don't limit yourself to these! In consultation with your teacher and with the help from your classmates, you will, perhaps, come up with other ways to create your researched autobiography. As you work on these or any other variants of the researched autobiography project, remember to use the knowledge and techniques which you have learned from other chapters of this book, particularly the ones on writing process, rhetoric, and research methods.

### Option1: Understanding Yourself Better Through Research.

Remember when you were young? What was life like for you and your family? Was your childhood fairly typical? Did you grow up in suburbia, in inner city, or in the country? Or, perhaps, as some of my students have, you were born and raised abroad, and only came to the United States recently. More importantly, though, how did your past shape you into the person you are now? Most of us can recall events and people important to us from recent past. But surely, if you try to recreate distant past, when you were a baby, a toddler, or a young adolescent only through recollection, you will not have much to go by. And this is where research comes in. You will be able to learn more about your past and how it has influenced by combining personal recollections and reflections with interviews with family members and friends, and some secondary research. As in personal piece you write, your objective in this one should be not only to tell an interesting and entertaining story, but, more importantly, to reflect on what that story means for you and your readers. Rather than complete sequences of steps leading you to the completion of each project, the following activities are starting points which you need to consider as you prepare and carry out each of these writing tasks.

### Option 2: Your Recent History: A Researched Look

Unlike Option 1 which invited you to look at events of relatively distant past and connect them to the present, this version of the researched autobiography project asks you to write about

some relatively recent and important event or stage in your life. You have probably done this kind of writing many times in the past. Many high school and college introductory writing classes begin by asking students to write about important events from their lives and to reflect upon them. What may be new for you in this project, though, is that it asks you to enhance your narrative about such an event and your understanding of its importance through research.

## Research Sources and Methods for Options 1 and 2.

To complete this project, you can and should use both primary and secondary research sources. You will use the kinds of sources which were discussed in earlier sections of this chapter: interviews, observations, family photos, heirlooms, and written documents. In addition to these sources, your memory itself is a very powerful source for good writing. Good writers work to recall important events, reflect on them, and combine these recollections and reflections with more formal research to produce complex and interesting autobiographical pieces. For methods and technique of finding appropriate and reliable sources and for source evaluation methods, see Chapter 11 of this textbook.

## Project 2—Family Member Interview

The purpose of this project is to recreate an important event or period in your family's history. To accomplish this, you will interview a family member, such as a parent, grandparent, or a sibling who participated in this period or event or directly witnessed it. Some possibilities include family celebrations and festivals, births, deaths, weddings, moving from town to town or from country to country, and so on.

The event you will decide to write about does not have to have a "universal" importance, but it has to be a significant part of your family's history. The subject of your writing should be removed in time enough for you to have to conduct research to find out about it. In other words, you should not write about a period or event which you can recreate entirely from memory. At the same time, feel free to mix in your own knowledge, memory, or understanding of your event together with the interview material. Remember that you are writing both for yourself (to recreate and analyze the importance of the event) and for an outside audience: your family, your friends, your classmates and teacher, and for anyone else interested in reading this kind of text.

## Suggested Stages of the Project

Choose an event or a time in your family's life which happened either before you were born or when you were a small child and about which you, perhaps, have vague memories. Use any of the invention techniques you know in this stage.

- Think about what you already know about event or time and consider why this time or event may be important for your family and, consequently, for you.
- Think who in your family might be the best candidate to tell you about it. Ideally, it should



be someone who participated in the event.

- Interview this person (we will be discussing specific interview techniques during the term).
- Reflect on what you had known before the interview and what you have learned during it. How has the interview changed or enhanced your view or memory of the event?

## Special Features of the Project

Obviously, the success of this project depends on your success as an interviewer and your ability to use the data which you will obtain during the interview in the paper. Therefore, study carefully the interviewing techniques presented in this chapter and in the chapter about ethnographic research. In addition to the interview data, use personal memories and experiences to enhance the story. Mix the personal and the researched freely; remember that your goal as a writer is to create the most interesting and engaging piece possible.

To augment and supplement primary research and personal memories, conduct some secondary research, if possible and appropriate. As you probably know by now, secondary research adds texture to writing by providing additional information, perspectives, and opinions which are otherwise not available. For more discussion of secondary research principles and techniques, see other chapters of this book.

## Basic Interviewing Techniques

Treat this list of interviewing techniques as your “quick reference guide” to interviewing. For a more complete discussion of interviewing strategies and techniques, see the chapter of this book dedicated to ethnography:

- Always know what you set out to find out in your interview
- Be prepared
- Ask open-ended questions (such that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no")
- If the conversation takes an unexpected but interesting turn, follow it, do not feel locked into your initial questions
- If you tape-record the interview, always ask for the subjects' permission
- If possible, share the write-up of the interview with your subject after you complete it.

Read more on the techniques for effective interviewing in Chapter 7 of this book.

## Project 3--Hometown or Community Research Project

The purpose of this project is to explore the history and character of your hometown or neighborhood. It will not be a traditional history, though. You will be at the center of it as someone who has lived in and experienced the place you are writing about. Your experience as a participant in this history will be at the heart of the project. At the same time, as you know, your perspective on the subject of your writing is only one of many.

In order to learn those other perspectives, you will need to conduct both primary and secondary research.



## Special Features of the Project

In this project, you will have to use many of the research skills and techniques that you learned in the previous two projects described in this chapter and in other assignments throughout this book. You may need to conduct various kinds of primary and secondary research, using a variety of sources, as well as write from memory.

You may be tempted to rely on your memory or current observations as the main sources of material for this project. Personal experiences and memories are certainly good starting points in the beginning of this or any other writing project. But they are useful and important, personal memories and observations should be used together with primary and secondary research in order to make your piece interesting and multi-dimensional.

### Writing Activity: Exploring Your Community

- What is special and/or usual about your home neighborhood or town?
- How do you remember it when you were a child?
- How has it changed through the years? Think of both positive and negative changes
- What is its history: when was it built and by whom? How long did it take? Why was it built?
- What kinds of people populate it and where did they come from? What is special about them?
- What do the town's or neighborhood's current and past residents think about living in it.
- You will probably need to conduct the following kinds of research for this project:
- Talk to your family members, friends and neighbors. Find out what they know.
- When at home for a weekend or a holiday, visit your hometown library or archives to see what you can uncover about your neighborhood or town
- Search the Internet for information about your hometown.

## Sources

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