



SECRETS, LIES, AND SCANDALS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

CHALLENGES WITH FAMILY AND TRUTH WHEN WRITING A MEMOIR

Writing a memoir is not an act of war, but it can seem that way to a family who will be portrayed in the memoir, or whose history will be exposed. When our “truths” are other people’s stories, naturally people feel concerned and laid bare to the public. Then there is the matter of the family myths, or the tilted truth, which can be seen as “lies,” depending on your point of view. A family myth is a story that family believes to be true, a story that upholds its view of itself.

SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE!

DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES OF TRUTH TELLING

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MEMOIR WRITERS

A MEMOIR WRITING GUIDE

NAMW.ORG

Some family members will disagree with any story that doesn't agree with their version of what happened, or that threatens them in some way. People in a family are like slices of a pie, each with a different perspective, seeing events through a different lens. Family wars can break out when people fight over what “really” happened—which can bring up age old unresolved issues. This is why some memoir writers stop writing when they imagine what people will say, or when they consider presenting their stories to the family.

Do any of these phrases sound familiar?

- *You're writing a memoir! How dare you air our dirty laundry.*
- *Why are you doing this to us?*
- *Don't you dare write any of that while we're alive!*
- *That's simply not true—it never happened like that.*
- *Your grandmother is going to roll over in her grave if you write that.*
- *You're a liar!*
- *Who gave you the right to tell my story?*
- *We're gonna sue you if you publish!*
- *Secrets are kept for a reason. Don't you rock the boat!*

Families may fight over what “really” happened, and some of these conflicts can be maintained for generations. To write, you need to put the family dialogues and chatter out of your mind. Get the voice of the inner critic out of the way.

For now, **your focus needs to be finding YOUR voice**, your story, and your point of view. Memory is subjective always. Your brain and emotions put together events to create a narrative memory. Since we are all unique, your narrative memory will likely be different from someone else's, though it's always great when someone says, “Yeah, it happened just like you say!”

When we write the family stories, especially if people behaved badly or were abusive or unkind, we still may want to protect them for various reasons, yet we want to tell our truths. Somehow the need to tell the truth as we see it is bursting us at the seams. But we hesitate. I don't need to get fancy and call this "writer's block," but you need to resolve what is holding you back so you can write.

Sometimes anger or revenge can fuel the desire to write, which is okay if you need to get something on the page so you can heal and move forward, but that version won't be publishable. We go through various emotional stages when writing a memoir, and we need to work with what comes up, allowing our different moods space to be revealed and considered. As we keep writing, we begin to feel more distance from the emotionality of the material, and we can see the universal aspects to our experience. In your final version, readers should resonate with your experiences, and identify with them—that's a successful story. But in the first draft, we are figuring out what we need to say, what scenes to include, and how we feel putting our inner lives down on the page. There's a lot do in the first draft!

*Only when we are brave
enough to explore the
darkness will we discover the
infinite power of our light.*

--Brene Brown

Suggestion: keep the fact that you're writing a memoir to yourself! Unless your family lives next door, the fact that you are writing about the past or your childhood won't be discovered unless you tell someone. You need the creative space to figure out the story you need to tell. You need the freedom to think and write, and write as much as you need to in your first draft. It's a long road from conceptual idea to publication. Protect your creativity and your story!

Secrets, lies, and shame are intertwined, so if you have stories that contain secrets, the thought of writing these stories will be fraught with conflict for you, especially at first, especially if you had been taught to be silent and to protect the family with your silence. However, the research on writing expressively shows how it heals us to lift those barriers and write the unvarnished truth. Writing your truths can free you from guilt and shame, giving you more room to breathe and find the core authenticity in your stories.

In your first draft, keep your stories private, revealing the secrets only to yourself. Give yourself room to explore your own voice, perhaps for the first time.

CHECKLIST:

What stories would your family object to?

- *Are you writing about subjects your family doesn't know about?*
- *Are there secrets revealed in your memoir that you want to write, yet you feel conflicted about anyone else knowing?*
- *Are there secrets that only you know about?*

When you get down to the true self and speak from that, there is always a metamorphosis in your writing, a transfiguration....the only way to find your true self is by recklessness and freedom.

--Brenda Ueland

On the next page, use that space to write down the issues and topics you want to include, and what consequences you imagine might happen if you write those stories. Do any of the voices listed above show up for you? Write everything out and get these voices and worries out of your head. When you put your thoughts on the page you have something objective to read and consider.

YOUR VOICE, YOUR MEMORIES



Just because we believe our point of view is correct, and we feel that our story is just and should be exposed and shared, doesn't mean it's ready to enter a public venue. In the first draft, **focus on the story YOU need to tell**, your voice, your memories, and your desire to write that story. This process of permission will need to be affirmed all the way through your first draft. Later, you can decide what to include in a final draft—which will take some time, at least a few months or even a year or more. Most people find great satisfaction writing that first, honest, and truthful draft without worrying about what others will say. Keep your first draft private, for the safest and most honest writing you can do. Once your story is on the page, it will get clearer what you might want to share with others.

When it comes time to publish, you can decide how you want to share your stories with your family. There is no "rule" about letting the family know there is a story that includes them, but it's a good idea to consider how you will present your story to your family. Are you asking permission—not recommended—or are you informing them of their part of the story? Your writing coach and publisher can help you when it's time to get to that stage of your memoir.

Get the inner conflicts out of your head by completing these sentences. Make them fit your situation and family:

My family will disown me if I write about...

It would give grandpa a heart attack if he knew I was writing....

I can never write about...

I'm so ashamed of...

If only I had never... or (If only I had...)

What I regret most about my relationship with _____ is:

I'm still angry about...

Make a list of why it's important for you to write your memoir—your motivation to write it. Perhaps some of these sentence stems can help you.

It's important to me to write the story of...

All my life I covered up _____, but now I need to write about it for me.

I love my family, but I need to write about _____.

My story is unique because it's about ...

I will feel _____ after I write the truths of my story.

I hope that others who have _____ in their lives, will benefit from my story about ...

Always, always we were becoming a story. But I didn't understand that fusing my life to the narrative, giving myself to the story's life, would be what would allow me to live.

Mark Doty

Once you have your list, return frequently to these reasons to write your memoir! And as you discover new inspiration, be sure to write about it your writing journal.

CREATIVITY, PERMISSION, AND YOUR UNIQUE MEMOIR

Write your unique story—and stick to your point of view. Write the whole thing, and then, after you write another draft, and even another, you can make some decisions about what you want to include and leave out. Remember, your view of events is particular to your experiences, how you feel in the world, and your perceptions. No one sees the world through your eyes, or has lived your experiences. You are crafting a story only you can tell!

On my last trip to France, I viewed many Impressionist paintings—wonderful! Many of these artists painted together, worked on the same scenes in the same setting like a garden, a river bank, or cafe, but



none of the paintings were the same, each was unique. Each artist saw the world differently. Give yourself permission to be an artist. Allow yourself to see the world through your own eyes without flinching or doubting yourself. Later, if you change your mind about what you wrote, that's fine. Everyone edits their work over and over again. You can change everything until it's finally published!

MORE WRITING PROMPTS

1. Write a scene about something you feel is secretive, shaming, or scandalous—in your eyes—something you’ve never written before.
2. Write about how you were different from other people in your family re: a controversial topic.
3. Write a story your family insists is not true.
4. Write a story they believe is true, but you disagree. Write both sides of the story.
5. What truths do you want to write about that you feel are unacceptable to put into print? List them.
6. Write a scene that is true, even if hurtful to others, so it does not have an edge of revenge or current anger in it. You might need to write it two or three times.
7. What secrets have been passed through the generations? Why have they remained a secret? Who did these secrets protect? What will happen (or did happen) when the secrets were revealed?
8. What secrets do you know about that no one in the family realizes you know? List them in your journal and how you found out.
9. How did you become a keeper of secrets? How old were you, what were the circumstances? Write about how you found out, and the significance of this information to you. What would it mean to family members if they knew? (This is about trying to understand it, trying to sort it out.)
11. What happened in the past that the family –or you—is most ashamed of?
12. Fictionalize one of the stories about secrets and shame. Then journal about how it feels to write the same story in fiction vs. memoir (truth.)