

Synopsis - How to Write Biographies, Memoirs and Family Histories Course

Module 1 - Making a writer out of you

When and where to write - how to start writing - coping with writer's block - basic equipment - getting organised - reading widely - personal qualities you need - coping with rejection.

Module 2 - Developing your style

Writing complete sentences - subject/verb agreement - avoid ambiguity - use prepositions correctly - the five Cs: correctness, conciseness, clarity, coherence and completeness - sentences and paragraphs - using linking words and sign posts - choosing the right word - things to avoid: verbosity, cliché, repetition, slang and obscenities, jargon, foreign words in English - adjectives - similes and metaphors.

Biographies

Module 3 – Preparation

An often overlooked market - making your subject a living, breathing character for the reader - picking your subject - celebrities, historical figures and "ordinary" people - madmen, murderers and monsters - the dark side of biography writing - whether your subject is interesting enough to make a commercially successful book - angles to consider.

Module 4 - The celebrity profile

What the public wants - a living subject or a dead one? - the pros and cons of both - do you need the celebrity's approval? - putting together an unauthorised account - how to locate and contact celebrities - interviewing stars - ghost-writing.

Module 5 - The historical figure

Recent surge in interest - a new approach - making the past three-dimensional - debunking myths and making judgements - spotting trends - fascinating, but less famous historical figures - looking at women in history - doing your research: primary sources, secondary sources, the Internet, talking to experts - writing historical biographies for the young.

Module 6 - "Ordinary" people

Ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances - finding the right subject - finding the right publisher.

Module 7 - Writing the book

Selecting the right material - trying to find a new angle - bringing your subject to life - staying clear of libel and copyright problems - structuring your book - giving the edited highlights (life with the dull bits left out) - the "extras" that make your work more commercial - tone (how familiar should you be?) - polishing the text: an 11-point checklist.

Module 8 - Selling your biography

Finding a publisher - what publishers are looking for - preparing a synopsis - the covering letter - choosing sample chapters to send - the presentation of your manuscript - pitching in an electronic age - do agents make a difference? - payment for your work.

Memoirs

Module 9 - Making a start

Why write your autobiography? - a window on the past - will it interest a commercial publisher? - have you got enough material? - alternative outlets if your life story won't fill a book.

Module 10 - Organising your research

Getting yourself organised - hunting out material - finding out what others remember - tapping your memories: the cluster approach versus the dump approach - choosing a theme for your memoirs.

Module 11 - Planning the book

The chronological or pot-pourri approach? - putting together an initial synopsis - being selective in what you use - taking an objective approach - how much should you reveal? - introducing yourself and starting with dramatic impact - getting the style and tone just right - avoiding the nostalgia trap.

Module 12 - The writing phase

Getting it down on paper - don't edit or get second opinions before it is complete - dealing with writer's block - revising your manuscript - getting feedback from others - structural survey: a 13-point checklist.

Module 13 - Publishing your book

Avoid vanity publishers - self publishing: the various options - getting your work into print cheaply - how to produce a proper book: cost, quantity, creating a professional image, registering your book, sales and promotion - the electronic alternative.

Module 14 - Putting it all together

Excerpts from two self-published autobiographies.

Family Histories

Module 15 - Organising the project

The benefits of compiling a family history - alternative ways of structuring your family memoirs - organising the project: who you will be writing about; what period the project will cover; who will tackle the various research and writing; how long the project will take.

Module 16 - The genealogical memoir

Getting information from family members: visits, questionnaires and interviews - tapping into your own knowledge - starting the paper trail - going back to old records - widening the search - additional sources of information - Internet resources - photos.

Module 17 - The snapshot memoir

Looking at your family here and now - possible topics to cover - looking at things from a multiple viewpoint - family portraits - miscellany of memoirs - preparing a dateline - photos - effective interviewing techniques.

Module 18 - Assembling your material

Making decisions on what to include (and what to omit) - dealing with skeletons in the cupboard - structure - the options: (i) archives (ii) genealogy charts (iii) a webpage (iv) a book - sharing your work with the family - final thoughts.

Supplement - Punctuation and spelling

If you have ever had doubts about your ability to spell and punctuate properly this excellent guide will help you.