

PART



WRITING EXERCISES,  
WORK PLANS, AND OTHER HANDS-ON  
ADVICE

# NOW, YOU TELL YOUR STORY

How to read and use Part II

So here we are, two hundred pages later, and you've become as expert as our experts. Weird, though: your memoir still hasn't written itself.

The following exercises are designed to take you through the writing process step by step. You'll warm up, you'll write a sentence, then a paragraph; then maybe an outline, then a passage or two. Soon enough you'll have a chapter, then another, then the momentum will carry you.

The exercises are grouped by chapter, building on that chapter's themes. Maybe, as we suggested on page 11, you did them as you read each chapter. Or maybe, as we suggested on page 11, you want to do them all in a row right now. Please, by all means.

*(Disclaimer: The following exercises are by no means necessary for you to do. If you feel ready to start writing, go ahead! But if you'd like a few more -suggestions, we hope you'll find at least one of these exercises helpful.)*

## Chapter I

# MEETING YOUR MUSE

Exercises for getting started

*Every professional starts with a warm up. Athletes stretch. Artists sketch. -Writers draft, free-write, read, check their email, play solitaire, free-write a bit more. The point is just to get some words down and let the ideas come without worrying about the end product.*

### WRITING EXERCISE IN THE BEGINNING

Let's begin at the beginning; write just a few words down. You'll be writing a very short piece—a paragraph is fine—about yourself. Your assignment: write your Genesis myth. How did you come into this world? How were you created? Your story can be straightforward: "She sat next to him on the bus. He had ragged cuticles; a bad sign. But his eyes were kind, and she couldn't help herself, and the next thing she knew it was June; and there were flowers, and preachers, and toasts, and nine and a half months later, there was me." Or it can be Old Testament-mythic: "In the OB ward of Cedar-Sinai hospital, the angels were singing. Trumpets were trumpeting. Out of room 707, a voice boomed." It can be magic realist, a prose poem, whatever you want.

### WRITING EXERCISE FIND YOUR TOPIC

This exercise is designed help you figure out what your memoir will focus on. Even if you already know what you want to write about—and you probably do—it's worth doing. Few memoirists end up writing the book they set out to write. One thing leads to another, and six months later the memoir of your life as a failed actor ends up being about your peripatetic childhood. This exercise should save you some time, getting you to the underlying issues faster, and pointing out some interesting tangents you may want to follow. Maybe, right now, your book is about having to change high schools three times. But once we start digging, we find out that changing high schools was just a side effect of the -bigger story: your family kept moving because your parents kept getting fired. And your parents kept getting fired because ... well, there must be a pretty good story there. See what stories the following prompts bring up for you.

**Body and Health.** The average person has a couple hundred genetic mutations and one of yours might be worth writing about. Write a few sentences about your most

unusual physical attributes.

**Brain.** If your brain is not what is politely called neurotypical, take heart: mental illness and neurological conditions have made for some great memoirs. It's probably worth a try just for the exercise—memoir-writing can be a kind of therapy in itself. Write a paragraph describing your brain's quirkiest attributes.

**Family.** Hollis Gillespie's mother was an alcoholic rocket scientist; -Augusten Burroughs's, a floridly psychotic poet. Both provided some great stories. Write half a page about your family's blackest sheep.

**Childhood.** Write a few sentences to answer the question: What was the most unusual aspect of your childhood?

**Hometown.** Haven Kimmel's *Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland, Indiana* is a warm and wry memoir of a traumaless childhood and a love letter to her hometown. Maybe you feel the same about your own; maybe you'd pen a hate letter instead. We'll get to that in more detail in "You Are Here." For now, just write a few sentences about your hometown, to give the reader an overall impression of it.

**Work.** People have written great memoirs about being waitresses, flight attendants, dominatrices, cab drivers, moguls, and reluctant rock stars. Write a paragraph or two about your worst and weirdest jobs.

**Survival.** Did you live through something amazing? In half a page or less, briefly describe what happened.

Which of these topics held your interest the most while you were -writing about them? Chances are that's the one that will hold the -reader's -interest, too. Pick that one and just free-write about it for one page. See where this leads.

## Chapter II

# PRECURSORS TO THE PAST

Exercises for interviewing and researching

*By now you have a rough idea of what you'll be writing about. The next step is gathering your material: probing your memories, interviewing the people in your life, finding pictures and documentation, and piecing together the clues.*

### WRITING EXERCISE

#### INSTANT MEMORY-TRIGGERS

Memory is the memoirist's greatest resource, but unfortunately, it's not always a reliable one. Our brains file things erratically. Details fall out and get lost. This exercise is designed to help you pick through your mental files and bring those details back. Do them with a notebook or computer at your side, and free-write about the memories they evoke.

**Music.** Go back to the music from the time in your life that you're -writing about. You'd be amazed at the memories that Rush, Styx, even A-ha, can unlock.

**Photos.** The bad hair, the giant glasses, the pegged jeans, and merciless acne: pick up a few old photos and let the memories come flooding back.

**Food.** Eat something you associate with the time of your life you're writing about: a Pop-Tart, Hawaiian Punch, dorm microwave popcorn, zwieback. It worked for Proust.

**Conversation.** We all remember separate elements of each event. You might remember what you wore; your mother might remember the bit of spinach you had between your front teeth; your dad, how it took an hour to find a parking space. Interview other people to glean bits of the story you might have missed.

**Travel.** Go back to the place where all the action happened to see it with fresh eyes. Walk around; see what memories the landmarks trigger.

### WRITING EXERCISE

#### FIFTEEN QUESTIONS

You don't have to interview people for your memoir, and you may not want to. It's your book, told from your perspective; they can write their own. But if you're curious, and there are some things you've been dying to ask, writing a memoir is a good excuse to

pry. Talking to other people can fill in the details you forgot, the backstory you never knew. You'll probably want to grill them about the events your memoir chronicles, but it's not a bad idea to ask them some general questions, too. -Chances are you'll be interviewing people you already know well—parents, -siblings, lifelong friends—and you've heard most of their stories a t-thousand times. These sample interview questions are designed to unearth stories you haven't heard before. Add a few questions of your own, sit down with your subject, and write up what follows.

1. How did I get my name? How did you get yours?
2. What do you remember most about your mother?  
Your father?
3. If you had a time machine, what decision would go back to undo?
4. What are you most proud of?
5. What is the thing you always hid from your parents?
6. How did my coming into your life change your life?
7. Who's had the biggest impact on your life?
8. What's your earliest memory?
9. What event made you feel like you were suddenly an adult?
10. What do you know now that you didn't then?
11. What didn't I know then that you want to admit to me now?
12. What was your favorite age?
13. When [big life event] was going on, what did you tell your friends about it?
14. What has been your greatest worry?
15. What used to thrill you? What thrills you now?

WRITING EXERCISE  
THE CASE OF THE ASPIRING MEMOIRIST

It may make your research more interesting—and the end product more compelling—to think of it not as research but detective work. Life is full of small mysteries, and memoir-writing is a good opportunity to solve them. What are the great mysteries of your life?

You may want to start by writing up a possible list of leads to investigate, areas to research that might lead to good stories, such as:

- Why does my father hate Phoenix so much?*
- Why did our next-door neighbor always wear wigs?*
- Why did my sister stop talking to me, briefly, during the summer of 1980?*
- Why do we always whisper Aunt Margaret's name?*

READING EXERCISE  
HIT THE BOOKS

One of the memoirist's greatest resources is other memoirs. Beginning on page 295, you'll find a list of great ones. Find the books that share a subject with yours—illness,

family, travel—and read them closely, -noting the narrative choices the author makes.

## Chapter III

# YOU vs. PAGE ONE

Exercises for starting your memoir

*Everyone has a good reason for not starting their memoir. Sometimes it's laziness. Sometimes it's ambition, the need to be perfect, so why even bother starting at all when that first attempt is bound to be awful. It may help to know that the best writers produce terrible first drafts—embarrassing, troglodyte efforts full of -inaccuracies and bad grammar and cheesy sentiment. Then they go back and fix it and it's a little better. Then, maybe, they fix it a little more. Finally, it's ready to show someone, who has more suggestions to fix it, and then suddenly it's a book. All good writing starts out as bad writing. It's just part of the process.*

### WRITING EXERCISE

#### WRITE SOMETHING AWFUL

Give yourself permission, right now, to write something terrible. Write about an incident in your life, big or small, with absolutely no concern for quality. It can be maudlin, overwrought, clumsy, misspelled. The worse the better. We'll leave you alone for twenty minutes, so you can bang it out.

...

So you wrote the story—it was awful. And yet, the police didn't come to your door. Your family didn't shun you, your friends are still your friends, and the earth is still revolving around the sun. Maybe you even found it freeing, empowering, fun. Or maybe you're itching to go back and fix it (that's fine, go ahead; that's part of the process too). Or maybe you can stand to let it be awful just a little bit longer. Greatness will come.

### READING EXERCISE

#### OPENING LINES

We're about to have you write your first paragraph. But first, we want to stoke your imagination with some fine examples. These authors' -techniques have the reader enthralled from page one:

**Start with the story's hook.** Drop a bomb. Anne Lamott's *-Operating -Instructions* does this very well: "I woke with a start at 4:00 one morning and realized I was very, very pregnant."

**Start in medias res.** Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* brings you right into the

action with a sound: “Ker-pow!”

**Combine the mundane and the shocking** in a sentence that gets right to the heart of things. Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* begins: “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the -Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.”

**Start with a simple, unassuming, declarative sentence.** *The Kiss*, Kathryn Harrison’s brave memoir of a sexual relationship with her biological father, begins with a spare four words: “We meet in -airports.”

**Open with something absurd.** Readers were hooked from the first lines of David Sedaris’s *Naked*: “I’m thinking of asking the servants to wax my change before placing it in the Chinese tank I keep on my dresser.”

**Start with one detail**, a strand that will lead us directly to the meat of the story. “The part I hated most was the shaving,” begins *Sickened*, Julie Gregory’s Munchausen-by-Proxy memoir, as her mother tries to wheedle a completely unnecessary open-heart surgery for her perfectly healthy daughter.

**Open with a crescendo.** Josh Kilmer-Purcell’s *I Am Not Myself These Days* builds, builds, builds in the first paragraph—then BAM:

I’m freezing. The door to the balcony is wide open. The wind has blown the bedcovers completely off my feet, and the room is dark except for the faint orange glow from the skyline outside. I can’t feel my toes. On the forty-second floor, the wind never stops - blowing.

My boyfriend is standing over me with a knife.

**Bonus tips:** If you’re having trouble making the first scene come alive, we highly recommend writing it in present tense. Later, you might decide to go back and put the whole book in past tense, and that’s fine. But writing it first in the present will make it more vivid; you’re there, it’s all happening right now, and all you have to do is get it down. Another great way to get things moving quickly: open with dialogue.

#### WRITING EXERCISE FRESH STARTS

Some openers have been overused, and some should never be used at all. Please do not begin your memoir with any of the following:

My friends keep telling me I have to write my story. I guess the time has come for me to do just that.

The mug reads “World’s Best Grandma,” and that’s not just talk. So pour yourself a hot cuppa joe—over the next six-hundred pages, I’m going to tell you exactly how I earned the title.

The Seed Packet Reform Act of 1947; the 1973 Soybean Subsidy Program; and three decades of oversight of wheat inspectors. I'm Department of Agriculture Assistant Under-secretary (Great Plains Region) Bob Clark, and this is my story.

Go through all the memoirs on your shelf; flip to the first page. Which opening lines do you love? Employ the technique the author uses and write a first sentence for your own memoir. Which opening lines would you change, if you were the author? Write a new one, just for practice.

WRITING EXERCISE  
THE FIRST PARAGRAPH

You don't have to begin with the beginning, and many people write their first paragraph after chapters two, three, and four are already done. But because that first sentence can gnaw at you, we've found it's helpful to get something down, even if it's just a placeholder. This exercise is designed to get your first paragraph out of the way so you can move on. Don't spend too much time on it. It doesn't have to be perfect; it just has to be done. If it's not working, you'll fix it later. But for now:

1. Write four possible first lines. You are not carving them in stone; you can go back and change them at any time. The sentence can even just be fragments. Many published authors start with something like this:

“Well, you’ve done it now,” my brother ~~sighed~~ said, squinting at the charred remains of the Barcalounger ...

It was a normal Monday: I nudged the stranger passed out on my floor, threw up on my nightstand ... patted my hair into an updo and ... I was ready to go to work.

I was crouching in on the backseat of a Rambler (was it a Rambler or a Duster? Check) ... and I couldn't remember how I got there.

We were sitting at the dinner table ... ~~eating~~ ... ~~lingering over laughing over~~ staring at the worst thing ~~dish~~ I'd ever tasted.

2. Polish your favorite one up a bit.
3. If it's good, it should lead to a next sentence. So try writing one more sentence.
4. One more.
5. Now you have your first paragraph. Congratulations: you've -started your memoir.

## Chapter IV

# LINES, CURVES, AND TANGENTS

Exercises to mold your memoir

*By now you've got a lot of clay to work with. Next, we'll start shaping it into something people will eventually recognize as you, and your life. These exercises will help mold your raw material into memoir.*

### WRITING EXERCISE OUTLINE YOUR OUTLINE

Here, you'll lay down the bones of your story. For many, this is the most important part, and it will make writing your memoir much easier. Don't let its importance daunt you, though. It's actually very easy and satisfying to build an outline, and we've broken the process down into manageable steps.

**Make a List.** First, write up a list, in any order, of possible chapter -topics and life events you want to write about. You can use the brainstorm method if you want, with satellites shooting off a central idea. These can be events, themes, people, whatever—just things that seem important to you and your story. Aim for at least twenty or thirty points.

Our sample list is below. Just to prove that anything can make an interesting story, we'll brainstorm for a memoir about the travails of an allergy sufferer.

- the rash I got in fourth grade
- chocolate: friend or foe?
- my first birthday in the E.R.
- weekly shots
- sitting out in P.E.
- school picnic day—I thought I'd die
- peanuts can kill me
- bee stings can also kill me
- I was a junior high adenoid case
- high school activities/committees/sports
- the time I lost my sense of smell/taste
- the prom queen has hay fever
- family pets/dander

- stuffiness
- that movie about the boy in the plastic bubble
- genetics—who else in the family has allergies?
- antibodies and metaphor
- the history of allergies
- the science of allergies, what causes it, what happens in the body
- are there any celebrity spokespeople for allergies?
- that time my mom thought vinegar compresses would help
- that weird, foul-smelling hippie cure I tried in college
- drugs (prescription and recreational)
- my EpiPen
- a courtship, with Kleenex
- will I pass this down to my kids?

**Order the List.** Now put the list in some sort of order. The order can be chronological (freshman year, sophomore year, junior year, etc.) or thematic groupings (trips, meals, friends; water, fire, earth). You could organize it as a to-do list, a catalog, a cookbook, whatever. Here our order is roughly chronological, with several asides. We can always move things around later if they don't fit quite right.

*childhood*

1. my first birthday in the E.R.
2. the rash I got in fourth grade
3. sitting out in P.E.

*the exact nature of my affliction*

4. peanuts can kill me
5. bee stings can also kill me
6. my EpiPen (here or in cures section? not sure yet)
7. the cat's dander
8. the dog's dander

*allergies and culture/history*

9. that movie about the boy in the plastic bubble
10. the history of allergies
11. the science of allergies, what causes it, what happens in the body
12. are there any celebrity spokespeople for allergies?

*adolescence*

13. school picnic day—I thought I'd die
14. I was a junior-high adenoid case
15. high school activities/committees/sports
16. the prom queen has hay fever

*cures, real and so-called*

17. weekly shots
18. one time my mom thought vinegar compresses would help
19. that weird, foul-smelling hippie cure I tried in college
20. drugs (prescription and recreational)

*adulthood*

21. the time I lost my sense of smell/taste
22. a courtship, with Kleenex
23. will I pass this down to my kids?

*not sure where to put these yet*

24. genetics—who else in the family has allergies?
25. antibodies and metaphor
26. chocolate: friend or foe?
27. stuffiness

**Look for Chapters.** Now you'll find your chapters, combining and -cutting ideas as you go. Maybe you don't need a chapter on your dog *and* your cat; maybe you can combine those into one. Maybe the idea for a chapter about Student Council is a little too thin. Maybe you remembered something else—that week at Bible Camp!—you have to write about instead. Aim for ten to fifteen chapters, maybe more, maybe less. If you're so inclined, title the chapters. Working titles and placeholders are fine for now.

*Chapter 1: Poor Baby*

- my first birthday in the E.R.

*Chapter 2: I Could Go at Any Minute*

- peanuts can kill me
- beestings can also kill me
- my EpiPen (here or in cures section? not sure yet)
- my other allergies: pet dander, various foods incl. chocolate

*Chapter 3: Sneezes are Contagious*

- the history of allergies
- the science of allergies, what causes it, and what happens in the body
- celebrities with allergies/that movie about the boy in the plastic bubble

*Chapter 4: elementary school—title TBA*

- the rash I got in fourth grade
- sitting out in P.E.

*Chapter 5: my tween years—title TBA*

- I was a junior-high adenoid case
- the school picnic—I thought I'd die

*Chapter 6: my teen years—title TBA*

- high school activities/committees/sports
- the prom queen has hay fever

*Chapter 7: Cures*

- weekly shots
- that time my mom thought vinegar compresses would help
- that weird, foul-smelling hippie cure I tried in college
- drugs (prescription and recreational)

*Chapter 8: College—title TBA*

- the time I lost my sense of smell/taste

*Chapter 9: Adulthood—title TBA*

- a courtship, with Kleenex
- will I pass this down to my kids?
- genetics—who else in the family has allergies?

*Chapter 10: Allergies as metaphor*

- stuffiness
- antibodies and metaphor

**Synopsis.** You're almost done. Write a one-or two-sentence synopsis of what each chapter will cover. A few samples are on the next page. By now enough themes have emerged that we've chosen a working title, which will help organize the book even more.

*ANTI-BODY: A LIFE ALLERGIC TO EVERYTHING*

*Chapter 1: Poor Baby*

An account of my first birthday, as celebrated in an -emergency room. Instead of stuffed animals and cake, I got a shot of adrenaline to keep my throat from closing.

*Chapter 2: I Could Go at Any Minute*

A full listing of all my allergies, and how they've affected my life.

Now you write yours.

## Chapter V

# METHODS FOR MOVEMENT

Exercises for incorporating your writing into your life

*You've got a solid start: you have a first paragraph and a fully annotated -outline. Before you begin filling in your outline and writing your second paragraph, you might first create a schedule and a -routine. In these exercises, you'll work on making writing a daily part of your life.*

### WRITING EXERCISE WRITE YOUR COFFEE

We can't overstate the importance of writing on a regular basis. -Momentum is a powerful force, and if you wrote yesterday, it'll be much easier to write today. Your assignment: for the next week, free-write one page of anything every single day. Do it while you drink your morning coffee, while you're on your commute, at lunch, or before you go to bed. At the end of the week, you can stop if this practice doesn't work for you, or continue, if it does.

### WRITING EXERCISE PLAN YOUR PROCESS

It's time for you to create your memoir-writing battle plan. Once that's done, all you have to do is follow your own instructions. You'll probably end up changing them once things are underway; be prepared for some experimentation and false starts. That's part of the process, too.

By now you should have a pretty good idea of what the book is -going to look like. So let's plot out the actual writing time, pen to paper, -fingers to keyboard. We've got two tracks for you here: one is --time-driven, the other a little more free-floating. Pick the one that suits you best and fill it in.

**Time-Driven.** Start by giving yourself a year. Some people take three months, some a decade, but a year is reasonable. Get your -calendar, and mark each month with a big (but achievable) goal, like "Write outline," "Write first chapter," etc. Then, on each Sunday, write down the weekly tasks that will get you to that goal: -"Interview Mom." "Write four pages." etc. On the last day of the month, write in the reward you earn when you meet your goal.

**More Free-Floating.** If you resist rigid schedules, this plan might work better for you. Forget the calendar and get a notebook—you're just going to plan stand alone goals. Some sample goals: decide on the memoir's topic and scope (exactly what parts of your life you think it will cover); research; outline a rough shape of the chapters; write first drafts of all the chapters; revise; share with others; send to an agent.

This is your pony, so you decide what order you want to do each assignment, and when. We don't want you to float too freely, though, in the interest of actually getting the thing done, so you'll also have to plan the steps of meeting each goal (take a class, research good agents online, talk to a writer you respect, etc.). Take your notebook and outline something like this:

- Goal #1:
- Steps for achieving it:
- Reward for meeting my goal:
- Repeat for Goal #2, Goal #3, and so on.

## Chapter VI

# TRIMMING THE FACT

Tips and exercises for editing the work in the progress

*Now that you have something to work with, we're going to do a few exercises to help you edit the work in progress. But first, we're separating you into groups. Packrats, you'll go first. Spartans, skip down. We'll all meet at the end of this section for a couple more exercises on common ground.*

### WRITING EXERCISE

#### PACKRATS: CUT IT OUT

If you're a packrat, chances are you've already started your memoir and it's already 800 pages long. It may be helpful to remember that a -memoir is not a diary, not a catalog of the things that happen to you. Memoirs have to have story arcs. You're not going to make anything up, but still, the action has to march along. Before you do the writing exercise below, read this and bear it in mind:

**You don't need many scenes that establish the same thing.** One or two, and move on. It is okay to conflate a few into one --representative scene.

**Cut most asides** or chunks of background that don't move the story forward. Be ruthless.

**Don't restate individuals' characteristics** unless it's absolutely -necessary. A lot of people do this. If you tell us, in chapter one, that your brother is a doctor, we will still remember he is a doctor in chapter three.

**Wordy/verbose can be a fine style choice, but** make sure all the words are doing something useful. First drafts tend to be loaded with stray words that slow down the writing and water down the meaning. Cut anything wishy-washy or hesitant—the “sort ofs” and “kinds ofs.” Ask yourself if you really need the really, if the just is justified.

**Read a good, short memoir** and note the editorial choices the author makes. We recommend the following for their economical style: Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*; Anne Fadiman's book of personal -essays *Ex Libris*; and anything by Joan Didion.

**Tell a story**, a complete story with an arc, including climax and -conclusion, in 250 words. It can be fiction, or memoir, or a fairy tale, or a mystery. We just want you to

practice an economy of words.

Now, take the page you wrote for the exercise on page 235 and edit it down to half that.

WRITING EXERCISE  
SPARTANS: ADD IT UP

If your memoir's first draft has the girth of a pamphlet, you're a Spartan, and your job is to add, add, add. As we told the Packrats: -remember that this is a story. You're not going to invent—that's fiction—but even nonfiction stories require a full cast of characters, a setting you can -picture, dialogue, and detail.

Your story might be running a little low on all that. Try to add some meat to its bones. The action has to build, and if it doesn't, think about the events you're forgetting to include, the details that will round the story out. Before you do the writing assignment below, here are some tips to bear in mind:

**Add more dialogue.** It's like ping pong—you keep returning the serve, line after line.

**Add more description.** What did the room/person/meal look like/smell like/taste like? How did it make you feel then, and how does it make you feel now?

**Ask yourself more questions.** Why did I do that? Why did she?

**Add more background:** about you, your family, your community, -history, etc.

**Do some more research.** Read up on any matters that relate to your subject—medical, historical, scientific, anthropological, etc. You'll probably dig up some anecdotes you can use.

**Remember, an aside might be justified.**

**Read a good, long memoir** and pay attention to the details the writer includes. We especially recommend Gore Vidal's *Palimpsest* and Sean Wilsey's symphonic *Oh, The Glory of It All*.

YOUR WRITING ASSIGNMENT

1. Write about something simple—your breakfast, maybe—in as much detail as possible. Give us 500 words about your breakfast. It's okay to wander a little bit—you might reminisce about other breakfasts, daydream about perfectly soft-boiled eggs, consider where your blueberries come from, ponder the history and cultural importance of breakfast, whatever you want.
2. Take the page you wrote for the exercise on page 235 and rewrite it so it's twice as long.

## EVERYONE: REASSESS

1. With fresh eyes and this chapter's tips in mind, read over what you've written of your memoir so far. What feels unnecessary? What feels underdeveloped?
2. Add or cut as you see fit.

### READING EXERCISE THE PROCESS IN ACTION

In case you didn't believe us when we told you that all published -authors revise and rework, we offer proof. Below, your editor Jennifer Traig shares a page from a forthcoming manuscript, and explains why she made the decisions to cut this and add that.

#### FROM "SPLIT ENDS"

There are lots of connections that strangle, lots of ties that bind. Hair is the one part of the body that doesn't have nerve endings, that you can sever painlessly. Other connections are more sensitive; the cuts and splits hurt. Friends who hurt your reputation must be shunted; apron strings must be cut. ~~*Hair never stops growing, but I think people do. I'd like to think I'm a different person now, but it's probably not true.*~~ [Ugh. Too Hallmarky and forced. Also, "think" is repeated.]

~~*In high school I had a classmate whose mother had talked her into getting matching mother-daughter cuts that were straight out of MTV, an asymmetrical bob landing to the ear on one side and the shoulder on the other. No one knew what to make of it. On the one hand, it was the coolest thing anyone had ever seen; on the other—her mom? [I like this anecdote but it's veering too far off topic; this is a story about my relationships with my school friends, not my mother]*~~

[I'll cut the following, too; I needed a segue, so went on a bit about mothers. But we've decided that's not what this piece is about at all, so it has to go:] ~~*Your mother is supposed to hate your hair. Hair disagreements enforce a healthy distance and guarantee you'll always have something to talk about, something harmless to fight over, to fill the silence that might force you to discuss more painful things.*~~ [I think I can just start the paragraph here now:] I didn't figure it out -until I was in my 20s, when, once again, I hoped hair might transform me, make me cool for once. But my definition of cool was -pathetically stunted. I was in graduate school. I should have been wearing tasteful separates. Instead I was dyeing my hair magenta and crimson, an overgrown Goth in my short plaid skirts and torn stockings, lace-up platform boots and leather jacket, like I was -running for queen of the junior high alterna-prom. When a twelve year-old approached me in Taco Bell to ask where I'd gotten that cool hair dye I should have figured it out: not cool.

My mother hated it not so much because it looked -ridiculous, but because it stained her tub. But also because it looked ridiculous. The only thing worse than having your mother pick out your hairdo in junior high is to have her feel sorry for you for "acting out" in your 20s. [This I'm keeping because it mentions my mother but it's not about her; it's about what my peers think of me. Also, I like the stained tub detail. It might all get cut in a later draft, but it's in for now.]

Twenty-six is no time for adolescent rebellion. It was so ugly because it had been bottled up for so long, my adolescence marked by obsequious obedience. [*Here I need to add something referencing an earlier part of the story, and I need to start summing things up. I'll try this:*] That, I think, was the quality Mrs. Heffernan sniffed out in me and did not care for, an eagerness to please authority, a child who brought teachers baked goods and quoted Emily Post. No wonder my friends had abandoned me. She was doing me a favor, trying to shame me out of this need to kiss up to authority. It would make me uncomfortable, years later, remembering those Holocaust videos, wondering, if I'd been born in another time, another race, if I would have done terrible things out of a need to be obedient, a desire for praise.

On the other hand, it was just a hair cut.

## Chapter VII

# MEMORIES MAY DIFFER

Exercises for writing not about you

*It can be hard to translate the people in your life on the page. How do you depict the wince on your partner's face when you've hurt her feelings? The way your father's eyes shine when he's elated? The multiple motives that make anyone do what they do? These exercises should help you find your way.*

### WRITING EXERCISE OTHER CHARACTERS

Writing a memoir can be lonely work, and it always helps to bring in more people from your life. Below, you'll practice making them feel rounded and real.

1. Gertrude Stein was famous for writing word portraits, one--paragraph descriptions of her friends that captured their essence in a few -sentences. It was the literary equivalent of Cubism, a face faithfully captured in a few blocky strokes. Write your own word portraits of the three people who've been most important in your life: one - paragraph each, bold strokes.
2. Now you'll do the fine work. Pick one of the portraits you just wrote—either the one that caused you the most tension or gave you the most joy—and expand it to a page. Be sure to include lots of detail and examples. What are the little things about them that tell us who they are? The watchless wrist? The carefully parted hair? The lisp, the limp, the things they mutter in their sleep?

### WRITING EXERCISE IRON FIST, KID GLOVES

A memoirist has to be honest, and that can be tricky when other people are involved. You want to be fair to the people you're writing about, but you also have to be fair to yourself. Do you write with iron-fisted abandon, or kid-gloved care? Both have their pitfalls. Abandon can skew your narrative when your emotion gets the best of you. But too much caution can make it feel whitewashed and false. Here you'll write several versions of the same event, trying to find the balance that feels most fair and true.

1. There's probably one scene you're dreading writing, because it -concerns someone who's not going to be happy to see it in print. Don't worry about that now. Write it with

complete abandon, for your eyes alone.

2. Read the passage over, pink highlighter in hand, marking anything you're fairly certain will anger or hurt others.
3. Put the passage aside for a few days. When you come back to it, ask yourself if the pink passages move the story forward or detract from it. Are they honest, or exaggerated?
4. Now put on your kid gloves and write it again, imagining the -person in question reading it.
5. Read this second passage over, using a yellow highlighter this time, marking the parts that feel false or colorless, where you've omitted hard truths or toned them down.
6. Now you'll rewrite the passage one last time, combining the -elements of each version that feel most fair, effective, and necessary.

## Chapter VIII

# YOU CONTAIN MULTITUDES

Exercises for many points of view

*Memoir is heavy on the “me.” These exercises are designed to make that me bigger, more inclusive, and more encompassing. A lot, after all, has made you who you are: the places you’ve lived, the things you’ve seen, and the people you’ve known. Your memoir will incorporate all that.*

### WRITING EXERCISE YOU ARE HERE

How do you write about the place you’ve lived your whole life? This exercise will help you see home through fresh eyes and make it come alive on the page.

1. Let’s start by doing the writer’s version of Mapquest.
  - First, write a few sentences about your town, big strokes.
  - Next, write about your neighborhood, with more detail.
  - Now, describe your house, your block, fleshed-out.
2. Let’s make it more visual. Draw a map of your neighborhood, marking spots of particular interest to your story: the house where the crazy lady lived, the mailbox at which you threw pumpkins, the shed where you hid contraband.
3. Now, just for fun, write a one-page travel guide to your town, -naming all the not-to-be-missed highlights. Use any tone you like: -insider-tipster, snarky outsider, booster given to hyperbole, -bewildered -foreigner.

### WRITING EXERCISE SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES

Me, me, me. This writing exercise is designed to get you out of yourself for a bit.

1. Write up one anecdote from your life. Nothing too big; just a little story that happened in, say, sixth grade, college, your first job.
2. Now, rewrite the story, telling it this time in the third person.
3. Next, write it in first person—from the perspective of another -character who was there.

4. Let all of this sit for a day or two. Then go back and reread all three accounts. Which version feels truest? Which is the most readable?
5. Now rewrite that first first-person account, incorporating some of the perspective the exercise gave you from the other points of view.

Chapter IX

## LAUGHING WITH YOU

Tips for writing funny

*An ancient, unfunny joke: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice! You get to humor the same way. Practice below.*

WRITING EXERCISE  
COPY YOUR ANSWERS

Aspiring comic book artists learn to draw by copying others. Aspiring humorists can do the same. Here, you'll copy the style of a writer you love, getting a feel for technique as you do.

1. Reread a passage from a book that made you laugh out loud. Now, with that cadence in your head, proceed to step 2.
2. Humiliation is almost always a rich comic vein. Write up a short anecdote from your life in which you embarrassed yourself terribly. You're building a story here, not reporting, so take as much license as you need. Humor often requires hyperbole.
3. Wait a day or two so you'll come back refreshed. Then go back and re-read the book passage you chose in step 1, this time studying it for technique. What is it that makes you laugh out loud? Is it -surprise? (It often is—a surprising word choice or image. Readers laugh when they don't see the joke coming.) Is it identification—it's funny because it's true? Is it the intonation—casual or way too formal? Is it deadpan or over the top? Pay special attention to the rhythms in your favorite lines. Humor often follows a rhythmic rule of three: straight fact, straight fact, joke.
4. Now read over your own story again and revise, implementing some of the techniques you picked out in step 3.

WRITING EXERCISE  
YOU, THE COMIC STRIP

Take a scene from your life and draw it as a comic strip. You don't have to have any art skills; stick figures are fine. The idea is just to distill the episode down to its simplest elements, to find the joke at the heart of it. If you need some inspiration, Roz Chast (*Theories of Everything*, *The Party After You Left*, etc.) is great at this.

## Chapter X

# WRITING THROUGH PAIN

Tips and exercises for writing about grief

*We hope you've had an easy, happy life, but if you haven't, comfort yourself with this: you've certainly got a story to tell. The trick is to convey the emotion without sliding into mawkishness. These exercises will help you learn how.*

### READING EXERCISE ON WRITING ABOUT GRIEF

Before we dive into the writing, here are some tips to bear in mind:

**With difficult material, less is generally more.** Steer clear of hyperbole and exaggeration. Joan Didion is a master of this, describing the most painful events in short simple sentences, with an almost neutral tone. The effect is devastating.

**Keep the poetic language to a minimum.** Avoid words like “weep,” “heart,” “ache,” etc.—they're so overused they'll water down the emotional impact.

**Watch out for stock phrases.** It's easy to fall back on them, -especially when you're dealing with material that makes you shut down a -little. So things like “I'd never felt so alone” will likely show up in that first draft. Go back and root them out.

**Show, don't tell.** Yes, this is a stock phrase, but it's true. The reader may not be particularly moved if you say “My pain was bottomless,” but if you illustrate it—by showing how you expressed the pain at the time—all that emotion comes through. How, exactly, did you express (or try to suppress) that pain at the time? Biting your cheeks until they bled? Drinking mouthwash? Vibrating in the car at 4 a.m., unable, once again, to sleep? Write out the scenes.

**Be wary of laying blame.** When you tell the story properly, readers will know who to point fingers at. Let them do it for you.

### WRITING EXERCISE GETTING IT OUT

If you've been putting off dealing with the wrenching stuff, this -exercise will help you get through it—and help you make it a great piece of writing.

1. Write out the most painful scene, right now. Turn your -internal -editor off and just get it down. Then go do something nice, -nurturing, and distracting: watch a movie, reread a book you love, take yourself out for your favorite meal.
2. The first draft tends to be full of unresolved emotion, anger, and overwrought sentiments that clutter up the narrative. So when you're ready, try writing a more detached version. Some of the most powerfully moving memoirs are, in fact, the ones that recount the author's story without a lot of emotion. In this draft, write the scene almost as a case report: what happened, no commentary. Minimal adjectives. Let it sit while you do another nice thing for yourself. Then, if you want, go back and embroider the scene just a little bit more.
3. Read both versions over. If you have a writing partner you really, really trust to be careful with you and your material, you can have him or her do this instead. Which version do you, or they, find more effective, more true? Revise accordingly.

WRITING EXERCISE  
PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

The hardest parts of your life to write about are usually the most -dramatic ones. So try writing the episode as drama. Write a difficult scene from your life in play form. By having to tell the story through stage -direction and dialogue, you'll avoid the overwrought description that can lend too much color to a passage that might be best served by simplicity.

## Chapter XI

# THE FACTS vs. THE TRUTH

Exercises for writing what's real

*All writers invent; it's a natural part of storytelling. And a certain amount of invention is universally allowed. But the memoirist needs to be especially careful. These exercises are designed to heighten your awareness of what's factual, what you fabricate, and what, ultimately, feels most "true."*

### WRITING EXERCISE TRUE OR FALSE

Straight fact is unreadable; unlimited license is fiction. To find the line where fact meets story and becomes memoir, try the following:

1. Take a scene from your life and write it up as a deposition: just the facts. No hyperbole, no reconstructing dialogue.
2. Now, write the same as, say, a tabloid article: highly fictionalized, based on only a kernel of truth.
3. Look at the two versions. Where do they converge? What can you take from each to make your story the best—and most honest—story it can be?

### WRITING EXERCISE YOU, DECONSTRUCTED

1. Go read Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, a wonderful meta-memoir that fact-checks itself. McCarthy follows each chapter with a meticulous deconstruction of the narrative, pointing out where she differs from the strict facts and explaining why.
2. Now take something you've written, like a chapter from your -memoir, and give it the same treatment. Write endnotes detailing where you diverge from the facts, and explaining why.
3. Did this exercise change your thinking at all about the original -version? Does looking at it side by side with the actual facts make you want to revise anything? If so, how? Do you want to make it more factual, or take even more license? Revise accordingly.

## Chapter XII

# LOST IN THE LABYRINTH

Tips for taking a break to find your words  
and shape your story

*You've got writer's block. Instead of writing exercises, then, this chapter has --not-writing exercises, activities to end the block and get you moving again.*

### NOT-WRITING EXERCISE TRY SOMETHING NEW

Small changes can do wonders when you're stuck. Try:

**Taking a walk.** Go wander, and let your mind do the same.

**Cleaning your desk or office.** Organize your papers. Throw out what you don't need. Give things away. An uncluttered work space helps uncluttered writing, and the process of getting things in order will help you think through the problem.

**Journaling it out.** Write for twenty minutes, on anything—the one rule is that you must keep your hand moving. By minute ten, you'll be complaining about the thing that you're stuck on, and by fifteen, you'll have found the solution.

**Talking to a friend or colleague.** Maybe they'll come up with the solution or maybe you will, but either way, talking it out is always a useful strategy.

**Going through your old stuff.** A yellowed photograph can open doors, windows, and other mental blockages.

**Writing something else.** All writers say this works: you write something else for a while, then come back, warmed up and refreshed. We'll give you an assignment to get you going: write about a scar you have and how you got it.

### NOT-WRITING EXERCISE SABBATICAL

1. Your assignment is simple: Don't write. Don't write for three days. Don't even look at your manuscript. You might be stuck because you're running on empty, and you need a chance to refuel. It's been all output; time for some input. Go to a museum, or explore a -neighborhood you rarely visit, window shop, see a movie.

2. While you're not writing, read. Read the book that inspired you to want to write your memoir in the first place. And if you happen to know what book inspired that writer, go read that too.
3. After three days you can return to your manuscript, but only for brief visits. For the next week, you're only allowed to work on it for thirty minutes a day—no more. You don't even have to write—you just have to sit with it for thirty minutes, each day for a week. But you can write, and chances are you will.

## Chapter XIII

# THE END OF YOU (FOR NOW)

Tips and exercises for ending your memoir

*You're almost there. Below are some exercises to nudge you across the -finish line.*

### READING EXERCISE GREAT ENDINGS

Before you sit down to write your own ending, read some for -inspiration. We loved the ending techniques these authors used:

**End at the beginning:** Stephen Elliott's autobiographical novel *Happy Baby* is told backwards, ending with the narrator's earliest, happiest memory. The effect, after a couple hundred pages of very unhappy memories, is unbelievably powerful: "His arms encircle me, pulling me into him, surrounding me with the hard dark creases of his -jacket and his smell, which is thick, like metal and oil. He stands still. I'm with him, holding the empty bowls. When a horn punctures the quiet apartment, my father's fingers grip my ribs. He hasn't left yet. He's still here."

**End with an incantation:** It's something of a ritual for memoirs to end with an incantation, repeating words in a chant-like rhythm for an almost prayerful effect. Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies* is a great example: "The waves haven't come for my smooth glass yet. In the meantime, it is right here in the front pocket of the jeans I am wearing now. I reach into my pocket for it a lot; it helps me write in some mysterious ways I don't at all understand. But what I want to say is, happy birthday, Sam, Samuel John Stephen Lamott. And traveling mercies, too. I can't help but say again what I said on the beach that day, in a whisper this time and without even being exactly sure to whom I'm saying it: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

**The classic happy ending:** The marriage plot is a staple literary form, and we're hard-wired to want a story to end with a wedding. Some memoirs we like best tweak this a bit—yes, there's a wedding, but there are some surprises, too. Hilary Liftin's *Candy and Me: A Love Story* surprises us by focusing not on the ceremony but on the snacks, which become a metaphor for the whole thing: "As far as I am -concerned, Meltaways are nectar of the gods. I could eat them ceaselessly ... I must have them."

When I do get my hands on a box, I must eat all of it at once, while Chris tries to sneak one or two -before they are gone. A genuine vacation candy, Meltaways are true to their name. They melt gently into nothingness, and with them go a the worries of the world. The three of us make a fine pair.”

**The flat tire:** Memoirs tend towards self-seriousness. So we can't help but love an ending that builds and builds—and then lets all the air out. Dan Kennedy's *Loser Goes First* is a perfect example. As the book ends it seems like Kennedy has overcome a lifetime of humiliations and bad career choices to make something of himself. Walking home from work, he notices a little boy staring at him, about to say something, and he muses philosophically about what that is: “Whatever he says, he will deliver the message that all of us have lost the ability to say in our jaded adult lives. Maybe about how our lives finally change but only when it is right for our lives to change. That we are not in control of this thing. I look back at him just before making my right turn onto the highway for the last part of my walk to the train. It feels like slow motion as he sizes me up that one last time. He opens his mouth and the words come out:

‘Hey mister. Why don't you have a car?’

Oh, man.”

WRITING EXERCISE  
HERE'S WHERE IT ENDS

1. Ending your own story can be especially difficult, so you're going to warm up by writing endings for some other things. First, write a new ending for a well-known story, like a folk tale, fable, or movie. Have fun with this. It doesn't have to be long; a page or even just a couple paragraphs is fine.
2. Now write a new ending (two paragraphs or so) for a book you know well. Pick a memoir rather than a novel.
3. Next, take a crack at your own ending. Write a two-paragraph conclusion for your memoir. Rough it out. It's not set in stone, and you can always dump it later if it just doesn't work.
4. Put it aside for a day or so. Either polish this ending if you think it's going somewhere, or draft a new potential ending. Maybe two.

## FINDING YOUR FIRST (AND IDEAL) READER

Giving your first draft to your first audience

*In this chapter, there's nothing for you to write, and the reading is going to be done by someone else: it's time for your manuscript to have its first audience. Below are some tips to help you find the reader that will do your manuscript the most good.*

*You don't have to share your manuscript just yet, or ever. But it's often useful. Memoirists are literary lighthouse keepers, always working alone. All that navel-gazing can make you nearsighted, and it's sometimes a good idea to ask for others' input. Sometimes. Constructive criticism is one thing; passive-aggressive commentary is quite another. You should feel free to solicit others' advice; and just as free to ignore it. To maximize the chances that you'll get useful feedback, bear the following in mind:*

**You're more likely to get good advice from writing instructors, -editors, and avid readers.** If you take suggestions from non--writers, do it with care. Getting encouragement from amateurs is great, but remember that getting advice from them can be dangerous.

**You might not want to ask your more domineering friends**—they're likely to edit your manuscript into the book *they* would write.

**Do not show the manuscript to that one friend you're sort of competitive with**, the one Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan call "The Underminer" in the book of the same name. They may not have your best interests in mind.

**Writers' groups can be great, but that depends on the group.** They can be inspiring and collaborative while also acting as a helpful sounding board. However, they can also be entirely counterproductive by not being supportive or by being competitive. If you feel the latter is true, find another group or decide to write without a group.

### FINDING YOUR IDEAL READER

The ideal early reader of your book is a close and careful reader, is happy with her or his place in the world, and wants the best for you and your book. This reader very well might be your spouse, your best friend, your mother or father, or a fellow aspiring writer you've met only on the Internet. The most important thing is that this person—especially if they're one of your early readers—is supportive, and careful about how they express

themselves. Again, because we are all sensitive with our first book, if you choose the wrong first reader, it can mean a -major setback for you and your work. So unless your personal armor is -extraordinarily thick, be careful, and consider this:

*Your ideal reader should like the sort of thing you're trying to write.* If you consider yourself a humorist, your reader should have a sense of -humor. If your memoir is anguished and confessional, show it to someone who is sympathetic and open-minded.

Now, when you think you have such a reader, consider this order of -operations:

1. *Give this reader your book with as little advance preparation as -possible.* Don't tell them where you think it's weak and strong, what you think is wrong with it. Let them read it cold.
2. *Ask them to read it with a red pen handy.* This is optional, of course, but here's why: By the time you've written the book, you have little sense of its flow, of its overall pace and structure. If you ask your reader to mark when they're confused, when they're bored, when something doesn't work—and mark it right there in the margins—you won't be left with the great curse of some comments: those that are vague and overly general. "It was sort of slow somewhere in the middle" is far less helpful than if your reader wrote in the margins of page 145: "My interest in this section about Papua New Guinea is starting to wane here. Maybe move on?"
3. *Give them as much time as they need.* We can all become anxious about this first read. We want their input immediately. But -remember that you're asking for upwards of eight hours of someone's time; be patient. If you make them read too quickly, it will alter this crucial first read, and their comments will not be nearly as good as if they're allowed to read it on their own time and terms.
4. *Before or while they're reading the book, make a list of concerns and hopes you yourself have about the book (but don't show it to them).* Perhaps you're -worried about the beginning, or you think that the father character is -unsympathetic. We all know where our work is weakest, so be -honest with yourself. This list should be at least twenty items long, and should include both those parts you're worried about, and also the overall hopes you have for the book. A sample list you might prepare and ask of your reader (after they read it):

I'm worried that the first chapter is slow. Do you think I should move that material to a later part of the book? I was thinking of starting with the car accident. Would that be too soon?

Do you find the uncle sympathetic? I know he does some bad things, but I want him to be likable.

The third chapter should really feel triumphant for the -narrator. She's finally made it to Florence and escaped her life in Kansas. Does the sense of euphoria come through?

5. When your reader is finished, set aside an afternoon to talk with them about it. Get comfortable. Serve food and lemonade. And while sitting together, consider these guidelines:

**Let them talk randomly and loosely about the book.** Don't tell them how to talk about it.

**Don't wait for outright praise.** Consider yourself a builder, who is showing a friend the rough skeleton of a cottage. After one read, you are surely not finished with the book, so don't expect your reader to consider it their favorite book. Be realistic and humble.

**Don't be defensive.** If your reader didn't understand something in your book, it means, most likely, that you, in the pages of your book, need to explain it better. If they didn't like a certain part—and you want them to like it—it means that there is probably work to be done. Arguing with your reader about what they missed, what they should have liked, where they should have laughed—none of this will help either of you.

**Listen.** Listen for an hour, if possible, without talking. Take notes. -Record the conversation. You will not remember everything they say unless you're documenting it in some way.

**After a summary of their thoughts,** if you have a very good reader, they might go through the book with you, page by page. This is by far the best way to examine your book with your first reader. They can explain the marks they've made in the margins, and they might even remember thoughts they had that they forgot to write down. Again, if you think of your book as an architectural -project in -progress, imagine that your reader is walking through the -unfinished rooms, showing you loose bolts, sloppy plastering, dangerous wiring. Just as in the writing of your book, the details are key, the specifics are everything.

**When your reader has told you everything** they thought about the book, go into your questions. While your reader has monologued about your book, they likely will have pointed out the same weak spots you were aware of. But in many cases they won't—unless prompted. After all, you've spent a year or more on the book, while they've spent a few days. So you need to probe them, going through your list of questions about the book.

For example, if you have concerns about your dialogue, you might ask, "Did you think the dialogue was believable?" And your reader might say, "Oh, now that you mention it, there are a few places where I thought it could be improved." Then you can page through the book and find those spots.

Most important, now you can tell your reader what your hopes are for the book. That, for example, you want it to convey the joys of a childhood spent in the open land of Wyoming. That you want it to read like *King Lear* but set on an island in the Chesapeake Bay. Here your reader might say, "Oh yes! I saw the *Lear* comparisons all the way through." Or, "I didn't get that the first read. Maybe if you added something

here or there ...”

Because you will only get this ideal reader to read the book cold once—and remember that all subsequent reads will be less pure—ask as many questions as you can conjure. The cold read is a precious thing, and ideal readers are few, so take advantage of the moment.

## GETTING IT OUT THERE

Exercises and tips for entering the publishing process

*Lastly, some brass tacks on publishing. These exercises will walk you through the process.*

### READING EXERCISE PUBLICATION, STEP BY STEP

There's no one single way to publish a book. Some authors luck out with a blind submission to the slush pile. Others pay their dues interning for agents and enrolling in MFA programs. Still others get huge advances on a vague pitch while they're still in high school, and are roundly -resented by everyone else. There are a hundred different paths, but if you don't know where to start, read the following step-by-step plan to get an idea of the typical path:

1. Write and finish your memoir. Some people get lucky and sell it on the strength of a proposal, but most first-time authors need the manuscript in hand. So if yours isn't quite done, finish it up.
2. At this point, some people choose to submit the manuscript directly to a publisher (see more in box below). This almost never works, which is why you'll want to get an agent. Yes, agents get 15 percent of the royalties, but they earn it. Negotiating deals is their job, and they're very good at it. Make a list of, say, six to ten agents you think will be a good fit for you. Here's how you find them: find six to ten books you like that are somewhat similar to yours, skip to the acknowledgments, and see who they thank as their agent. Other good sources: Jeff Herman's *Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & -Literary Agents* and The Association of Authors' Representatives website ([www.aar-online.org](http://www.aar-online.org)). A good agent will never charge you to read your work, and AAR members are prohibited from doing so. If your prospective agent asks for money upfront, look elsewhere.

If you decide to forgo the agent route—remember, we warned you!—you'll submit the manuscript yourself. Most big publishers don't accept unagented manuscripts. However, some smaller ones do. You'll find submission guidelines on their websites. Write a fabulous cover letter, then submit only to publishers that publish books like yours. Submitting your combat memoir to a gardening press rarely works out.

3. Visit the agents' websites to read their submission guidelines. Some will tell you just

to send a cover letter, some will accept manuscript samples, and some will take the whole enchilada. Some prefer email queries, some only read paper. Follow their rules.

4. Write a query letter, summarizing your book, to send to your -chosen agents. Be sure to personalize it—send an individual letter to an individual human being that you would like to represent you as an individual author. No cc:, no bulk email, no “Dear Agent ...”
5. Send the agents your letter and writing samples, if any. Some people will send to all six or so agents at once, others will approach them one at a time. Because we tend to err on the side of prudence, we -favor the latter approach. To keep the agent from sitting on the -letter for too long, mention this in your query: “You are the only agent I’m approaching at this time, and I’m hoping you can respond in the next two weeks.” If you do submit to multiple agents, and one of them gets back to you, be honest about this. Agents talk to each other and they’ll find out anyway.
6. Repeat Step 5 until an agent takes you on. The agent will often ask for some manuscript revisions, and it’s usually a good idea to make them. Then your work is more or less done. The agent, hopefully, sells the book, and fame and honors await.
7. Okay. Sometimes it doesn’t happen that way. Sometimes the agent can’t sell the book. Sometimes you and your agent just don’t have the right fit, and your book falls through the cracks. So you’ll want to be careful with any contracts you sign—make sure you’re legally free to take your manuscript to another agent after a certain amount of time (say, a year) if things don’t work out. Then keep trying, trying, trying. You’ll get there.

**BONUS TIP:** It’s easier to get an agent if you can include a clip file of articles you’ve published in magazines, newspapers, and websites. Many magazines and newspapers have a feature for first-time authors writing about their lives; it’s usually called something like “My Story” or “My Turn” or “My Life” or “In My Own Words.” Whip up a good 1,000-word piece and send it out to a periodical.

#### READING EXERCISE SAMPLE QUERY LETTER

Here’s an example of a query letter that worked for our own editor.

Dear Agent,

My name is Jennifer Traig, and I’m a columnist for the *-Forward*. I am seeking an agent for a new project and I would love for you to represent me.

The project in question is *Devil in the Details*, a nonfiction account of my adolescence as an obsessive-compulsive religious fanatic. For the better part of my teens, I suffered

from a strange condition called scrupulosity, a hyper-religious form of OCD. It began when I was twelve, and plagued me, off and on, for the next six years. I never knew what I would be compelled to do next, but I could be sure it would be tedious and embarrassing. I might have to chant psalms in homeroom, or make a praise-offering in gym. Maybe I would immerse the flatware in the Jacuzzi or maybe I'd anoint the dog. It was a full and exciting life, made all the more exciting by my family's odd religious arrangements: I was an insane Orthodox Jew; my mother was a devout Catholic; and my sister was a born-again Baptist schoolgirl.

Because crazy people are funny, and because a straight recounting would be mawkish, the overall tone of the book is light, -landing somewhere between David Sedaris's *Naked* and Anne Lamott's *-Traveling Mercies*. To lighten things further, the chapters are -broken up by interstitials like recipes, games, and instructions for -washing your hands. The book is aimed at a general-interest nonfiction -audience. The manuscript is complete, and runs about 70,000 words long.

It is, it seems, the only work of its kind. My research turned up several clinical handbooks outlining the treatment of scrupulosity, but no first-hand accounts. The condition is little-known but by no means uncommon, and I can only guess that other sufferers have been too busy dealing with the disease to write about it. I hope *Devil in the Details* can fill that void.

I've enclosed an annotated table of contents. Please let me know if you'd like me to send a sample chapter, past clips, or any other materials. Thank you so much for your attention, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,  
Jennifer Traig

#### WRITING EXERCISE WRITE YOUR OWN QUERY

Writing a query letter is a little like writing an online dating profile. You have to somehow convey who you are in 300 words. You have to be confident without being arrogant, humble without being overly self-deprecating. It's squirmy and most people hate doing it. But it is only 300 words, and if you start this assignment now you'll have a finished query letter by lunch. Let's just get it over with.

1. Read the above for an example query letter that worked.
2. Now write your own.-
3. Ask a trusted friend—maybe the same one who helped you write your online dating profile—to read it over and let you know if there are any spots that sound off-putting, or just plain off.
4. Revise accordingly. Then get it in the mail.