

THE MEMOIR STARTER KIT

A gentle guide to preserving the stories that matter

By Wendy J. Woodcock

wendyjwoodcock.com

wendy@wendyjwoodcock.com

*“Stories don’t disappear because people forget them.
They disappear because nobody ever asked.”*

How This Started

It began, as many of the best things do, entirely by accident.

A few years ago, I was deep in the planning stages of my own fiction series when my mother, Winifred, announced she wanted to write something too.

I suggested she start small. Write about the skeletons in the family history, something for our ancestry page and to send to the relatives and give everyone a laugh.

She came back with the skeletons. And then we worked on her lifetime coincidences, and the way fate had shaped her journey in ways none of us had ever fully analysed.

I read it and thought, "If I'm enjoying this, other people will too."

So, I suggested she write her autobiography; start at the beginning — her childhood in Manchester, the war years, the move to Guernsey — to build it into a proper memoir.

What followed became one of the most unexpected and rewarding experiences of my life. In the morning I would find she had emailed me chapters of incidents and memories. Her dreams and thoughts were of people, places, and moments she hadn't thought about in decades. Every night we would sit at the computer, review what she'd sent, and shape it into something coherent. We cried at the losses. We laughed at the madness, and I will admit, I was more than a little apprehensive when her love life started appearing in the chapters.

But that's who she is. That's what she experienced. It's part of what made her the person she became. So, I looked straight ahead and wrote exactly what she told me.

That is what a good memoir editor does.

I have since been recommended to other writers with their stories — including a client whose upcoming manhood storyline arrived in my inbox on an otherwise quiet morning. I read it carefully, edited it professionally, and moved on to the next chapter.

Nothing is too personal. Nothing is too complicated. Nothing is too much. It is often therapeutic to write everything down and then remove the parts that feel uncomfortable to share.

If your story involves real people, real feelings, real mistakes, and real love — good. That is precisely what memoirs are made of.

Horseshoe Bay, my mother's memoir, was published with a cover photograph taken in 1960 on a Guernsey slipway by my father. She is wearing a local crab pot as a hat and laughing; a candid moment of pure joy, the woman who had craved a family and

a place to belong, having found both. People still tell us they picked the book up off the shelf because the cover made them smile.

This memoir starter kit is for anyone with a story worth capturing — their own or someone else's. It doesn't have to be a full book; it could just be a few pages of your memories and thoughts. I don't expect to receive a perfect script; that's what I'm here for.

You may find it easier or faster to dictate into your iPhone, iPad or computer or just scribble notes freehand. At least the stories will be in some form that someone can piece together.

I hope it helps you to begin. And most of all, have fun and enjoy the process.

Part One: Before You Write Anything

The most common reason memoirs never get started is not lack of material. It is not knowing where to begin.

You do not begin at the beginning.

You begin with the memory that feels most alive right now. The one that surfaces most often. The one you find yourself telling at dinner tables. Start there. Everything else will follow.

Three questions to ask yourself today:

- What is the one story from my life I most want people to remember?
- Who taught me the most important thing I know — and have I ever written it down?
- What would be lost if I never told this?

Write your answers down. Even roughly. Even just a few lines. You have already started.

Part Two: If You Are Helping Someone Else Tell Their Story

If you are sitting with a parent, grandparent, or elderly relative and trying to help them capture their memories, the most important thing you can do is this:

Ask one question. Then be quiet and listen.

Do not rush to the next question. Do not fill the silence. Let the memory arrive at its own pace.

Some of the richest material in my mother's memoir came not from her direct answers but from the stories that arrived alongside them — the person she suddenly remembered halfway through a sentence, the detail she hadn't thought about in sixty years.

Questions that unlock memories:

- What was the house you grew up in like? Describe a room.
- Who was your best friend as a child? What did you do together?
- What did your mother or father always say that you can still hear now?
- Where did you live, and have you moved away and why?
- What was the hardest year of your life — and how did you get through it?
- What do you wish you had said to someone you've lost?
- What are you most proud of that nobody knows about?
- What did ordinary life look and smell and feel like when you were young?
- Who deserves to be remembered that history has forgotten?

You do not need to ask all of these in one sitting. One question per conversation is enough. The stories will come.

Part Three: Capturing the Memories Before They Fade

My mother used her iPad. You might use a notebook, a voice recorder on your phone, or a simple Word document or dictate into an AI assistant. The method matters far less than the habit.

Practical ways to capture memories as they arrive:

- Keep a notebook by the bed — memories often surface at night or first thing in the morning.
- Use the voice memo app on your phone to record stories as they are told — transcription can come later. If you don't know how to use this, ask a youngster; I'm sure they will help you.
- Email yourself or your co-author immediately when a memory surfaces, however rough — my mother's late-night emails became the backbone of her book.
- Create a simple folder on your computer labelled with the person's name and drop every fragment into it — organisation comes later, capture comes first.
- Don't wait for a full story — a name, a place, a single sentence is enough to preserve the thread.

Using AI as Your Personal Memoir Interviewer

Many people find it easier to talk than write.

If you have access to ChatGPT or another AI assistant, you can dictate your memories exactly as you would tell them to a friend.

Create a new Project called: Your Name – Memoir

(For example: *Margaret Smith – Memoir*.) This gives your memoir a home of its own and makes it easy to find and continue later.

Keeping all your memoir conversations inside a single Project allows the AI to remember what you've already discussed and build your story over time.

Then paste this prompt:

"I am creating a memoir.

Act as an experienced memoir interviewer and story archivist.

Ask me one question at a time and wait for my answer before asking the next.

Help me uncover memories, people, places, emotions, family stories, achievements, losses, turning points, funny incidents, and life lessons.

If I mention something interesting, ask follow-up questions.

At the end of each session:

- Summarise what I've told you
- Suggest possible chapter topics
- Create a timeline of events
- Recommend questions for our next conversation

Begin by asking:

What is the first memory from your life that still feels vivid today?"

Then simply talk.

Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or structure.

Just tell your story. You can organise it later.

Capture first. Organise later. A rough note is infinitely more valuable than a perfectly structured memory that was never written down.

Part Four: A Simple Structure to Get You Started

You do not need a chapter plan. You do not need a timeline. But a loose structure helps.

Try organising your memories into these five areas to begin with:

1. The Early Years

Childhood, family, home, school, the world as it looked then.

2. The People Who Shaped You

Parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, rivals, strangers who changed things.

3. The Turning Points

Decisions, losses, surprises, moments where life went one way instead of another.

4. The World You Lived Through

History as you experienced it — wars, recessions, social change, technology, the texture of daily life across the decades.

5. What You Want to Leave Behind

The things you know, the things you believe, the things you want the people who come after you to understand.

Every memoir ever written is, in some form, these five things. You don't need to fill them in order. Just start dropping memories into whichever area they belong to.

Part Five: When You Feel Stuck

Every memoir writer gets stuck. Here is what to do when it happens:

- Go back to a photograph. Pick any photograph from your life and write down everything you remember about the day it was taken. Not just what's in the picture — what happened before, what happened after, who else was there.
- Ask someone who was there. Memory is collaborative. Call the person who shares the memory with you and compare notes — you will be surprised how much the conversation unlocks.
- Write the easy bit first. The funny story. The embarrassing moment. The one you've told a hundred times. Getting words on the page, even light ones, breaks the paralysis.
- Give yourself permission to write badly. First drafts are not meant to be good. They are meant to exist. You can improve a bad page. You cannot improve a blank one.

You can improve a bad page. You cannot improve a blank one.

What Happens Next

Many memoirs never reach completion because writers don't know what to do with the material they've gathered. If you've started collecting memories and would like professional guidance on structure, editing, publishing, or simply deciding what comes next, I'd be delighted to help.

Publishing Clarity Session — £95

A 60–90-minute conversation by phone or Zoom where we discuss your manuscript or your memories, your publishing options, and exactly what you need to do next. You'll come away with a clear picture of your route to publication and a follow-up summary of your next steps.

No jargon. No overwhelm. Just clarity.

If you need any help during your creative phase, simply get in touch for more information:

wendy@wendyjwoodcock.com

wendyjwoodcock.com/self-publishing-help

Why work with me?

- Co-author and editor of *Horseshoe Bay* – a memoir of a remarkable life, available on Amazon
- Books successfully self-published on Amazon KDP
- Professional editor and publishing consultant
- Experienced in helping first-time authors organise and publish their stories