

# Eating an Elephant

*Write your life*  
One Bite at a Time

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LifeStory Publishing  
Orlando, Florida

Eating an Elephant . . .  
Write Your Life One Bite at a Time

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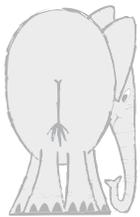
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All grammatical and typographical errors have been put in this book  
for your enjoyment in finding them.

## Get Started

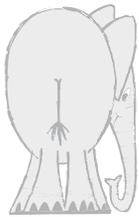


### Bite #1

#### ***The Only Way To Do This Wrong Is To NOT Do It at All!***

I write my motto at the top of the board at every class I teach and every talk I give: *The only way to do this wrong is to not do it at all!* I do it to let people know that whatever they put to paper in whatever form they choose will work. Most people don't even try to write their life stories for fear of doing it wrong. We all have a ninth-grade English teacher sitting on our shoulders, red pen in hand, whispering in our ears, "What makes you think you can write? See, there's a dangling participle here. You have comma splices throughout your paper." (What is a comma splice anyway?) The only way to silence that critical voice is to write your way through it.

Just looking at the 1,000-plus pages of the Bible of writing rules and regulations, *The Chicago Manual of Style: The Essential Guide for Writers, Editors, and Publishers*, is reason enough to put your pen and paper away and go take a nap. When driving, we need yield signs, green lights and turn signals to keep us in the road. Likewise, good grammar and punctuation are important in that they help us understand one another, but we don't need to get so hung up on the details that we come to a standstill in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Keep your eyes on the road—your life story—and move forward at a steady speed.

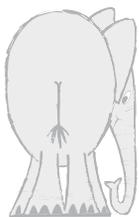


## **Bite #2**

### ***It's Personal***

There are as many ways to write life stories as there are people to write them. One man in my class did nothing but make lists. Each day for more than thirty years, he created an accounting of whatever captured his attention for the day—the price of gas, a movie he saw, his wife's birthday present, a new business that opened recently, items in the news, how much he paid for bread. Some days his list had twenty entries, other days only two or three. But he filled his pages consistently in a way that worked for him, and this small action of making a daily list resulted in a treasure trove of historical and personal information.

Over time, I've seen many unique approaches to writing life stories: automobile enthusiasts wrote their memoirs based on the cars they rode in or drove throughout their lifetimes; great cooks dished up family recipes and told the stories behind those delicious meals; artists sketched and wrote scenes they lived; gardeners traced the seasons of their lives with photographs, drawings and descriptions of what grew in their gardens and their lives. Maybe you enjoy a different hobby or interest. How can you use this activity to write your life story?

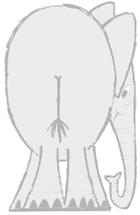


## **Bite #3**

### ***Don't Try This at Home***

I recently heard about a new way to preserve family history from the seventeen-year-old granddaughter of one of my longtime students. After her maternal grandparents died, she and her family moved into her grandparents' home. In this Florida Panhandle residence, they found family history written on the walls of a closet. Someone, probably her grandmother, covered the closet walls with dates of births, deaths, marriages, hurricanes, large purchases and so forth. She and her family continued the tradition and now routinely add new information to these history-filled walls, lending new meaning to the saying: *if only these walls could talk*.

I don't necessarily recommend this method of preserving history—it's very difficult to share or transport walls from one place to another—but it is proof that *how* we write our history is limited only by our imagination. There are as many *correct* ways to write life stories as there are people to write them. What's yours?



## **Bite #4**

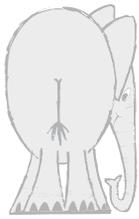
### ***Start Anywhere***

As I sit here on a cloudy, drizzly, Florida morning, ready to begin writing this book, I feel the need to start at the beginning. Really, it's almost a compulsion. It's what I've been taught throughout all my years of schooling: "Write your thesis sentence first. . . ." But in writing a life story, you set yourself up for failure when you think you have to start at the beginning and write your way through, year-by-year, to the end.

Most of us have brains that do not think in a linear fashion. My mind flits across the decades as easily as I walk from one room into the next. I remember a time I picked figs with Grandpa Luke when I was five years old and that thought takes me to helping Grandma Louisiane make fig preserves when I was ten and on to the time twenty years later, when my parents attempted to ship me fresh figs from their backyard tree (It was a disaster; they arrived as a hot, sour, liquid mass of nastiness.), to the small, plastic container of figs, which cost \$9 at the grocery store my husband Bob bought me last week just to see the delight in my face.

Thinking in that jumping-around way is normal, but when it comes to writing, we believe we have to start with, "I was born a very young child . . ." and write our way through to the great barbeque we had with family last Sunday. What are the chances of that happening? The odds are better in Vegas. We get overwhelmed, turn off the computer or put down our pen and go take another nap.

My advice? Start anywhere. Write now, organize later. Write what is on your mind today. If something your spouse says reminds you of a prank you played in high school, write that. If drinking your orange juice at breakfast causes you to remember the sweet smell of orange blossoms on your first trip to Florida when you were six years old, write that. If the baby in a commercial on TV brings back the memory of the birth of your first grandchild, write that. You can't go wrong writing what's on your heart.



## Bite #5

### *Keep an Idea Notebook Handy*

Memories pop into our heads at the most inconvenient times—when we’re driving, in the shower, in a business meeting, in church. When this happens to me, I tell myself, “Oh that’s a great memory. I’ll write it down as soon as I get home.” What usually happens? You’re right. The priceless memory is long gone by the time I pull into the driveway. Sometimes I remember I had a great thought but can’t think of what it was. Other times I don’t even remember having the thought.

I often tell my friends that I don’t have a memory problem; I have a filing problem. I know whatever I need is in my brain, *somewhere*; it’s merely misfiled. For example, I’m looking for a memory about my first dog, Shep, under the Ps for pets, and it’s filed under the Gs for the Gravy Train I fed him every day. Who knows why? I have to stumble upon it accidentally, but when I do, I don’t want to lose it again.

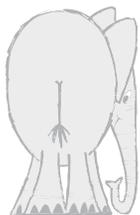
This is my solution to those misfiled memories:

I carry a small notebook and a tiny pen with me everywhere I go, so when I have a memory I don’t want to lose, I write down a couple of words that will remind me of it later. Works every time. I suggest you purchase a small notebook (3"x 5") or multiple notebooks, so you can place one in your pocket or handbag, one in the car, one by the bed and wherever else thoughts seem to regularly bubble up to the surface.

Notebooks are great because all the little memory gems are in one place. If I don’t use a notebook, I have sticky notes, old receipts, torn off bits of bills, the backs of envelopes, business cards, whatever I can get my hands on, scattered everywhere around my house, in my car, in pants’ pockets, in desk drawers, everywhere. And guess what? When I start looking for that memory I wrote down on some piece of scrap paper a week ago, I can’t find it. If I write everything in my handy, dandy little notebook, I know right where to go when I need my next writing topic.

Or you can use a technique to keep track of memories my student Judi employs. She often combines writing and eating her lunch. She makes a sandwich, heats up her soup, sits at the kitchen table with her notebook and pen and readies herself to write. On the wall above her kitchen table is a bulletin board covered with memories and story ideas on slips of paper she’s accumulated over time. Before she takes the first bite, she chooses

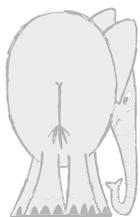
a writing topic from the many possibilities tacked to the board, takes in her lunch and pours out her heart.



## **Bite #6**

### ***Hello, Self . . .***

If you're driving and you can't pull over or don't want to risk running your car into a light pole while trying to jot down some notes, call yourself on the phone and leave a message. "Hello, Self, I had this great memory. Remind me to write about the time . . ." Then when you get home, you can safely enter the memory in your notebook so the little gift will be there waiting for you when you need it. But if you choose this option, be careful. In some places you can't legally talk and drive at the same time, so pull over and leave that voice message or send yourself a text.



## **Bite #7**

### ***Now Get a Bigger Notebook***

Using a large, three-ring binder to organize your stories accomplishes two things at the same time. It helps separate your life into smaller, more manageable segments and painlessly organizes your stories as you write them. Once you have your binder, purchase a package of eight or ten index tabs. Make a tab for each decade of your life, e.g., 1–9 years, 10–19 years, 20–29 years and so forth. After you finish each story, slip it into the section that matches the time period in which the piece takes place. Do this with all your stories, and when you write or type in the last period on the last sentence of the last story, a great deal of your organization will already be completed.

Some of you computer-savvy people reading this may say, "I already do all that in folders on my laptop. Why do I need a notebook?" I'm glad you're organizing your work electronically, but I still suggest you put a hard copy in a binder because you never

know what might happen to the computer file. My documents have been corrupted, deleted by mistake and lost; don't ask me how. Having a hard copy saved me more than once.

Plus, with my notebook, I feel a sense of accomplishment that motivates me to keep going as I see the binder, filling with stories. It starts out all skinny and empty, but every story I write plumps it up until it's this big, fat notebook that's a chore to lug around. I hold it in my arms, and I feel the weight of my effort. Go get a binder and watch it grow, sort of like a Chia Pet.



## **Bite #8**

### ***Give It a Name***

Your book needs a name, any name. You may have picked one out a long time ago and told yourself, “If I ever write my story, I’m going to call it. . . .” I assisted one gentleman in writing his life story who knew his title was *I Am Blessed*; another said his book must be named *Hoosier Roots*. Great titles. In each case, I printed the title on a sheet of paper in the largest font I had and put the page on the front of the binder. I even printed the title vertically and slid it down the spine of the folder.

A book title may never have crossed your mind. Okay, writing a book may never have entered your mind until now. Either way, it's important to give it a name. It may not be anything like the name you ultimately select, but it needs to be called *something* for a couple of reasons. One, it makes your project easy to identify. You might say, “I’m working on the story of my life from the time I was six years old to when I was twelve years old, growing up in rural Pennsylvania in the 1940s.” Whew! That’s a mouthful. Or you could simply say, “I’m working on my book titled. . . .”