

# AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Literature, Psychology, History, Philosophy

### 1. Core Definition

The term **autobiography** derives from the Greek words *autos* (self), *bios* (life), and *graphein* (to write), literally meaning the writing of one's own life. Fundamentally, an autobiography is a self-penned narrative documenting the author's life, or a significant portion thereof, presented as a continuous chronological or thematic sequence. Unlike a biography, which is written by another party, the autobiography maintains the author's subjective voice and perspective, providing an intimate, albeit filtered, portrayal of personal experience, internal thoughts, and emotional responses to external events. This inherent subjectivity is central to the form, making the autobiography not merely a record of facts, but an act of self-interpretation and narrative construction.

Within the realm of **clinical psychology** and **psychotherapy**, the autobiography takes on a specific functional definition, often employed as a therapeutic technique. In this context, the client is directed by the therapist to produce a written life history. This document serves as a powerful diagnostic and exploratory tool, allowing the clinician to obtain comprehensive background information regarding the client's developmental trajectory, familial environment, and past behavioral patterns. The exercise of writing one's own story encourages **introspection**, compelling the individual to organize disparate memories and events into a coherent life narrative, a process often crucial for identifying the roots of current psychological difficulties. For instance, if a therapist suspects that a client's present anxiety stems from longstanding patterns of relational avoidance, requesting a detailed life history can illuminate when and how these patterns first manifested and solidified over time.

It is important to differentiate the autobiography from the **memoir**. While both are forms of self-writing, the traditional autobiography aims for a comprehensive account of the entire life span, focusing on the public self and historical development of the individual (often chronologically from birth), while the memoir typically focuses on a specific period, theme, or relationship, emphasizing reflection and emotional experience over exhaustive chronology. However, in contemporary practice, these definitions frequently overlap, especially as psychological approaches value the thematic coherence and emotional truth found in selective self-narration. Regardless of the genre distinction, the central feature remains the author's retrospective control over the narrative of the self, positioning the author simultaneously as the subject, the object, and the chronicler of their own existence.

## 2. Etymology and Historical Development

Although the conceptual underpinnings of self-writing trace back to antiquity, the term **autobiography** itself is a relatively modern invention. Its earliest documented use in English is attributed to the poet Robert Southey in a 1797 review, where he referred to the writing of the life of a distinguished man by himself. Prior to its formal naming, the practice existed under various forms, including confessions, apologies, and spiritual narratives. The history of the form demonstrates a gradual shift from texts primarily focused on spiritual transcendence and public defense to narratives centered on the development of the private, individualized self.

The true foundational text of the genre is widely considered to be St. Augustine's *Confessions* (c. 397-400 CE). Augustine's work established the critical elements of self-scrutiny, conversion narrative, and addressing a higher power (or, later, posterity). However, subsequent autobiographical works often remained heavily weighted toward public figures recounting military, political, or religious achievements. A major transformation occurred during the Enlightenment, exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), which inaugurated the modern focus on the uniqueness of the individual soul, prioritizing inner emotional life and vulnerability over public status. Rousseau's declaration that he intended to show "a man in all the truth of nature" codified the expectation of brutal honesty that would become a standard, if often unattainable, goal of the modern autobiography.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the genre flourish, paralleling the rise of individualism, psychology, and secular interest in the self. Figures like Benjamin Franklin established the American tradition of the self-made man narrative, while the rise of psychoanalysis in the early 20th century provided new frameworks for understanding and interpreting the self-narrative, fueling the therapeutic potential of the written life story. This historical trajectory demonstrates that autobiography is not a static form, but one that constantly adapts to philosophical shifts regarding the nature of identity, memory, and subjective truth.

## 3. Autobiography as a Therapeutic Tool (Clinical Application)

In clinical settings, the application of autobiography, often termed **bibliotherapy** or **narrative journaling**, is a structured intervention designed to facilitate therapeutic insight. The instruction for the client to write their life story serves multiple critical functions beyond mere information gathering. Firstly, the act of writing enforces a degree of distance and organization upon chaotic internal experiences. By externalizing their history, clients can observe patterns and connections--such as recurring conflicts or maladaptive coping mechanisms--that were previously obscured by immediate emotional distress. This process of objectification aids in cognitive restructuring and the preparation for deeper analytical work.

Secondly, the autobiography is invaluable for differential diagnosis, particularly in identifying

whether current difficulties represent acute reactions or entrenched, **longstanding patterns of behavior**. As the initial source content suggests, the therapist uses the autobiography to determine the historical depth and pervasiveness of the client's issues. For example, a clinician reading a client's account might discover consistent themes of abandonment dating back to childhood, suggesting an underlying attachment disorder rather than merely a situational crisis. This rich, contextual data allows for the tailoring of treatment strategies, moving beyond superficial symptom management toward addressing core identity issues.

The implementation of the therapeutic autobiography can vary widely. Some therapists prefer a completely unstructured approach, encouraging the client to write freely about any memories that surface. Others utilize highly structured templates, providing specific prompts related to key developmental stages (e.g., schooling, relationships, career shifts, traumatic events, self-perceptions) or specific themes relevant to the presenting problem. Regardless of structure, the resulting document becomes a shared text between client and therapist, a foundational narrative against which future interpretations and therapeutic shifts can be measured. It becomes a concrete starting point for **Narrative Therapy**, where the goal is often to help the client "re-author" their life story, shifting the dominant, restrictive narrative toward one that allows for agency and positive change.

#### 4. Key Characteristics of the Form

The autobiography is characterized by specific structural and epistemological features that define its unique relationship to truth and memory. Perhaps the most defining characteristic is its reliance on **retrospection**. The author must necessarily look back across a gulf of time, interpreting past experiences through the lens of the present self. This retrospective gaze means that the narrative is inherently selective; memory is not a perfect record, but a reconstructive process influenced by current psychological needs, desires, and ideological commitments. What is remembered, what is emphasized, and what is strategically omitted are all products of the author's present consciousness.

Another key feature is the inherent tension between the three temporal selves embedded in the text: the **writing self** (the narrator in the present moment), the **protagonist self** (the younger self being described), and the **implied reader**. The author must reconcile the perspective of the mature self who understands the consequences of past actions, with the perspective of the naive self who lived those actions. This interplay creates dramatic irony and allows for self-critique, transforming the record of events into a cohesive argument about how the self came to be. This dialectic is crucial in therapy, where the client's current interpretation of their past often reveals more about their current psychological state than the factual accuracy of the events themselves.

Finally, the autobiography operates under what literary theorist Philippe Lejeune termed the

**Autobiographical Pact.** This refers to the implicit contractual agreement between the author and the reader, where the author pledges, explicitly or implicitly, that the narrator, the author, and the subject of the story are one and the same person, committed to telling the "truth" of their life. Although readers accept this pact, they are aware that the truth being presented is subjective--it is a narrative truth, not necessarily a verifiable historical truth. This complexity defines the literary and psychological function of the form, distinguishing it from purely historical accounts.

## 5. Significance and Impact

The impact of the autobiography is profound across both humanities and clinical practice. In literature and history, autobiographical writing serves as a primary source for understanding the lived experience within specific cultural, social, and political contexts. Works by marginalized groups--such as slave narratives, memoirs of political prisoners, or accounts of displacement--have historically challenged dominant historical narratives, providing crucial counter-perspectives that reshape collective understanding of the past. The form grants agency to individuals who might otherwise be silenced by mainstream history, allowing personal trauma and triumph to enter the public discourse.

Psychologically, the significance of autobiography centers on the concept of **narrative identity**. According to theorists like Dan P. McAdams, humans construct their identities by integrating their perceived past, present experiences, and anticipated future into a personalized, evolving story. The process of writing an autobiography is thus an essential act of identity formation and maintenance. By crafting a coherent life story, individuals impose meaning on suffering, integrate conflicting aspects of the self, and establish a sense of continuity. This coherence is strongly correlated with psychological well-being and resilience.

Furthermore, autobiography has influenced major developments in **counseling psychology**. The rise of approaches like Narrative Therapy, pioneered by Michael White and David Epston, directly draws on the power of self-narration. These therapies view psychological problems not as inherent flaws of the individual, but as oppressive stories or "problem-saturated narratives" that the client has internalized. The therapeutic goal is to help the client externalize the problem and collaboratively dismantle the debilitating story, using the written autobiography or life account as the raw material to construct preferred, empowering narratives. Thus, the significance of the autobiography extends far beyond simple historical documentation; it is a fundamental mechanism for psychological healing and self-creation.

## 6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its utility, the autobiography faces several significant intellectual and practical criticisms, particularly concerning issues of veracity and self-interest. The primary debate revolves around the

reliability of memory. Psychological research has conclusively shown that human memory is fallible, prone to reconstruction, distortion, and outright confabulation. When writing an autobiography, the author is particularly susceptible to biases, such as **retrospective determinism** (the tendency to view past events as inevitably leading to the present outcome) and **self-aggrandizement** (selectively emphasizing achievements and minimizing failures). Critics argue that the autobiography is often less a record of what happened and more a justification of the author's current standing.

In the therapeutic context, critics raise concerns regarding the ethical implications of using intensely personal documents. While the autobiography is intended to provide insight, the emotional labor involved in recounting traumatic events can, if not managed carefully, lead to re-traumatization or overwhelm the client. Furthermore, the completed text introduces a powerful element into the therapeutic relationship; the written narrative can solidify transference dynamics, where the client projects feelings onto the therapist based on figures in their life history, or invite **countertransference**, where the therapist reacts personally to the details of the client's story. Maintaining clinical boundaries while interpreting the deeply subjective text requires high professional vigilance.

Literary critics often debate the true limits of the form, particularly concerning honesty. Since the author controls the narrative, they inevitably perform a version of the self designed for public consumption or therapeutic scrutiny. The promise of "truth" often clashes with the necessities of narrative structure, privacy, and self-protection. This leads to the critical observation that every autobiography is, to some extent, a work of **fiction**--not in the sense of being entirely fabricated, but in the sense that it is a crafted artifact designed to persuade the reader of a particular version of the author's identity.

## 7. Further Reading

[Autobiography \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Narrative Therapy \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Autobiographical Pact by Philippe Lejeune \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Memory Reconstruction and Bias \(Wikipedia\)](#)