UNIT STRUCTURE

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Introduction

11.3 What is an Autobiography?

11.4 Historical Evolution of Autobiography

11.5 How to Write an Autobiography

11.6 Let Us Sum Up

11.7 Examples of Autobiographies

11.8 Further Readings

11.9 Answers to Check your Progress

11.10 Possible Questions

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- get an idea about what an autobiography is,
- write an autobiography.

11.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit makes an attempt to acquaint you with the steps that you could follow in order to write an autobiography. Writing an autobiography is an ideal way to capture the stories of your life and the times you have lived in. We shall focus on a step by step procedure towards writing an autobiography.

11.3 WHAT IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

An autobiography is a personal account of one's own life written by a person outlining the events and experiences of the writer in a factual way.

11.4 HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF AUTO-BIOGRAPHY

Autobiography has existed in a sense from antiquity but the word itself was not coined until 1809 by Robert Southey. The autobiographical tendency belongs chiefly to the modern rather than to the ancient world,

for modern man is far more self-conscious than his classical predecessor. It has developed through four distinct stages in four periods of upheaval and transition which made men want to find their bearings. Some felt the urge for self recording and this resulted in great autobiographies.

The first of these periods of conflict occurred at the time of the break up of the classical world and the first great autobiographer was St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430). He set down an engrossing record of spiritual experiences in his “Confessions”. The next important autobiographical writing appeared during the Renaissance and the Reformation .The rediscovery of classical thought and attitude at that time released a new awareness of personality which encouraged the individual to assert himself. Three writers marked this autobiographical advance-Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) Jerome Cardan (1501-1576) and Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). St. Augustine had concentrated on the inward self while Cellini concentrated on the outward self. The third impulse of autobiographical writing came with the opening of new mental horizons in the 18th century. An important autobiographer of this period is Jean Rousseau (1712-1778), who bared his spiritualism in the “Confessions” and their sequels. Other were William Cobbett, J.H Newman, Charles Darwin, Joseph Jefferson, Thoreau and many others.

The 20th century heralded the fourth autobiographical stage. The development of psychology made the complex nature of the human mind very obvious in the conscious and unconscious levels. There were rival ideologies and numerous autobiographies surfaced. Some of the notable autobiographers were G.K. Chesterton, Theodore Dreiser, Maxim Gorki, Henry James, Mark Twain, M.G. Wells, W.B. Yeats, Jean Paul Sartre.

LET US KNOW



Though autobiography is generally regarded as a department of prose literature, one great example, Words worth’s “The Prelude” (completed 1805), is a poem. An autobiographical strain is evident in other poetry such

as Horace's "Satires and Epistles", Dante's "Vita Nuova", George Herbert's "Temple", Byron's "Childe Harold", and Tennyson's "In Memoriam."

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



1. Define Autobiography.

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Who was the first great autobiographer? Name his work. What did his work contain?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

11.5 HOW TO WRITE AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

***UNDERSTAND YOUR REASONS FOR WRITING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY :**

Please understand your reasons for writing the autobiography. Your autobiography will turn out best if you write it simply because you want to, perhaps to share the experiences of your life with others, to understand your life and the forces that have shaped you, to preserve your legacy or simply to exercise your desire to write. You could read some autobiographies to get a lot of good ideas about how to organize your story.

***DEVELOP YOUR THEME:**

You should have a unifying theme which would be the main idea of your story – the driving force of your life. The driving force of your life may be the love of your teacher/mother/grandmother/spouse. Following

is an example from Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi:*

> *My guru was a peerless interpreter of the scriptures. Many of my happiest memories are centred in his discourses. But his jewelled thoughts were not cast into the ashes of heedlessness or stupidity. One restless movement of my body, or may slight lapse into absent-mindedness, would suffice to put an abrupt period to Master's exposition. (1963: 113-114)*

Again from the same book by Yogananda,

> *My guru could not be bribed, even by love. He showed no leniency to anyone who, like myself, had willingly offered to become a disciple. Whether Master and I were surrounded by his students or by strangers, or were alone together, he always spoke plainly and upbraided sharply. No trifling lapse into shallowness or inconsistency escaped his rebuke.(1963:119)*

You should build your story around the event or theme that is most important to you. Having a theme will make it more compelling and keep unnecessary details at bay. Here is an example from Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography:*

> *I admired father tremendously. He seemed to me the embodiment of strength and courage and cleverness, far above all the other men I saw, and I treasured the hope that when I grew up I would be rather like him. But much as I admired him and loved him I feared him also. I had seen him losing his temper at servants and others and he seemed to me terrible then and I shivered with fright, mixed sometimes with resentment, at the treatment of a servant. His temper was indeed an awful thing and even in after years I do not think I ever came across anything to match it in its own line .But ,fortunately ,he had a strong sense of hum your also and an iron will ,and he could control grew*

himself as a rule .As he grew older this power of control grew and it was very rare or him to indulge in anything like his old temper.(1962:7)

***ORGANISE THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY:**

Maintaining the chronological order is generally a must in the autobiography. A logical beginning would be your birth but you may also want to start by giving an overview of yourself or your ancestors stories. It is not necessary to go through your life year by year. It would help you if you could plan it out in an outline which will serve as a helpful guide.

***STEP BY STEP PROCEDURE:**

You should focus on three major aspects:

- ☐ Who you are in life
- ☐ What life means to you
- ☐ What your outlook on the future is

WHO YOU ARE IN LIFE:

The best way to start an autobiography is to state your name. When writing this paragraph you can explain when and where you were born, where you live (city and state), who you live with and the type of person you are. You have to give a lot of information so that your reader can clearly understand what is going on. You should give an overview of your personality, your likes and dislikes.

Instead of starting your sentence with “I was born in Guwahati, Assam…”, it would be better to write why you were born, where you were and how your family’s experience led to your birth.

An example from Nehru’s ***An Autobiography:***

An only son of prosperous parents is apt to be spoilt, especially so in India. And when that son happens to have been an only child for the first eleven years of his existence there is little hope for him to escape this spoiling. My two sisters are very much younger than I am, and between

each two of us there is a long stretch of years. And so I grew up and spent my early years as a somewhat lonely child with no companions of my age. I did not sent to any kindergarten or primary school. Governesses or private tutors were supposed to be in charge of my education. (1962:1)

Every region of the world has a special story and every family comes from a region or culture that will seen very different and interesting to others. An example from Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf:*

It has turned out fortunate for me to-day that destiny appointed braunau-on-the-inn to be my birthplace. For that little town is situated just on the frontier between those two states the reunion of which seems, at least to us of the younger generation, a task to which we should devote our lives, and in the pursuit of which every possible means should be employed. German Austria must be restored to the great German motherland.(2006:16)

You should write about your grandparents, great grandparents, what they did for a living and how they came to settle in a certain part of the world. You should also include some interesting things about the region you were born in and experiences that were interesting in the place that you grew up in. From Nehru's *An Autobiography:*

We were Kashmiris. Over two hundred years ago, early in the eighteenth century, our ancestor came down from that mountain valley to seek fame and fortune in the rich plains below. Those were the days of the decline of the Moghal empire after the death of Aurangzeb, and Farrukhsiar was the Emperor. Raj Kaul was the name of that ancestor of ours and he had gained eminence as a Sanskrit and Persian scholar in Kashmir. He attracted the notice of Farrukhsiar during the latter's visit to Kashmir, and probably at the Emperor's instance, the family migrated to Delhi, the

imperial capital about the year 1716. A jagir with a house situated on the banks of a canal had been granted to Raj Kaul, and from the fact of this residence, 'Nehru' (from 'nahar', a canal) came to be attached to his name. Kaul had been the family name; this changed to Kaul-Nehru; and in later years, Kaul dropped out and we became simply Nehru's. (1962:1)

Kashmiris have had one advantage over many others in India, especially in the north. They have never had any purdah, or seclusion of women, among themselves. Finding this custom prevailing in the Indian plains, when they came down, they adopted it, but only partly and in so far as their relations with others and non-Kashmir is were concerned. That was considered then in northern India, where most of the Kashmir is stayed, an inevitable sign of social status. But among themselves they stuck to the free social life of men and women, and every Kashmiri had the free entrée into any Kashmiris house. In Kashmiri feasts and ceremonies men and women met together and sat together, though often the women would sit in one bunch. Boys and girls used to meet on a more or less equal footing. They did not, of course, have the freedom of the modern West. (1962:10)

If you live in a city, for instance, you should realize that many people who grew up in the country have never ridden a subway, never walked to school, never used a taxi and never walked to a store. On the other hand, if you grew up in the country you should consider that many people who grew up in the suburbs or inner city have never eaten food straight from a garden, never camped in their back yard, never fed chickens on a work farm, never watched their parents canning food and never been to a country fair or a small town festival. An instance from Nehru's *An Autobiography:*

My childhood was thus a sheltered and uneventful one. I listened to the grown-up talk of my cousins without always

understanding all of it. Often this talk related to the overbearing character and insulting manners of the English people, as well as Eurasians, towards Indians, and how it was the duty of every Indian to stand up to this and not to tolerate it. Instances of conflicts between the rulers and the ruled were common and were fully discussed. It was a notorious fact that whenever an Englishman killed an Indian he was acquitted by a jury of his own countrymen. In railway trains compartments were reserved for Europeans and however crowded the train might be – and they used to be terribly crowded – no Indian was allowed to travel in them, even though they were empty. Even an unreserved compartment would be taken possession of by an Englishman and he would not allow any Indian to enter it. Benches and chairs were also reserved for Europeans in public parks and other places. (1962:6)

There will always be something about your childhood that will seem unique to others. You just have to step outside your life for a moment and address the readers as if they know nothing about your region and culture.

As you write your autobiography, think about the ways that your family celebrated or observed certain days (birthdays), events (harvests) and months and tell your audience about special moments.

The most special gift you ever received and the event or occasion surrounding that gift .

- ☐ Certain types of food that you identify with a certain day of the year.
- ☐ An outfit that you wear only during a special event.
- ☐ You may have ridden on a horse carriage, hay wagon, donkey or a limousine train, mountain bike, eighteen wheel truck, tractor, police car, power boat, sailboat or ski lift.
- ☐ You may have walked the beach or mountain trail.

Your culture is the overall way of life, including the customs that come from your family's values and beliefs. Culture includes the holidays you observe, the customs you practice, the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the games you play, the books you read the special phrases you use, the language you speak and the rituals you practice.

As Hitler wrote in his autobiography *Mein Kampf :*

> *Those were happy days, which appeared to me almost as a dream; but they were bound to remain only a dream. Two years later my mother's death put a brutal end to all my fine projects. She succumbed to a long and painful illness which from the very beginning permitted little hope of recovery. Though expected, her death came as a terrible blow to me. I respected my father, but I loved my mother.*
>
> *Poverty and stern reality forced me to decide promptly.*
>
> *The meager resources of the family had been almost entirely used up through my mother's severe illness. The allowance which came to me as an orphan was not enough for the bare necessities of life. Somehow or other, I would have to earn my own bread.*
>
> *With my clothes and linen packed in a valise and with an indomitable resolution in my heart, I left for Vienna. I hoped to forestall fate, as my father had done fifty years before, I was determined to become 'something' – but certainly not a civil servant.(2006:29)*
>
> *From early youth I endeavoured to read books in the right way and I was fortunate in having a good memory and intelligence to assist me. From that point of view my sojourn in Vienna was particularly useful and profitable. My experiences of everyday life there were a constant stimulus to study the most diverse problems from new angles. In as much as I was in a position to put theory to the test of reality and reality to the test of theory, I was safe from the*

danger of pedantic theorizing on the one hand and, on the other, from being too impressed by the superficial aspects of reality.(2006:45)

You should tie together all the interesting elements of your life story and craft them into an engaging essay.

WHAT LIFE MEANS TO YOU:

This is the second part. In this part you should state how you see life and what life means to you. You should state whether you are happy or sad, whether you have a lot of friends or just a few, what your favourite places are and the associations that you enjoy with other people.

WHAT YOUR OUTLOOK ON THE FUTURE IS:

In this paragraph you should explain what you think the future will be like. You could pick a particular year and explain how it will be but explain it through your eyes. Where will you be and how will you be living, whom you will be living with and how you foresee your life in the near future. In the conclusion, you should try to add some type of closure to bring the whole autobiography together.

As Hitler wrote in his autobiography *Mein Kampf:*

Now, I have no hesitations in saying that today, once the die has been cast, it is not only impossible to win back South Tyrol through a war but I should definitely take my stand against such a movement, because I am convinced that it would not be possible to arouse the national enthusiasm of the German people and maintain it in such a way as would be necessary in order to carry through such a war to a successful issue. (2006:561)

Sit in a comfortable place take one page at a time and be with yourself so that you write faster and more naturally. Do not concentrate too much on style/grammar as the ‘art of writing’ may prevent you from telling the story. You can always edit later. You should make your story

vivid. You should use descriptive words. You should think about the who, what, where, when, how and why of each memory. You should use your senses to help describe these stories.

***EDIT COMPLETED WORK:**

After writing your life story, let your manuscript be for a few weeks before proceeding to edit it. You could ask others to read your story and comment on it. You should then take out the extraneous details, tie up the loose ends and make sure your writing is crisp. The manuscript must be edited to perfection as the readers may not know anything about the people, places in your autobiography.

***PRESERVE YOUR WORK:**

Make sure you have at least one copy which is safe from fire, flood or other damage. Such important work should not be lost. If your story is saved on your computer, make sure to print out a hard copy and save a back up copy. You should have a plan of passing on your autobiography. You should do this either by getting the book published, publishing it yourself or distributing copies to friends and relations. You should have a plan of passing on your story to your heirs as you are going to put in a lot of effort into this project.

***BUILD A RELATIONSHIP USING YOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY:**

Children and grand children will learn many new things about you and other people, times and places from your life story. You have the power to bring these people to life through your memories and you become multi dimensional to them as they learn more about when you were a child a teen, a young adult, a worker, a parent and a grand parent. It's a legacy worth sharing.

***OTHER THINGS TO INCLUDE IN YOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY ARE:**

1. **Dedication.**
2. **Foreword.**

As Nehru wrote in *An Autobiography:*

I am glad that a cheap paper-back edition of my autobiography is being issued in India. This book was written by me more than a quarter of a century ago. Much of it, therefore, perhaps deals with matters which are no longer of topical interest. But it may still be of general interest to many people in India because it deals with a period of our national struggle in which many of us were personally involved.

People are apt to forget the inner content of that struggle and how it helped in changing the face of India, especially the rural masses. It is out of that struggle that present day India has arisen. The problems today are naturally different from those of a generation ago. But there is a connecting link and, in order to understand the India of today, we have to have some understanding of what preceded it and what gave rise to it.

Many of us were moulded by that struggle and are what we are today as a result of that struggle and the ideals and objectives that governed us then. This is past history now, but sometimes it is worthwhile knowing that past in order to know better the present. Essentially an autobiography is a personal document and therefore it reflects personal views and reactions. But the person who wrote it became merged, to a large extent, in the larger Movement and therefore represents, in a large measure, the feelings of many others.

I trust that this book will revive something of the past in the minds of many of those of the newer generation who did not have personal experience of what it describes.

3. **Chronology Sheets**
4. **Family Tree**
5. **Epilogue**

In Mahatma Gandhi's *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, we have an example as shown below.

It is not without wrench that I have to take leave of the reader. I set a high value on my experiments. I do not know whether I have been able to do justice to them. I can only say that I have spared no pains to give a faithful narrative. To describe truth, as it has appeared to me, and in the exact manner in which I have arrived at it, has been my ceaseless effort. The exercise has given me ineffable mental peace , because it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in Truth and Ahimsa to waverers.

My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth. And if every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader that the only means for the realization of Truth is Ahimsa, I shall deem all my labour in writing these chapters to have been in vain. And, even though my efforts in this behalf may prove fruitless, let the readers know that the vehicle, not the great principle, is at fault . After all, however sincere my strivings after Ahimsa may have been, they have still been able to have of truth can hardly……..

LET US KNOW



An Autobiography by Jawaharlal Nehru was written entirely in prison from June 1934 to February 1935, during a particularly stressful period of his existence. The autobiographical narrative remains a sketchy, personal and incomplete account of the past, verging on the present, but cautiously avoiding contact with it.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



3. How does a theme help an autobiography?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. What are the three major divisions of an autobiography?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

***TIPS TO WRITE A GOOD AUTOBIOGRAPHY :**

1. Scents are powerful memory joggers. If you want to remember details of your childhood home, for example cook up one of your mom's old recipes. As the aroma fills the air you may feel like you're right back in your childhood home eating dinner with your family.

2. Too many details listing everyone that was at a party or trying to include all the events of each day will bog the story down. Then you will also have to spend a lot of time researching every last detail, such as exact dates of each event.

3. If you are handwriting the manuscript, consider having it typed when you finish it.

4. Honesty is the best policy but you do not have to include some detail that you do not wish to.

5. If you need help getting your thoughts into order, you should consider hiring someone to write the manuscript for you.

6. If you want to pass on your autobiography, you should include memorabilia for e.g. pictures, heirlooms, medals, mementos, letters etc. and your story in a scrap book format.

LET US KNOW



The first volume of *Mein Kampf* was written while the author Adolf Hitler was imprisoned in a Bavarian fortress. How did he get there and why? The answer to that question is important because the book deals with the events which brought the author into this plight and because he wrote under the emotional stress caused by the historical happenings at that time. It was the hour of Germany's deepest humiliation, somewhat parallel to that of a little over a century ago when Napoleon had dismembered the old German Empire and French soldiers occupied a large part of Germany.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS 3



5. What are powerful memory joggers?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6. How can you make your autobiography very interesting and complete in itself, if you want to pass it on to your heirs?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

ACTIVITY



1. Oral or video personal histories can be interesting as they offer the advantage of preserving your image and voice consider creating an audio/video presentation of your story.

2. Write about an extraordinary instance or instances in your school life worth mentioning.

3. Write about your wedding/birth of your child that marked the advent of a new chapter in your life.

4. Think about someone you loved and cared for and write about the circumstances surrounding or following his passing away. You could add a philosophical dimension to the incident to make it engaging for the readers.

11.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt what an autobiography is and how to write an autobiography. We have made you aware of the general outline that should be adhered to in the course of writing an autobiography. We have shown you how to divide your project/manuscript/work into three main parts with a few examples. You should now be able to write an autobiography.

11.7 EXAMPLES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

- Gandhi , M.K., *The story of my experiments with Truth*. Navaajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad,1927;1969 (reprint)
- Yogananda, Paramahansa. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Mumbai : Jaico Publishing House, 1963.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. An Autobiography. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Ltd., 1962.



11.8 FURTHER READINGS

Website Resources:

1. http://www.wikihow.com
2. http://www.sarasota.k.12.fe.us/bhs/bryan/bryan_auto.html
3. http://homeworktips.about.com

4. Halsey, William D and Friedman Emanuel. Colliers Encyclopedia. New York: Macmillan Educational Company, 1985.
5. Hitler, Adolf. Mein Kampf. Mumbai : Jaico Publishing House, 2006.
6. Yogananda, Paramahansa. Autobiography of a Yogi. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 1963.
7. Nehru, Jawaharlal. An Autobiography. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Ltd. 1962.
8. Pascal, Roy (1960) Design and Truth in Autobiography, Cambridge , Harvard University Press



11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. An autobiography is a personal account of one's own life written by himself/herself outlining the events and experiences of the writer in a factual way.
2. The first great autobiographer was St. Augustine. His work is called "Confessions" which contains a moving record of spiritual confessions.
3. A theme presents the main idea of the story thereby making it more compelling and keeping unnecessary details at bay.
4. The three major divisions of an autobiography are
   - Who you are in life
   - What life means to you
   - What your outlook on the future is
5. Scents are powerful memory joggers.
6. We can make our autobiographies very interesting and complete in itself by including memorabilia for, e.g. pictures, heirlooms, medals, mementos, letters etc. and putting the story in a scrap book format.



11.10 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the historical evolution of the autobiography.
2. Elaborate on some important points to keep in mind while writing an autobiography.
3. Why is organization important in an autobiography?

******