

## CHAPTER 2

# WRITING MEMORIES

This section is contributed by Kelly Pang, a former journalist and executive sub-editor with *The Straits Times*. She was one of the key researchers for *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* and *From Third World to First*. She is also a co-founder of Dotted Line Consultancy, an editorial consultancy.

## INTRODUCTION

Memory writing is the act of capturing memories and documenting them in written form. Think of some of the most memorable places, people and events in your life and put them down in writing. You can also help capture the recollections of others by interviewing them and documenting their memories in writing. Think of it as “freezing” a particular moment in time. Together, the written memories will create a rich tapestry of stories, allowing us to leave a legacy for our future generations.

## WHAT YOU NEED

You hardly need anything else besides a pen and notebook, and perhaps a computer. Memories may come back to you anytime, so be sure to jot down anything that comes to mind, so that you can look through your notes later.



### Equipment and tools checklist

- ✓ Writing tool such as a pen or pencil
- ✓ Notebook
- ✓ Computer
- ✓ Interview transcripts (if you are writing someone else's memories)





### 1 Choose a topic

If you are writing your own memory, **begin with a memory list:** write down the most significant people, places, events and experiences you can remember about your past. Then pick one topic that is especially meaningful or nostalgic to you.

If you are writing someone else's memory, you may need to do some research first to find out what is interesting about his or her life. Then select a topic to focus on.

### 2 Research and conduct interviews

When writing your own memory, **go through your personal memorabilia, journals and old photos.** Talk to friends and family members — their recollections may help jog your own memories. Write down all the details you can remember about the topic, including your thoughts and feelings. Follow up with some research at the library or on the Internet.

If you are writing another person's memory, do an in-depth interview and transcribe the interview. (See chapter on Oral History)

### 3 Outline your story

Before you start writing, **ask yourself: What is the key idea that you want to convey** through this memory? Is it to highlight the significance of a person or place, to relate a lesson learnt, or to capture someone's personal memories?

Let's say you are writing another person's memory about life in the 1960s. Your key idea can be the neighbourhood he grew up in. Framing your story with a "key idea", or angle, will help you decide what to put in and what to sieve out.

Write an outline to help you organise your thoughts. You may want to structure your story with an introduction, main body and conclusion. You can introduce your key idea in the opening paragraph, go on to describe different scenes and people in the next few paragraphs, and conclude with your interviewee's personal reflections.

### 4 Write your story

**Voice:** If you are writing **your own memory, use the first person "I"** so that the memory becomes more intimate to your reader. If you are writing **another person's memory, you can use the third person, i.e. "he" or "she"**.

**Introduction:** Put down your **key idea** and **background information about the memory** in the introduction, to give your readers a bird's-eye view of what is to come. For example, for your interviewee's memory on the neighbourhood he grew up in, the introduction can be written as:

*Mr Lim Teck Boon, 57, may have left his kampung days behind but he still carries fond memories of growing up in a remote Chua Chu Kang village. Born in 1956, he lived with his family in a one-storey house on a chicken farm until they were resettled in a HDB flat in Jurong East in 1988.*

**Main body:** Use **vivid details and recreate scenes** that engage your readers' five senses. Show them using movements, smells, colours, sounds, texture, taste and more. Enliven your story with dialogue or quotes to express your main characters' own voices. It is fine to recreate conversations based on the material gathered from your interview or if you have noted down specific unique phrases. For example:

*Mr Lim's house was along a dirt road known as Track 2, an offshoot from the main Chua Chu Kang Road. He said: It would turn into a brown slush after the rain. My friends and I loved running barefoot and chasing one another on the muddy path."*

*Like the other houses along this road, the Lim family's house had wooden planks as the walls and zinc plates as the roof. Mr Lim said: "When heavy rain fell on the zinc roof, the noise was thunderous. We had to raise our voices in the house just so that we could hear one another."*

**Conclusion:** If you are writing your own memory, **you can end your story with your personal reflections**, such as the lessons

learnt, your feelings and thoughts about the memory, or your hope for the future. If you are writing someone else's memory, you can conclude the story with your interviewee's personal reflections. For example:

*Even though the families along Track 2 moved to flats, Mr Lim has kept in touch with some of his old neighbours. "I missed the old days and our kampung spirit," he said. "Luckily, many of us moved to the same housing estate and we still visit one another during Chinese New Year and meet at the coffeeshop to catch up."*

### 5 Do a final check

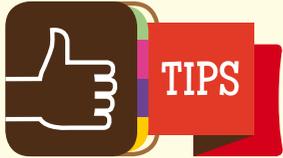
Read through and **correct any spelling or grammar errors.** Make sure that important information, such as the dates of events and the names of people and places, is correct. If unsure, make it a point to check it up.

Let your story sit for a few days if you have the chance. Then read through it again to see if you have missed any details or if you should remove any.

### 6 Upload your story

Save your writing in a Microsoft Word document if required.

Follow the step-by-step instructions and **upload your story directly onto the [singaporememory.sg](http://singaporememory.sg) portal.**



- Your story should answer the questions of who, what, when, where, how and why — also known as the 5W1H. Use the 5W1H as a checklist to see if you have a complete story.
- Enhance the memory with old photos, video footage and oral history recordings, especially if you are publishing online. Look out for these during the research stage and ask your interviewee for old photos. Remember to ask for permission to use them.

## WRITING SAMPLES

### *The History in Matchboxes*

by Zhang Ling, Hui Han and Pham Thi Minh Thuy

*Hearts of Rochor Centre* by Ruth Anne Keh, Nguyen Thi Viet Linh and Zhao Xijun

*Streets We Remember* by Hamzah, Su Myat and Li Junlu

## MORE ON WRITING

### Books

*On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinsser

*Your Life as Story: Discovering the 'New Autobiography' and Writing Memoir as Literature* by Tristine Rainer

### Online

*Make the Most of Your Memory: 10 Tips for Writing About Your Life*

*Tips on Writing Your Autobiography or Memoir*

*How to Write Your Autobiography*



## PAULINE LOH

Pauline Loh is a journalist, magazine editor and award-winning book author. She has met many interesting people during the course of her work and has always felt that it would be a pity if their stories are not preserved. So when she heard about the Singapore Memory Project, she jumped aboard with conviction. Since then, she has written several Singapore memories and conducted small group training on writing memories.

### What are the most important elements in memory writing?

It is important to capture all aspects of who, what, when, where, why and how — also known as 5W1H — in your writing. Paint “word pictures”, eg. descriptions of the place or person you are writing about. For example, if you are writing about a *kampung* (village), describe the road conditions, the number of houses, the materials used to build houses, the landmarks, the residents and more.

### How does one write a credible memory that will impact readers?

Get all the facts right, including the dates of events. Include quotes from your interviewees. It is important to provide descriptions, since scenes are or will no longer be available. Focus on the positive and refrain from criticism, especially on sensitive topics such as politics, race and religion. After writing, check your grammar and spelling.





Photo courtesy of National Library Board

## How do you develop an interesting angle for a story?

Every individual has his or her own take on the same scene. For an interesting angle, quote the people involved in the story. You can also go into detail for the one scene that is crucial to the whole story. For example, for a story on the Malaysia Cup, you can write: "Fandi Ahmad lined up the ball. The stadium fell into an anticipatory hush. Selangor's goalkeeper pulled his gloves nervously. Fandi moved. It was over in a split second. The 50,000-strong audience went into hysterics. Fandi alone was silent. He stood with arms akimbo, a small satisfied smile on his lips."

## Can you share about the memories you have written?

For *Unofficial Raffles' Historians: Raffles Hotel as Seen Through the Eyes of Two Special Guests*, I interviewed Cecil Holmes and Brian Grimwood. I was interested in how

Singapore is seen through their eyes as tourists. I wrote *The Robinson's Department Store Fire* story because it was rare to find an insider's story of that tragedy. We have news and court records of this incident, but a first person's

experience is always the truest and most heartbreaking account. I also wrote about my father-in-law Ong Tien Soo's younger days, so that his grandchildren would know more about him.

## What was the most difficult challenge?

Cecil Holmes and Brian Grimwood have heavy British accents, so I had to concentrate to understand what they said and try to reflect their way of speaking when I quoted them. They also kept interrupting each other, so I had to take careful note of who said what.

My father-in-law was 80 when I interviewed him. He spoke in the *Hinghwa* dialect and little Mandarin. He was also sick and in pain. In addition, he was a taciturn person, so it was difficult to draw him out. To overcome the challenge, I also talked to the people who knew him, such as his wife and children.

## SAMPLE STORY

### Excerpt from *Unofficial Raffles' Historians: Raffles Hotel as Seen Through the Eyes of Two Special Guests* by Pauline Loh

Although Raffles has its own resident archivist, Bertie and Cecil put up a healthy competition for the post.

If Bertie is to be believed, when Michael Jackson stayed in Raffles (which he did during the Dangerous World Tour in 1993), a gloved hand was spotted to have silently slid around the door of his suite and then quietly withdrawn. Bertie is also adamant that the great singer moonwalked in the corridor.

They also reminisced the time a great-great-(they were unclear about how many greats) grand nephew of Vincent Van Gogh stayed in Raffles. This famous person had made his suite into an art studio and had invited Bertie and Cecil to view his work.

“And did you know that the front door of Raffles was once at the side?” announced Bertie triumphantly. “Not many people know it. And breakfast used to be eaten outdoors, accompanied by songbirds in cages. Ahh, that has to be my fondest memory. But it's not politically correct now.”

“They (the bellboys) wore these little hats. It's as much a tradition as the doormen's majestic turbans! It's a shame the practice isn't continued. It would be nice to see that again.”

Started on the topic of the doormen, Cecil declared affectionately, “The doormen are our friends. We've gone out socially with one of the brothers, Swaran. One year, he brought us out to eat frog. You heard right – frog. It was at a restaurant across the road from Raffles. Swaran said we *must* try it. The frog was still alive! It was huge! We couldn't eat it. But we did buy a live one. We carried it back to Raffles Palm Court and released it among the bushes. So now, whenever we're back, we would listen out for its croaks. We saved its life!”