**How to write a memoir (a single, one-hour talk)** by Chris Palmer

HOLD UP MY 4 MEMOIRS AND BRIEFLY DISCUSS EACH ONE.

When you write a memoir, you are creating something meaningful and important, something that will help to make sense of your life.

You are creating a legacy that will enrich your own life, the lives of others, the life of your family, including those not yet born.

Let me say right away, it doesn’t matter how bad your writing is. Better to have a lousy draft than a blank sheet. Very few people are like the prolific author Isaac Asimov who only wrote in perfect sentences. I certainly don’t.

You should write your first draft for your eyes only. No censoring, no worrying about possible criticism from others. As you write, try to withhold self-judgment.

Your goal is to produce a poor first draft. Make that your mantra.

How many have already made major progress on a memoir? How many are at the very start of the process? HANDS UP

The first thing to do is to *start a creative journal* and every time you think of an idea, write it down. *(Hold up mine)*

Your creative journal is not the book you are going to write. Rather it is the place for spontaneity, play, creative risks, and total freedom from judgment.

It is a safe, private place where you can capture memories out of order, and experiment with different ideas for structure.

It is a place to make mistakes, write clichés, rant, be unfair, and perhaps have flashes now and then of brilliance. It is for your eyes only. No one else will ever see it.

So I encourage you to have a creative journal. One of the purposes of your creative journal is to capture fleeting memories, and even repressed ones, before you forget them:

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Now what makes a good memoir? Five things:

1. Tell the good and the bad (Not all Panglossian and idyllic)
2. Be gracious when writing about others (use discretion)
3. Be yourself, be authentic
4. Tell stories
5. Write with your audience in mind (general public, a certain demographic, your grandchildren?)

Here is an important question: *Why* do you want to write a memoir? The “why” keeps you going when you hit obstacles or lose motivation or momentum. Viktor Frankl wrote in his famous book *Man’s Search for Meaning* that a person can bear any “how” if he has a “why.” So when you get stuck writing your memoir, or run out of steam in some way, keep coming back to the “why.”

How many of you would like to write a memoir but are overwhelmed by the massiveness of the job? *(See hands raised)* The way around that feeling of overwhelm is to break it down into tasks and subtasks, to “chunk” the project.

So what is the best way to organize or chunk your memoir?

There are several ways to do this. Divide your life by decades and write a chapter on each decade OR divide your life by pivotal events and make those events the topics of the chapters OR divide your life by major decisions you’ve made OR list your desires as you moved through your life OR divide your life by the major stepping stones in a relationship. Or any number of other ways. One of my memoirs was constructed around confessions and mistakes I had made in my life.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS?

Let’s talk about the importance of story. We need to find the stories in our memoirs!

Three essential story elements:

1. *Take the journey*: initiating incident, problem, desire
2. *Face the challenge*: struggle with adversity, disappointments, and setbacks.
3. *Find the victory*: crisis, climax, realization, transformation

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS?

Here is an exercise in remembering. Try it tonight! Think of an experience you want to include in your memoir. Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. Imagine yourself to be living through the experience again. Open your eyes and start writing in your creative journal while answering questions like:

* What do I see?
* What do I feel?
* What do I hear?
* What am I thinking?

If you can’t answer these questions, make up answers being as truthful as you can. *Allow your imagination to take over where memory stops.* Add movement. Turn it into a movie.

See and feel yourself move and play a role in the film. What happens? What do you do? What do you think and say? What changes?

While it may not be literal truth, it may have emotional truth. You are combining imagination with memory to try to find a deeper truth. We saw an example of this in *The Crown* concerning the relationship between Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth. Their conversations were not literally true (obviously), but we gained insight into their marriage.

Making up the truth in this way may not work for some of you, but for others of you who have faint memories of important events, this might help to jog your memory.

Here is a similar exercise you can try tonight: Choose a moment you don’t remember very well and write about it in the present tense. Any memory fragment will do.

For example, your earliest memory, an embarrassing moment, an experience that took your breath away, your first kiss, or whatever. Write fast, don’t stop, and don’t worry about grammar or spelling or good English.

This technique is useful for blasting through memory blocks as you are writing.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS?

Some of you might feel hindered because you are concerned about judging people. This is a challenge. One way to approach this problem is through the use of telling details rather than broad, sweeping adjectives like selfish, arrogant, or cowardly. Find the details that distinguish the person from others. This might include gestures and behaviors.

Here is another exercise you can do tonight.

In your creative journals, select a character who plays a large role in your memoir, and list colorful and interesting details about them, trying to avoid pejorative, belittling adjectives.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS?

Here are two ways to trigger and spark memories that you may have forgotten or repressed:

First , look at old photos: looking at photos may help some of you remember. Feel free to do this for *homework*.

Second, build a memory house. What I mean by that is get out a piece of paper and draw a floor plan. Slowly go through the house letting it trigger memories. Write about it in your creative journal. I encourage you to do this for *homework*. (trigger, provoke, ignite, jumpstart, activate, spark, release, arouse, stimulate)

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS?

Some of you are dealing with trauma and intense pain in your memoirs. We don’t simply want to recall trauma or painful experiences, but rather write about them in such a way that we bring meaning to them and so can begin to heal. Remember this key point: *We heal by making meaning out of memory*.

It takes courage and grit to open old wounds. Being unsparingly candid and baring-all, and doing so in a way that produces meaning and insight, can be therapeutic and revelatory.

[Sometimes the only meaning we can make is to create an interesting memoir about events or experiences that caused us enduring suffering.]

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS?

Some of you will be familiar with the writer William Zinsser.

He wrote several books including *On Writing Well*. He also wrote an essay on how to write a memoir, and he included this advice. *(Quote him).*

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS (FINAL CHANCE)

Let me end with this, and please just go along with me. I want you to close your eyes, palms of hands up. Imagine your finished memoir is in your hands. You are giving it to a loved one having written a thoughtful message on the title page. You see the delight in the face as they leaf through the pages. You feel an intense and visceral gratitude for all the hard work you invested in the book. You never gave up, you keep plugging away every day, and you got if finished. This is an act of both courage and creative imagination.

Thanks for having me! Good luck writing your memoirs!

Memoir talk in one hour