

# How to Write an Autobiographical Essay/Personal Narrative

A short summary of your life story, two to four pages, begins your portfolio. It tells the assessor how you got to be who you are now (attitudes and behaviour), what things you did to gain what you know now (knowledge), and what you can do (skills). It is important for the summary to show how you and your abilities are connected to the kind of work you are doing now and what work you hope to do in the future. The process of making a portfolio, therefore, begins with remembering your life experiences.

There are a number of steps you can follow to help you do this:

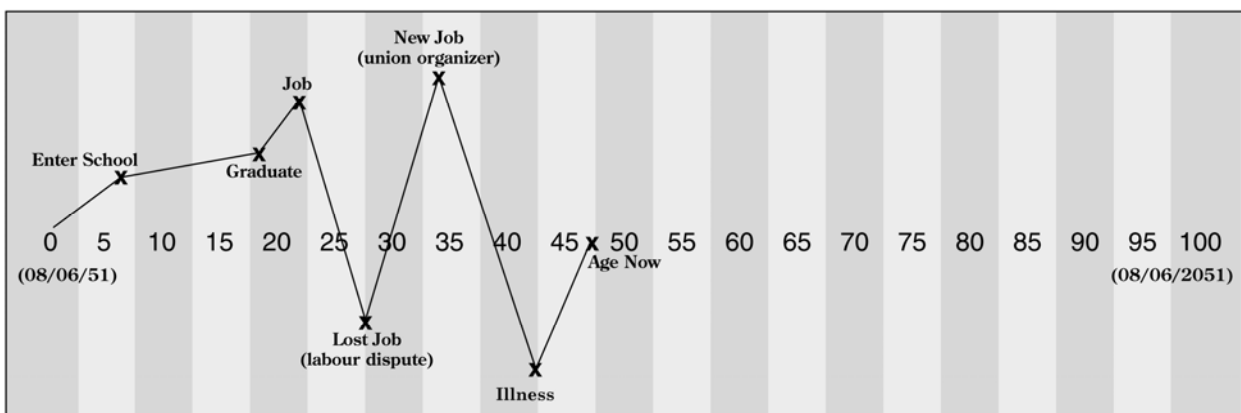
## 1. Drawing a lifeline.

A lifeline is a line drawing that visually shows the important personal and work events, especially voluntary activities, that have happened in your life; for example, you will mark events on the line like your birth, your school entrance, your high school graduation, your first job and any other important highlights (either personal or work related; either large or small) that happened during your life up to the present time that influenced your present learning with respect to your degree program.

### How is drawing a lifeline useful to me?

- A lifeline drawing helps you remember important events in your life so you can write your life story; it is for your personal reference only. It is yours; you do not have to show it to anyone; it is not put in the portfolio; you are making a vision, a picture, of your life.
- However, a summary of this picture must be included in your portfolio so that the assessors can see how you became who you are today, and how your experiences shaped you. For example, they want to know why you sought out your particular knowledge, and /or why you were interested in gaining your particular skills; they want to know how these relate to your present interest in getting a university credential.

### How do I draw a lifeline?



## **2. The importance of marking personal events.**

Judge and mark the important (“critical”) events that happened in your life in this way:

- If a positive event happened to you, mark your “X” ABOVE the appropriate year on the lifeline and ABOVE the line to a height that tells you how important it was to you; marking the “X” very HIGH above the line means the event was very significant to you; marking the “X” above the line, but CLOSER to the line, means the event was not very significant to you.
- If a negative event happened to you, mark your “X” BELOW the appropriate year and BELOW the line to a depth that tells you how important it was to you; again, if you mark the “X” very LOW and away from the line, this means the event was very significant to you; if you mark the “X” below the line, but CLOSER to the line, it was not very significant to you.
- Connect the “Xs” together to form a continuous line from left to right on the paper.
- Some people like to use various colours to mean various things when making their lifeline. This is fine; just make sure they are erasable, as you may change your mind from time to time about the significance of events upon you or you may remember a significant event and want to add it later.

Marking important personal events on the lifeline shows you where you’ve been, where you are, and where you’re headed. These make clearer who you are, so you can explain yourself in detail to anyone, whether it is an assessor or a job interviewer. Assessors are looking for the autobiographical essay to show:

### **Clarity**

- You understand what you offer.
- You understand what you needed at each stage of your life.

### **Strategy**

- An ability to communicate your value to those who want or need what you offer.

### **Action**

- Your ability to move steadily forward to get what you need

## **3. To begin this process, think about your life as having three stages: the past, the present, and the future.**

The following offers detailed instructions on how to revisit your past in order to reflect on your learning – past, present, and future.

### **Looking into the past**

It is important to take a look backward to understand the future. Our present ambitions and abilities often can be found in our childhood. Who one is may be found in early family stories. e.g., a scientist did not speak a word until he was two years old. His first words then came out in a whole sentence. This method of observing, thinking, and rehearsing thoughts carefully before speaking is characteristic of his adult scientific behaviour: observe, collect data, analyze, and speak.

- so think back and identify events in your past that influenced who you are now: what you believe, what is important to you, what you like or dislike
- these may be from your personal life, or from your physical, spiritual, emotional, or intellectual life; what acquired skills and preferences (those that you were born with or

emerged early in life) surfaced in your early work experiences? e.g., what did you learn about yourself from, for example: summers spent with grandparents; a school award; marriages, divorces; births, deaths of family members; recognition for special achievements in sports; a personal best that others might not know about; once these are identified, mark your significant events on the life line with an “X” at the age you were then

- make a separate list of your childhood preferences, talents, and patterns of behaviour that contribute to your current activities now; think of the usual milestones that mark the first 20 years of life; what did you learn about yourself in the way you approached, for example, learning to ride a bike; did you struggle to keep at it until you could do it, in spite of scraped knees; did you fall down and then ask the adults in your life to help you until you learned from this group accomplishment
- what we are trying for here is a recognition of “ Yes, this is me. I’ve been like this from day one!” or, “Oh, I forgot I started being interested in that in my early teens.” e.g., some personal beliefs and values may centre around things like: the importance of strong family ties; learning as a top priority; an interest in human rights and racial or gender equality issues; it is important to be able to identify and get what one needs in the family or on the job; being able to negotiate your way through tough times
- the point is to record anything from your past that tells something about who you are now: significant events, interests, activities, concerns, hopes, qualities, characteristics
- to help organize your thinking about the past, break it into time segments, such as: AGE 0 – 5, AGE 5 – 10, AGE 10 – 15, AGE 16 – 20, AGE 20 – 30, AGE 30 – 40, and AGE 40 on. Here is an example of questions you could ask yourself about your development within a certain timeframe:

### **Age 16 to 20:**

These years mark a transition from dependence to independence and may provide insights into why we are who we are now in our personal and work life:

- between the ages of 16 and 20 how did my life change?
- how well did I feel I fit into the world?
- what was I known for in high school?
- how was I described in our yearbook; the “one most likely to” do what?
- what were my secret wishes, desires, fears; what happened to them?
- how did I make important decisions (e.g., work, college, financial support, living arrangements)?
- did I use careful reasoning and research; decide on impulse; decide independently; decide by discussing with my parents, friends, and teachers?
- what kind of social circles was I in; what role did I take?
- as I began to form adult friendships, who were the people I was drawn to; what did I give and get in those relationships?
- if I started to “work” early on in life, was it to “help out,” to get money, or to gain experience (e.g., helping my parents with chores, putting up a lemonade stand in the summer, bagging groceries at the corner store, or teaching swimming at the local “Y”); what personal qualities about me began to emerge, and what do these experiences say about what I now believe, approach a task, and the kind of work I choose to do?

It’s important to use these events as reflection tools. However, do not get bogged down in details from the past while preparing your personal narrative! While some incidents will be critically important to your development, many are not. Those incidents that are presented as being important must be linked effectively to your present role and aspirations for the future. The “Framing the Issue” piece of the portfolio can provide a good place for making sense of critical incidents from your past. See pages \_\_\_\_ for directions on writing “Framing the Issue.”

### Considering the Present

- Your present age is already marked on the life line with an “X”.
- Your past influences and decisions brought you to where you are now.
- Mark any significant event, either positive, or negative, that is happening now.

### Looking ahead to the Future

It is hard to know where you are going if you do not have a picture of what you want.

- Think about the life stages you anticipate **in the next ten years** (e.g., moving; new career; different professional activities; education; retirement)?
- Think of some goals you have and the age by which you want to attain them.
- Mark them with an “X” on your lifeline (e.g., write a book; increase financial security; live near the mountains); remember you aren’t making commitments here, just outlining possibilities.
- Write down any insights you have doing this exercise (e.g., I need time for: union social justice activities; writing; building savings; finding a dream home near the mountains; attaining a university credential).

### Summarizing

Use your **list of talents and patterns of behaviour** to begin writing your **autobiographical essay**. Keep it brief, but explain how you became the kind of person you are now (**attitudes and behaviour**). Describe your interests and how these influenced you to learn the skills you have today (**knowledge and skills**). How did you decide to enter the kind of work you do now? Where do you want to go from here?