



*'The Long Night'* by Ernst Bornstein

What's your story?

# 1. What is an autobiography?

How can we use language to describe our experiences?

An online self-study course about the Holocaust for secondary school students studying English in KS3 and 4.

# Short lesson 1: Welcome!

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Hello and welcome to this series of short lessons. I'm Dr Tom Haward, and if you click on my picture you'll be able to see a couple of minutes of film introducing you to the course.

# Overview

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This is the first in a series of short, 30-minute lessons that I've put together for you to help think about how language can be used to tell the stories of our lives.

**In this 30 minute lesson you are going to;**

- a) Make predictions about the story of someone's life (5 mins.)
- b) Reflect on what an autobiography is (5 mins.)
- c) Look at examples of how autobiographies are written (10 mins.)
- d) Have a go yourself at using language to start your own life story (10 mins.)

# Introduction: Key icons

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As you work your way through each slide, there will be icons to help show what you are expected to do. The icons are;



Something for you to read



Some extra help for you



An activity for you to do



The time the next section is supposed to take you.



Something for you to think about



A warning that what you are about to see or read may contain things you may find distressing. Do skip this, or stop and talk to someone about it.



# Key terms for this lesson

You may find some of these words useful for this short lesson

Key term	Meaning
autobiographical	where the author writes about their own life
biography	a book where the author writes about someone else's life
characterisation	describing the personality of someone in the story
mystery	writing that has something the reader wants to work out and 'solve.'
objective details	where something is described factually
subjective details	Where someone gives their personal feelings and opinions
testimony	being a witness to a significant event

This is a picture drawn to illustrate a special form of **autobiographical** writing called a **testimony**. It comes from a book we will be looking at in this series of short, self-study lessons.

- What do you think it might be about? Are there any clues? Write down at least 3 ideas.





This picture is just to introduce you to the main book we'll be looking at over this series of short lessons called 'The Long Night' by Ernst Bornstein. You might think about the colours that are used, the expressions on people's faces, and the clothes they are wearing. They all give clues as to what this life story is about ...





At this stage I also want to introduce you to the author of *The Long Night* that we're going to be focusing on. This is Ernst Bornstein with his family, taken in the early 1970s. He is shown with his wife, Renee, whom he married in 1964, and his three children, Noemie, Alain and Muriel. They are a Jewish family.





Ernst and his family are Jewish. During the Second World War he was forced to live in a ghetto and then was sent to seven different camps in occupied-Poland and Germany in what was called the Holocaust – the deliberate murder of six million Jewish people. They are shown on the map here. The things he experienced and witnessed on this journey are recorded in his book ‘The Long Night.’ You will be finding more about his incredible story in the next few lessons.

# What is autobiographical writing?

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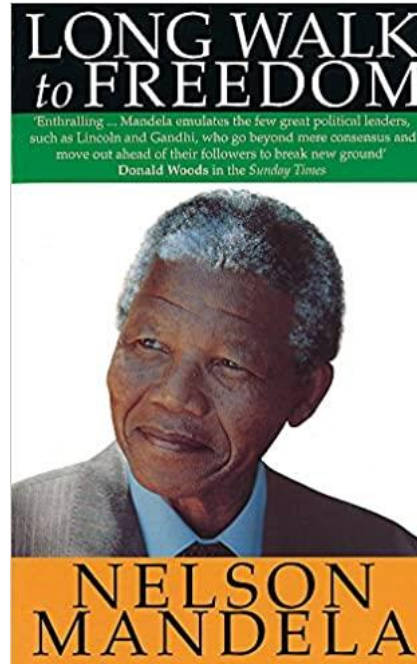
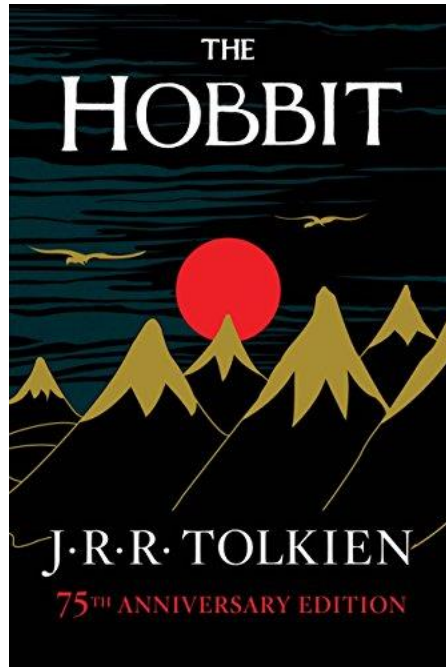
So let's get started now.

This first part is to get you thinking about what **autobiographical** writing is. Why do people write books this way, and who do they write them for?

# What is autobiographical writing?



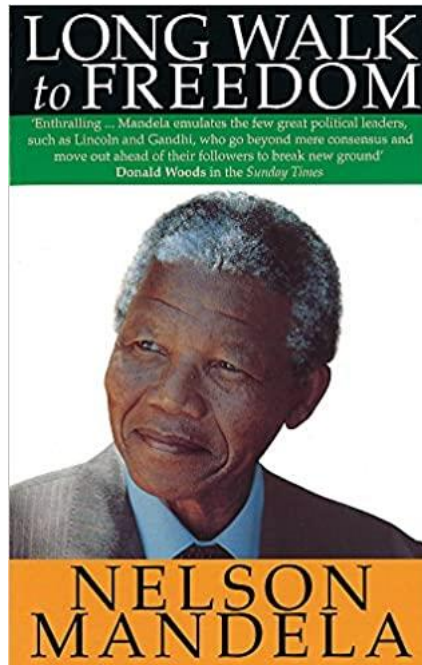
Which of these three books is an autobiography, and how can you tell?  
Make a note of your answer.





# What is autobiographical writing?

An autobiography is where someone writes the story of their own life.

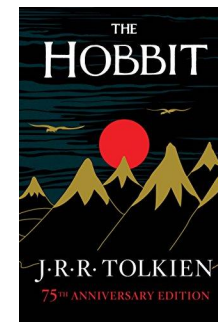


'Long Walk to Freedom' is an **autobiography**.

You can tell this because the author is Nelson Mandela himself, writing about his own life.



'Finding Freedom' is a **biography**. It tells us about the lives of Harry and Meghan, but it isn't written by them.



'The Hobbit' is a work of **fiction**, a fantasy story about a journey made by Bilbo Baggins, a Hobbit. It was written by J.R.R. Tolkien.

# What features does autobiographical writing have?



So now you know what an autobiography is, let's look at three short examples to see what features they have.

The next three slides show three extracts from autobiographies. Read each one and then complete the task in the yellow box on each slide to help develop a list of key features of autobiographical writing. You will be using these ideas to write a paragraph about a story from your own life at the end.

# Example A

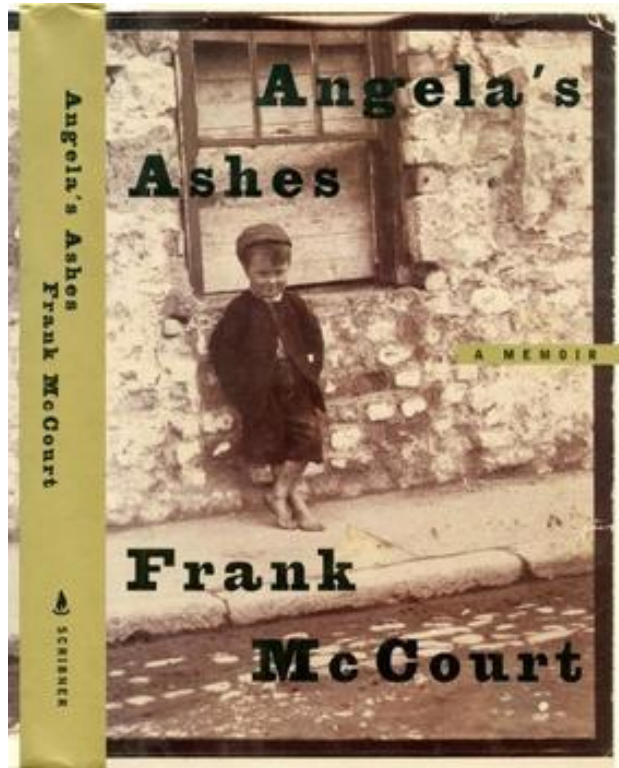
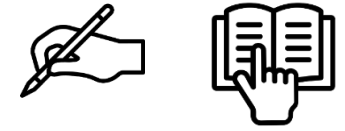


Paddy Clohessy has no shoe to his foot, his mother shaves his head to keep the lice away, his eyes are red, his nose always snotty. The sores on his kneecaps never heal because he picks at the scabs and puts them in his mouth. His clothes are rags he has to share with his six brothers and a sister and when he comes to school with a bloody nose or a black eye you know he had a fight over the clothes that morning. He hates school.

One aspect of writing a good autobiography is to consider the **verb tense the author is** writing in. A basic way of thinking about this is whether it is in the **past** or **present** tense.

- In this extract, what verb tense is the author using, and why?

# Example A



This is an extract from a book called 'Angela's Ashes' by Frank McCourt, describing growing up in Ireland in the 1940s.

When he says his school friend Paddy 'has no shoe to his foot' he is using the present tense. He is describing Paddy as if he is seeing him now. This can help readers better imagine what Paddy was like.

Frank also uses **characterisation**: describing what someone's personality is like, in this case through their appearance, habits, likes and dislikes.

# How can language be used to start an autobiography?



*'Life changes fast.*

*Life changes in the instant.*

*You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

*The question of self-pity.*

Those were the first words I wrote after it happened.'

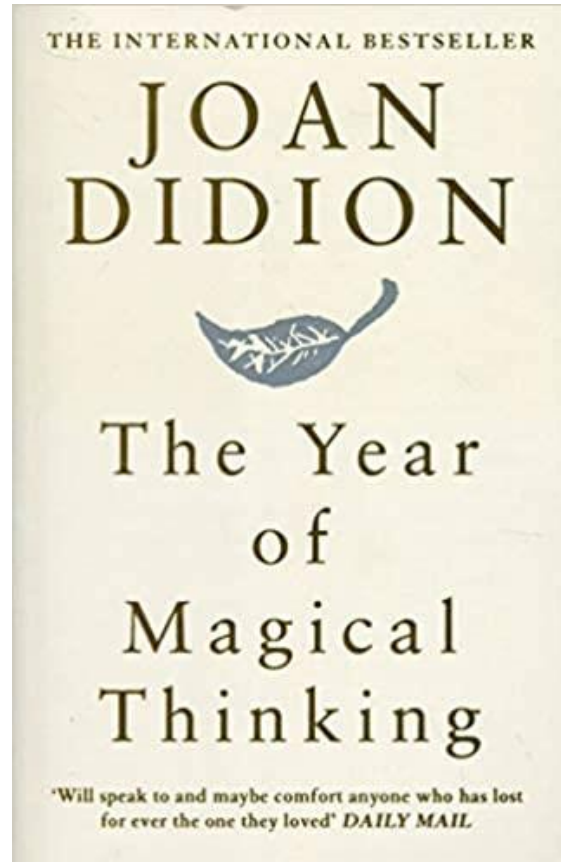
A **mystery** is where the author tries to get you to ask questions to work out what is happening. It's a good way of getting the reader to want to keep reading.

- In this opening, what is the mystery that makes you want to read on? What is it that you want to know?





## Example B



This is the start of an autobiography called 'The Year of Magical Thinking' by Joan Didion.

The **mystery** she creates is about what the 'it' is that has made her life change so suddenly.

In the book, she goes on to describe the sad time when her husband, John Dunne, died. It is a book about a really difficult year in her life and how she tried to cope.

## Example C



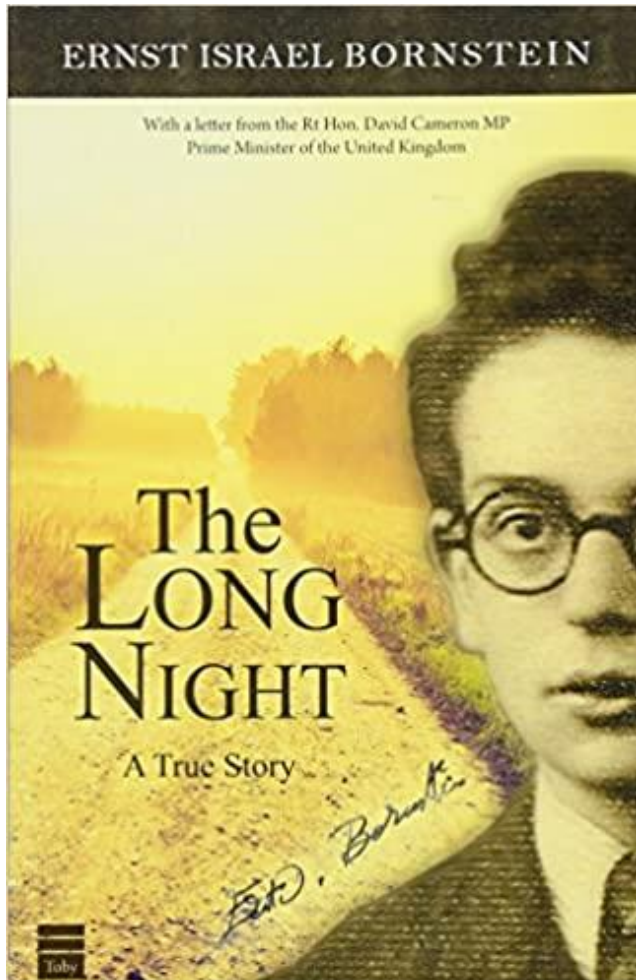
Here we discovered for the first time the difference between thin and thick soup. With sore, burning feet we often had to queue for an hour or more because the soup kettle was frequently emptied before we received our portion; we had no choice but to wait until another cauldron of soup was ready. Often the kitchen personnel just poured water into the soup to make it go further, so it would suffice for all those waiting in the long queue. As soon as we received our soup, we were urged to finish our ration quickly and return the bowl.

Authors of autobiographies often use **details** like this extract about thin and thick soup to tell their life stories. **Objective details** are those which purely descriptive and factual. **Subjective details** are those where the author gives their personal feelings and opinions.

- In this extract, are the details objective or subjective? Why do you think this might be?



# Example C



This is the start of an autobiography called 'The Long Night' by Ernst Bornstein

Ernst writes very **objectively** here. He describes how food is served up in the kitchen without explaining his personal feelings about it.

He is trying to be very factual about it. This is because wants people to know exactly what happened, and make sure people wouldn't make up lies about it in the future. He is what we call an eyewitness to events, and this is his **testimony**, which is why he wants it to be as accurate as possible.

# How could you describe an event from your life?



Now it's your turn!

You're going to write a paragraph or two about an event that's happened in your life. Don't worry too much about how it turns out. At the moment you're just experimenting to find a voice – a way of writing about yourself and your experiences – that suits you.

But do try to include these four things that we've been talking about this lesson;

- **Verb tense.** Will you write in a form of the **past** or **present**?
- **Characterisation.** What are the people you've grown up with like?
- A sense of **mystery** to get the reader interested
- Describing the **detail** of something or an event **objectively** or **subjectively**

When you've finished, show someone at home to see what they think. You could also email it to your teacher to get their opinion too.

# What would be the first lines of your own autobiography?



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If you're a bit stuck just getting writing, here are some sentence starters. You can choose any one – use it as it is or change it a bit - and get going!

***One of my friends has a really annoying habit. For example...***

***It was 3.12 pm on a rainy Sunday afternoon. That's when it happened....***

***I spot something on the floor, picked it up and examine it in detail. It is ...***

# End of short lesson 1

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## Well done!

You have now completed the introduction to ‘What’s your story?’ You have started thinking about some of the ways authors use language to write about their experiences, and even had a go yourself.

You have also been introduced to ‘The Long Night’ by Ernst Bornstein. In the next short lessons you will be looking more closely at how writers of autobiographies get started, and have a go at starting your own!

*'What's your story?'*

## 1. What is an autobiography?



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