

Word Phobia: Steps to Conquering Your Fear of Writing

The photos are sorted, the shapes and patterns chosen, the color scheme is great. You trim and punch and place, imagining yourself sharing this album with friends and family. You'll sit on the couch describing who, what, where and when. You'll tell the story, giving the details, laughing, remembering, reliving these days: how bubbly Tyler was at three (*don't ever forget "two, two, two! here me come!"*), how hectic the holidays were with a pageant, a company party, and Kayla's recital all the same week (*don't ever forget Kayla's inspired ad-lib when the icicles forgot their part*), how great the birthday bash was (*don't ever forget Dad's I-can't-believe-you-surprised-me face*) and it's all there on the page, right?

Wrong! Unless you confront your word phobia soon, the page has only the pictures, a few clever captions ("Gotcha, Dad!"), and your lovely decorations. But the story isn't there! The story only comes alive in your memory (for a while) and in your telling (from time to time). Your page, however creative, is the evidence left behind by the story, the life — the lifestory — you want your albums to record. The element that's missing is the words.

Preventing story loss

Lost-story photos are all too familiar. So is that uneasy feeling of "I used to remember." (*Who is that man next to— is it Uncle Bill? Is that St. Augustine, 1996 or is that the lighthouse near Nana's condo? Is that goblin Davey or Emma?*)

Memory loss compounded by word phobia is a problem facing every family and every scrapbooker. There is only one remedy: you have to write the stories down. The evidence is overwhelming that they will be lost if you don't. It's just a matter of time.

If you, like most dedicated scrapbookers, face the task of photo-journaling, or photoscribing, as I call it, with well-established dread and some very effective, fully-developed avoidance strategies, take heart. There is a cure for word phobia.

Diagnosis: word phobia

Admit it. You are a word-phobic. Faced with a blank, expectant piece of paper, armed with a pen and good intentions, you feel vulnerable, inadequate, and desperate to clean out a closet or wash the kitchen floor instead of writing.

You claim that your handwriting is awful. You've always been, shall we say, creative when it comes to spelling and punctuation. The word "grammar" puts you to sleep, and most of all, you just hate how that glow of memory you get from a photo ends up stiff and dry and totally dull when you try to put it into words.

Conquer your fear of writing

Yet you know it's worth doing. You know that you know the stories you want to record, the stories you share as you sit on the couch. The fading family history in your parents' albums, the unexplained images from your own childhood haunt you with unanswered questions. Still, that blank page makes you break out in a sweat and you succumb to filling the page with decorations, not details.

Your album page lies before you, white, empty, expectant. How can you get a grip, conquer your word phobia, and let the story flow? "Practice makes perfect." It's what you'd tell a discouraged child or a dispirited friend. It's good advice for word phobics, too! Writing gets better only when you write.

Remedial action you can take today

Here are suggestions for reluctant writers, each one a simple step towards crafting a deeper layer of meaning into your albums by challenging your "I can't" demon. Follow them to develop the habits and the skills of a lifestory writer, a confident family historian, a successful scrapbooking photoscribe.

1) Take time to be with your photos. Reflect, then write. Allow yourself to return to the era in each picture. Recall the background as well as the foreground of that time: what was happening behind the scenes with family or friends? What the camera didn't capture is part of the story even though it's not part of the photo. It sounds so obvious that it's often overlooked: remembering is the key to effective photoscribing.

2) Create a MemoryList. Jot down everyone and everything. Nothing is insignificant. If you remember it, it belongs on your MemoryList. Though every detail may not make it into your final story, it's worth including here because the the more you jot down, the more you will remember. Three to five words per item (person, place, event, details of any kind) is usually enough. Like a road map, the MemoryList, whether a work-in-process for the present or a recreation for the past, guides the photoscribe along the way.

3) Choose the most meaningful photos to photoscribe. Drop the unrealistic expectation to write about every photo. Choose ones of the most meaningful aspects of your life. These can be the ordinary moments as well as the highlight events. Recognize the value of background details. Even photos with poor focus or composition sometimes contain memories you want to keep. Life's most important moments don't always coincide with artificial photo-ops.

4) Write naturally. Sounds easy, right? — it is! Take it step by step. Write whatever comes to mind. Write for yourself, in your own voice. Fire that monkey on your shoulder who criticizes every word. Instead of getting distracted by thoughts of how someone else might word it, imagine a conversation with a friend and write down those words, the words you use every day. Then, read it over and cross out anything you've repeated or anything that doesn't add to the memory. Is any detail missing? If a stranger (your great-great-grandchild!) reads this story, will they understand? Check your MemoryList for this era or event. Add anything you forgot.

Practice really can make perfect

These first four steps are foolproof. If you do them you will write the stories behind your photos. Like anything, photoscribing improves with practice. As you gain experience and confidence keep these tips in mind:

1) Use details. Details make readers (that's you, years from now) feel they are living the experience themselves. So mention colors, sizes, textures, temperatures. Include lyrics, menus, recipes, guest lists, flora, and fauna. Describe the sound of voices,

the gait, the style, the posture of people. Check your MemoryList for all the details that add depth and breadth.

2) Be a story sleuth by going beyond the photo. Look for the story that's not in the photo. The life you want to preserve is more than the scenes caught on film. Write the before and after happenings, feelings, settings. Write the little things that make up a picture that's bigger and fuller than the one the camera captured. Search for clues. Can you guess meaning from the way people are standing together or apart? Trust your intuition. Is someone missing? Why may be part of the story.

3) Write about the photos you don't have. Memories don't exist just because they appear in a picture. Think of your scrapbooks as lifestory albums not just photo albums. They can and should include short or long stories — word pictures — that link or set the scene for the events and characters that do appear in photographs. The story goes on (and has been going on) even when the camera wasn't there.

4) Let simplicity be your rule. Short sentences are fine. Your own voice speaking everyday words will convey more of you than any attempt to be fancy. You don't have to be clever, witty, or profound. Let the story itself emerge as you write. Focus each piece on one story. Write a second story with the leftovers.

5) Use all the writing elements you can. Stories that include descriptions of places and people, with dialog that sounds like real people and action that makes you feel like you are right there are always our favorites. Brief stories for albums can contain all these elements. Be inventive as you photoscribe! Add interest by telling a story in dialog and scenic description, or through action and a character portrait. Enjoy the creative act of putting pieces of the word picture puzzle together.

The blank, expectant page is before you. Is that dread that makes your heartbeat quicken or is it eagerness to shape your story into words? Perhaps you have discovered that your word phobia was an imaginary demon, all smoke and shadows and fed by outgrown fears. If you accept the photoscribing challenge to create storied pages for your albums, you'll soon be taking as much pleasure in trimming words as

photographs for your pages! The photoscribed album is rich with all the color, shape and pattern of your life, the texture of your voice in your own words, telling your own story. It's a legacy your great-great-grandchildren deserve to inherit. Life is short; clean the closet later.

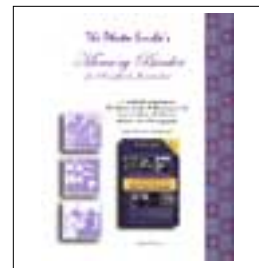
These exercises are from
The Photo Scribe: A Writing Guide
How to Write the Stories Behind Your Photographs.

You'll find more help for writing lifestories and
for making your albums come alive with stories at
<http://www.turningmemories.com>

For more on:



The Photo Scribe



The Photo Scribe's Memory Binder



Writing Great Cameo Narratives Pad



Writing Great Memory Lists Pad