

Autobiography Revision Checklist

Systematic guide to polish your manuscript to completion

HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

Approach: 1. Print this checklist and your manuscript 2. Work through one category at a time 3. Mark sections that need revision 4. Fix issues before moving to next category 5. Return for final check after all revisions

Suggested Order: 1. Big Picture (structure, coherence) 2. Content (scenes, accuracy, depth) 3. Style (voice, language, pacing) 4. Technical (grammar, formatting)

PART 1: BIG PICTURE STRUCTURE

Overall Coherence

- ☐ **Clear central theme** runs throughout manuscript
- ☐ **Opening hooks reader** and establishes what story is about
- ☐ **Ending provides closure** and connects to opening
- ☐ **All sections support main theme** (no tangents)
- ☐ **Logical organization** (chronological, thematic, or blended works)
- ☐ **Smooth transitions** between chapters/sections
- ☐ **Balanced coverage** (important periods get appropriate space)

Red Flags: - Reader asks “What is this about?” - Sections feel disconnected - Abrupt jumps without transition - Too much time on unimportant periods

Quick Fix: Write one-sentence summary of each chapter. Do they build toward something? If not, reorganize or cut weak sections.

Narrative Arc

- ☐ **Clear beginning** establishes who you were
- ☐ **Developed middle** shows change/growth/challenges
- ☐ **Satisfying ending** demonstrates transformation
- ☐ **Character development** (you) is evident throughout
- ☐ **Tension/conflict** present (not just chronology)
- ☐ **Change is earned** (not sudden or unexplained)

Test: Can you summarize your transformation in one sentence? If not, the arc needs work.

Chapter/Section Balance

- ☐ **Chapters are appropriate length** (relatively consistent)
- ☐ **Each chapter has clear focus** (one period/theme/event)
- ☐ **No chapters feel rushed** (major events need space)
- ☐ **No chapters drag** (minor details don't dominate)
- ☐ **Proportional coverage** (significant events get more pages)

Action Items: - Combine short, similar chapters - Split overstuffed chapters at natural

breaks - Expand important moments with scene and reflection - Cut or condense less relevant material

PART 2: CONTENT & ACCURACY

Factual Verification

- ☐ **Dates are accurate** (check records if uncertain)
- ☐ **Names spelled correctly** (people, places, organizations)
- ☐ **Places described accurately** (verify if memory unclear)
- ☐ **Timeline is consistent** (no conflicting dates)
- ☐ **Ages match dates** (math checks out)
- ☐ **Historical context accurate** (verify major events/dates)
- ☐ **Quotes attributed correctly** (verify if claiming exact words)

Mark passages with: - (?) where memory is uncertain - [verify] where facts need checking - Note sources for verification (family, documents, photos)

Memory Honesty

- ☐ **Acknowledge when memory is uncertain**
- ☐ **Distinguish fact from interpretation**
- ☐ **Don't claim memories you don't have**
- ☐ **Note conflicting versions** if family disagrees
- ☐ **Avoid false specificity** (making up details)

Good Practice: - "I remember..." vs. "I was told..." - "As I recall..." vs. "I've since learned..." - "My memory of this is hazy, but..."

Scene Development

- ☐ **Important moments shown as scenes** (not just summarized)
- ☐ **Scenes include sensory details** (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste)
- ☐ **Dialogue feels authentic** (natural, not stilted)
- ☐ **Setting clearly established** (reader can visualize)
- ☐ **Action is clear** (what's happening physically)
- ☐ **Scenes have purpose** (reveal character, advance story)

Weak Scene Indicators: - All telling, no showing - Generic descriptions ("nice house," "good day") - Missing sensory details - No dialogue despite conversation

Revision Strategy: Choose 3-5 most important moments. Expand into full scenes with sensory details, dialogue, and specific action.

Reflection & Analysis

- ☐ **Balance of event and reflection** (not just "what" but "why")
- ☐ **Reflection shows growth** (past vs. present understanding)
- ☐ **Insights feel earned** (not forced wisdom)
- ☐ **Avoids clichés** (generic life lessons)
- ☐ **Connection to theme** (reflections relate to main story)
- ☐ **Appropriate depth** (serious moments get serious reflection)

Test: After major events, ask: - What did you understand then? - What do you understand now? - How did this change you?

Emotional Authenticity

- ☐ **Emotions feel genuine** (not performed)
- ☐ **Vulnerable without oversharing** (appropriate boundaries)
- ☐ **Complex emotions acknowledged** (not oversimplified)
- ☐ **Difficult moments not minimized** (honest about pain)
- ☐ **Joy and triumph not exaggerated** (authentic celebration)
- ☐ **Allows for contradictions** (ambivalent feelings okay)

Warning Signs: - Everything resolved neatly - No complicated feelings - Excessive positivity or negativity - Emotions feel fake or forced

People Portrayal

- ☐ **Fair characterization** (balanced, not one-dimensional)
- ☐ **Specific details** (not generic descriptions)
- ☐ **Dialogue captures their voice** (distinctive speech patterns)
- ☐ **Motivation considered** (why they acted as they did)
- ☐ **Complexity acknowledged** (heroes and villains are human)
- ☐ **Privacy respected** (see sensitivity check below)

Good Practice: Show people through action and dialogue, not just description. Include redeeming qualities of antagonists, flaws of heroes.

PART 3: STYLE & VOICE

Voice Consistency

- ☐ **Consistent tone throughout** (doesn't shift jarringly)
- ☐ **Voice is authentic** (sounds like you)
- ☐ **Appropriate formality level** (matches purpose/audience)
- ☐ **Perspective consistent** (past/present balance maintained)
- ☐ **Style suits content** (serious moments = serious tone)

Read aloud test: Does it sound like one person wrote it?

Language & Word Choice

- ☐ **Active, specific verbs** (not passive, vague)
- ☐ **Concrete nouns** (specific, not generic)
- ☐ **Varied sentence structure** (mix of short and long)
- ☐ **No unnecessary words** (concise, not wordy)
- ☐ **Clichés eliminated** (“at the end of the day,” “what doesn’t kill you”)
- ☐ **Fresh metaphors** (original comparisons, not tired ones)
- ☐ **Appropriate vocabulary** (accessible but not dumbed down)

Common Weak Phrases: - “very,” “really,” “quite” (usually unnecessary) - “started to,” “began to” (often just say the action) - “I think,” “I feel” (assumed; usually cut) - “in order to” (usually just “to”)

Pacing

- ☐ **Important scenes slow down** (detailed, present)
- ☐ **Transitions move quickly** (summarized efficiently)
- ☐ **No long stretches without scene** (balance summary and scene)
- ☐ **Varied pacing throughout** (not all fast or all slow)
- ☐ **Building toward climax** (tension/interest increases)
- ☐ **Appropriate detail level** (more for important, less for minor)

Pacing Problems: - Important moment rushed in one paragraph - Minor details get full scenes - Too much summary (feels distant) - Too much scene (exhausting, loses focus)

Fix: Speed up transitions/minor events. Slow down pivotal moments.

Dialogue

- ☐ **Sounds natural** (people actually talk this way)
- ☐ **Each person has distinct voice** (not all sound the same)
- ☐ **Purposeful** (reveals character or advances story)
- ☐ **Properly formatted** (correct punctuation)
- ☐ **Not overused** (balanced with narrative)
- ☐ **Realistic for time period** (no anachronisms)

Dialogue Red Flags: - Too formal/stiff - Everyone sounds identical - Explaining things characters already know - Perfect grammar when people don't speak that way

Show vs. Tell Balance

- ☐ **Important emotions shown** (through action, not labels)
- ☐ **Character traits demonstrated** (not just stated)
- ☐ **Sensory details included** (not just abstractions)
- ☐ **Strategic telling** (efficient for minor details)
- ☐ **Showing for key moments** (scenes for important events)

Examples:

Telling: "I was angry." **Showing:** "My hands clenched the steering wheel until my knuckles whitened."

Telling: "My mother was loving." **Showing:** "She always cut my sandwiches diagonally, the way I liked, even when rushing to work."

PART 4: SENSITIVITY & PRIVACY

Privacy Considerations

- ☐ **Living people's privacy protected** (permission or anonymity)
- ☐ **Children's identities protected** (if they can't consent)
- ☐ **Sensitive information flagged** (consider impact of revealing)
- ☐ **Others portrayed fairly** (especially if critical)
- ☐ **Legal issues considered** (defamation, privacy laws)
- ☐ **Shared stories respected** (family secrets, collective trauma)

Strategies: - Use pseudonyms for privacy - Composite characters for minor figures - Get permission for major portrayal - Consider who might be hurt by revelations - Focus on your experience, not diagnosing others

Cultural Sensitivity

- ☐ **Stereotypes avoided** (groups portrayed with complexity)
 - ☐ **Historical context appropriate** (acknowledge when views have evolved)
 - ☐ **Language respectful** (terminology appropriate for time and now)
 - ☐ **Not speaking for entire groups** (your experience, not universal)
 - ☐ **Privilege acknowledged** where relevant
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Trauma & Difficult Content

- ☐ **Trauma treated with gravity** (not sensationalized)
- ☐ **Appropriate detail level** (graphic only if necessary)
- ☐ **Agency in your story** (not just victim narrative)
- ☐ **Healing/growth shown** (if applicable)
- ☐ **Resources considered** (for readers facing similar issues)
- ☐ **Warning if graphic content** (for potential triggers)

Balance: Be honest without being gratuitous. Include enough for truth, not every detail.

PART 5: TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

Grammar & Mechanics

- ☐ **Subject-verb agreement** throughout
- ☐ **Consistent verb tense** (usually past, present for reflection)
- ☐ **Correct punctuation** (commas, periods, quotation marks)
- ☐ **No run-on sentences** or fragments (unless intentional)
- ☐ **Proper apostrophe use** (possessives, contractions)
- ☐ **Spelling checked** (especially names)

Common Errors: - Mixing past and present tense randomly - “Me and X” instead of “X and I” - Missing commas in dialogue - Its/it’s confusion

Formatting

- ☐ **Consistent chapter headings** (same style throughout)
 - ☐ **Paragraph breaks appropriate** (not walls of text)
 - ☐ **Dialogue formatted correctly** (new speaker = new paragraph)
 - ☐ **Scene breaks indicated** (** or extra space)
 - ☐ **Font and spacing consistent** (if for submission/publication)
 - ☐ **Page numbers included** (if applicable)
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Length & Pacing

- ☐ **Meets target length** (or deliberately exceeds/falls short)
- ☐ **No unnecessary padding** (content-driven length)
- ☐ **Important material included** (nothing crucial missing)
- ☐ **Extraneous material cut** (tangents removed)
- ☐ **Chapters roughly balanced** (no 2-page and 50-page chapters)

If Too Long: - Cut less relevant anecdotes - Combine similar events - Summarize minor transitions - Remove repetitive reflection

If Too Short: - Develop key scenes with detail - Add reflection on major events - Include

more sensory description - Expand important relationships

PART 6: FINAL POLISH

Title & Front Matter

- ☐ **Strong title** (intriguing, relevant, memorable)
 - ☐ **Subtitle if needed** (clarifies focus)
 - ☐ **Dedication appropriate** (if included)
 - ☐ **Epigraph meaningful** (if included)
 - ☐ **Author bio written** (for back matter)
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Opening & Closing

- ☐ **First page hooks reader** (compelling opening)
- ☐ **First paragraph strong** (no weak starts)
- ☐ **Introduction establishes stakes/theme**
- ☐ **Conclusion circles back** to opening
- ☐ **Final paragraph satisfying** (leaves impression)
- ☐ **Last sentence resonates** (memorable close)

Weak Openings to Avoid: - “I was born on...” - Dictionary definitions - “Let me tell you about my life...” - Apologizing or explaining

Read-Aloud Test

- ☐ **Read entire manuscript aloud** (catches awkward phrasing)
- ☐ **All dialogue sounds natural** when spoken
- ☐ **Rhythm and flow work** (not choppy or monotonous)
- ☐ **No tongue-twisters** (revise hard-to-say phrases)
- ☐ **Pacing feels right** (speeds up/slows down appropriately)

This step is crucial. Many issues only become apparent when reading aloud.

Fresh Eyes Review

- ☐ **Set manuscript aside** (minimum 1 week)
 - ☐ **Return with fresh perspective**
 - ☐ **Read as if you’re the audience** (not the writer)
 - ☐ **Note confusing passages** (clarify unclear sections)
 - ☐ **Mark boring sections** (cut or enliven)
 - ☐ **Identify strongest parts** (learn what works)
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Beta Reader Feedback

- ☐ **At least 2 beta readers** from target audience
- ☐ **Specific questions asked** (not just “what do you think?”)
- ☐ **Feedback considered** (but not all implemented blindly)
- ☐ **Pattern recognition** (multiple readers note same issue)
- ☐ **Confusion addressed** (if readers don’t understand something)

Good Questions for Beta Readers: - Where did you get confused? - What parts

dragged? - What surprised or moved you? - Do I come across as likable/sympathetic? - What's the main thing you'll remember?

REVISION COMPLETION CHECKLIST

Before considering manuscript complete:

Content Complete

- ☐ All planned chapters/sections written
- ☐ No major gaps in story
- ☐ Theme clearly developed throughout
- ☐ Beginning, middle, and end all strong
- ☐ Character arc (your development) evident

Quality Assured

- ☐ All sections revised at least twice
- ☐ Weak scenes strengthened or cut
- ☐ Dialogue authentic and purposeful
- ☐ Reflection balanced with event
- ☐ Voice consistent throughout

Technical Sound

- ☐ Grammar and spelling checked
- ☐ Formatting consistent
- ☐ Transitions smooth
- ☐ Pacing appropriate
- ☐ Length appropriate for purpose

Sensitivity Reviewed

- ☐ Privacy concerns addressed
- ☐ Fair portrayal of others
- ☐ Cultural sensitivity checked
- ☐ Legal issues considered
- ☐ Trauma handled appropriately

Polished

- ☐ Read aloud completely
 - ☐ Beta reader feedback incorporated
 - ☐ Opening and closing strong
 - ☐ Title finalized
 - ☐ Ready for submission/publication
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COMMON AUTOBIOGRAPHY WEAKNESSES

Problem: Too Much Summary, Not Enough Scene

Symptoms: - Reads like a timeline - Emotionally distant - “And then... and then...”

Fix: - Choose 5-10 most important moments - Develop into full scenes with dialogue, detail, action - Balance summary (transitions) with scene (key events)

Problem: No Reflection or Too Much

Symptoms: - Just events with no meaning (too little) - Constant interpretation, no story (too much)

Fix: - After major events, add 1-2 paragraphs reflection - Show before telling (scene, then interpret) - Let some moments speak for themselves

Problem: Boring Middle

Symptoms: - Strong start, weak continuation - Reader loses interest - No tension or conflict

Fix: - Identify central conflict/question - Build tension toward climax - Vary pacing (scene, summary, reflection) - Cut tangential material

Problem: People as Props

Symptoms: - Others feel flat or generic - No real relationships shown - Everyone exists only to affect you

Fix: - Give key people distinctive traits - Show them acting independently - Include dialogue revealing their personality - Acknowledge their perspective

Problem: Resolution Too Neat

Symptoms: - Everything works out perfectly - All questions answered - No ambiguity or ongoing struggle

Fix: - Acknowledge complexity - Allow unresolved elements - Show ongoing growth - Avoid false wisdom

FINAL QUESTIONS

Before declaring your manuscript finished, honestly answer:

1. **Would I want to read this?** If no: What's missing?
2. **Does this tell the story I intended?** If no: What needs to change?
3. **Am I proud of this work?** If no: What would make you proud?
4. **Have I been honest?** If no: Where are you hiding?
5. **Is this the best I can make it right now?** If no: What specific improvements remain?

If you answered "yes" to all five, your manuscript is ready.

REMEMBER

Revision is not: - Fixing typos (that's proofreading) - One pass-through - Optional

Revision is: - Re-seeing your work - Strengthening structure - Deepening meaning - Multiple passes - Essential for quality

Your story deserves the time and effort of thorough revision.

When in doubt, wait another week, read again, and revise again.

The manuscript is finished when you've done everything you know how to do—and you're ready to let it go.