

Syllabus: Sequential Guided Autobiography Courses for Older Adults

Overview

This syllabus outlines two separate Guided Autobiography courses designed for adults aged 50-90. Each course stands independently, allowing participants to choose one or both based on their interests and needs. While the courses are designed to be taken sequentially (Course 1 and then Course 2), both courses support the creation of personal narratives. Courses will be offered one per OLLI term.

Both courses are based on the Guided Autobiography process developed by Dr. James Birren and Dr. Cheryl Swenson at the Birren Center, a California non-profit. Dr. Orem has been certified by the Birren Center in 2024 to teach GAB courses.

Course 1: Core Life Narratives (4 Sessions)

Title: "Foundations of Your Story: Exploring Life's Central Themes"

This course guides participants through four foundational themes (out of 10) that form the backbone of most personal narratives:

Session 1: The Meaning of Money

Participants identify what money has meant to them throughout their lives, or how the meaning of money has changed over time.

Session 2: Self-image and wellbeing

This session explores self-image and how self-image impacts wellbeing.

Session 3: The Male-Female Equation

Whether participants are female, male, or neither or both, we have relationships with whomever “the others” represent. How has our own gender (whether life-long, fluid or trans) impacted our experience in our culture and organizations.

Session 4: End of life

This session addresses participants' experience of the end of life, whether it means our wishes for our own end, our experience of a loved one's end, the legacy we want to leave, or something else about this life transition.

Individual Course Structure

Format for Each Session:

- Opening circle and check-in (15 minutes)
- Small group sharing (60 minutes)
- Break (10 minutes)
- Large group discussion and insights (25 minutes)
- Mini-lecture on week's theme with writing prompts (30 minutes)
- Closing reflection and homework assignment (10 minutes)

Session Length: 2.5 hours

Class limit: 18

Materials for Each Course:

- Course-specific writing prompts for each theme
- Reading list with exemplary autobiographical excerpts
- Guidelines for respectful listening and sharing

Educational Approach

Both courses are grounded in positive psychology principles, emphasizing:

- Meaning-making through narrative reflection
- Recognition of personal strengths and resilience
- Integration of life experiences into a coherent identity
- Cultivation of wisdom through life review
- Building community through shared stories

Participant Engagement

Participants will be encouraged to:

- Attend both courses, but whichever course(s) appeal to their current interests and needs will be encouraged.
- Continue their autobiographical writing journey by taking the second course if they find the process valuable
- Write 800-1000 words between sessions at home. Participants will be encouraged to read aloud each week on the topic for that week.
- Reading will be done in small groups of 4-5. Feedback from group members will focus on appreciation of experience and description of topic. **Writing structure is not the focus of this class.**

- Form informal writing groups after course completion to sustain their narrative work

Expected Outcomes for Each Course

Participants will:

- Complete 4 autobiographical vignettes tied to important life themes
- Develop increased narrative coherence and life satisfaction
- Identify patterns, values, and wisdom in their life journey
- Experience social connection through shared reflection
- Create meaningful written legacy material for personal or family use

Each course is designed to be complete in itself while offering participants the option to continue their autobiographical exploration through the second course if they wish to expand their narrative work.

Instructor Bio- Sara Orem

With over a decade of teaching experience at OLLI, Dr. Sara Orem brings both academic expertise and practical wisdom to the Guided Autobiography process. As the founder of Vital Aging, which began as an interest group in 2020 before becoming a core OLLI offering in 2022, she has helped countless adults discover the power of personal storytelling.

Sara holds a doctorate in human and organizational systems with a focus on positive psychology and is certified in the Guided Autobiography process. Her popular courses on writing, gratitude, finding joy, and mindfulness reflect her commitment to enhancing well-being through reflective practice.

This Guided Autobiography course welcomes all OLLI members interested in preserving their life stories—whether you're just beginning your storytelling journey or looking to enhance memoir writing already in progress. Join Sara for this transformative experience in capturing your unique legacy.