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The Mental Edge: Become a better writer of your life story

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Whether or not you are fully aware of it, you have a story that shapes your life. I want to help you become more aware of this narrative and mix it up a bit. You can become a better writer of your life story.

Some people have a story that enriches them. They see themselves as the coordinator of their family and instinctively organize pizza and movie night. Social leaders jump to the task of planning their college reunion. When travel opportunities come up, adventurers don't question them.

If your story is authentic and compelling to you, embrace it.

Your story, however, may limit you. If you see yourself as shy, unimportant to others, or deeply flawed, habits and patterns have formed.

You may not question the invitations you turn down anymore or consider asking for the support you need at work. If you expect others to disappoint you in the end, you may preemptively hold back affection in relationships.

Your story can harden into a rut.

To revise your story, notice your narrative. Your thoughts, actions and life may have a theme.

Do you tend to experience yourself as powerless? Are you a self-sacrificing character that defaults to feeling responsible for others? Do you see yourself as profoundly different from those around you?

Sometimes the people close to you can better see the patterns in your life.

Who has written your story? Your pursuits may originate from someone else's dream. Kids can play sports because of the unfulfilled hopes of their parents, finding that the joy is absent as they progress.

Some professionals can report that, since such strong career expectations existed in their childhood, they never deeply questioned their direction for themselves. Anyone can find an emptiness to their story when someone else outlined the chapters.

To stimulate growth, invite a plot twist. You can drive a new way home, visit a different coffee shop, or wear red, if that isn't even close to your norm.

You can apply for a job that seems beyond your reach, or travel farther from home than anyone in your family. Treasure the moments when you surprise yourself.

Bring another character into the story. Ask a colleague for advice, even though this is something you just don't do. Invite an impressive acquaintance for coffee.

Join a group activity, such as a running club, and the members might delight you on the way to a 5K.

Make contact with others and open up to influence.

Verbalize multiple directions your story could take. Describe a life living in Florida or France. Put words on a new career teaching kindergarten. Visualize standing up to your parents, and setting more boundaries on visits than ever before.

Scenario-building develops flexible storytelling.

Accept that writing is rewriting and that no draft is perfect. You will need to introduce new subplots, close chapters and move to new settings.

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Though we would like to delete our mistakes, they enrich the tale, even if they lead to breaking a finger or losing a wallet.

Compelling stories involve change. Notice subtle shifts that occur naturally in your preferences, style and taste.

For example, a nightclub that seemed like a dive could turn into a comfortable hangout. A person who you saw as different may become a good friend. Value small developments to create room for larger ones.

Write with an active voice, as good stories don't write themselves.

Plan something interesting to do on Saturday night. When a friend asks, "Where do you want to go for dinner?" make a proposal and please avoid "wherever you want." Use your voice and accept that most decisions are made with some doubt.

Write to reach. Make connections and involve others in your story. Lead your daughter's Girl Scout trip and get to know other parents.

Share your opinion about a current event or your story about a camping experience. Other people, upon hearing from your true self, may feel moved to share with you.

Nourish the author with a fresh environment, a day alone or a visit with an old friend. Choose to sit and read *The New Yorker* for 15 minutes. Successful authors need the physical and mental space to be creative.

Owning the authorship of your life. If you were really in charge, what goals would you set? What would you like to do? Learn guitar. Start the ice cream store or corner pub that you have always secretly envisioned.

I want you to love the direction your story is taking. The passionate accomplish wonders.

Ben Johnson, Ph.D., ABPP, is a clinical psychologist who practices, supervises and teaches psychotherapy at RICBT, Brown University and URI. He loves helping people apply a broad range of psychological concepts and strategies to reduce isolation and improve their moods, relationships, productivity and lives. Please send comments to Features@ProvidenceJournal.com; put "Mental Edge" in the subject field. You may also write to "Mental Edge," Features Department, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St. Providence RI, 02902.



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