

# Writing and Publishing Black Women's Biography

**A WRITING RESOURCE GUIDE**



# CONTENTS

3 Introduction

4 Biography Faves

5 Tips for Lively Writing

6 Cultivating Complex Characters

7 Timelines Are Essential

8 Creating Your World

9 Writing Journal

10 Developing a Writing Routine

11 Tips for a Productive Writing Session

12 Study the Art and Industry of Writing

# INTRODUCTION

Black women's life writing has been among the fastest-growing literary subgenres in the past several years—due in part to the Black Lives Matter movement, Black feminist engagement on social media, and the public's fascination with the growing number of prominent Black women in the political sphere. Long before this explosion of memoirs and biographies on and by Black women, scholars such as Nell Painter, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Barbara Ransby led the way in the 1990s and early 2000s, writing path breaking biographies and establishing the methodologies that other scholars would build upon. And while Black women's biography has remained a vital form of writing and research for academics at various career stages, only a few have managed to secure contracts with commercial publishers and garner wider audience reach.

On October 18 & 19, 2021, we hosted the Writing and Publishing Black Women's Biography in the Black Lives Matter Era Workshop, sponsored by the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. The workshop brought together emerging and established Black women's biographers and publishing industry professionals to explore strategies for producing life writing that reaches a broad and diverse public audience. Over the course of two days, we worked together to demystify the commercial publishing process for Black women biographers who are weighing the pros and cons of trade and academic publishing. We also sought to build community among Black writers. We laughed, learned, and strategized together.

Our hope is that this writer's resource kit, drawn from our workshop discussions, will allow you to join our community and conversations.

Cheers to discovering your writing genius!

Ashley D. Farmer  
@drashleyfarmer

Tanisha C. Ford  
@soulistaphd

## PARTICIPANTS

**K.T. Ewing**  
Tennessee State University

**Mary Phillips**  
Lehman College, CUNY

**Alexis Pauline Gumbs**  
Independent Scholar

**Anastasia Curwood**  
University of Kentucky

**Daina Ramey Berry**  
University of Texas-Austin

**Tiffany Florvil**  
University of New Mexico

**Sherry Johnson**  
Grand Valley State University

**Susana Morris**  
Georgia Tech

**A'Lelia Bundles**  
Biographer and Journalist

**Ashley Farmer**  
University of Texas-Austin

**Tanisha Ford**  
The Graduate Center, CUNY

## GUEST SPEAKERS



**Jennifer Baker**  
Senior Editor



**Cherise Fisher**  
Literary Agent



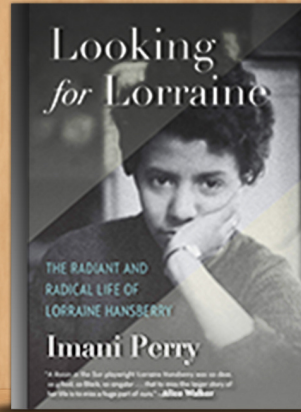
**Gilda Squire**  
Publicist & Manager



**Bridgett Davis**  
Writer & Professor

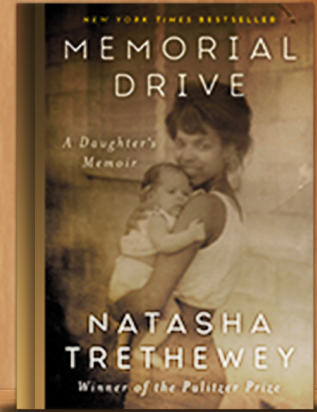


# BRIDGETT DAVIS' BLACK WOMEN'S BIOGRAPHY FAVES



Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry

Date Read: .....



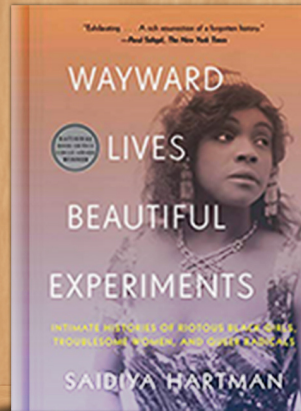
Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir

Date Read: .....



Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston

Date Read: .....



Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals

Date Read: .....



Sometimes Farmgirls: Become Revolutionaries: Florence Tate on Black Power, Black Politics, and the FBI

Date Read: .....


# BRIDGETT DAVIS' TIPS FOR LIVELY, TEXTURED WRITING

Your story should:

- 1** Offer rich sensory detail, appealing to all five of the reader's senses.
- 2** Create moments of tension and/or rising and falling action.
- 3** Have a setting that functions like a character. It should be fully fleshed and easy for the reader to imagine navigating.
- 4** Use your outside research to create historical/social/cultural/political context; which will explain your central figures' actions, motivations, and moral conflicts.
- 5** Introduce robust characters. As soon as you put a person down on the page, even in nonfiction writing, they become characters. Use your research and informed speculation to flesh them out in ways similar to those in your favorite novel.
- 6** Give an interior view of your central character's psyche.

# CULTIVATING COMPLEX CHARACTERS

Who is your book's central figure?



What compels you to write about this person?

What are the central features of your subject's personality?

What were the tough choices and decisions that your subject had to make?

What evidence do you have of their inner thoughts and feelings?

What language would you use to plausibly imagine their thoughts, feelings, choices that are not evident in the historical record?

How might you place your subject and their thoughts/feelings into the larger historical setting?

# TIMELINES ARE ESSENTIAL

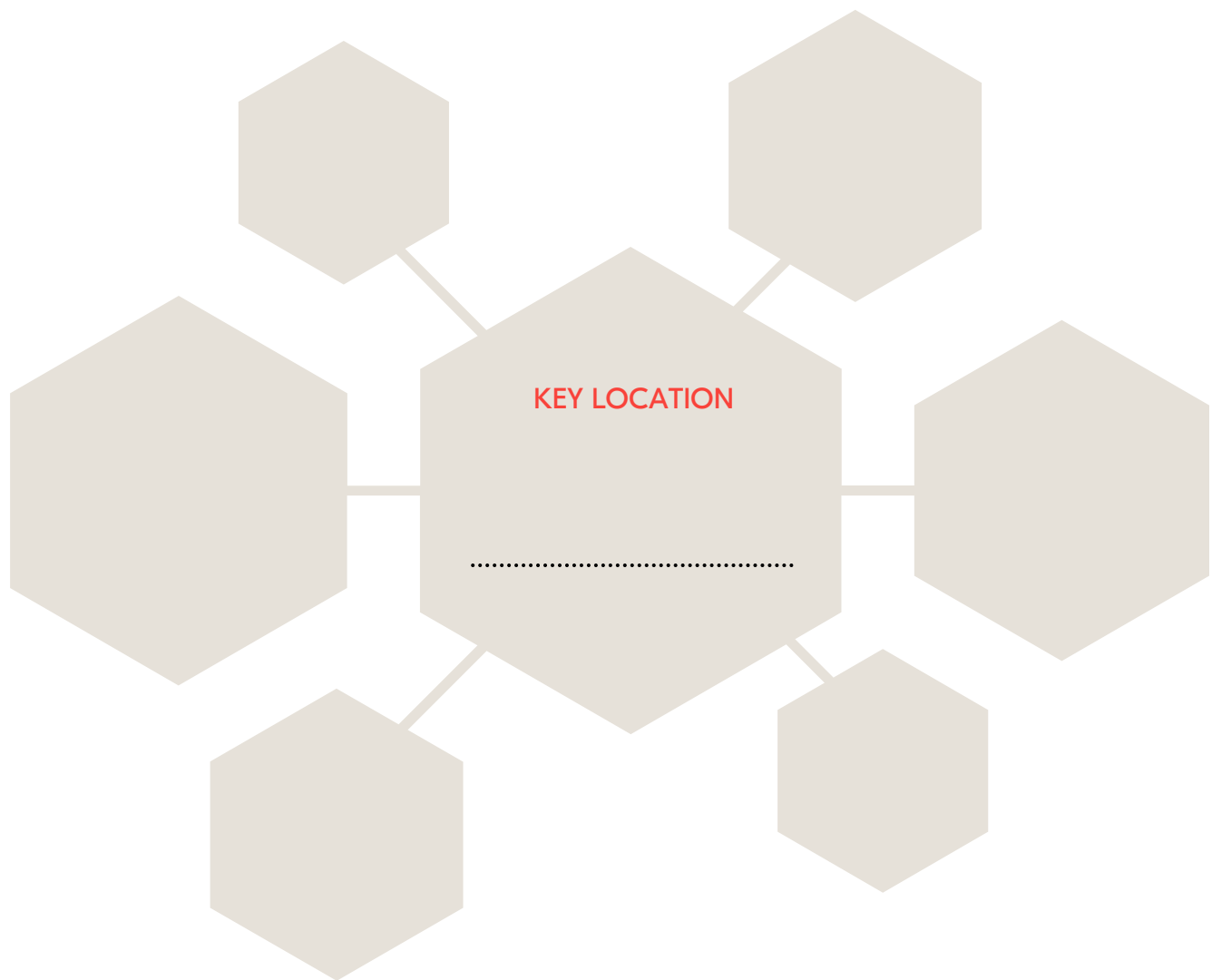
Timelines are an excellent way to map the chronology of your central figure's life, changes to the book's setting, significant cultural or political events, and major moments in national/global history. You can use these timelines to discover new things about the world in which your central figure lived. And, they're a great way to organize your research.

Use the space below to begin crafting 2-3 key timelines for your project. Consider creating a large wall space for your timelines to live so you can see them and add to them regularly. Potential supplies: pens, markers, sticky tabs, dry-erase board, string, corkboard, push pins.



## CREATING YOUR WORLD

Your setting should be a character in your story--alive, three-dimensional, and sensorial. Science Fiction writer N.K. Jemisin encourages writers to create a detailed map of the physical environment in which the story unfolds and the characters emerge. She calls this “macro-worldbuilding.” For Jemisin, this starts with the building of planets, continents, ecosystems, etc. She gives great thought to weather patterns, how climate affects her characters’ clothing choices, what time the sun rises/sets, and so forth.



Use the space above to begin designing the physical environment for a key location (it could be a neighborhood, a house, a deserted island) in your story. Be as detailed as possible, remembering that your design does not need to be true to real life but true to the story you're telling. Keep in mind the importance of sensory details: how does your location look and smell? What and where do the people eat and drink? What do people moving through this environment hear and touch?



# WRITING JOURNAL

When did you know you were a writer?

If you've not yet claimed this identity, what's holding you back?

What are your favorite topics to write about?

Who do you write for?

List the 5 books you find inspirational and why.

**1**

---

**2**

---

**3**

---

**4**

---

**5**

---

# DEVELOP A WRITING ROUTINE

What time of day do you do your best writing?

What are your biggest roadblocks to writing?

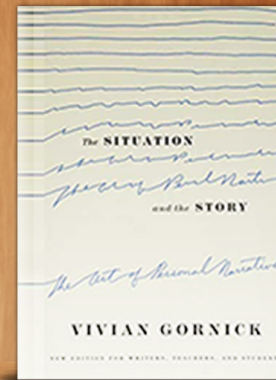
What are your writing rituals or most ideal conditions for a productive writing session?

How do you begin/end your writing session?

# TIPS FOR A PRODUCTIVE WRITING SESSION

- 1** Create a mood in the room to stimulate your senses (light aromatherapy candles, play soft music or an ambient noise program).
- 2** Say a mantra and/or do some deep breathing to center yourself to begin & end your session.
- 3** Set reasonable goals or expectations for your session.
- 4** Begin your writing session with freewriting on a low-stakes topic unrelated to your book.
- 5** Try the Pomodoro Technique: Break your writing session into timed mini-sessions (15-25mins each) followed by a brief break (5 mins).
- 6** Get some fresh air.
- 7** Plant a garden or buy some house plants. Nurturing other living things can stimulate writing productivity.
- 8** Be consistent. Write on a regular schedule so that writing becomes a way of life.
- 9** Find a few accountability partners.
- 10** Check in with yourself. Writing brings up all sorts of emotions; take good care of your spirit.

# TEXTS ABOUT CRAFT

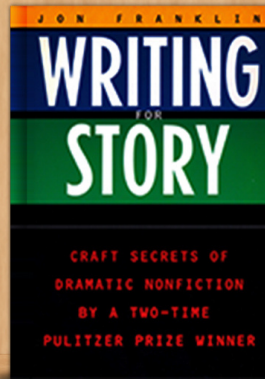
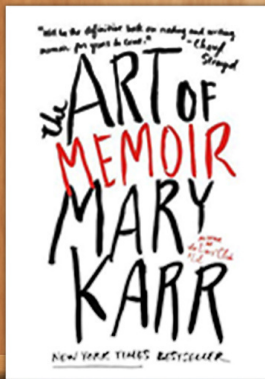


"The Site of Memory"

Date Read: .....

The Situation and the Story

Date Read: .....



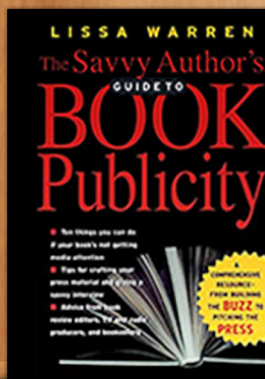
# BOOKS ABOUT THE INDUSTRY

The Art of Memoir

Date Read: .....

Writing for Story: Craft Secrets for Dramatic Nonfiction

Date Read: .....



The Savvy Author's Guide to Book Publicity

Date Read: .....

Online Marketing for Busy Authors

Date Read: .....

Publishers Weekly Book Publishing Almanac 2022

Date Read: .....