My brother and sister, Tahir and Safia, and my elderly aunt Amina and I were all attending the wedding of my uncle’s son. Although my uncle’s home was closer than I’d ever been, I was not yet inside Afghanistan. This branch of my family lived in Peshawar, Pakistan. On seeing two unmarried daughters in the company of a female chaperone, my uncle obviously concluded that we had been sent to be married. I was taken aback by the visceral longing I felt to be part of this world. I had never realized that I had been starved of anything. Now, at 17, I discovered that like a princess in a fairy tale, I had been cut off from my origins. This was the point in the tale where, simply by walking through a magical door, I could recover my gardens and palaces. If I allowed my uncle to arrange a marriage for me, I would belong.

Over the next few days, the man my family wished me to marry was introduced into the inner sanctum. He was a distant cousin. His luxuriant black mustache was generally considered to compensate for his lack of height. I was told breathlessly that he was a fighter pilot in the Pakistani Air Force. As an outsider, he wouldn’t have been permitted to meet an unmarried girl. But as a relative, he had free run of the house. Whenever I appeared, a female cousin would fling a child into his arms. He’d pose with it, whiskers twitching, while the women cooed their admiration.

A huge cast of relatives had assembled to see my uncle’s son marry. The wedding lasted nearly 14 days and ended with a reception. The bride and groom sat on an elevated stage to receive greetings. While the groom was permitted to laugh and chat, the bride was required to sit perfectly still, her eyes demurely lowered. I didn’t see her move for four hours.

Watching this tableau vivant of a submissive Afghan bride, I knew that marriage would never be my easy route to the East. I could live in my father’s mythological homeland only through the eyes of the storyteller. In my desire to experience the fairy tale, I had overlooked the staggeringly obvious: the storyteller was a man. If I wanted freedom, I would have to cut my own path. I began to understand why my uncle’s wife had resorted to using religion to regain some control—at least in her own home. Her piety gave her license to impose her will on others.

My putative fiancé returned to Quetta, from where he sent a constant flow of lavish gifts. I was busy examining my hoard when my uncle’s wife announced that he was on the phone. My intended was a favorite of hers; she had taken it upon herself to promote the match. As she handed me the receiver, he delivered a line culled straight from a Hindi movie: “We shall have a love-match, ach-cha?” Enough was enough. I slammed down the phone and went to find Aunt
Amina. When she had heard me out, she said: "I'm glad that finally you've stopped this silly wild goose chase for your roots. I'll have to extricate you from this mess. Wait here while I put on something more impressive." As a piece of Islamic one-upmanship, she returned wearing not one but three head scarves of different colors.

My uncle's wife was sitting on her prayer platform in the drawing room. Amina stormed in, scattering servants before her like chaff. "Your relative . . .," was Amina's opening salvo, "... has been making obscene remarks to my niece." Her mouth opened, but before she could find her voice, Amina fired her heaviest guns: "Over the telephone!"

"How dare you!" her rival began.

It gave Amina exactly the opportunity she needed to move in for the kill. "What? Do you support this lewd conduct? Are we living in an American movie? Since when have young people of mixed sexes been permitted to speak to each other on the telephone? Let alone to talk — as I regret to inform you your nephew did — of love! Since when has love had anything to do with marriage? What a dangerous and absurd concept!"

My Peshawari aunt was not only outclassed; she was out-Islamed too. "My niece is a rose that hasn't been plucked," Amina said. "It is my task as her chaperone to ensure that this happy state of affairs continues. A match under such circumstances is quite out of the question. The engagement is off." My uncle's wife lost her battle for moral supremacy and, it seemed, her battle for sanity as well. In a gruff, slack-jawed way that I found unappealing, she made a sharp, inhuman sound that sounded almost like a bark.

**READING FOR MEANING**

This section presents three activities that will help you reread Shah's autobiographical essay with a critical eye. Done in sequence, these activities lead you from a basic understanding of the selection to a more personal response to it and finally to an analysis that deepens your understanding and critical thinking about what you are reading.

**Read to Comprehend**

Reread the selection, and write a few sentences briefly explaining what happened during Shah's visit with relatives in Pakistan. The following definitions may help you understand Shah's vocabulary:

*unadulterated* (paragraph 1): pure, not mixed; containing nothing that would detract from its effect.
SAIRA SHAH
Longing to Belong

Saira Shah (b. 1964) is a journalist and documentary filmmaker. The daughter of an Afghan father and Indian mother, she was born and educated in England. After graduating from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, Shah began her career as a freelance journalist in the 1980s, reporting on the Afghan guerrillas who were fighting the Soviet occupation; eventually she became a war correspondent for Britain's Channel 4 News. She is the recipient of the Courage under Fire and Television Journalist of the Year awards for her risky reporting on conflicts in some of the world's most troubled areas, including the Persian Gulf and Kosovo. She is best known in the United States for her undercover documentary films about the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, Beneath the Veil (2001) and Unholy War (2002).

"Longing to Belong," originally published in the New York Times Magazine in 2003, is adapted from Shah's autobiography, The Storyteller's Daughter (2003), which relates her search to understand her father's homeland of Afghanistan. In this essay, Shah tells what happened when, at the age of seventeen, she visited her father's Afghan relatives living in Pakistan. As she explained in an interview, "I wanted this kind of romantic vision. This is the exile's condition, though, isn't it? If you grow up outside the place that you think of as your home, you want it to be impossibly marvelous. There is also the question of how Afghan I am. When I was growing up, I had this secret doubt—which I couldn't even admit to myself—that I was not at all an Afghan because I was born in Britain to a mixed family."

As you read, think about Shah's search for her ethnic identity and the sense of cultural dislocation she experiences. Annotate the text, noting places where her sense of cultural dislocation is evident and anything else interesting about Shah's autobiographical writing strategies. (For help annotating, see the examples in this chapter on pages 15 and 58, as well as the advice on annotating on pages 597–603.)

The day he disclosed his matrimonial ambitions for me, my uncle sat me at his right during lunch. This was a sign of special favor, as it allowed him to feed me choice tidbits from his own plate. It was by no means an unadulterated pleasure. He would often generously withdraw a half-chewed delicacy from his mouth and lovingly cram it into mine—an Afghan habit with which I have since tried to come to terms. It was his way of telling me that I was valued, part of the family.
tableau vivant (5): a scene or portrait that is acted out.
putative (6): generally regarded or accepted as being (something).

Identify three or more additional words that you don’t understand, and find the best definitions from the dictionary that work with their context.

To expand your understanding of this reading, you might use one or more of the following critical reading strategies that are explained and illustrated in Appendix 1: outlining, summarizing, paraphrasing, and questioning to understand and remember.

Read to Respond

Write several paragraphs exploring your initial thoughts and feelings about Shah’s autobiographical story. Focus on anything that stands out for you, perhaps because it resonates with your own experience or because you find a statement puzzling.

You might consider writing about the following:
- Shah’s “longing to belong”;
- Shah’s experience of new and different cultural traditions—perhaps in relation to your own experience;
- her uncle’s assumption that Shah and her sister were sent to Pakistan “to be married” (paragraph 2); or
- Shah’s realization that “[i]f I wanted freedom, I would have to cut my own path” (5).

To develop your response to Shah’s essay, you might use one or more of the following critical reading strategies that are explained and illustrated in Appendix 1: contextualizing and reflecting on challenges to your beliefs and values.

Read to Analyze Assumptions

Reread Shah’s autobiographical essay, and write a paragraph or two exploring one or more of the assumptions you find in the text. The following suggestions may help:
- assumptions about cultural differences. Shah begins her story by describing her uncle’s “Afghan habit” of feeding her “choice tidbits from his own plate,” sometimes taken “from his mouth” (paragraph 1). Shah’s word choices such as generously withdraw and lovingly cram might be read as ironic (suggesting these actions are not really generous or loving), but they may also signal that Shah is ambivalent, that she recognizes her uncle’s affectionate intentions at the same time that she is somewhat repelled by his actions. To think critically about the assumptions in this essay related to these cultural differences, ask yourself:

To probe assumptions about cultural vision (headnote 2), she “mythological horn and his ‘submissive experience the fair some is a man’ related to gender dy his bride inspire th theor are girls taught Snow White, and th

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Reading Like a Conveying Author

Shah conveys the combination of showing and telling: “He would mouth and lovingly cram with...
differences, ask yourself: Where else in this reading do you find evidence of cultural differences? Which of these cultural differences cannot be bridged or at least pose the greatest challenge? What values, beliefs, ideas, or attitudes underlie these differences and make them so difficult to overcome?

- **assumptions about gender differences.** When Shah uses the phrase “romantic vision” (headnote) and describes herself as “a princess in a fairy tale” (paragraph 2), she is talking about the impact her father’s stories about his “mythological homeland” had on her as a child (5). But watching her cousin and his “submissive Afghan bride” makes her realize that “[i]n my desire to experience the fairy tale, I had overlooked the staggeringly obvious: the storyteller was a man” (5). To think critically about the assumptions in this essay related to gender differences, ask yourself: Why does watching her cousin and his bride inspire this realization? What kinds of values, attitudes, and behaviors are girls taught by fairy-tale characters like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and the Little Mermaid?

To probe assumptions more deeply, you might use one or more of the following critical reading strategies that are explained and illustrated in Appendix 1: reflecting on challenges to your beliefs and values, exploring the significance of figurative language, and looking for patterns of opposition.

**READING LIKE A WRITER**

**CONVEYING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Shah conveys the autobiographical significance of the event through a combination of showing and telling. She begins the essay with a vivid image of her uncle: “He would often generously withdraw a half-chewed delicacy from his mouth and lovingly cram it into mine.” This image conveys dramatically how she felt at the time, especially to Western readers who, like her, are inclined to be repelled by this particular cultural practice. The choice of the word cram, because it implies force, conveys a sense not only of disgust but also of violation. Yet by modifying cram with the adverb lovingly, Shah makes clear the ambivalence of her feelings. When she calls her uncle’s behavior “an Afghan habit,” she suggests to her Western readers that it should be read not as a sign of domination but of love and acceptance. In effect, by taking food from his own mouth, he is extending to her his protection and treating her as if she were his own daughter.

**Analyze**

1. Shah uses a vivid image to convey her remembered feelings when she describes herself as “a princess in a fairy tale” (paragraph 2). Reread paragraphs 2 and 3 to see how she imagines this fairy tale and what she feels about
the reality of her experience. Underline the words or phrases that show or tell you how Shah feels about the man with whom she has been matched.

2. Reread paragraphs 4 and 5 to see how the image of her uncle’s son and his bride affect her fairy-tale fantasy. Underline words or phrases that show or tell how Shah feels about the role in which she has cast herself.

Write

Write several sentences explaining what you have learned about the autobiographical significance of this event for Shah. Give two or three examples from your underlining to support your explanation.

CONSIDERING IDEAS FOR YOUR OWN WRITING

Like Shah, consider writing about an event that you were looking forward to but that turned out differently than you had expected—perhaps a dreadful disappointment, a delightful surprise, or more likely a surprising combination of disappointment and delight. You might write about a time when you had thought you wanted something but then realized your desires were more complicated, when you were trying to fit in and discovered something about yourself or about the group to which you wanted to belong, or when you tried to conform to someone else’s expectations for you or decided not to try to conform, but to rebel and go your own way. If, like Shah’s, your experience involves a clash of cultures, you might write about that aspect of your experience and how it has affected you.

One evening dusk came early, and cold spinning to eaves or on metal chairs and beer bottles collected sweaters or jackets. A storm. Tino and I strolled past the neighborhood consists of poor white families (Texas). Ranchera music filled the air as we continued toward the grime stained basketball court.


I looked up and across the street. ALLOWED AFTER 4:30 PM.
A Guide to Writing Autobiography

The readings in this chapter have helped you learn a great deal about autobiographical writing. You have seen that some autobiographies tell dramatic stories, while others present vivid portraits of people who played a significant role in the writer's life. Whether the focus is on events or people, you have discovered that the overall purpose for writers of autobiography is to convey the significance—both the meaning and the importance—of their past experience. In so doing, autobiographers often present themselves as individuals affected by social and cultural influences.

As a reader of autobiography, you have examined how autobiographers convey through their writing drama and vividness as well as significance. But you may have also found that different readers interpret the significance of an autobiographical selection differently. In other words, you have seen how the meanings readers make are affected by their personal experience as well as their social and cultural contexts.

Having learned how autobiographers invest their writing with drama, vividness, and significance and how readers interpret and respond to autobiographical writing, you can now approach autobiography more confidently as a writer. You can more readily imagine the problems you must solve as a writer of autobiography, the materials and possibilities you have to work with, the choices and decisions you must make. This Guide to Writing offers detailed suggestions for writing autobiographical essays and resources to help you solve the special challenges this kind of writing presents.

INVENTION AND RESEARCH

The following activities will help you choose a memorable event or an important person to write about, recall details about your subject, and explore its significance in your life. Completing these activities will produce a record of remembered details and thoughts that will be invaluable as you draft your essay.

Choosing a Subject

Rather than limiting yourself to the first subject that comes to mind, take a few minutes to consider your options. By listing as many subjects as you can, you will have a variety of possible topics to choose from for your autobiographical essay. List the most promising subjects you can think of, beginning with any you listed for the Considering Ideas for Your Own Writing activities following the readings in this chapter. Here are some additional ideas to consider:

Events
- A difficult situation, such as when you had to make a tough choice, when someone you admired let you down (or you let someone else down), or when you struggled to learn or understand something
- An event that shaped you in a particular way or that revealed an aspect of your personality you had not seen before, such as your independence, insecurity, ambition, or jealousy
- An occasion when something did not turn out as you thought it would, such as when you expected to be criticized but were praised or ignored instead, or when you were convinced you would succeed but failed
- An event in which a single encounter with another person changed the way you view yourself, changed your ideas about how you fit into a particular group or community, or led you to consider seriously someone else’s point of view

People
- Someone who helped you develop a previously unknown or undeveloped side of yourself
- Someone who led you to question assumptions or stereotypes you had about other people
- Someone who surprised or disappointed you
- Someone in a position of power over you or someone over whom you had power
- Someone who made you feel you were part of a larger community or had something worthwhile to contribute or someone who made you feel alienated or like an outsider

Choose a subject that you feel comfortable sharing with your instructor and classmates. The subject also should be one that you want to try to remember in detail and to think about in terms of what it means to you. You may find the choice easy to make, or you may have several equally promising possibilities. In making a final choice, it may help to think about your readers and what you would want them to learn about you from reading about the event or person.

Developing Your Subject

The following activities will help you develop your subject by recalling actions that happened during the event or by telling anecdotes that reveal something about the person. These activities will also help you recall details of the
RESEARCHING YOUR SUBJECT ONLINE

The Web offers sites that can help you write your autobiographical essay. Exploring Web sites where people write about their life experiences might inspire you by triggering memories of similar events and people in your own life. Moreover, the Web provides a rich repository of cultural and historical information, including photographs and music, that you might be able to use to prime your memory and create a richly detailed, multimedia text for your readers. As you search the Web, here are some possibilities to consider:

- Investigate sites such as citystories.com and storypreservation.com, where people post brief stories about their lives.
- Search for sites featuring the people and places you are writing about, as well as sites of friends, family members, or others who have been important to you.
- Look for sites related to places or activities — such as neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, sports events, or films — that you associate with the person or event you are writing about.

Make notes of any ideas, memories, or insights suggested by your online research. Download any visuals you might consider including in your essay — such as pictures of people and places you may want to include. Also be sure to download or record the information necessary to cite any online sources you may want to refer to in your essay. See Appendix 2 for help in citing sources.

place and people. Each activity takes only a few minutes but will help you produce a fuller, more focused draft.

Recalling the Event or Person. If you have chosen to write about an event, begin by writing for five minutes, simply telling what happened. Do not worry about telling the story dramatically or even coherently.

If you have chosen to write about a person, begin by listing anecdotes you could tell about the person. Then choose one anecdote that reveals something important about the person or your relationship, and write for five minutes telling what happened.

Presenting Important People. If you have chosen to write about a person, list aspects of the person's appearance and dress, ways of walking and gesturing, tone of voice and mannerisms — anything that would help readers see the person as you remember her or him.

If you have chosen to write about an event, recall other people who were involved, and write a brief description of each person.

Reconstructing Dialogue. Write a few lines of dialogue that you could use to convey something important about the event or to give readers an impression of the person you have chosen to write about. You may use direct quotation, enclosing the words you remember being spoken in quotation marks, or you may use indirect quotation, paraphrasing and summarizing what was said. Try to re-create the give-and-take quality of normal conversation in the dialogue.

Describing Important Places. Identify the place where the event happened or a place you associate with the person, and detail what you see in the scene as you visualize it. Try to recall specific sensory details — size, shape, color, condition, and texture of the scene or memorable objects in it. Imagine the place from the front and from the side, from a distance and from close up.

Considering Visuals. Consider whether visuals — photographs, postcards, ticket stubs — would strengthen your presentation of the event or person. If you submit your essay electronically to other students and your instructor or if you post it on a Web site, consider including photographs as well as snippets of film or sounds or other memorabilia that might give readers a more vivid sense of the time, place, and people about which you are writing. Visual and audio materials are not a requirement of an effective autobiographical essay, as you can tell from the readings in this chapter, but they could add a new dimension to your writing. If you want to use photographs or recordings of people, though, be sure to request their permission.

Reflecting on Your Subject

The following activities will help you think about the significance of your subject by recalling your remembered feelings and thoughts as well as exploring your present perspective. The activities will also help you consider your purpose in writing about this subject and formulate a tentative thesis statement.

Recalling Your Feelings and Thoughts. Write for a few minutes, trying to recall your thoughts and feelings when the event was occurring or when you knew the person. What did you feel — in control or powerless, proud or embarrassed, vulnerable, detached, judgmental? How did you show or express your feelings? What did you want others to think of you at the time? What did you think of yourself? What were the immediate consequences for you personally?

Exploring Your Present Perspective. Write for a few minutes, trying to express your present thoughts and feelings as you look back on the event or person. How have your feelings changed? What insights do you now have? What does
your present perspective reveal about what you were like at the time? Try looking at the event or person in broad cultural or social terms. For example, consider whether you or anyone else upset gender expectations or felt out of place in some way.

**Considering Your Purpose.** Write for several minutes exploring what you want your readers to understand about the significance of the event or person. Use the following questions to help clarify your thoughts:

- What will writing about this event or person enable you to suggest about yourself as an individual? What will it let you suggest about the social and cultural forces that helped shape you—for example, how people exercise power over one another, how family and community values and attitudes affect individuals, or how economic and social conditions influence our sense of self?
- What do you not understand fully about the event or relationship? What about it still puzzles you or seems contradictory? What do you feel ambivalent about?
- What about your subject do you expect will seem familiar to your readers? What do you think will surprise them, perhaps getting them to think in new ways or to question some of their assumptions and stereotypes?

**Formulating a Tentative Thesis Statement.** Review what you wrote for Considering Your Purpose, and add another two or three sentences that will help you convey to readers the significance of the event or person in your life. Try to write sentences that do not just summarize what you have written but that also extend your insights and reflections. These sentences may be contradictory because they express ambivalent feelings. They also must necessarily be partial and speculative because you may never understand fully the event’s or person’s significance.

Keep in mind that readers do not expect you to begin your essay with the kind of explicit introductory thesis statement typical of argumentative essays. None of the readings in this chapter offers to readers an explicit thesis statement. Instead, the readings convey the significance of the event or person. Instead, the readings convey the significance by combining showing with telling in their narration of events and descriptions of people and places. And yet it is possible for readers to infer from each reading an implied thesis or impression of the significance. For example, some readers might decide that Dillard wants readers to think that what was most significant and memorable about the event was the way the man threw himself into the chase, showing that childlike enthusiasm sometimes can survive into adulthood. Other readers might focus on the idea that what was significant was that the man as well as the children “all played by the rules” and that when people play by the rules they act with honor and nobility (paragraph 16). If, like you, Dillard had tried to write a few sentences about the significance she hoped to convey in writing about this small but memorable event in her life, she might have written sentences like these.

Nearly all first attempts at stating a thesis are eventually revised once drafting gets under way. Writing the first draft helps autobiographers discover what they think and feel about their subject and find ways to convey its significance without ever spelling it out directly. Just because there is no explicit thesis statement in an autobiography does not mean that the essay lacks focus or fails to convey significance.

**DRAFTING**

The following guidelines will help you set goals for your draft, plan its organization, choose relevant details, think about a useful sentence strategy, and decide how to begin.

**Setting Goals**

Establishing goals for your draft before you begin writing will enable you to make decisions and work more confidently. Consider the following questions now, and keep them in mind as you draft. They will help you set goals for drafting as well as recall how the writers you have read in this chapter tried to achieve similar goals.

- **How can I present my subject vividly and memorably to readers?** Should I rely on dialogue to present people and relationships, as so many of the writers in this chapter do, especially Brandt? Or should I concentrate on presenting action rather than dialogue, like Dillard and Rodriguez? Can I use visual or other sensory details, as Shah, Rodriguez, Gray, and Benioff do, to give readers a vivid impression of the person and place while also establishing the significance of my subject?
- **How can I help readers understand the meaning and importance of the event or person?** Can I build the suspense, as all of the writers do? Can I show how changed, as Benioff does?
- **How can I avoid superficial or one-dimensional presentations of my experiences and my relations with others?** Knowing that my readers will not expect easy answers about what makes the event or person significant, how can I satisfy their expectations for writing that has some depth and complexity? How might I employ one or more of the strategies illustrated by the writers I have read in this chapter—the paradox in Dillard’s feeling both terror and sure as she is chased by the man in the black Buick; the contradictions Gray sees in relating the different attitudes toward talking she and her father have; Benioff’s love-hate relationship with his coach? What contradictions, paradoxes, or ironies exist in my own story?