



# Virtual War Memorial Australia

## Writing a Biography

### WRITING A BIOGRAPHY

When adding a biography, try to tell a story of a life and not repeat data that is already known. Avoid a string of dot points or date related information that is already on the record. A narrative is always easier to read. Readers will want you to 'tell the story'.

*What did the person like, and dislike? What did others think of them, what was important to them? Why did they sign up for service?*

Letters, diary notes and oral histories / interviews all add a personal dimension and, if you can, they should be included. First-hand accounts are a lot more compelling than retrospective speculation. Personal impressions of the situation they were in add to the depth and substance of the narrative.

**The aim of this memorial is to be more than a presentation of data.  
We want to tell a story and give life to the name...**

#### Process

- Assemble your sources and collate the information.
- Prepare an outline and use headings if it helps.
- Write it in Word. Check the spelling and grammar before uploading to the site.
- Try and tell a story - use prose rather than dot points but keep paragraphs short.

#### What information should I include?

1. **A timeline based narrative** is probably the best. There is usually a typed chronology of the soldier's service in their service record – it is a basis to work from.
2. It is always useful to start from the beginning! **Birth, parents, siblings and residence.** Relationships to others who served Australia are also good to include. A clue is to search the [National Archive](#) service record by entering the name of next of kin.

Date of Birth was not collected for WWI personnel; rather their age in years and month was declared. So record the age at enlistment. The declaration was often 'not truthful' - nor indeed were names in many cases! Date of birth and death can be investigated through [Genealogy SA](#).

The [Red Cross files](#) connect with other names - witnesses, colleagues etc. If you can identify them we can extend the link or connect the records.

3. **Growing up** - school records are terrific if you can find them – check out [Arthur Harris](#)' school cadets photo!
4. **Pre enlistment** employment and /or service in the cadets or militia etc adds context to life before conflict.



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5. **Enlistment, embarkation, re-assignment** (where and when it took place). Many soldiers embarked with one unit and ended up in another. Working out whether they were involved in particular campaigns is a bit more difficult.
6. Absences such as **illness, courses / training and detachment** to other units is generally recorded in the service record. So before assuming they were in, it is best to see if they were definitely 'out'.
7. **Decorations** are often best treated as "stories" – what they were awarded for – action place date, are more important than when they were gazetted or actually presented. Check on the AWM Honours and Awards site.
8. As far as **post service life**, that is where family records or perhaps "Trove" kicks in.

### Writing Tips

More detail can be added as a **Resource** in your individual's profile, eg. a standalone document such as memoir.

1. Keep it **concise** – if it's too long, people won't stick with it.
2. If there is a lot of information, look for **key or quirky events** - they serve as the 'hook' to keep people reading
3. An appropriate point of focus might be a particular **incident** or some **distinguishing characteristic** of his/her service.

### Added Extras

1. **Photos with multiple people** - those people who are pictured help us to build biographies and stories of other men and women who served - and yours might be the only photo that exists of them!
2. **Quotations** are great evidence of your individual's life and service – but one or two are generally enough, so pick the best ones.



AWM A00714 – Australian 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion Headquarters at ANZAC

Additional quotes can be added as stories. We found an absolute gem - a letter from Private Max Allan's Platoon Commander Sergeant John Ponton, addressed to none other than Miss Vera Deakin - the founder of the Red Cross Missing investigations.

### Don't Forget

1. Captions and attributions are necessary for any images - respect Copyright and acknowledge the source.
2. Tell us if photos are from a personal collection.