

English 2: Memoir Writing

Particular memories tell a story about ourselves, stories that thread their way through our lives and give us details about who we were then, and who we are now. Memoirs are more than telling people something about yourself, but emphasize the process of how you came to know it.

Features of a Memoir:

- They are almost always written in the **first-person**.
- **Subject is usually commonplace.** You might write about the time you saved two kids from a burning building, but it's more likely that you'll write about the time your brother set your favorite Barbie Doll on fire.
- **Narrative and scenes** are the primary method of development. Sometimes you will *show* us what happened, and other times you might *tell*, and expect difficulty achieving the proper mix of both. **Sea of Detail vs. Mountain of Reflection.**
- It should be richly detailed. It doesn't use excessive detail for the sake of it, but focuses on vivid, sensory imagery and significant detail—details that set the tone, reveal emotions or illuminate character. In an argument essay, your evidence is in the facts; in a memoir, it's in the details. These particulars aren't just there to sound good or be anecdotal, but must be hitched to something larger: a key emotion that we all feel or a better understanding of your own life.
- Thesis or **meaning is implicit**, and emerges later in the piece. This meaning isn't simple. It takes every line of the memoir to get at the meaning, and often it can't be embodied by "this memoir is about X." The tough part is answering the SO WHAT without beating us over the head with it.
- Often they are **open-ended**. Don't be afraid if there is still some uncertainty at the end, and you should especially not be afraid if you're uncertain going in. If you already know exactly what a certain event meant to you, then there's no point in writing about it.
- It relies on memory, observation, and subjectivity over facts.
- It often shifts back and forth between "now" and "then" even if it isn't overtly delineated. If you write about something that happened to you when you were five years old, there are actual two characters: you at five and you now. Even if you don't say, "looking back now, I think..." and keep us firmly in a child-like perspective, that adult author is still behind the scenes pulling the strings.
- It does more than simply tell a story. There must be a *purpose* behind the story that speaks in some way to your audience.

Memoirs: Finding Your Subject

Brainstorming:

- Make a list of experiences you've had that you could never forget.
- What dreams do you have for the future? Where did they come from? At what point in your life did they originate and why?
- What objects would you regret losing in a house fire? The answers will most likely reveal something about your passions. Where did they originate? What is your most treasured object and why?
- Draw a line on a piece of paper. This is your life. Divide the lines into segments that seem to describe what feels like distinct times. These might not correspond to familiar categories like adolescence or childhood. More likely, they'll be associated with place, relationships, schools, jobs, a personal challenge, family events, etc. Examine your timeline and pick two periods. What do they have in common? How did the earlier period shape the later one, if at all?

Don't reject material because you haven't found the SO WHAT or the meaning yet. In judging what's promising and what isn't, consider the following:

- **Abundance:** Which topic generated the most writing? Do you think there is much more to write about?
- **Surprise:** What topic did you find the most confusing in interesting ways? Was there something that surprised you? A feeling you didn't expect, a memory that seems emotionally charged, or an observation in looking back that challenged your preconceptions?
- **Confusion:** What subject raised questions you're not sure you can answer easily? That's good!
- **Honesty:** Can you write honestly about this subject? Is this material personal or *private*? Remember, your audience is potentially the entire class. Feel free to share, but don't scare.

Personal: It happened to you and we're getting your angle on it. The subject matter might be serious, depressing, or traumatic. It might even be a bit painful for you to write about; ultimately, however, you're comfortable sharing it and we're comfortable reading it.

Private: You're uncomfortable sharing it and we're uncomfortable reading it. Please don't write anything that requires me to get a counselor involved. Kathryn Harrison wrote a famous memoir entitled "The Kiss" which details a four-year incestuous affair she had with her father, whom she met as an adult. Wait until you're out of English 2 to write that memoir.

The Writing Process

- **Free-write.** Don't be afraid to over-tell in your notes how this event makes you feel and then make it more subtle later. What questions does remembering this event raise for you? We will do a free-writing exercise in class to get you started.
- I find it's best to **start with the sea of detail**, not the mountain of reflection. Choose a place to start (anyplace) and begin getting down all of your sensory memory of the event. Don't be afraid to write badly.
- Before you start your first draft, **sketch out your memoir's scenes or key moments** and try to determine a logical organizational strategy. You might have one continuous piece, or you might tell this story in sections, especially if you're dealing with large gaps in time.
- As an exercise, **answer the following questions** before you begin:
 - What do you understand now that you didn't understand or think then? Finish the following: "When I look back on this, I realize _____" Now consider how you can *show* the reader this realization without using the words "now I realize."
 - Has your view of this subject changed since you began writing about it?
 - What surprised you the most? Why?
- You should explicitly or implicitly **establish the focus** of your memoir in the first few paragraphs. While this is not an essay, we still need to know what we're reading about quickly. Opening your piece with the first thing that happened may not be the best idea, since often it reveals nothing about your purpose in writing about the event. You might start with an orienting sentence or two, an anecdote, or immediately drop us into scene.
- Establish your lines of **tension** quickly: you versus other people or you versus yourself. Trouble is interesting, and makes us want to read more.
- Remember that your rough draft is composed with a sense of audience and purpose, but not necessarily a clear sense of thesis, meaning, or controlling idea. **Embrace uncertainty, and suspend judgment.** Focus on the sea of detail and sensory experience. Don't go for easy answers. Your draft is the means of figuring out your purpose in writing and should raise more questions. As you revise and have a better sense of purpose, you can move from showing to telling or vice versa, and pick out the significant details that contribute most to your piece's meaning.
- **Time:** Some memoirs cover twenty years in a paragraph; others (like Orwell's "The Hanging") can spend five pages dramatizing seven minutes. Try and figure out what you want to summarize versus what you want to dramatize, and establish early on how much time you plan to cover. Remember that covering too much time in four pages can be a pitfall, as well as giving equal weight to everything that happens. Focus on the significant events and only dramatize in scene what can't be accomplished in summary.

Memoir “Sketch” Peer Review:**Peer Reviewer:**

- What does the writer seem to want to say but doesn't quite say in this sketch?
- What line appears most important to the sketch as you understand it?
- What scene or moment seems most important? Do you think this should be the main focus of the memoir?
- What was most surprising about what the writer said or showed? Why?
- What is this sketch *about* in your mind?
- Highlight at least three instances where the writer tells something you think should be shown.
- Highlight at least three times when the writer fails to elaborate or expand on something you find interesting or important.
- Is there dialogue in the sketch? Is it falling victim to any of the pitfalls outlined on the dialogue sheet? Is there too much empty dialogue, or not enough dialogue in places you want it? Are there moments when the characters say too much?
- Highlight your favorite moments of vivid description or sensory detail. Do they go beyond mere description to become significant? How? Is there any excessive description that, while well written, seems to be mostly just taking up space, not establishing tone, etc.?
- Is there too much sea of detail and too little mountain of reflection? Too much reflection and too little detail?

Evaluating your own sketch:

- What surprised you in writing this?
- What's the most important line? What makes it important? Free write a paragraph that begins with this line. Is it possible this is the theme or controlling idea of your draft?
- What scene, moment, or situation is most crucial to the story being told? Could this be the starting scene?
- Finish the following sentences:
 - The real story I seem to be trying to tell is _____.
 - So what? I have answered or could answer that question by saying _____.
 - The main thing I'm planning to do in revising this sketch is _____.