

How to Write a Memoir

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A Memoir is your truth created from your memory and your experience.

Lisa Dale Norton, Author

Introduction. Writing a memoir is a process that requires planning and organization in addition to creative thought and expression. This mini-course series offers an organizational framework for how to get started and complete a memoir essay during this time. Classes are interactive as ideas and opinions are considered, personal manuscripts are shared and group feedback provided.

1. What is a Memoir

A memoir is a true story based on a situation that has special meaning or has impacted and changed your life in a significant way. It differs from an autobiography in scope as an autobiography includes an author's life story beginning at birth. A memoir is a slice of life or a snapshot, not a full life story. In this class, we will write a memoir essay. Please note that a personal memoir can also be expressed through poetry, photographs, artwork and/or a combination.

2. Getting Started (Organizing and Arranging Phase: Class 1 and 2)

- a. You will need
 - A main character.
 - A situation that will be the core of your story with a collection of related actions (or scenes) that happened. Emotional journey.
 - A lesson learned. If there is no lesson, there is no story.
- b. Select a targeted event that you have strong feelings about writing. It can be a special experience or one that shaped or changed you in some important way. Keep your focus narrow.
- c. Before getting started, think about the following considerations because they will have an effect on how you write the story:
 - WHAT is the THEME or moral of your story? The theme will be like thread that ties your memories together to keep them relevant as your story unfolds.
 - WHO are you writing it for?
 - WHY are you writing it?

- e. Brainstorm. Reflect on memories around a situation you will be writing about. Jot down brief details of scenes you remember. (Post-it notes and index cards work well) The following questions might help trigger memories.
- Who was involved?
 - When did it happen? Do you recall details about time period that might have influenced what happened?
 - Where did it happen? Do you remember details about location including landscape or surroundings?
 - How did this situation get started? How did it end?
 - What were you thinking at the time?
 - How did you feel?
 - Was anyone else directly involved?
 - Visualize memories in color and vivid detail
- f. Review identified memories carefully. Select only memories that are relevant to the specific theme of your essay. Memories that are not directly related can be saved for a different story.
- g. *It is important to include research in the planning and organizing phase of writing a memoir. If writing about your ancestors or sharing a story from a different generation, historical information from that time period is imperative to make your story believable and understandable. Resource information can be found at genealogy websites and other reliable online resources, in newspapers, at libraries and local county archive offices. Other sources might include family stories that have been passed down through generations or other gathered documents or letters. It is important that you organize research and record reference citations and sources.*

3. Let the Writing Begin (Class 3 and 4)

With organization activities completed, thoughts can turn to writing your story in three parts: the beginning, plot, and ending. Review notes from the Organizing and Planning phases, look over your memories and decide first where you want to **BEGIN** and **END** your memoir. These are the most important features of a good memoir.

- The **BEGINNING** of your story must be compelling in a way that wants readers to keep reading. You can start your memoir at any point in the story.
- With a beginning in mind, decide where the story will end. The **ENDING** must weave the threads of experiences together to create a strong conclusion. The character has grown, changed or learned a lesson.

- The MIDDLE of story or plot are memories that connect the beginning and end of your story together. It is the chain of cause and effect from beginning to end that gives readers something to follow.

TIPS

1. Establish a regular writing routine.
2. Tell the truth. Memoirs explore truth as seen through your eyes.
3. Writers get the most satisfaction from writing what we are passionate about.
4. A memoir is an emotional journey of feelings, thoughts and reactions.
5. Avoid editing as you write – you can edit later.
6. Let yourself go and write from the heart.
7. Your voice is your presence on a page giving it your personality and attitude. Each of us is unique and we want to translate our uniqueness to the page. It helps to write how you speak.
8. Write down what you see and hear as you remember details of actions or events.
9. Include background information to help reader understand events unfolding in the story.
10. The setting includes details not only about the location, but also the time period.
11. Show Don't Tell is largely about allowing your readers to interpret what you are going through without just telling them. Think of an emotional moment and describe your body language at that time.
12. As you edit content, pay attention to words in a sentence. An ACTIVE voice is more concise, direct and bold. Writing in PASSIVE voice often uses unnecessary words that are less direct.

4. What's Next?? (Class 5)

- a. Read class memoir essays and provide feedback.
- b. Preserving old letters, articles, and other documents.
- c. Brief summary of traditional publishing and self-publishing options.

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