

MASTER THE MEMOIR

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I. MEET THE MEMOIR

A special kind of autobiography, usually involving a public portion of the author's life as it relates to a person, historic event, or thing. The text is about the personal knowledge and/or experiences of the author. —Barbara Doyen, literary agent

A. Memoir, Defined

1. That _____ Touch (personal)
2. _____ of Life (slice)

Examples: (Classic/ABA/General Market): *An American Life*, Annie Dillard; *Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt; *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott; *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert; *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson; *The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls; *Rare Bird*, Anna Whiston-Donaldson; *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom; *Two-Part Invention*, Madeleine L'Engle; *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion

Examples (CBA): *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller; *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story*, Ben Carson with Cecil Murphey; *I Would Die for You*, Brent and Deanna Higgins; *A Widow's Journey*, Gayle Roper; *Out of the Dust*, Avis Goodhart with Marti Pieper; *Same Kind of Different as Me*, Ron Hall and Denver Moore with Lynn Vincent; *Thin Places: A Memoir*, Mary DeMuth; *Through the Eyes of Hope* by Lacey Buchanan with Bethany Jett

"Writers are the custodians of memory." —William Zinsser, author and professor

B. Memoir, Undefined: What It's Not

1. A _____ (autobiography)
2. B _____ (biography)
3. F _____ (fiction)

C. Why write memoir?

1. Self- _____ (exploration)
2. Legacy
3. Gift
4. As a part of a _____ . (larger work)
 - a. Fiction
 - b. Nonfiction: devotionals, compilations, illustrations in articles and trade books, plus many more
5. But NOT for _____ or _____ (fame or fortune)

II. Digging Deeper

A. Types of Memoir (General)

1. F _____ (formal)
2. I _____ (informal)
3. O _____ (oral)
4. H _____ (hybrid)

For Reflection: *Why did you decide to take this class? Have you already written or started a memoir? What are some of the challenges you anticipate?*

B. Basic Principles: The Three R's

1. R _____ memoir. (Read)
2. R _____ with care. (Review)
3. R _____ slices of life. (Record)

“Basic Principles: There are none.” —Will Smith as Alex “Hitch” Hitchens in *Hitch*

For Reflection: *Which category(ies) would your memoir fit into? Where are you in this process?*

III. CONNECTING POINTS

I find interesting characters or lessons that resonate with people and sometimes I write about them in the sports page, sometimes I write them in a column, sometimes in a novel, sometimes a play or sometimes in nonfiction. But at the core I always say to myself, 'Is there a story here? Is this something people want to read?' I never think that just because I'm saying something, it's important. I've never felt that.—Mitch Albom

A. Remember Your Reader

1. Be _____. (yourself)

*When you write your own family history, don't try to be a "writer." It now occurs to me that my father, who didn't try to be a writer, was a more natural writer than I am, with my constant fiddling and fussing. **Be yourself and your readers will follow you anywhere.** Try to commit an act of writing and your readers will jump overboard to get away.—William Zinsser*

2. Be _____. (transparent)

3. Tell the _____ as you _____ it. (truth/remember)

4. Show that you've _____ and _____. (learned/grown)

5. Include _____ - _____ experiences. (common-thread)

Why do people relate to the book [Wild]? They saw themselves in me. Sometimes they had a similar experience, lost someone they loved deeply or they went on a big journey. There are many different ways for people to access the story on a personal level. —Cheryl Strayed

B. Borrow the Novelist's Tools

1. N _____ Arc (narrative)
2. C _____ (characters)
3. D _____ (dialogue)
4. I _____ and M _____ (images/metaphor)

When nonfiction is raised to an art, it's usually because the writer imposed on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an idea—that hadn't been attached to them before.

—William Zinsser

5. Setting and _____ Detail (sensory)
6. T _____ (theme)
7. V _____ (voice)

My equation: Creative _____ + Consistent _____ +

_____ in His _____ = Your Writing Voice
(thinking/writing/continuing/Word)

Establish your voice (the hardest thing to do in writing, but the single most important step to becoming successful).”—Chip MacGregor, literary agent

IV. BACK TO THE ATTIC: Memoir-Writing Process

The best memoirs, I think, forge their own forms. The writer of any work, and particularly any nonfiction work, must decide two crucial points: what to put in and what to leave out.

—Annie Dillard

A. Collection

1. Think _____ . (small)

Many of the stories in my book are about small episodes that were not objectively “important” but that were important to me. Because they were important to me they also struck an emotional chord with readers, touching a universal truth that was important to them.

—William Zinsser

2. Listen _____ . (well)

3. Organize your material into an _____ that may change as you go along. (outline)

B. Direction

1. Hurry up and _____ . (wait)

2. Pay attention to emerging _____ or _____.
(motifs or themes)

C. Selection

1. Choosing what to _____ is as important as choosing what to _____ (leave in/take out)

2. Keep your goals, _____, and _____ in mind.
(outline/readers)

D. Reflection

1. Think like a _____ to keep the reader engaged. (director)

2. But be careful to include moments of _____ and _____ about the action to maintain an emotional connection with your readers. (thought/reflection)

Fact without incident, thought, connection to something larger, interrogation, and speculation, is often merely nostalgia. Memoir exists to take us further into the future, not to keep us rooted in the past. It's the layers of detail, event, reflection, and the writer's mind and heart at work that create whatever meaning we make of experience.—Lee Martin

“So remember: the writer of memoir makes a pact with her reader that what she writes is the truth as best she can tell it. But the original pact, the real deal, is with herself. Be honest, dig deep, or don't bother.” –Abigail Thomas, bestselling author of fiction and memoirs

For Reflection: *Do you understand the difference between narrative and reflective elements of memoir? Think of three life incidents that will work best in written form with the addition of reflection.*