

1. Narrow the focus

While an autobiography covers the entire trajectory of one person's life, memoirs are much more focused and exploratory. *A memoir author's first task is to determine the specific theme or the precise time period of a great personal transformation.*

Goal: readers experience enlightenment, yet yearn to know more.

2. Borrow fiction techniques

Using description, sensory detail and dialogue draws readers into our personal world. Even larger novel-structuring techniques (plotting a character arc), can frame memoir. Seek life-changing experiences or moments of great conflict.

Warning: using fiction techniques doesn't mean you can invent events or conversations.

Cardinal rule: be honest with your readers.

3. Show More—tell Less

Show, not tell, an established fiction method, also applies to memoir. Put the reader into our shoes, our perspective, and invite them to draw conclusions. Unfold a scene instead of simply telling a series of events.

Avoid the trap of judgment. Instead of inserting our own opinion by labeling, *show* the reader how this character acted. Paint a scene of substance abuse, etc. Strive to make readers feel our emotions. Plant readers in our own point-of-view—this is much more powerful than simply telling them what happened.

4. Explore truth and avoid casting judgment

A memoir author reflects on experiences, explores truth, and tries to view people fairly (including oneself.) Memoir explores the past to shine light on greater truth, helps others in similar situations, inspires, and entertains.

Guidelines for discovering theme

Plot your scenes on a timeline. Think of a title for the timeline.

Sum up your memoir in one sentence.

Mind Map your memoir—see where this takes you. Start with one experience, perhaps from childhood, and branch out from there.

Tell someone the story of your memoir.

Determine how the narrator (you) changed during each chapter.

Look at the first draft. How did the narrator change from the start to the end? A first draft may be nearly unrecognizable by the time your memoir is complete.

Quotes About Memoir

"Spiritually, we cannot measure our lives by success, but only by what God pours through us, and we cannot measure that at all." Oswald Chambers

"The ultimate lesson all of us have to learn is unconditional love, which includes not only others but ourselves as well." Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

Even painful past experiences can create a better future...the greatest obstacle to this learning process is shame. Shame is **an excuse to hate ourselves today for something we did or didn't do in the past**. There is no room in a shame-filled mind for the fact that we did our best at the time, no room to accept that as a human being we are bound to make mistakes. Our thinking is distorted. *Courage to Change*, p. 57 The memoir writing process is ultimately for our own healing, whether we ever publish or not.

*"Make up a story... For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us **what the world has been to you** in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us **belief's wide skirt** and the stitch that unravels fear's caul."*
Toni Morrison, *Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993—died in 2019*.