Memoirs

In this chapter, you will learn how to—
• generate content for your memoir.
• use the memoir genre to organize a story.
• develop an engaging voice to tell your story.

The words memoir and memory come from the same root word, but memoirs involve more than an author sharing his or her memories. While telling an autobiographical story, good memoirs explore and reflect on a central theme or question. They rarely provide explicit answers to those questions. Instead, they invite readers to explore and reflect with the narrator to try to unravel the deeper significance of the recounted events.

Writers create memoirs when they have true personal stories that they hope will inspire others to reflect on or understand interesting questions or social issues. Readers come to memoirs expecting to engage with authors and their stories. They expect to encounter new perspectives and insights that are fresh and meaningful.

Today, memoirs are more popular than ever. They are common on best-seller lists of books. Some recent memoirs, such as Jeanette Walls’ Glass Castles about growing up in a dysfunctional family and Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes about his childhood in Ireland, sold millions of copies. Meanwhile, blogs and social networking sites give ordinary people opportunities to post their reflections on their lives.

In college, professors will sometimes ask you to write about your life to explore where you came from and how you came to hold certain beliefs. In these assignments, the goal is not just to recount events but to unravel their significance and arrive at insights that help you explore and engage more deeply with the issues discussed in the class.
Memoirs

This diagram shows a basic organization for a memoir, but other arrangements of these sections will work, too. You should alter this organization to fit the features of your topic, angle, purpose, readers, and context.

**Introduction:** Sets the scene

- **Description of a complication**
- **Evaluation of the complication**
- **Resolution of the complication**

**Conclusion:** What the writer learned

Using rich detail, memoirs tell a personal story in which an event or series of events leads the writer to new insights about life. They tend to have these main features:

- **An engaging title** that hints at the memoir's overall meaning or “theme.”
- **An introduction with a “lead”** that captures the reader’s interest or sets a scene.
- **A complication** that must be resolved in some way—a tension or conflict between people’s values and beliefs, or a personal inner conflict the author faces.
- **A plot** that draws the reader forward as the memoir moves through a series of scenes or stages.
- **Intimacy between the narrator and the reader**, allowing the writer to speak with readers in a personal one-on-one way.
- **Rich and vivid details** that give the story greater imagery, texture, and impact.
- **A central theme or question** that is rarely announced or answered explicitly, but that the narrator explores and reflects on with the reader.
- **A new understanding or revelation** that presents a moment of growth, transformation, or clarity in the writer.
Diving In

Helen Sanderson

Take your mark. Anticipation builds as I crouch and grip the edge of the rough plastic, ready to strike at any second. I finally hear the sound of the electronic starter just a few nanoseconds earlier than my competition. I hit a block of ice before I dive just below the surface. A few strong kicks and I'm taking my first stroke, and then another as fast as I can. Breathe as little as possible. By the time I'm on the second lap, I'm going nowhere. I am dying to take in gulps of air and rest for only a moment, but I know I can't. Surely this is almost over. My lungs and muscles burn for oxygen as I dig in for the final stretch; the end of the pool could not come soon enough. I look up to find that I have shaved a second off of my time and have achieved last place in my heat, as usual.

I have never been an athlete. My motions are awkward, uncoordinated, and uncertain. At fourteen, I had only just learned to swim the butterfly with a dozen eight year olds as my classmates. Deciding to try out for my high school swim team was the biggest challenge I had ever undertaken. I will never forget the day of my first tryouts. The coach had posted tryout times that were way beyond my reach: thirty-five seconds for fifty yards. I had never even come within twenty seconds of that time. All that time I had spent the summer before my freshman year swimming lap after lap, practicing for this day, seemed like wasted effort. I knew I could swim those fifty yards ahead of me, but only if I was given a full minute, not just thirty-five seconds. Holding back tears, I watched my classmates, fearless, dive into the water. Should I dive in behind them knowing I will fail?

It's not as though I've never failed before: a Latin test, a piano audition, or even as a friend. But I had personal experience behind me to reassure myself that I would get better. I started swimming with a stone cold slate and only a few months of summer training with a private instructor. No summer leagues or competitive teams. I just swam back and forth. Up to this point, I had never physically pushed myself so hard. All I wanted was to make the team.

Practices were much worse. Though no one was cut, I knew I was the slowest. My teammates passed me, and I always finished each set last. I can hear the coach yelling at me to push harder, to swim again, to show up the next day, just keep trying. I still struggled to keep up with the faster members of the team's every move. I was the slowest in the pool. I was a disappointment.

I immediately started working harder. Although I was an average swimmer, only thirty-five seconds for fifty yards, I worked even harder to push myself. I would swim back and forth, always striving to improve, always thinking about how I could do it better. I was determined.

Swimming. It's not just a sport; it's a way of life. Just diving in, and finding the right direction.

Take a deep breath. Anticipation builds. I hear the sound of the electronic starter. Take your mark. Anticipation builds as you crouch and grip the edge of the rough plastic, ready to strike at any second. You finally hear the sound of the electronic starter just a few nanoseconds earlier than your competition. You hit a block of ice before you dive just below the surface. A few strong kicks and you're taking your first stroke, and then another as fast as you can. Breathe as little as possible. By the time you're on the second lap, you're going nowhere. You are dying to take in gulps of air and rest for only a moment, but you know you can't. Surely this is almost over. Your lungs and muscles burn for oxygen as you dig in for the final stretch; the end of the pool could not come soon enough. You look up to find that you have shaved a second off of your time and have achieved last place in your heat, as usual.

Your goal is to push yourself. Work at the line of your potential. You will find that you will be. Instead, you will only discover that you want to push yourself even harder. You will be the best swimmer you can be.
Inventing Your Memoir’s Content

Your goal in a memoir is to uncover the meaning of your past for your readers and for yourself. When starting out, you shouldn’t be too concerned about what your point will be. Instead, begin with an interesting event or series of events from your life that you want to explore.

Inquiring: Finding an Interesting Topic

With your whole life as potential subject matter, deciding what to write about and narrowing your topic can be a challenge. Think about the times in your life when you

...
did something challenging, scary, or fun. Think about the times when you felt pain or great happiness. Think about the times when something important happened to you, helping you make a discovery about yourself or someone else.

Now, on your screen or a piece of paper, make a brainstorming list of as many of these events as you can remember (Figure 4.1). Don’t think too much about what you are writing down. These events don’t need to be earth-shattering. Just list the stories you like to tell others about yourself.

Inquiring: Finding Out What You Already Know

Memoirs are about memories—of course—but they are also about your reflections on those memories. You need to do some personal inquiry to pull up those memories and then reflect on them to figure out what they meant at the time and what they mean to you now. Pick an event from your brainstorming list and use some of the following techniques to reflect on it.

Possible Topics for a Memoir

- Breaking my leg skiing
- Winning the clothing design competition
- Failing that geometry class
- The trip to Mexico
- Death of Fred Sanders
- Leaving home to go to college
- Meeting Senator Wilkins
- Discovering Uncle Jim is gay
- When Bridgeport’s downtown flooded
- When the car broke down in Oklahoma
- Going to the state volleyball finals
- Not making the cheerleading team

Make a Map of the Scene. In your mind’s eye, imagine the place where the event happened. Then draw a map of that place (Figure 4.2). Add as many details as you can remember—names, buildings, people, events, landmarks. You can use this map to help you tell your story.

Record Your Story as a Podcast or Video. Tell your story into your computer’s audio recorder or into a camcorder. Afterwards, you may want to transcribe it to the written page. Sometimes it’s easier to tell the story orally and then turn it into written text.

Storyboard the Event. In comic strip form, draw out the major scenes in the event. It’s fine to use stick figures, because these drawings are only for you. They will help you remember and sort out the story you are trying to tell.

Do Some Role Playing. Use your imagination to put yourself into the life of a family member or someone close to you. Try to work through events as that person might have experienced them, even events that you were part of. Then compare and contrast that person’s experiences with your own, paying special attention to any tensions or conflicts.

Researching: Finding Out What Others Know

Research can help you better understand the event or times you are writing about. For instance, a writer describing her father’s return from the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) might want to find out more about the history of this war. She could find out about—

(and other research methods). Among the types of sources can be:

Online Sources. You can search online for information that might have helped you understand the event. For example, young and history buffs especially helpful. Or maybe you want to ask your parents or grandparents.

Print Sources. There are also print sources that might have historical information. Books, newspaper articles, or historical sources can help with

Empirical Sources. You might want to interview people who were there. For example, a writer describing her father’s return from the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) might want to find out more about the history of this war. She could

FIGURE 4.1 Brainstorming to Find Topics

Brainstorming is a good way to list possible topics for your memoir. Try to think of moments when something important happened that changed your life or led to a new insight.
Inventing Your Memoir’s Content

Sometimes drawing a map of the scene where an event happened can help you reconstruct it and remember important details. Here is a map of the pool described in Helen Sanderson’s memoir.

**FIGURE 4.2 Making a Map of the Scene**

Sometimes drawing a map of the scene where an event happened can help you reconstruct it and remember important details. Here is a map of the pool described in Helen Sanderson’s memoir.

find out about soldiers’ experiences by reading personal stories about the Gulf War (and other recent wars) at The Memory Archive (memoryarchive.org). When researching your topic, you should try to find information from the following three types of sources:

**Online Sources.** Use Internet search engines to find information that might help you understand the people or situations in your memoir. This information can be especially helpful if you are recounting an experience from a time when you were very young and had little or no awareness of what was happening in the world. Understanding the historical context better might help you to frame your memoir. Or maybe you could find information on psychology Web sites that could help explain your behavior or the behavior you witnessed.

**Print Sources.** At your campus or public library, look for newspapers or magazines that might have reported something about the event you are describing. Or find historical information in magazines from the period or a history textbook. These resources can help you explain the conditions that shaped how people behaved.

**Empirical Sources.** Research doesn’t only happen on the Internet and in the library. Interview people who were involved with the events you are describing in your memoir. If possible, revisit the place you are writing about. Write down any observations, describe things as they are now, and look for details that you might have forgotten or missed.
Organizing and Drafting Your Memoir

To create a good memoir, you will need to go through a series of drafts in order to discover what your theme is, how you want to recount the events, what tone will work best, and so forth. So don’t worry about doing it “correctly” as you write your first, or even your second, draft. Just try to write out your story. When you revise, you can work on deciding what’s most important and on making it all hold together.

Setting the Scene in Rich Detail

Start out by telling the whole story without worrying too much about the structure you will use. At first, you might just describe what happened. Then, once you have the basic series of events written down, start adding details. Write as much as you can. Be sure to give rich descriptions of people, places, and things.

The People. What did your characters do that hints at who they are? What did they say? How did they behave? What were their blind spots? What did they care about, and what were they ambivalent about? What prominent or quirky characteristics did they have?

The Scenes. What did each scene look like? How did it feel or smell? What did you taste or hear? What is the history of this place—both its public history and your personal history?

Dialogue. What was said before and after the event? Who said what to whom? How did they say it? Were they angry? excited? thrilled? scared?

These kinds of details are some of the most important features of your memoir. Your memoir will be more realistic if you give the readers enough detail to reconstruct the scene, people, and events for themselves.

Main Point or Thesis

Memoirs explore and reflect on a central theme or question, but they rarely provide explicit answers or explicit thesis statements early in the text. When writing a memoir, put your point in the conclusion, using an implied thesis. In other words, don’t state your main point or thesis in your introduction unless you have a good reason for doing so.

Describing the Complication

The complication in your memoir is the problem or challenge that you or others needed to resolve. So pay special attention to how this complication came about and why people reacted to it in a particular way.

The Event. What exactly happened? Who did it and what did they do? Was the event sudden or did it take a long time to develop?
The Complication. What was really at stake here? What was the essential conflict or complication that caused this story to be something more than an everyday event? How did you or the other people in the story feel about that tension?

The Immediate Reaction. How did people react to the event? What were their emotions? What did their reactions look like? Did they do anything that they later regretted?

Evaluating and Resolving the Complication

After the initial reaction, you should show how you and others evaluated and resolved the complication. The complication isn’t necessarily a problem that needs to be fixed. Instead, you should show how the people involved tried to make sense of the complication, reacted to the change, and moved forward.

The Evaluation. What did you and other people think was happening? Were there any misunderstandings? Did you talk about the appropriate ways to respond? Did you or others come up with a plan?

The Resolution. What did you decide to do? Were you successful in resolving the complication, or partially successful? If so, how did you handle it? If you weren’t successful, how did you make changes to adjust to the new situation? How did other people make adjustments?

Concluding with a Point—an Implied Thesis

Your conclusion describes, directly or indirectly, not only what you learned but also what your reader should have learned from your experiences. Memoirs usually have an “implied thesis.” You should avoid writing a “and the moral of the story is . . .” or a “they lived happily ever after” ending. Instead, you should strive for something that feels like the events or people reached some kind of closure.

Your conclusion is where you are going to make your point. For example, you might state it directly, as in Wang Ping’s “Book War” at the end of this chapter:

When I saw stars rising from their eyes, I knew I hadn’t lost the battle. The books had been burnt, but the story went on.

If, however, you think your point is obvious to readers, or if you want to have your readers reflect on the overall meaning, you can leave it unstated. In these situations, you can give readers a glimpse into the future. Or you can provide a final sentence or passage that hints at your memoir’s meaning. For instance, Joe Mackall’s “Words of My Youth,” which appears at the end of this chapter, does not end with a tidy message but with an evocative set of images that foster reflection:

An excellent question. I honestly do not know. I have no idea. The slur just seems to have been out there, there and somehow not there, like incense, like the way a Wiffle ball whips and dips, the way adults laugh at things kids don’t
Mackall's final paragraph provides a sense of closure but asks readers to reflect on the central theme for themselves.

understand, the way background noise from a baseball game leaks out of transistor radios, the way bits of gravel bounce out of pickup truck beds, the way factory fires flirt with the night sky, the way sonic booms burst the lie of silence.

Whether you choose to state your main point directly or not, your readers should come away from your memoir with a clear sense of closure.

Choosing an Appropriate Style

Your memoir's style and tone depend on how you want to portray yourself as the narrator of the story. Choose a style that works for you, your story, and your readers. If you want your narrator (you) to have a casual attitude, that's the style and tone you want to strive for. If the narrator's relationship to the story is more formal, then the style will be more formal.

Evoking an Appropriate Tone

Tone refers to the attitude, or stance, that is taken toward the subject matter and the reader. That is, a certain "tone of voice" arises from the words on a page. For instance, in the story about joining her high-school swim team, Helen Sanderson combines past tense with present tense, evoking a vivid and tell-it-straight tone, to paint a frank picture of what was happening around her and inside her head. Wang Ping's tone in the memoir at the end of this chapter is serious and sincerely reverent, which mirrors the author's attitude about books, stories, and their power.

At times, whether you're writing the first draft or polishing your final draft, you may want to strategically establish a certain tone. Here's how to do it with concept mapping. First think of a key word that describes the tone you want to set. Then put that word in the middle of your screen or a piece of paper and circle it (Figure 4.3). Now create a concept map around that key word. Write down any words that you tend to associate with this tone. Then, as you put words on the screen or paper, try to come up with more words that are associated with these new words. Eventually, you will fill the screen or sheet.

In the draft of your memoir, look for places where you can use these words. If you use them strategically throughout the memoir, your readers will sense the tone, or attitude you are trying to convey. This will help you develop your central "theme," the idea or question that the entire memoir explores. You only need to use a few of these words to achieve the effect you want. If you use too many of them, your readers will feel that you are overdoing it.

Using Dialogue

Allow the characters in your memoir to reveal key details about themselves through dialogue rather than your narration. Use dialogue occasionally to reveal themes and ideas that are key to understanding your memoir. Here are some guidelines for using dialogue effectively:

Use Dialogue to Move the Story Forward. Anytime you use dialogue, the story should move forward. Dialogues between characters are key moments that should change the flow of the story in an important way.
Choosing an Appropriate Style

FIGURE 4.3 Creating a Tone with a Concept Map

A concept map is a good tool for helping you set a tone in your memoir. Simply choose the words or phrases that best describe the tone you are looking for and create a concept map around them. Here, a concept map has the ideas of "innocence" and "reality of the world" in the center, with other word and phrase clusters surrounding them.

Write the Way Your Characters Speak. People often don't speak in proper English, grammatical sentences, or full thoughts. When using dialogue, take advantage of opportunities to show how people really talk.

Trim the Extra Words. In real dialogue, people often say more than they need to say. You can trim out the unnecessary details, most of the "ums" and "ahs," and the repetitions. Your dialogue should be as crisp and tight as possible.

Identify Who Is Talking. The readers should know who is talking, so make sure you use dialogue tags (e.g., he said, she said, he growled, she yelled). Not every statement needs a dialogue tag; however, if you leave off the tag, make sure it's obvious who said the line.