Session Notes: Writing Your Memoir

By Ann Eichenmuller

**WHAT IS YOUR GOAL?**

* A memoir is not an autobiography.
* A memoir doesn’t tell the story of your whole life.
* A memoir is a slice of your life—or a series of slices—unified by a common purpose or theme.

Memoirs can be

* As short as an essay, as long as a novel, or anywhere in between
* Organized in a variety of ways: chronologically, thematically, by geography, relationship, etc.
* In a tone that can range from serious to humorous

All memoirs should

* Be written in your authentic voice
* Strive for unflinching honesty
* Be richly textured (an immersion into time, place, people, and experience
* Show, not tell, through anecdote, dialogue, and literary devices
* Have a narrative arc
* Reflect on “big picture” ideas (themes)

**Developing an Authentic Voice**

The narrator should have a distinct individual voice conveyed through writing style, word choice, and sentence structure. The voice reflects the character’s age and situation; a second wiser or more reflective voice may be layered on the piece to provide a more current perspective.

Other characters’ voices are separate and distinct from the narrator through use of idioms, dialect, cadence, and word choice.

**Show Rather than Tell**

Telling: I think my friend Susan is suffering from depression.

Showing: When Susan opened the door, she was wearing a bathrobe, and her hair was in tangles. Behind her I saw last night’s dishes still on the table. It was 3 in the afternoon.

“I tried calling but you didn’t answer the phone. Is everything okay?”

She shrugged, her face void of expression. “I just couldn’t seem to get out of bed.”

Telling: My father was the sort who saw his entire role as being a provider. As a family, our job was to accommodate him.

Showing: My father had a hot breakfast every morning at 5:30 AM and left at 5:45, though he wasn’t due at work till 8. It was the traffic, he said, and he dared anyone to say differently. Every night he walked in the door at 5, spent 30 minutes in the bathroom with the sports section, and expected dinner on the table by 5:30. Nothing—not my mother’s nursing classes, nor my drill team practices, not even my little sister’s Brownie meeting—was allowed to interfere.

**Themes: “Big Picture” Ideas**

* Overcoming (racism, sexism, abuse, addiction, illness, divorce, etc.)
* Dealing with loss
* Understanding/healing the past (family relationships)
* Making tough choices
* Adjusting to change
* Holding onto friendship or love
* Maintaining hope
* Coming of age
* Rising to a challenge
* Finding/keeping faith
* Finding oneself or one’s purpose

**Think of the theme as a lens….**

Narrow Enough?

* Essay-length memoirs (approximately 1-10 pages, or 3,000 or fewer words), usually focus on one event or a series of short incidents with a single topic or theme
* Short memoirs (less than 100 pages/+/-25,000-30,000 words) often focus on a series of related events over time (example: weekends at Dad’s, summers at the beach house) or the events within a specific period of your life (the trials of parenthood, my life as a soldier, surviving a stroke).
* Full-length memoirs (200 pages or more, 50,000-60,000+ words) are most often told chronologically, focusing on either a specific period or slices taken from your life as a whole that support your theme.

Steps To Begin Writing

1. Find your theme
2. Narrow your focus
3. Brainstorm/research for details
4. Draft

**Timeline Exercise: A Slice of Your Life in Five Minutes**

* Draw a timeline on your paper for a decade of your life that you feel was foundational or pivotal and/or you want to include in your memoir.
* Write in the main incidents/events/turning points during this period. These are events that impacted you emotionally and/or influenced or changed you or the direction of your life.

**Step 2: Narrow Your Focus**

 **Step 3: Brainstorming/Researching**

* Review family photos
* Look at newspaper and magazine clippings from the time period
* Interview friends and relatives who were part of the memory
* Sensory exercise
* Characterization exercise
* Tell your stories orally and have a friend ask questions
* Sensory Exercise:
* Place
* Characterization Exercise
* Seeing Yourself
* Drafting Basics
* The first sentence of a chapter/section should hook the reader.
* In short pieces, the last sentence or sentences should complete the narrative arc/provide closure.
* In longer pieces, the last sentence of a section/chapter should create enough tension or provide a “tease” through foreshadowing to keep the reader engaged.

**STEP 4: Drafting**

* Craft an Opening
* More Beginnings
* A description of an event of historical significance: The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 lasted two hours. It killed 2,403 men, destroyed 188 aircraft, and nearly decimated the Pacific fleet. But that isn’t all. For families like mine—Japanese-American families living in places like Topeka—Pearl Harbor tore apart the fabric of our lives.
* An action/event: One beautiful April morning, on a narrow side street in downtown Tokyo, I walked past the 100% perfect girl.

**Control the Flow**

The pace and flow of writing depends on sentence variety, sentence length, paragraph length, word choice, and use of dialogue, internal monologue, description, and exposition.

* The Pace of a Narrative
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* Know What to Skip

Your thoughts, generalizations, and conclusions about life, borne from years of experience, are an important part of your memoir.

* Injecting Wisdom

Memoirs to Read

*Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Maya Angelou

*The Men We’ve Reaped*, Jesmyn Ward

*The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion

*A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway

*Sure, I'll Be Your Black Friend: Notes From The Other Side Of The Fist Bump,* Ben Philippe

*Ancestor Trouble*, Maud Newton

*1000 Years of Joys and Sorrows: A Memoir,* Ai Weiwei