

The Writing and Reading Center

Writing a Memoir



What is a memoir?

- A memoir—a literary non-fiction essay—in which you recall a person, a place, or an event from your past. In presenting this experience, you will need to use vivid details and sensory expressions to re-create the moment for your readers.
- Writing a memoir as the word itself suggests, involves memory work. Thus, in writing your memoir, you will, as any memoirists, draw on your past, looking back at events, people, and places that are important to you, in order to re-create that event or experience through your writing.

What is Literary non-fiction?

- Whether you call it literary nonfiction, creative nonfiction, factual fiction, documentary narrative, or the literature of actuality, such a powerful genre is called by many names that reflect the richness and depth in its search for both reality and individual vision.
- "The genre recognizes both the inherent power of the real and the deep resonance of the literary," thus giving an unprecedented empirical and artistic value to the narration of facts, the search for truth and the uniqueness of the writer's presentation of his/her vision.

What makes a memoir successful?

- It is important to note that memoirs are successful to the extent they are able to make personal experience significant to others. So the success of your memoir depends upon your ability to make that experience meaningful to your readers by allowing them to live through that experience through your use of details, specific and vivid sensory impressions, and dialogue that make that experience come to life to readers.
- Remember that the point of a memoir is to reveal the meaning of the past so that the readers can understand the significance your memories hold for the present. Since memoirs function to help both writers and readers understand the past, this assignment can be a good time for you to probe significant times in your life, revisiting them now that you have some distance from them. You can learn about yourself in the present by looking into events in your past.

Brainstorming for the Memoir:

- Focus on a job you have held at some time in the past, as Gary Soto does. To read Gary Soto's essay, go to http://spalding.pbworks.com/f/Soto_Black+Hair.doc.
- How could you reconstruct the experience of work in order to reveal something about its significance to you and others?
- Pick a photograph that holds memories and emotional associations. You might, for example, focus on a particular detail that helps you recall a particular moment in the past to explore how your family's history intersects with larger social and historical forces
- Recall a particular family ritual, such as visits to grandparents. Sunday dinners, summer vacations, holiday celebrations, weddings, and so on, as a way to focus on an event or a person that is especially significant to you
- Focus on a childhood incident to recreate the event and your perspective as a young person

Invention:

I- For five minutes, describe the setting and free-write about the following:

- What do you **see** in the scene(s) you are reconstructing? Describe the room or place you are in. Do you see the color of the walls, something hanging on them, books, pictures, wallpaper, red ink, people, places to sit? What do you see out the window? How is the weather like? Is it dark or light? Do you see cars, children playing, etc?
- What do you **hear**? Air conditioners; water dripping; leaves rustling; wind howling; rain; someone reading aloud; shouts; cheers; cries; music; the TV; etc?
- What do you **smell**? Sweat; perfume; incense; food cooking?
- How and what do you **feel**? Nervous; anxious; sad; happy; cold; hot; thrilled; disappointed; afraid; tight shoes; a scratchy wool sweater; rough wood on a bench; weight of a heavy backpack on your back?
- What do you **taste**? Gum; mints; juice; tea; coffee; etc?

Invention:

II- Describe and bring to life the key people in the memoir:

- Narratives involve people whose actions are central to the story. One way to develop your narrative is to write about the people involved in it. Here are some questions to help you develop your understanding of those involved in the story and enhance your portrayal of those characters.
- For five minutes, write about the following:
Describe each one of the key characters in a paragraph. What do they look like? How do they dress? What is the color of their clothes? Does it make a statement about their character? Describe their movements, features, attitudes, facial expressions, and scent.

Invention:

- Dialogue is an effective way of bringing your characters to life and speeding up the action in your narrative. Try to recreate dialogue between two characters or between you and one character in the narrative. Try to write six to ten lines of dialogue. How do the characters speak? Slowly or quickly? With an accent or an attitude? Are they shy or assertive? Do they speak clearly or do they mumble? Do they use certain words or phrases?

Invention:

III- Describe the action:

- In one paragraph summarize the action and what happened in the memoir. Remember that a good narrative dramatizes the action. Make sure to use active verbs (such as, mumbled, muttered, whispered, shouted, asserted) to bring the action to life and make it vivid and detailed.