

## 5

# Memoirs

In this chapter, you will learn how to—

- 5.1 generate content for your memoir.
- 5.2 use the memoir genre to organize a story.
- 5.3 develop an engaging voice to tell your story.
- 5.4 design and add visuals to enhance the narrative.

The words *memoir* and *memory* come from the same root word. Memoirs, however, do more than allow writers to share their memories. Good memoirs explore and reflect on a central theme or question even though they rarely conclude with 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.

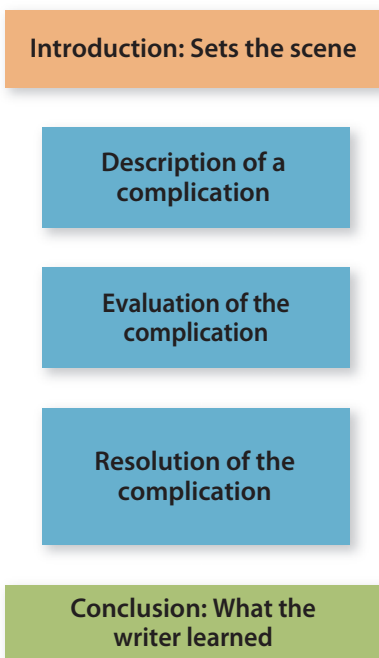
People write memoirs when they have true personal stories that they hope will inspire others to reflect on intriguing questions or social issues. Readers expect memoirs to help them encounter perspectives and insights that are fresh and meaningful.

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

In college, professors will sometimes ask you to write about your life to explore your upbringing and discern 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.*



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.

## ONE STUDENT'S WORK

# Memoirs

Visit **MyWritingLab** to explore an interactive version of this essay.

### Diving In

Helen Sanderson

Engaging title that forecasts the subject of swimming and also hints at the memoir's theme.

Introduction starts fast with a lead that sets the scene, and it ends in a surprising way.

The complication is introduced, an inner struggle the narrator faces.

Background moves the plot forward.

Rich and vivid details give the story texture and intensify the complication.

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 out the next set of drills: "Ten 100's! Ready ... go!" Meanwhile I am still struggling to get to the end of the previous set, deprived of energy, oxygen,

and morale. I cried countless times out of frustration and self-pity, wanting to quit. I had made the team, but I was failing my teammates. I cramped my team's efforts and embarrassed myself, but I swam every lap. I may have been the slowest, but I was going to work the hardest.

I improved tremendously after just a few weeks of rigorous practice. Although I was still the slowest, I was slower by a smaller margin. Fifty yards in thirty-nine seconds. No one else could say they had improved by seventeen seconds, a tremendous accomplishment. I persevered through every meet, practice, lap, and stroke. I had attained my goal: I was a swimmer.

Swimming is the hardest challenge I have ever undertaken. I have always been very driven academically and socially, but I was very afraid to push myself to be an athlete because balance, endurance, and coordination were so unfamiliar to me. However, I did not allow myself to accept failure. Just dive in and keep swimming. There is only me and the pool, a full immersion of body and mind.

Take your mark. My muscles and mind lock into place, attentive and poised. I hear the starter sound and take a leap, already stretching toward the end of the pool. My strokes are fluid, deliberate, and quick. Breathe as little as possible. I do a flip turn, tight and well executed, as I push myself harder and faster. I don't think about the air I need to fill my lungs or the other girls in my race; I only concentrate on what I feel. This time as I reach the end of the pool, I look up to find that I have reached a new personal record of thirty-six seconds and have achieved next-to-last place in my heat. I have won.

Narrator's personal tone is maintained throughout.

Conclusion resolves the conflict as narrator describes a newly gained clarity.

## Inventing Your Memoir's Content

The aim of your memoir is to explore the meaning of an event or series of events from your past. When you start out, don't be too concerned about the point of your memoir. Instead, choose an interesting incident from your life that you want to explore in greater depth. You want to uncover the meaning of this event for your readers *and* yourself.

**5.1** generate content for your memoir.

### 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 when you did something challenging, scary, or fun. Think about the times when you felt pain or joy.

Think about the times when someone or something important came into your life, helping you make a discovery about yourself.

Make a brainstorming list of as many of these events as you can remember (Figure 5.1). 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 include 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 to you 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

### FIGURE 5.1 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.*

**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 5.2). 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 can transcribe it to the page or screen. Sometimes it's easier to tell the story orally and then turn it into written text.

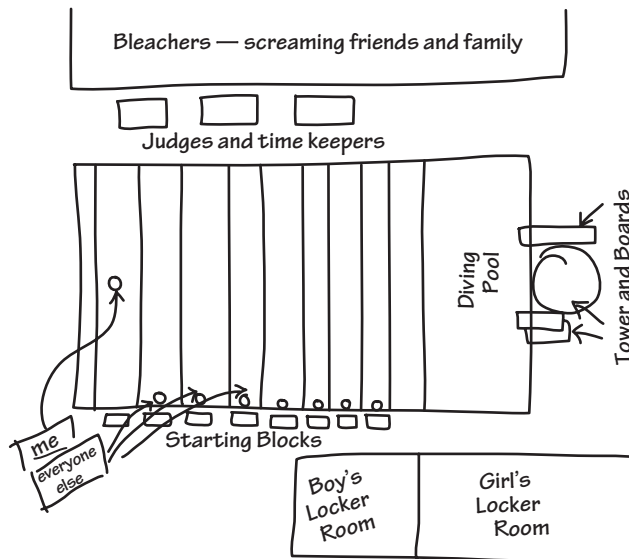
**Storyboard the Event.** In comic strip form, draw out the major scenes in the event. It's fine to use stick figures, because these drawings are only for you. They will help you recall the details and sort out the story you are trying to tell.

**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

ones 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 a tour in the Iraq War



### FIGURE 5.2 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.

(2003–2011) might want to find out more about the history of this war. She could also find out about soldiers' experiences by reading personal stories at *The Memory Archive* ([memoryarchive.org](http://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. Psychology Web sites, for example, might help you explain your own actions or the behavior of others that you witnessed. Meanwhile, historical Web sites might provide background information for an event. This knowledge would help you better recount an experience from a time when you were very young and had little or no awareness of what was happening in the world.

**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 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

**5.2** use the memoir genre to organize a story.

To write 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 figuring out what's most important and how it all holds 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. Use dialogue to bring your readers into the story.

### Main Point or Thesis

Memoirs explore and reflect on a central theme or question, but they rarely provide precise 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 you and others first reacted to it as you did.

### Evaluating and Resolving the Complication

After describing the characters' 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 people tried to make sense of the complication, reacted to the change, and moved forward.

### 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 often have an

“implied thesis,” which means you’re allowing readers to figure out the main point of the story for themselves. In some cases, though, it’s fine to just tell your readers what you learned from the experience.

Tearing an ACL my senior year was a major disappointment and the end of my dream of playing soccer in college. I learned, though, that when one dream ends, other dreams take its place.

Avoid concluding with a “the moral of the story is . . .” or a “they lived happily ever after” ending. Instead, you should strive for something that suggests the events or people reached some kind of closure. Achieving closure, however, doesn’t mean stating a high-minded platitude or revealing a fairy tale ending. Instead, give your readers the sense that you and your characters are looking ahead to the future.

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

## 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.

**5.3** develop an engaging voice to tell your story.

## Evoking an Appropriate Tone or Voice

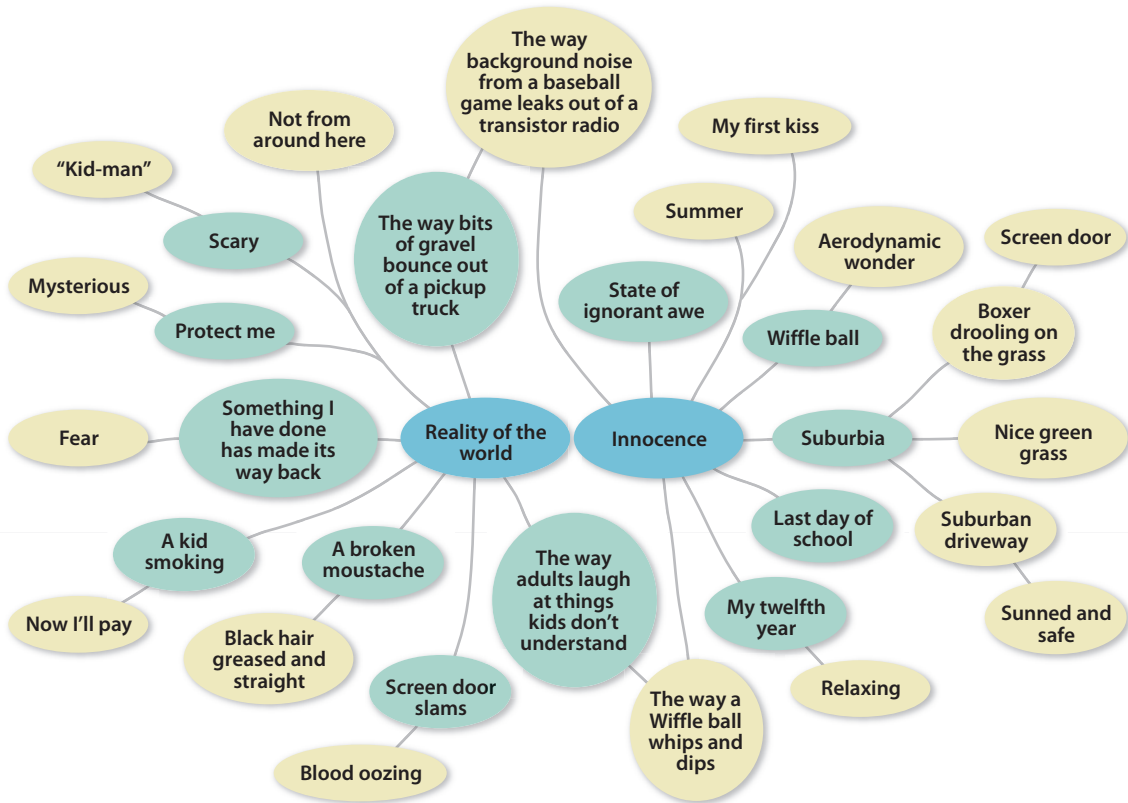
Tone or voice refers to the attitude, or stance, that you are taking toward your subject matter and your readers. That is, a certain “tone of voice” arises from the words on a page. Your tone or voice isn’t something innate to you as a writer. Instead, it should fit your topic and readers.

Concept mapping is a useful tool for helping you set a specific tone and find your voice.

1. Think of a key word that describes the tone you want to set in your memoir.
2. Put that word in the middle of your screen or a piece of paper and circle it (Figure 5.3).
3. Around that key word, write down any words or phrases that you tend to associate with this tone word.
4. As you put words on the screen or paper, try to come up with more words that are associated with these new words. *Hint:* you can use your word processor’s thesaurus to help you generate more words.

Eventually, you will fill the screen or sheet. Then, in the draft of your memoir, look for places where you can strategically use these words. If you use them consistently





### FIGURE 5.3 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.

throughout the memoir, your readers will sense the tone, or attitude you are trying to convey. This tone will help you develop your central “theme,” the idea or question that the entire memoir explores.

You should use these words and phrases occasionally to achieve the effect you want. If you overuse these words, your readers will sense 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 strategically 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.** Dialogues between characters should be reserved for key moments that should move the story forward in an important way.

**Write the Way Your Characters Speak.** People rarely speak in proper English. 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. To avoid drawing out a conversation too much, craft your dialogue to 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. If you leave off the tag, make sure it's obvious who is speaking.

**Create Unique Voices for Characters.** Each of your characters should sound different. You can vary their tone, cadence, dialect, or style to give them each a unique voice.

What if you cannot remember what people actually said? As long as you remain true to what you remember people saying, you can invent some of the details of the dialogue.

## Designing Your Memoir

Memoirs, like almost all genres today, can use visual design to reinforce the written text. You can augment and deepen your words with images or sound.

**5.4** design and add visuals to enhance the narrative.

**Choose the Medium.** Readers might be more moved by an audio file of you narrating and enacting your memoir than by a written document. Or, perhaps a video or a multimedia document would better allow you to convey your ideas.

**Add Visuals, Especially Photos.** Use one or more photos to emphasize a key point, set a tone, or add a new dimension. Photos or drawings of specific places will help your readers visualize the places where the events in the memoir took place.

**Find a Place to Publish.** You might want to go a step further to get your story out there. Web sites, like the *Memory Archive* and *Teen Ink*, offer places where you can share your memories. Otherwise, you might consider putting your memoirs on a blog or on your *Facebook* page. Remember, though, to not reveal private information that might embarrass you or put you or others at any kind of risk. Save your most personal information and photographs for yourself.

# The Literacy Narrative

The literacy narrative and digital literacy narrative are memoirs that describe how the author learned to read and write or that focus on some formative experience that involved writing and speaking. Literacy narratives usually have all the elements of other memoirs. They don't just recount a series of events, but carefully work those events into a plot with a complication. Quite often, the author describes overcoming some obstacle, perhaps the quest for literacy itself or the need to overcome some barrier to learning. Digital literacy narratives are especially popular because they show how authors learned to use new technologies that helped them solve problems in their lives.

Literacy narratives are distinguished from other memoirs by a single feature: they focus on the author's experiences with reading and writing. Keep in mind that "literacy" encompasses more than learning to read and form letters on the traditional printed page. New writing situations are emerging due to new contexts, readers, purposes, and technologies. Learning to negotiate among these readers, situations, and technologies is the real challenge of becoming literate in today's world. The definition of literacy is constantly changing. New situations, technologies, and other changes require each of us to continually acquire new literacy skills. All of these challenges are fair game for a literacy narrative.

Literacy narratives should have all the features described in this chapter's At-a-Glance on page 49. Be sure to pay attention to the conflict or tension: What challenge did you face and how did you resolve it—or fail to resolve it? Also, how did the experience change you? What new understanding (positive or negative) did you come away with? And finally, think about the larger theme: What significance does your story have, and what does it tell readers about literacy or what questions does it encourage your readers to reflect on?

**WRITE your own literacy narrative or digital literacy narrative.** Remember that "literacy" includes a broad range of activities, skills, knowledge, and technologies. Choose a significant incident or set of related incidents in your life that involved coming to terms with literacy. Write your literacy narrative or digital literacy narrative as a memoir, paying attention to the memoir's features. Possible subjects include:

- encountering a new kind of literacy, and the people involved
- working with or helping others with literacy issues
- encountering a new communication technology
- a situation where your literacy skills were tested
- a particular book, work of literature, or other communication that changed your outlook

# From *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Frederick Douglass

*In the following excerpt from one of the best-known literacy narratives ever written, Douglass describes his determination as a young slave in America to become literate, even though the effort put him in grave personal danger.*

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else. . . . The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

Douglass introduces the complication.

The scene is set, while background information is provided up front.

Vivid descriptions of people and places.

Douglass shows how he resolved the conflict.

The conclusion reveals the larger point of the narrative: the injustice of slavery.

*Here's one basic approach for creating an engaging memoir that makes a point.*

## **CHOOSE** the Event or Series of Events You Want to Write About

Use the brainstorming exercises to come up with a list of events and choose the one that could become an effective memoir.

## **QUESTION** Your Memory About the Event(s)

Figure out what you know and what you can imagine about the event. What can you find out about the place, the objects in that place, and the people and what they did?

## **DO** Some Research

If you want to find out more about the time, the place, or a person in your memoir, do some background research to find out what things were really like.

## **DRAFT** the Story

Write the story, including all the events that relate to it. Describe people, their actions, and places with rich and vivid detail.

## **FIND** the Theme

Reflect on what you've written and decide what "theme" you want this story to evoke for your readers. "Pets and people" is a topic, not a theme; "To what degree can pets replace people in our lives?" is a theme.

## **STATE** the Message Directly or Indirectly

Whether you choose to make the main point directly or indirectly, your final paragraphs should provide a sense of closure that points readers to your overall message.

## **DEVELOP** an Appropriate Tone or Voice

Develop your narrator's voice and use dialogue to add different voices to your story.

## **EDIT** the Story to Its Essentials

When you ask yourself, *What is essential to the theme of my memoir?* you'll probably end up cutting a lot out of your original draft. Good memoirs are to the point; they should include only what is essential.

# My Ex Went to Prison for Sex Crimes

JEAN ELLEN WHATLEY

*In this memoir, Jean Whatley describes her reactions to discovering that her husband had become a pedophile. Memoirs like this one allow writers to better understand something that was once incomprehensible. Pay attention to the way she contrasts her original understanding of her ex-husband with the criminal that he had become.*

People assume the wife knows. Not really. I found out about my former husband's descent into pedophilia at the same time the rest of the world did—on the 10 o'clock news.

My mind could not comprehend what my eyes were seeing. I studied his mug shot on TV. Here was the face of the man I had loved, the cleft in his chin, his square jaw, the soft, smooth skin just below his eyes, which I'd kissed a thousand times. Who was this broken man with the downcast eyes? Did he look away when the shutter closed because he was thinking of his children? What happened to the proud young father who cradled his newborns like fragile glass, the guy with a contagious laugh and shiny blue eyes, who owned any room he walked into? A hometown celebrity, a respected journalist, with a good wife and four great kids—now, reduced to this. Who *was* this man?

The kids in bed, I turned down the volume on the TV in a futile attempt to shield them for just one more day. My colleagues in the press, with whom I'd jockeyed for position at many a crime scene, were now covering a crime that would deal my kids a blow unimaginable. *"The accused is charged with three counts of statutory sodomy stemming from a series of sexual encounters with a teenage boy at a high school field house."* For years I'd been blase about broadcasting the worst day of someone else's life. In one minute, I knew what that felt like.

What would I say to my children? How could I prepare them? I had one son in college, a 17-year-old, a 14-year-old and my youngest, barely 13. How does a mother explain sodomy to a seventh grader? How does a mother suck back into the cylinder the toxic cloud that has just exploded all over her family? *How could he?*

Disbelief turned to maternal rage, like jet <sup>5</sup> fuel in my blood. I would *not* let him ruin my children's future. I would *not* let his indefensible addiction stain their beautiful lives. And in this flashpoint, I seized the strength of a righteous fury long trapped.

I had been one of those kids once, a victim kid. A little girl caught in a hopeless game of duck and cover. I remained silent for decades, until I simply couldn't hold down the bile of violation and secrecy any longer. I was in my 40s when I finally told my mother that my stepdad had molested me. By then he was dead. I'd even delivered the eulogy at his funeral, skipping over his ignoble deeds. Little did I know that the man I was married to—the man in the first pew, dabbing his eyes—would end up in prison years later for committing some crimes of his own.

I had no clue when I married him that the very thing I was running away from, I was actually running to. This happens sometimes to people who were sexually abused; we tend to behave like refugees. We don't assert our rights, because we're not sure we have any.

We lack confidence in scrutinizing others, because we feel like damaged goods ourselves.

But in time, I stood up for myself, challenging the endless hours he spent on the Internet, his increasing disengagement from our family. Backed into a corner, he told me he was gay. I told him to get out. But they don't lock people up for being gay anymore. No longer under the wary eye of a wife, or the threat of being discovered, he took greater risks. He was found out by a mother who made a painful discovery about what was keeping her son so busy on the computer.

After a 14-month IV drip of news coverage, my former husband was sentenced to seven years in prison for having sex with that teenage boy. I spent those seven years trying to convince my children that the sins of their father were not carried on their backs, seven years of trying to help them deflect the shame by association that I had endured firsthand. Seven years; I was like a widow with no death benefits, no child support, no moral support, no "every-other-weekend" relief, no one to call in the middle of the night to meet me at the hospital with a sick kid, nobody else to ante up for college or cars, braces or bail money. Nothing. We inherited nothing, except enough pain and financial hardship to throw us all into a bottomless well with no rope, just the bucket tossed in behind us, smackin' us on the head. But guess what?

We climbed out. We climbed out of that dark, slimy drowning hole by our bloody fingernails, each one, pushing up the next, back into the sunlight, where we sat on the side of the well, flicking off the mud. We made it. Three of my four kids are now out of college, the fourth will graduate next year. They're amazing: loving, resilient, remarkably well adjusted, and a funnier lot, I have never seen.

I just didn't realize how tired I was. It's hard to process stuff while you're holding up a car. When my brother died not long ago—the second of my brothers to die inside a few short years—I hit the mat. I couldn't rally. I found myself asking, "*Is this it? Really? Is this*

*what my life is about?*" Have you ever felt that way? Like you just might lose it?

So I did something radical. I set the car down, got behind the wheel and drove—all across America. I blew off my soul-killing, 60-hour-a-week job, took every last dime I had in savings (which wasn't even enough to get back home on), loaded up my dog and more baggage than I realized and hit the road. We drove all over the country last summer, traveling through 21 states, from Missouri to New York to California and back again. I needed a defibrillator as big as a nation. I went to reconnect with every place and every person I had ever loved. I went to find a half-brother I had never seen. I went seeking solace.

What I got was healing. Eight weeks and more than 8,000 miles later, at a scenic overlook alongside a lonely, two-lane highway, it all got settled. Gazing out at the endless Utah desert, I sat on a huge, flat rock with my dog watching the sun go down. We were safe and dry, but out on the far horizon brewed a huge thunderstorm. Rain in the desert comes down in grey, vertical shafts from giant pink and purple clouds. Looking out at what felt like infinity, I was inspired to let it all go. I simply let it go.

All the egregious offenses that had been<sup>15</sup> hurled my way—a betrayed wife, an abused child—over time, had ceased to matter. They were like a downpour on the desert, dark stabs into a porous surface. I absorbed them to make my life better, *yes better*, because along the way, I'd been blessed with the wisdom that there is far more surface than there is rain.

How quickly the pain can vanish if we are open to the healing. Mile by mile, house by house—at the end of this road trip in which I'd been embraced by friends, family, strangers on the highway, and yes, my found brother, I realized how fortunate I really am. The grimy corners of shame and bitterness had been scrubbed clean by love. Victim, no more.

We've heard a lot about victims in the news lately and the staggering abuse that came from people who were charged with helping them, not hurting them. Heads *should* roll.



But, in the cacophony of competing sound bites, with the accusations, denials, demands for retribution and pleas for justice, there is a vital message that isn't breaking through.

Healing is possible.

It takes time. It takes courage. It takes trusting another human being enough to

open up your mind and your heart to speak your truth.

If I had a chance to yell from a mountain-<sup>20</sup> top to anyone whose life has been marred by sexual abuse, here's what I would say: There is a place where it's safe and dry. Come see how fleeting the rain can be.

#### A CLOSER LOOK AT

### "My Ex Went to Prison for Sex Crimes"

MyWritingLab

1. In this memoir, Whatley uses metaphors (e.g. "toxic cloud," "jet fuel in my blood") to express thoughts that would be difficult to express in non-metaphorical terms. Find three other metaphors in this memoir. With your group, discuss the effects that these metaphors have on you as the reader.
2. When tragic things happen, people often go back over their history to rethink prior events and assumptions. Find three places in Whatley's memoir where she is rethinking her past. What kinds of conclusions does she reach?
3. At the end of this memoir, Whatley offers a lesson for the readers. Much of that lesson, however, seems directed at herself. With your group, discuss how memoirs like this one can help heal their authors. After reading this memoir, do you believe Whatley is fully healed?

#### IDEAS FOR

### Writing and Discussion

MyWritingLab

1. Think of a moment when you made a painful discovery about yourself, someone you know, or something you cared about. In a memoir, tell this story of discovery and how it forced you to rethink much of what you thought you knew. Conclude with a lesson that you took away from the experience.
2. Find a memoir on the Internet or in a popular publication. Write a rhetorical analysis or literary analysis in which you explore how the memoir works. You might explain its content, organization, and style. Or, perhaps you might focus on its use of stylistic devices like metaphors and similes.

# Slapstick

## THADDEUS GUNN

*In this memoir, author Thaddeus Gunn describes the physical abuse he and his siblings experienced from his mother. He discusses how this abuse shaped his life and the lives of others. Watch how he reveals the lesson of the narrative in a subtle way at the end.*

I don't remember every beating mom gave us. I just remember that we named them after All Star wrestling moves. She had an extensive repertoire of techniques. The Half Suplex. The Full Suplex. The Spine Buster. Also the body part specific moves: the Wrist

Lock, Atomic Knee Drop, and Corner Butt Slam. Some included hardware, like the Lasso from El Paso, which was a leather belt with a welt-inducing metal buckle, and The Board of Ed, a maple yardstick with steel end caps.



We six kids had our own repertoire of tortures as well, those we gave each other: the Irish Kiss, the Hertz Donut, the Purple Nerple, the Indian Burn, the Stop Hittin' Yourself, and the ever-popular Open Your Mouth and Close Your Eyes and You Shall Receive a Big Surprise.

It wasn't until my younger sister Emily was removed from custody that it stopped. The Board of Ed left marks where teachers could find them. But by then I was the only child left at home, and I was starting to grow muscles.

Years later, when my siblings and I were all grown and had kids of our own to beat, I accompanied my mother to the doctor's office to see the results of her CAT scan. He showed us an image of an enormous calcified tumor, an alabaster walnut that was crowding her right temporal lobe.

He asked her if she remembered ever<sup>5</sup> being hit in the head, ever receiving a blow to her temple hard enough that it would cause a

sliver of her skull to separate inward, the same way a shard of glass separates from a windshield when it's been hit by a bb. He theorized that there was a shard of bone in the center of the mass, just as there is a grain of sand at the center of every pearl.

She said, "No, I can't remember anything. I can't even imagine what it would be."

He said, "Are you sure? Perhaps a car accident. It would have caused a concussion. You may have been knocked unconscious."

And again she said, "No, I don't remember anything."

But I remember perfectly well. My grandmother, proudly noting she was never one to spare the rod, told me herself what a bother my mother was: how she was sullen, how she burned the toast, spilled the juice, and failed in math. And for these infractions she was justly punished, with the rap on the knuckles, the slap on the jaw, the punch in the stomach, and the milk bottle to the side of the head.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT Slapstick

MyWritingLab

1. At the beginning of this memoir, Gunn uses names similar to those of professional wrestling moves to describe the kinds of physical abuses that his mother used on him and his siblings. How are these names descriptive, creating a visual image for the readers? With your group, use these names to imagine what each abuse might have actually been.
2. The tone of the narrative is rather flat, even though the subject is hurtful and emotional. With your group, discuss three strategies that Gunn uses to set this tone. Why do you think he chose this tone rather than an outwardly emotional tone?
3. Memoirs, like most narratives, offer a lesson. Where does the lesson in this memoir reveal itself? In one sentence, articulate that lesson and share it with your class. Did everyone come up with a similar understanding of the lesson?

## IDEAS FOR Writing

MyWritingLab

1. All parents make mistakes. Think back to a time when one of your parents or guardians made a mistake. Write a brief memoir in which you tell the story of that mistake. In your memoir, reveal the lessons that were learned or not learned from this mistake.
2. Do research on child abuse. Write a causal analysis in which you describe some of the reasons why child abuse exists in our culture. At the end of your paper, describe some of the effects of this abuse.

1. Ask each member of your group to tell a funny story about himself or herself (something PG-13 or milder, please). After each person tells his or her story, compare the organization of the story to the typical organization of a memoir. What are some of the similarities and differences between these funny stories and memoirs?
2. With a group of people in your class, talk about the physical space where you did a lot of your learning in elementary school. Is there a classroom or other space prominent in your memories? Describe sensory details: how the furniture was arranged, who sat or stood where, the background noises, perhaps even the smells of that place.
3. Do some people who don't really know you have a false idea about who you are? Perhaps it's an impression or image that you yourself have adopted, encouraged, or just never bothered to correct. Give your group a description of this mistaken or alternative impression that some people hold about you. Tell a story that illustrates the "you" others see, and how that image or impression just doesn't capture the real you.

## Talk About This



1. All families have stories that have been told so often they have become "famous." Choose a story about you that stands out as especially celebrated in your family.
  - a. Briefly relate that story. If you're writing the story, make it less than 300 words; if you're telling it in a small group, make it less than three minutes.
  - b. Now explain (in writing or orally) *why* that story is a favorite. What does it *mean* to those who tell it? Does it mean the same thing for everyone involved? *When* is it told? What purpose does it serve? What *point* does it make about your family—what is its significance? Do different people draw different meanings from the story? What general *theme* does it evoke, and why is that theme important for your family?
2. Find a memoir in a book or magazine, or on the Internet. Think about how changing the intended audience and/or the medium might help the memoir reach a different set of readers. What other medium would you choose, and how would you alter the original memoir to adapt it to this medium?
3. Authors write memoirs because they have a point they want to get across to their readers. If you wanted to "repurpose" a memoir to, say, a profile, a proposal, or a research report, how might you do it? How would its angle and purpose change? When you change genres, the nature of the text changes. The readers themselves and their expectations may change significantly; tone needs to change, as do style and many other factors. List specifically what would change if you used a different genre to handle the subject of a memoir.

## Try This Out



## Explore This



Ready to search for your own microgenres? Here are some microgenres that are related to memoirs. Choose a microgenre from the list below and find three examples in print or on the Internet. Compare and contrast their content, organization, style, and design.

**Manifesto**—a statement of your personal beliefs based on your experiences

**Confessional**—a story about something you did wrong

**“This I Believe”**—a story that illustrates a belief or value you hold as true

**Graphic-Novel Memoir**—an illustrated memoir, designed like a comic or storyboard

**Digital Literacy Narrative**—a story about how you learned to use technology (e.g., texting, e-mail, mobile phone) to communicate with others

## Write This



- 1. Write a memoir.** Write a five-page memoir in which you explore your relationship with another member of your family. Choose an event or series of events that could illustrate that relationship and explore its tensions. Identify a complication or a struggle of values. Then show how you and this other family member evaluated the complication and resolved it. End your memoir by telling your readers what you learned from this experience.
- 2. Create a map or a storyboard.** Create a map or a storyboard and write a three-page memoir about a specific event in your life. Develop your memoir by paying special attention to the scene, the people, and the events (actions, dialogue, thoughts) that make up the plot. Be sure that your memoir evokes some significant message or theme that you want your reader to understand.
- 3. Write a “six-word memoir.”** A six-word memoir tries to tell a story in just six words. For instance, when the famous writer Ernest Hemingway was challenged to tell a story in just six words, he responded: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” *Smith Magazine* challenged famous and unknown writers to contribute and received over 11,000 responses, some of which were collected in *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. Here are a few of them:
  - I’m ten, and have an attitude.
  - Anything’s possible with an extension cord.
  - Revenge is living well, without you.
  - My reach always exceeds my grasp.
  - Never should have bought that ring.
  - Found true love after nine months.

Go to **MyWritingLab** to complete this chapter’s exercises and test your understanding of its objectives.