

Adult Memoir

WRITING BOX

So, you're interested in writing your memoir.

What is a memoir? A memoir is not the same as an autobiography. While an autobiography spans your entire life, a memoir focuses on one particular moment or series of moments around a theme. In other words, a memoir is not “what you did in your life, but what you did *with* your life” (Smith). Think of a memoir as a story with these 3 elements (from Marion Roach Smith):

- A theme (“What is this about?”)
- An argument (“Why your theme is important”)
- The scenes from your life that you will deploy to prove that argument

How do I get started?

Start with some pre-writing, ways to get your ideas down on paper before you start the actual writing.

1. *Try a life map.* Draw a map that uses images to represent some moments in your life. Think about how those images connect.
2. *Try a six-word memoir.* Capture the spirit or essence of your memoir in just six well chosen words

Here are some examples:

Out of everyone, I chose you – Samantha Yanez-Chavez

Moved every year then came home – Allison Harris

Maybe art school was a mistake – Holiday Campanella

Surviving dog attack, Beatlemania and egomania - Catherine Palmer

I'm not so good at following rules - Adrian Khachtu

The experience was worth the risk - Adrielle Brousse

Slightly awkward, clumsy, asks many questions - Taheer Oksman

3. Try a 100-word version of your memoir. Why 100 words? According to <http://www.100wordstory.org/about/>

“100 seems perfect. . . . The 100-word format forces the writer to question each word. . . . ‘to keep a story free from explanation,’ as Walter Benjamin wrote.”

Here are some 100 word examples:

Hanover Park <http://www.100wordstory.org/hanover-park/>

Rings <http://www.100wordstory.org/rings/>

Durable Power <http://www.100wordstory.org/durable-power/>

Then dive into the writing.

Consider Brooke Warner's six steps to get you started:

- 1 - Narrow your focus
- 2 - Include more than just your story
- 3 - Tell the truth
- 4 - Put your readers in your shoes
- 5 - Employ elements of fiction to bring your story to life
- 6 - Create an emotional Journey

(<https://thewritelife.com/how-to-write-a-memoir/>)

Or look at one or more of the books on how to write a memoir available through the Ypsilanti District Library. These include

Writing Life Stories: How to Make Memories into Memoirs, Ideas into Essays, and Life into Literature - by Bill Roorbach

Writing Family Histories and Memoirs - by Kirk Polking

Will Write for Food: The Complete Guide to Writing Cookbooks, Blogs, Reviews, Memoir, and More - by Dianne Jacob

Tips

Read Other Memoirs

There are a lot of different types of memoirs. Reading other memoirs will also help get you started: in terms of ideas and in terms of writing style. As you read, notice these elements.

- **Opening sentences or leads:** That first sentence can really hook the reader into wanting to read more. Here are some common types of leads (adapted from Barry Lane's *After The End*)

Big Potato Leads: Jump into the middle of your story and leave the reader wanting more:

“Every so often a dead dog dreams me up again.” – Stephanie Vaughn, *Dog Heaven*

Snapshot Leads: Create a picture in the reader's mind

“The doorman of the Kilmarnock was six foot two. He wore a pale blue uniform and white gloves made his hands look enormous. He opened the door of the yellow taxi as gently as an old maid stroking a cat.” – Raymond Chandler, *Smart Aleck Kill*

Talking Leads: Begin with dialogue

“Where is Papa going with that ax?” said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.” – E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*

Thinking Leads: Start with a thought inside a character or you.

“As a boy, I never knew where my mother was from—where she was born, who her parents were.” – James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*

- **Detailed snapshots throughout the memoir** (see above) can help the reader picture the setting and the action

- **Exploded moments** that create a movie in the reader's mind, so the reader experiences the same intensity that you did in the moment. Exploded moments use all five senses: what the scene looked like, sounded like, smelled like, felt like, even tasted like!
- **Dialogue** brings the reader immediately into the action. Sometimes one line of dialogue can do more than a paragraph of description! Think about using a paragraph of dialogue within, or mixed in with, snapshots and exploded moments. Sometimes, you want a longer back and forth, so that the dialogue becomes your snapshot.

Some memoirs you can read to help you get started (the list is from Barry Fox, PH.D.

<https://barryfox.us/how-to-write-a-memoir-1/>):

- *inspirational memoirs such as Michelle Obama's *Becoming*.
- celebrity memoirs such as Jeff Tweedy's *Let's Go (So We Can Get Back)*.
- *nostalgia memoirs such as Jennifer Worth's *Call the Midwife*.
- *political memoirs such as Hillary Clinton's *What Happened*.
- *"growing up" memoirs such as Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*.
- motherhood memoirs such as Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*.
- *memoirs of sorrow and survival such as Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*.
- travel memoirs, sports memoirs

(<https://barryfox.us/how-to-start-a-sports-memoir/>)

- coming of age memoirs, family memoirs
(<https://barryfox.us/how-to-start-a-family-memoir/>) and more.

(* titles available at the Whittaker Library)

Another kind of memoir, one that mixes words and art is the graphic memoir. These have become really popular with adults and young adults. If you are art-inclined, check out the young adult graphic memoirs as another way to approach your memoir. All of these are available at the Whittaker Library.

Andrew, Mari – *Am I There Yet? The Loop-de-Loop Zigzagging Journey to Adulthood*

Bechdel, Alison – *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

Bechdel, Alison – *Are You My Mother?*

Davis, Lacy & Jim Kettner – *Ink in Water*
Fairfield, Lesley – *Tyranny*
Forney, Ellen – *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me*
Georges, Nicole J. – *Calling Dr. Laura*
Knisley, Lucy – *Displacement: A Travelogue*
Knisley, Lucy – *Kid Gloves: Nine Months of Careful Chaos*
Knisley, Lucy – *Relish: My Life in the Kitchen*
Kurzwell, Amy – *Flying Couch: A Graphic Memoir*
Lewis, John, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell – *March: Book One*
Prince, Liz – *Tom Boy: A Graphic Memoir*
Spiegelman, Art – *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*
Spiegelman, Art – *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Begin*
Takei, George, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker – *They Called Us Enemy*
Weaver, Lila Quintero – *Darkroom: A Memoir in Black & White*

**For additional help in memoir writing, YpsiWrites offers one-to-one consulting.
For more information, see ypsiwrites.com.**

Adult Memoir Example

Hanover Park

Their first date: an old plaid quilt spread over damp grass, pint-sized cartons of vegetable fried rice, a wayward kite trapped in the branches of an ancient elm tree. He'd meant to ask her roommate, extroverted and blonde, but playing it safe, asked her instead—mousy brunettes rarely declined. Later, when she climbed the elm to free the kite, he grew dizzy, then started applauding. In his car they touched hands; neither let go. Twenty years later—Jesus, time flies!—it turns out she wasn't mousy at all, except for her feet, tiny and delicate and light upon the ground.

- 1 - **Narrow Focus:** A date in Hanover Park
- 2 - **Include more than just your story:** Observations regarding characteristics
- 3 - **Tell the truth:** Journey of discovery
- 4 - **Put your readers in your shoes:** Highly descriptive imagery
- 5 - **Employ elements of fiction:** Characters, clear plot, third person point of view, Hanover Park setting, themes of love and journey of discovery
- 6 - **Create an emotional journey:** A mistake that turned into a lifelong connection

LEAD: "Their first date"

DETAILED SNAPSHOTS: "...an old plaid quilt spread over damp grass, pint-sized cartons of vegetable fried rice, a wayward kite trapped in the branches of an ancient elm tree."

EXPLODED MOMENTS: "Later, when she climbed the elm to free the kite, he grew dizzy, then started applauding. In his car they touched hands; neither let go."

DIALOGUE: "Jesus, time flies!"

Retrieved from <http://www.100wordstory.org/hanover-park/>.