

Getting Started on Your Memoir

5 ELEMENTS of Memoir

Memoir tells a compelling story using truth, theme, 1st person POV narration, voice, and a fifth element—the M&Ms of writing, Memory and Musing.

1. TRUTH

It really happened. We know the trouble writers can get into by not remembering this. But the bigger dilemma is how not telling the truth leaves the reader; it not only weakens the relationship with the author, it destroys it. No longer trust them. This can be tricky because not everything in a memoir is word for word true. Who can remember exactly what their dad said at breakfast fifty years ago? Dialogue serves to further the theme.

In memoir, the author stands behind her story saying to the readers, "This happened; this is true." What is important about this is that the reader believes the story is true, which in turn requires the writer to be rigorously honest.

2. THEME Memoir is different from autobiography in choice of subject matter.

JB: "An autobiography is a story of a life: name implies that the writer will somehow attempt to capture all essential elements of that life. ...Memoir, on the other hand, makes no pretense of replicating a whole life. Indeed, one of the important skills of memoir writing is the selection of the theme or themes that will bind the work together..."

3. VOICE

JB: "Voice has been said to be the fingerprint of the writer, not the person on the page... The writer with her own particular linguistic quirks, sentence rhythms, recurring images.

4. POV- First Person Narrative

First person (singular):I—"I woke up this morning." The narrator is the protagonist; the person who is telling story.

JB: "Separating yourself as a writer from yourself as protagonist will help give you necessary perspective to craft memoir as a story. It will also decrease the degree to which you feel exposed as others critique your work."

5. THE ONGOING ATTEMPT TO ARRIVE AT ANSWERS

Memoir is about perception. What is important/significant about a particular set of events? What do you remember about a certain event? Why? What did you think when it happened? What do you think now? The M&Ms of memoir. In a sense, in writing memoir "It is all about you."

Suggestions for Writing Memoir

1. Utilize 5 Elements of Memoir: Truth, Theme, Voice, POV, Musing
2. Be with writers. They are brave.
3. Think of a family story you have told or have heard told many times. Decide what the theme of the story is. Write the story down.
4. Make a list of your family's or other close-knit group's classic stories—those you always hear at family occasions. Make notes on what purpose you think the story serves, or what myths it fosters in family or group.
5. Keep track of 'scenes', little windows on your life (JB), pieces of conversation, then connect them. LA calls them 'snippets.' ELM calls them 'seedlings.'
6. Write 10 defining moments in your life. Group them according to categories. Are there themes? (loss, birth, love, moving, change, success, tragedy, ambition, relationships, coming of age)

Ethel Lee-Miller *Thinking of Miller Place: A Memoir of Summer Comfort (ELM)*

Lorraine Ash- *Life Touches Life: A Mother's Story of Stillbirth and Healing; Self and Soul (LA)*

Judith Barrington- *Writing a Memoir (JB)*

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