

## Memoir Writing

WRCR6218

### Course Outline

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#### Description:

Everyone has a story to tell but why write a memoir? Perhaps you feel compelled to honour someone who made a difference in your life. Most writers want to document unique experiences, record something about their family history, and leave a written or multi-media legacy for future generations. Some memoir writers have had a life event that moved them profoundly. Others want to understand and heal old wounds. Whatever your interest, *Memoir Writing* is a step-by-step, introductory course to help you put your story on paper. You will develop writing techniques to examine, organize and translate your personal experiences into memoir. And you will find the narrative voice that will make your personal history interesting to other readers.

**Course Goals:** *Memoir Writing* is designed to help you decide which story to tell and how to tell it. This course is intended for students with an interest in personal narratives who want to hone new writing skills in a supportive environment. You don't need to have written before but you must commit to writing regularly over the six weeks of this course. You will learn how to mine important memories from your life, and set goals and a vision for a completed memoir. Memoir is a blend of memory and imagination. You will learn to narrow the focus of your life story and define the underlying theme that connects you with an audience. You will learn literary devices such as narrative arc and plot, scene and summary to make your work more readable and enjoyable. You are the central character in memoir and we will develop and strengthen your unique and authentic voice. You will gain insights about how to handle sensitive subjects and family secrets. The student will be given in-class and at-home writing exercises to review the building blocks of memoir. We will do short, selected readings of great works of memoir. Excerpts from Judith Barrington's *Memoir Writing* will be used to help you understand the structure of memoir. You will be encouraged to share your writing work in class – first with a partner and then with the group in a workshop setting.

**Course Objectives:** At the completion of this course, the student will be knowledgeable about the different forms of memoir and recognize the key elements of a good narrative. Through varied writing exercises you will learn how to sharpen your instincts and hone your storytelling craft. You will develop a memoir skills toolkit that include these critical elements; how to plan, write, revise and improve your work. Your assignments will receive constructive feedback - an essential component of the creative process - though you will not receive a grade. Students will write several short pieces that will be revised to produce a series of connected essays leading to a final portfolio of memoir work.

#### Attendance Requirements:

Students must not miss more than one class to receive a completion for this course unless there

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is explicit approval from the instructor. A completion report can be printed from myWCS.

## Code of Student Conduct

The purpose of the Code of Student Conduct is to define the general standard of conduct expected of students registered at Western University, provide examples of behaviour that constitutes a breach of this standard of conduct, provide examples of sanctions that may be imposed, and set out the disciplinary procedures that the University will follow. For the complete Code of Student Conduct: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/board/code.pdf>

**Evaluation:** This is a non-graded course but regular feedback of your writing work by the instructor is a valued component. The course is limited to 12 participants.

There are six classes that run from 6:30-9:30 PM. There will be a personal meeting time scheduled with the instructor for 30 minutes at the beginning and end of each class. Each student in the course will receive, at minimum, one half-hour of private one-on-one time with the instructor. This time can also be scheduled at the mutual convenience of instructor and student on a different day. It is expected that students will work on assignments in teams from 6:30-7PM and 9-9:30PM when they are not meeting privately with the instructor. So be prepared to attend from 6:30-9:30PM. There may also be opportunities for group workshops and author readings outside of scheduled class time.

## Course Schedule:

### Week 1

#### Introduction to Memoir

Memoir is a sub-genre of autobiographical writing that focuses less on historical dates or an entire lifetime, and more on digging deeper into your own perceptions and experiences over a shorter period of time. Many contemporary literary superstars have written memoirs but the explosion of self-publishing options has encouraged many people to leave written legacies for loved ones in the form of memoir. The class will hear from everyone about their hopes and expectations in the course and about their writing background/experience. We will introduce you to the memoir genre in its many forms. We will discuss the importance of finding and honing your unique voice. As a result of this course you will learn how to manage the main character - You!

**Assignment:** Write a two page essay that answers the following question - What is your first memory about your siblings, parents, pets, toys, or house? And if you have not done so already, re-read your diaries and journals. Flip through old photo books. Get a feel for looking at yourself through fresh eyes as a character.

Two students will be assigned to read a short selection from their favourite memoir in class next week. Please see the links at the end of this syllabus to interesting works of memoir, or bring your own.

## Week 2

### The Form of Memoir

Memoir is a surprisingly flexible writing craft. From personal essays to highly creative non-fiction, great works of memoir can be a combination of many things including genealogy. But the heart of memoir is strong narration – a story told by you, the narrator. There are many popular topics explored in contemporary memoir including personal hardship and recovery, achievement and/or failure, an internal epiphany or redemption, a dissection of key relationships, or an exploration of travel and physical places. Memoir writing is a way for writers to figure out who they are, who they have become, and what it means to them and to the lives of others. A memoir puts the events of your life in perspective both for you, the writer, and for those who read it. It is a way to explain to others our choices, perspectives, decisions, and responses to life events. Critics of memoir suggest that the genre can encourage navel-gazing that makes a narrator sound self-indulgent, even untrustworthy. We will discuss the difference between indulgence and introspection.

We will also discuss the basics of organizing your source material. You can use timelines to plot your 5-6 most significant life moments. There may be one pivotal event that stands out as particularly important or meaningful. If there isn't, don't worry. There are many different ways to diagram a life. You can divide yours into categories such as critical choices, influential people, conflicts, beliefs, lessons, even mistakes. Experiment until you find the one story that needs to be told, the one experience that really fashioned you.

We will use memory worksheets to get you started. These worksheets will gather jot notes (three to five words is sufficient) of people, events, relationships, thoughts and feelings - anything-from your past of importance. The list is usually random and always uncensored. You will not need to share the memory list in class. Each line lists a different memory. Do not write in full sentences or force yourself to be chronological. Let yourself go where your imagination takes you.

**Assignment:** Take a closer look at the memory list sheets you prepared in class. Write two pages about a specific event that happened to you that had a major impact on your life. Did you have any obstacles that stood between you and reaching your hearts' desire? Can you think of how you changed as a result of this event? Did others around you change? Please be prepared to share this essay in class next week with a partner.

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## Week 3

### Memory Mining and the Truth

Our memories often contain family secrets and sensitive subjects. Memory can be imperfect and unreliable, open to interpretation and influence and prone to misdirection and distraction. You and your family members or friends may look at the same event with different eyes and observations. And that's the whole point. Making sense of these inconsistencies are what sets good memoir apart from bone-dry, fact-heavy writing. Imagination is also an important part of

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memoir. We recreate the events of the past and present them to readers in compelling scenes that form a narrative.

This week we will deepen our understanding of how to work with our memories. We will discuss the fallibility of memory and how memory can slant your story (expect an active in-class assignment.) We will review the differences between factual and emotional truths.

You will also complete a memoir exercise using plot as an organizational tool. We will discuss the beginning, middle and end of your narrative. We will use the Freytag Pyramid, a well-known tool in fiction writing, to understand plot and the arc of the narrative. Very simply, this pyramid looks at an inciting incident or complication, rising action, the climax and falling action. Understanding the basics of plot will elevate your writing to a new level of competency. You will begin to understand the need to have a problem for the character to resolve. In memoir, you want to share the one thing you want more than anything else in the world.

Unless your entire life was videotaped it is impossible to remember dialogue precisely. This can call into question the distinction between “fiction” and “nonfiction” especially given famous fabrications perpetrated by authors like James Frey in his drug-addled memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*.

You can be completely open about what you can’t remember, and write something like. “I can’t remember everything about that place, but this was unforgettable.....” OR “The conversation went more or less like this.” We can develop a form of amnesia about family history to cope with the past. There are things we don’t remember for a reason, and finding that reason can be also part of the story.

**Assignment:** Write another two pages of memoir to answer a question about your single greatest desire in life. Start your essay with this sentence: I wanted \_\_\_\_\_ . But things did not turn out as planned. To get it, I then \_\_\_\_\_ (action). But \_\_\_\_\_ (obstacle) got in my way. So, I \_\_\_\_\_ (action).

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## Week 4

### Honing Your Craft: Improve Focus and Find Your Narrative Voice

Your memoir can be about any moment or period in your life that holds significance to you and can be transformed into readable prose. It can include both funny, happy, and successful memories as well as tragic and devastating ones. Think about a few quirky incidents, anecdotes and explanations that describe the high and low notes of your life.

So what should *my* focus be? If your journals, memorabilia and photos did not spark a strong theme here’s a list of possible topics your memoir can explore.

- Be the first person in your family to attend university or college

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- Master a craft or profession
- Move to a new country and learning to adapt
- Win a contest or award or coveted job
- Lose your job and live rough
- Land your first band gig, your first contract as a writer or actor
- Recover from addiction
- Stickhandle a divorce
- Raise a challenging child
- Support a parent as they age
- Have a significant change of mind on a political or religious belief
- Come out to your family or friends
- Your time in the military
- Survive a serious illness or disease
- Be the first of your gender, race, orientation, etc. to accomplish something specific

The way to find your narrative voice is to put your readers in your shoes. Powerful writers show, not tell. You must invite your reader into your perspective and allow her/him to draw their own conclusions. Let your story unfold before your reader's eyes by using vivid language that helps them visualize each scene.

Use all your senses to create new worlds for readers to inhabit. Many budding memoirists produce first drafts that are flat. To transport readers (and yourself), write vividly with select, telling details and use all your senses to fully re-create a moment in time. Memoir is about handing over your life to someone and saying, "this is what I went through, this is who I am, and maybe you can learn something from it." If you can do this effectively, the reader gets the wisdom and benefit of your experience without having to live it.

**Assignment.** Pick the one phrase from the list above, the one closest to your life, and write up two pages on that topic. Do not overthink this writing – try and get it down as quickly as possible. Underline the sections where you use your senses to create vivid detail from memory.

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## Week 5

### Honing your craft: Scene and Structure

Where should the story begin? Where should it end? What goes in, and what doesn't? You should not lose the thread of your story by cramming in *everything* that happened—the trip to the Yukon, the dark months of unemployment in 2008, the moldy apartment you rented before you got the house. When you have a narrative arc, you have defined what must be dramatized in scene and what can be dealt with more quickly in summary. Summary is simply a longer piece of narration that summarizes the action and provides a crucial bridge in the narrative.

Your setting answers the questions "Where am I? and Why should I care?" What are the sights, smells and sounds? Your reader will want to know and you must be prepared to give them a satisfactory orientation. This is not just an exercise in geography but a means to see the scene

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in terms of an era - or an emotional terrain written on the heart. And as a character moves through a story you have to re-orient the reader to every major change in setting. Tonight, we will also discuss other aspects of narrative structure.

**Assignment:** From your Freytag pyramid, write two pages about your inciting incident or climax. You need to include both a scene and a narrative summary.

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## Week 6

### **You're Finished, Now What? Weaving Threads into Memoir - A Workshop.**

In tonight's workshop anyone is welcome to read their work. You'll leave this class with a memoir portfolio, a variety of tools to continue working on your memoir at your own pace, some new writing friends, many handouts and links, and the inspiration and determination to keep up a writing schedule.

You can start to revise and polish your work to perfection. Revising doesn't just mean proofreading for minor grammar and spelling mistakes; it's also the process of making sure everything flows together smoothly. This is where you get to test whether or not your memoir makes sense to others. Print out your work and distribute it to friends, family, or writing peers. Sharing sensitive family secrets can derail your progress as a writer if not handled carefully. It is best to get the bones down and edited in plain language before you open your memoir writing to others. Let facts speak for themselves.

Writing is an art form and you have to develop a writing muscle, and keep it exercised for peak performance. Set a daily goal of writing 200, 500, or even 1,000 words. Set aside a regular time, like early morning or before bed, and be disciplined. Don't worry about making what you write perfect. Just focus on getting the story out. (There will be plenty of time for polishing later.) But relax. Memoir is writing that is bred in the bone. You've already lived the research and know the story. Now you just need to tell it.

Tonight you get to ask questions about memoir and discuss any specific problems you may have with your manuscript. This will be a lively class and we can enjoy a few refreshments for energy. Where will the group go from here?

**Assignment:** Rewrites! Fine-tune what you have written to incorporate all we have learned about writing good memoir – character, plot, voice, summary and scene. Revise and make your words sparkle.

## Recommended Memoir Resources

*The Art of Memoir* by [Mary Karr](#)

*Writing Life Stories: How to Make Memories Into Memoirs, Ideas Into Essays And Life Into Literature* by [Bill Roorbach](#)

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*Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser

*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott

*Startle and Illuminate: Carol Shields on Writing* by [Carol Shields](#)

*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* by Stephen King

## **Family memoir:**

*Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje - a very funny account of his family's roots in Sri Lanka

*Madness: A Memoir* by Kate Richards — living with psychosis, told from the inside

*Fierce Attachments: A Memoir* by Vivian Gornick — a woman battles with her mother for independence

*Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* by David Sedaris — a collection of essays showing the absurdity of ordinary life

*Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt – at turns bleak and poetic, an Irish memoir of the old sod and the new world

*The education of Augie Merasty: a residential school Memoir* by Joseph Auguste (Augie) Merasty — an amazing account of a young boy fighting the loss of his culture in residential school

## **Online examples of Memoir**

“The Glass Essay” by Ann Carson

“Repeat after Me” by David Sedaris

“Somehow Form a Family” by Tony Earley

“High-tide-in-Tucson” by Barbara Kingsolver

“The Fourth State of Matter” by Jo Ann Beard

“Ayahuasca (Mis)Adventures” by Elizabeth Renzetti  
Great Memoir Links – pick any topic in this collection