

MEMOIR WRITING

WRCR6218

Course Outline (online)

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 memoir 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:

This course is designed to help you decide which story to tell and how to tell it. This online course is intended for students with an interest in personal narratives who want to hone new writing skills. 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 for a completed memoir. You will learn to narrow the focus of your life story and define the underlying theme that connects you with an audience – even if that it only a handful of loved ones. You will learn how to use literary devices such as story arc, scene, narrative summary and dialogue to make your work more readable and enjoyable. You are the central character in memoir and we will develop your authentic voice and gain insights about how to handle sensitive subjects and family secrets. As well, you will be given a mix of writing exercises to master the building blocks of memoir. We will do short, selected readings of great works of memoir.

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 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 this is an un-graded course. Students will be encouraged to write several short pieces in a series of connected essays leading to a final portfolio of memoir work.

Texts:

TBD

Evaluation:

This is a **graded course** where you will be issued a complete or incomplete. Regular feedback of your writing work by the instructor and peers is a valued component. Your complete/incomplete grade is based on the following:

1. ***Memoir writing exercises:*** You learn the art of memoir by writing in a consistent manner. The writing exercises in this course are designed to give you a portfolio of work and tools to help

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you continue to be a productive memoir writer.

2. **Speed writing** is an important skill to learn in this course.
3. **Quizzes and a Critique:** There are three short quizzes that test your knowledge of each of the main topics covered in the course: the form of memoir, story arc and plot, scene and structure, narrative voice and dialogue. You are required to critique at least one memoir reading from the final class assignment using the following rubric.

| RUBRIC | Exceeds Expectation | Meets Expectation | Needs some work |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| Quality of writing | Very polished writing. Have no edits to suggest. | Good quality writing. There may be small errors but nothing big. | The writing has errors or omissions. |
| Character | The narrator of the story has an interesting voice and tells the story in a realistic and engaging style. | The narrator tells a good story in a believable voice. | The character/narrator could use more development. |
| Story Arc | There is a clear beginning, middle and end to the plot of the story. | There is story progression that is easy to follow. | The story arc is hard to follow or non-existent. |
| Theme | The theme is clear and compelling. | There was a theme that was a good fit for the story. | The theme is unclear. |
| Scene | The reader is dropped in the middle of this story either through the narrative or the senses described. The scene was clear and believable. | The scene was reasonable to the story. | There was only narrative, not a clearly defined scene. |

4. **Participation:** You are expected to participate in several ways in Memoir Writing. Each week you will write an assignment and then share it with a partner in your Writing Lab. As well, you will have opportunities to review works of memoir with other students in the Book Club chat. Though it is not mandatory to read your work aloud, it is strongly encouraged. Our final class is a Memoir Workshop. Students can read a short excerpt from their story. Your classmates will provide feedback to the instructor, based on a rubric, who will share these comments and her own evaluation.

In the final three weeks of the course, I expect to hold 20 minute, one-on-one ZOOM meetings with any student who would like to submit writing work for review. We can discuss any aspect of your memoir work where you want guidance.

Grading:

| | | |
|----|----------|---|
| A+ | 90-100 | One could scarcely expect better from a student at this level |
| A | 80-89 | Superior work which is clearly above average |
| B | 70-79 | Good work, meeting all requirements, and eminently satisfactory |
| C | 60-69 | Competent work, meeting requirements |
| D | 50-59 | Fair work, minimally acceptable |
| F | below 50 | Fail |

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Policy on Cheating and Academic Misconduct:

Academic honesty is a cornerstone of conduct at Western University. We cannot have freedom of expression without integrity. Students are responsible for understanding the nature of and avoiding the occurrence of plagiarism and other academic offences; please refer to the section on "Scholastic Offences" in the current University Academic Calendar, or on the web at <http://www.westerncalendar.uwo.ca>. Such offences include plagiarism, cheating on an examination, submitting false or fraudulent assignments or credentials, impersonating a candidate, or submitting for credit in any course any academic work for which credit has previously been obtained or is being sought in another course in this University or elsewhere (without the knowledge and approval of the instructor to whom the work is submitted). Students enrolled in non-degree courses are expected to abide by the University's code of conduct

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>.

Plagiarism:

While it is unlikely that memoir students will not submit original work, all required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University to detect plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between Western University and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

How often will the instructor communicate with me?

As your instructor, I will respond to individual emails and forum questions within four hours, or less. Any question of interest to the group should be posted in the General Questions Forum so that all students can receive the same information and where appropriate, can respond. In addition, we will connect weekly via ZOOM sessions.

Policy on Late Assignments:

Online discussions for the Book Club and Writing Lab Forums are to be completed in the week they are assigned. This is to allow everyone in your group the opportunity to contribute to the conversation. The online week will run from Monday to Sunday.

All other assessments (quizzes, assignments, and reflections) have deadlines. Every effort should be made to submit by the deadline. With written permission from the instructor, they will be accepted and assessed without penalty until TBD deadline.

When will I receive my grades?

Final grades will be available 2 weeks after the last scheduled day of the course. A grade report can be printed from myWCS.

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Course Schedule:

Our weekly online portion of the course will run from Monday to Sunday. During this time, you will be required to engage and interact with the course material and other learners in OWL.

On Tuesday evenings, we will come together as a group on the Zoom platform for a mini lecture, writing and discussions.

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. The explosion of self-publishing options has encouraged many people to leave written legacies for loved ones in the form of memoir. We will introduce you to the memoir genre in its many forms and discuss the importance of finding and honing your unique voice. During the first ZOOM session, we will review the course objectives and how to get the most value from your readings, postings and assignments. You will also learn the importance of sharing your work with a writing partner.

Week 2

The Form of Memoir

In writing, it pays to plan for success. For memoir, that includes gathering documents and photographs as well as thinking about what you want to write. You will learn how to organize your source material. There are six forms of memoir. It is useful to start writing in the linear style: a story that progresses from Point A to Point B. But we will discuss the other forms of memoir including: outliers, braided, associative, framed and circular.

You will be given a variety of useful worksheets to help diagram your life. There may be one pivotal event, turning point or moment of discovery that stands out as particularly important or meaningful. And this may be where you want to begin to write.

Week 3

Memory Mining, the Truth and the Narrative Arc

Memoir is a surprisingly flexible writing craft. From personal essays to highly creative non-fiction, great works of memoir can combine many things, including genealogy. But the heart of memoir is strong narration – a story told by you, the narrator. Truth in memoir is critical. We have to believe you are telling the story straight. But our memories 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. Creativity, based on truth, is also an important part of 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 and discuss the differences between factual and emotional truths. As well tonight we will review the story arc: beginning, middle and end, discuss plot as it relates to memoir and review the Freytag pyramid.

Week 4

Honing Your Craft: Improve Focus, Narrative Voice and Sensory Description

The key to successful memoir writing is to find a focus and hold on to it. Life can be messy and hard to navigate. So what memories and experiences do you keep and what gets pitched as you write? Knowing, or finding out, what to include and leave out is how you develop your craft. Tonight we will discuss how to use sensory description and details that draw readers into your narrative.

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The way to find your narrative voice is to put your readers in your shoes. You must invite your reader into your perspective and allow them to draw their own conclusions. Voice is like your memoir's fingerprint—only the narrator can give a memoir its own voice and style. Voice can help uplift and make readable the most wretched of life situations. Your voice is the glue that ties everything together; the scene structure of your memoir, your setting and your themes are united by your voice.

Week 5

Honing the Craft: Scene and Structure, Narrative Summary and Dialogue, Timing and Setting

This week we will review other major structural components of the craft of memoir including scene – the primary building block that gives structure to memoir writing. We will look at the nuts and bolts of narration and when to use narrative summary, dialogue and beats. And you will learn how to orient your readers to the story setting and manage a timeline.

Week 6

Where do you go from Here?

We will do a quick summary and listen to student readings. You will also get a Memoir Publication Resource Package this week that gives you many ideas of where to try and publish your memoir.