

Fighting Words: The Write to Right

Introduction to Memoir Writing

By

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INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome to this Introduction to Memoir Writing. Over the course of this handbook you will gain an insight into what memoir writing is, different approaches to consider and some tips and tricks to help you unlock your memories.

This handbook was developed alongside a six week program of workshops with a number of TY students across two schools in autumn 2020 culminating in a collection of their memoir essays.

If running a standalone workshop I recommend using Chapter 1 combined with Chapter 2 or 3. This will enable participants to start writing short memoir pieces in a fun and engaging manner.

Each chapter looks at a different aspect of the form. You'll also see reference to specific memoirs I recommend reading and these are listed at the end of the handbook.

It's important to remember that we are trying to access our memories and not write an amazing piece of prose at this point. Get them down on paper as raw material to build on and develop at a later stage.

It is suggested setting aside at least sixty minutes to complete each chapter. By the end of this handbook the aim is to have gained a better understanding of what memoir writing is and to have created a series of short memoir essays and pages.

All you need to get started is some paper, a notebook, a pen and your all-important memories!

Enjoy!

John Grogan, Fighting Words Volunteer

1 WHAT IS A MEMOIR?

To begin can you spend a few minutes thinking about an early memory? Maybe even your first one. Something from way back in the beginning of your life on this earth. Once you have one, can you write it down on a piece of paper? Just one sentence will do. We'll come back to it later on.

What is a memoir?

The word memoir comes from the French meaning memory or reminiscence. Look it up in the dictionary and you'll find:

A narrative composed from personal experience.

A record or essay of important events based on the writer's personal knowledge.

What it is:

It's personal.

It is written in the first person, from the author's point of view.

It's non-fiction writing based on facts.

It's an honest account of a true story.

It reflects on and explores the emotions of an experience.

It touches on the universal as illustrated by you, e.g. childhood.

It's about something you know after something you've been through.

It has a narrower focus than an Autobiography or Biography.

What it isn't:

It's not the story of a complete life but the story of part of a life.

It doesn't have to be in chronological order.

You don't have to be famous to write one.

It might be an account of a single, life-changing event that means a lot to you, or it may be a reflection on a particular period of importance in your life which has shaped who you are today. It could be about a challenge you faced and overcame.

There are many different types of memoirs.

E.g. Event, Themed, Travel, Celebrity, Sport, Music, Childhood and Family.

Below are two examples to look at, each one with an accompanying writing prompt.

Let's take a look at the first page of *The Speckled People* by Hugo Hamilton.

What does it tell us about this writer?

What do we learn about him in the first few sentences?

How does he draw us into his story?

Do any words stand out?

The Speckled People is a memoir where this author writes about his German-Irish childhood in 1950's Dublin. A book about Ireland as well as about a particular family. It focuses on the author's childhood years. Adjusting to a new country, a new language, a new structure to navigate. At the beginning he is out of place and through the recounting of his journey through his childhood years he finds his place in the world.

WRITING PROMPT – Out of Place

Write about a time you felt out of place, awkward and uncomfortable. Try not to focus on your feelings but project your feelings onto the things around you. (Maybe it was your first day in a new school or class, or you had moved house or country. Maybe you joined a sports team or club or it could be about meeting someone who later became a good friend or important person in your life.)

Consider a situation where this was the case and describe how your circumstances changed and how you navigated through this.

Allow 15 to 20 minutes to complete this.

Now we'll take a look at another memoir: *DUBLN PORT DIARIES* by members of *The Dockworkers Preservation Society*.

Read through some of the stories from the *Life on the Docks* section.

What do you think about this piece?

What are these stories about?

Consider the language used.

If working with teenagers ask them is this relatable in any way?

Why is it important to have this record of events documented?

In 2018 a series of workshops held in Fighting Words with retired dockers and their families lead to the publication of this memoir. We are taken on a journey through their working lives. Included are tales of first days, average days, last days, nicknames, a dockers dictionary and the dangers and perils of this type of work. These stories bring you into a particular world and a unique way of life that no longer exists.

A window into the past, one student said.

WRITING PROMPT - A Journey through Memories

So remember your first memory? You wrote a line down earlier.

Now can you find a memory from years ago? Maybe something from the middle of your life. Anything that sticks out in your head?

Write down what you can recall about this memory.

Next thing to think about is a recent memory.

Is there anything that is fresh in your mind from the last year or so?

Look for any incidents that are vivid and stick out for you.

This exercise will help to place you in your own story and is a way of mapping the landscape of your mind. Don't worry about linking these memories at this point, you may find certain themes keep appearing, pay attention to these. These themes could be explored in greater detail at a later stage to create a bigger story. For now just get the memories down.

An early one, a middle period one, a more recent one.

Allow 5 - 10 minutes to write each memory with as much detail as possible.

Any questions?

If you prefer drawing to writing, you can use images and text to illustrate your story. See the work of Allie Brosh, *Hyperbole and a Half* on her webpage: <http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/>

Her memoir deals with everyday topics like family, birthday parties and her pets as well as insights into the human condition and coping during difficult times.

2 SIX WORD MEMOIRS AND THE SHAPE OF YOU

Welcome back everyone.

This time we'll be looking at writing a six word memoir, then we'll be reading and discussing some more memoir examples, followed by a related writing exercise. Let's get started.

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in only six words.

Does anyone know that story? His response?

“For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

The Six Word Memoir. Have you heard about this?

Take a look at this Video on YouTube by searching for:

Larry Smiths Six Word Project.

It asks can you tell your life story in six words.

WRITING PROMPT - Six Word Memoir

Spend a few minutes making a list of words about yourself.

Things in your life, stuff that you do, what you like, don't like and feelings you have. Use a variety of nouns, adjectives, verbs, anything that comes to mind. Don't edit, write quickly, keep going and don't worry about spelling mistakes just get it down on paper fast.

Next thing is to circle or highlight two or three of these words. Ones that you could say more about or if you heard that word. A story from your life would pop into your head or it would remind you of something that happened to you, maybe something important, a big or small moment.

Now, pick one of these words and free write about it for five minutes. Whatever comes into your mind about that word? Don't stop if you can, keep pushing forward with it.

When you have an idea about your topic, synthesise it into a phrase that captures the essence of what this topic means to you.

A six word phrase that captures a sense of what you have written.

Get the group to share their six word memoirs.

Let's look at two more memoirs, first up is *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby.

Would someone please read the first page?

What do you think about this one?

What scene is being set here?

How does the writer hook us into his story?

Consider the first line.

Where do you think this story goes?

It's a detailed account of the writer's obsession with a football team and the way this has shaped him. Everything connects through the lens of the game and Arsenal in particular. Football is a constant in his life during good times and bad and is a major theme running through the memoir.

Let's look at another memoir, *Why be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* by Jeanette Winterson.

Would someone read the first page please?

What do you think about this one?

How does the writer engage us?

Look at the use of language?

How do you think this one will turn out?

It's very specific to a time and place. We are going to be taking on a journey in search of a mother and a journey into madness and out again, it is generous, honest and true. The writer really looks into the patterns and events in her life in an attempt at an understanding and making sense of what shaped her and made her the person she is today.

WRITING PROMPT – The Shape of You

What shaped you, any words of wisdom for your younger self?

Imagine that you've travelled back in time to encounter a younger version of yourself. What news would you share with them, any tips or advice for them about life that you have picked up along the way?

Write about this encounter in the form of a letter to yourself. Tell them a few things that will happen along the way and how you dealt with these events. Mention what they need to look out for, consider any life lessons you may have learnt or are still figuring out. Did anything turn out differently to how you had expected?

Allow 15 – 20 minutes to complete.

How was that?

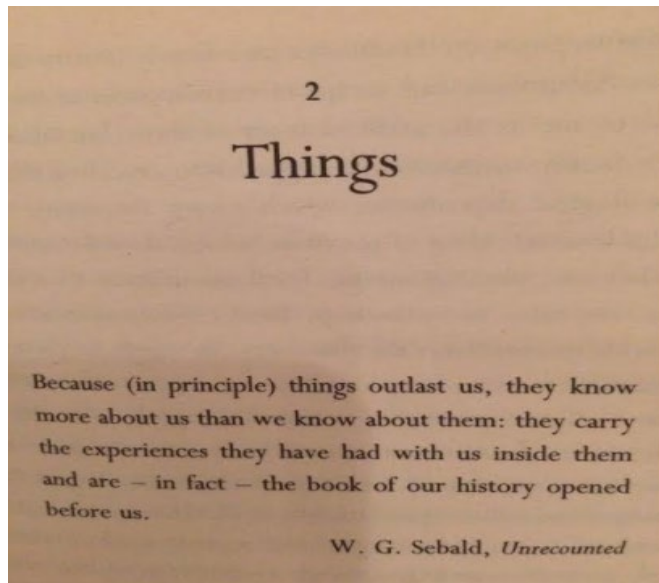
What topics did you write about?

What younger self age group did you write to?

If doing this with secondary school students they may not want to read out their letters in front of their classmates but should be happy enough to talk about the topics they have written about and the ages of their younger selves.

3 OBJECTS AND YOUR GREATEST HITS

Welcome back! This time we'll be looking at the objects in our lives that have meaning for us and also we'll be compiling a list of our greatest hits plus looking at another memoir example.



The above quote is taken from *IN THE DARK ROOM* by Brian Dillion.

Does anyone know the film Citizen Kane?

In it, Citizen Kane, a very rich successful newspaper owner and business man is on his deathbed. At the start of the film Kane is seen holding a snow globe, he drops it as he dies and his last words are Rosebud. A reporter is tasked with finding out the meaning of this. We see him uncover the events of the man's life, and how he was given over by his parents to a guardian to take care of him when he was eight years old. The reporter interviews various people from the man's life but he doesn't find out the meaning of the word, Rosebud. Finally Kane's personal items are being stored away or burned and we the audience see his childhood sled thrown into a fire. The camera reveals the name on the sled to be ...? It was on this sled the young Kane was playing the day his parents gave him over to a trust to provide for his education and upbringing.

Considering small objects in your life can reveal larger broader themes of meaning.

WRITING PROMPT – Objects

Think about an object that really matters to you. That brings you joy, magic and meaning. Describe the object in as much detail as possible. Tell the story of how this object became so important to you.

Allow 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

Ask the group to share, depending on the age group they may prefer to talk about the objects they hold dear rather than read out their words.

Next we'll take a look at the first page of *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris. A series of memoir essays.

What do you think about this piece of writing?

Is there humour in it?

Does the title tell us anything?

How does the author feel about the situation he finds himself in?

Me Talk Pretty One Day is a collection of essays about the everyday life of the author, David Sedaris. The book's first essays detail his upbringing in North Carolina. It sheds light on the little details of everyday life, highlighting strange encounters Sedaris has had in a number of different contexts. What's important to grasp, though, is that Sedaris is interested in exposing not only the absurdities that people overlook in daily life, but also the humour that can be found in even the most mundane situations.

WRITING PROMPT –Greatest Hits

The details of your life. List down 20 moments. Opening the vault inside yourself. Moments of change or turning points. Big and small.

If you think of a band bringing out a series of albums over their career and then one greatest hits album with all the best songs included. Look at the album of your life and select some of your hits.

Write down the first thing that comes to mind and move on. A brief sentence that may begin with *The time I...* Or *The day that...* Fill the page. Whatever comes to you, anything at all that pops up?

Disappointments, accomplishments, people, objects, pets, conflicts, fears, luck or lack of, gratitude. From childhood, from years ago, from recent times. There is no wrong subject, it all feeds into your story.

Allow 15 – 20 minutes to complete.

Go down the list and circle a couple of ones that jump out at you.

Pick one and write the story of that particular moment if there is time otherwise work on it later.

4 THE VITAL INGREDIENTS AND CHOOSING YOUR TOPIC

This time we'll be looking at the ingredients that go into a memoir. Plus choosing your final topic to write about. Also included are two more writing prompts.

First we'll take a look at the first page of *H is For Hawk* by Helen MacDonald and then the essay: *My Dad Tried to Kill me with an Alligator* by Harrison Scott Key.

What do we think about these?

How do they contrast and compare?

What techniques does each writer use to engage us?

Consider how the writers use landscape and humour to convey meaning.

“If there are burned-out cars and shotgun-addled road signs, or a creek full of trash and a high-security perimeter fence alongside the singing nightingale, don’t leave them out. That’s how this world is.

Honour it.” – *Helen MacDonald, H is for Hawk*

WRITING PROMPT – A Memorable Day

Consider a memorable day in your life, describe why it has stayed with you? What sort of a day was it, what happened? Any sounds or smells that you can recall, who else was there? What was the setting like? The landscape? Anything at all that comes to mind, write it down. How did you feel about it at the time? How do you feel about it now today?

WRITING PROMPT – An Adventure

Is there a big adventure or discovery you’ve experienced?

It doesn’t have to be about climbing a mountain or have alligators in it, it might be something simple like learning how to do something really well or going on a journey someplace new.

Pick one of these above prompts and write for 15 to 20 minutes.

Ask the group to share their memorable days or adventures.

Things to consider when planning a memoir.

Why, what, where, when, who?

Ask the group for suggestions.

Why write one?

To help make sense of your life and increase your understanding of yourself. To give a voice to your desires, disappointments and achievements. To share the experience with others who may recognize similarities with their own lives.

“Do not shy away from the specificity of how you, as an individual, feel. If you mourn something, if you can communicate that loss, the reader can mourn with you.” – *Helen MacDonald Author of H is for Hawk*

What to put in?

Scenes from your life.

Your truth, your version in your own voice.

The small things, the funny incidents, the in-between moments.

Include specific images, memory is tied to the five senses.

Memoir takes on something universal and uses you as the illustration of that larger idea.

Where do I start?

Start with your childhood.

Develop a writing habit, commit to it.

Pick one event, one experience and jump right in.

Keep a journal, diary, record the incidents in your life.

Read a cross section of memoirs.

The writer Flannery O Connor said that anyone who has survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life.

When to stop?

When you’ve been through that particular memory or series of moments that convey your theme to the reader.

Once you feel that you’ve covered your subject matter, wrap it up.

Who cares?

Every one of us has a story and our stories are worth telling.

The sharing of them is what makes us human and help us make sense of our place in the world. What makes a memoir special is your writing style and the way you draw meaning out of past experiences.

Topics to choose from when writing your final Memoir Essay

Objects, Places, People, Pastimes

Is there a particular object that holds special meaning for you?

Is there a person, pet or place that means a lot to you?

Tell the story of how it became so important.

Letter to a Younger Self

Write to your younger self, bring them the news from now. Any words of wisdom or advice to guide them? Any unexpected moments to prepare them for the future?

Six Word Memoir

Look at the six word memoir that you wrote earlier and go deeper into it, tell the story of it in a longer form. Let us see the backstory behind it and how you arrived at this moment in time. Use the six words as the title of the piece.

Greatest Hits of your life

The first time I... The day that ... The best/worst day so far...

Disappointments, accomplishments, adventures, challenges, conflicts, fears, loss, luck or lack of, gratitude.

Moments from childhood, from years ago, from recent times.

There is no wrong subject, it all feeds into your story.

Pick one Greatest Hit or a few that relate to one another and write about them.

At this point you can expand on the topics you initially worked on in the earlier sessions. Develop these now into memoir essays of between 750 and 1000 words.

5 WHAT IS YOUR ARGUMENT? THEME, PLOT AND STRUCTURE

Once you've chosen a topic to write about here are some things to consider when composing your essays.

What is your argument?*

*This approach to memoir writing is taken from *The Memoir Project* by Marion Roach Smith. See her website for more details.marionroach.com

Argument definition: a reason or set of reasons given in support of an idea, action or theory.

You argue something, meaning simply that you tell us what you know about some experience after you've been through it.

A piece that goes from when you did not know something to when you did. Chart that journey.

In *H is for Hawk*, the writer gives an honest account of her struggle with grief during the difficult process of the hawk's taming and her own untaming. By taming the hawk she learned to deal with her own grief and so is able to carry on engaging with life.

We'll take a look at shaping your essay next using theme, plot and structure.

What is Theme?

It's the central topic, subject or message in a piece of writing.

You may want to explore your theme by writing about one event and its effect on you or by linking a series of moments together that highlight your theme. One student wrote about how her love of dancing started when she was very young and how it has influenced her life ever since.

The writer Roald Dahl wrote a memoir about his childhood called *Boy: Tales of Childhood*. It covers his schooldays and sheds light on themes and motifs that would feature in his later writing. His love for sweets, a mischievous streak and a distrust of authority figures.

Nick Hornby uses the theme of his obsession with football to write about his relationship with his father and later on, other important relationships in his life.

What is Plot?

The main events in your story presented in an interrelated sequence.

One event leads to another in a logical sense.

You'll need to arrange your writing to create a narrative arc.

The narrative arc is the story line with a start, middle and end.

The plot is the summation of the cause and affect actions that are in the narrative arc. It connects events via emotions, response and reactions.

The plot will have suspense and conflict and usually only one goal.

All your action is geared towards your quest, your mission.

What is Structure?

It's the arrangement of the elements of your story.

You use structure to take the reader on a journey.

A journey, then, implies a change.

The end is not the same as the beginning.

The reader wants to know how you are affected by your story.

You can use structure to manipulate time, perspective, and to create dramatic effects.

Some different types of Structure to consider:

- **Linear structure**, covers a period of time, see *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, from his birth up to aged twenty. Or a year in someone's life, see *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. It's the most straightforward type. Few flashbacks. Jeanette Winterson, and Nick Hornby both use linear structure.
- **Associative structure**, moves like stepping stones in a river, you bounce around, using theme rather than a timeline. *DUBLIN PORT DIARIES*, tells various stories from the lives of the dockers, using this structure.

- **Circular structure**, keeps coming back to a particular episode or meaningful point in the story. The story begins in the middle of the action and circles back round to explain this. See *H is for Hawk* by *Helen Macdonald* which is informed by the author's father's death. We learn what is driving her need to tame a wild bird as the memoir unfolds.

WRITING PROMPT – The First Sentence

Think about the memoirs we've looked at so far and see how the writer manages to engage the reader through their use of language and description. Look at how they grab the reader's attention. The way they manage to bring us into their world. Consider the story you are writing and see if you can capture the essence of that story in your first sentence or first paragraph.

6 REDRAFTING AND REACHING THE END

Some things to consider for subsequent drafts of your work

A first draft is best written fast, try to keep going till you have the bones of your story down on paper before you start re-editing it.

What is it you're writing about? Be as specific as you can with your answer. At the start of your memoir let the reader know why you are writing this, and what you are exploring with this piece.

Give your story a timeline and then start putting in key events where they happened. This will give you a visual cue to follow that will help you write out your memories in a way that makes sense.

Consider your opening paragraph as a way to grab the reader's attention. Look at the way other writers engage the reader. Once you have the readers on board you can then feed in any background information.

The middle part will be full of activity and events and is usually the longest section. What obstacles (internal and external) and challenges are in your way? How did you manage to overcome them?

Show don't tell, if you are sad then show the sadness as opposite to telling the reader "I was sad that day." Show it in the way you describe the day in question.

The ending is summing up and the reader sees where you are now today, you'll reveal how you are changed by the experience you've been through.

Well done for reaching this point. I hope you have enjoyed yourselves and will continue to explore your memoirs in the future. Keep writing!

References

The Speckled People by Hugo Hamilton

H is for Hawk by Helen MacDonald

Fever Pitch by Nick Hornby

Why Be Normal When You Could Be Happy? by Jeanette Winterson

DUBLIN PORT DIARIES by members of The Dockworkers Preservation Society.

Me Talk Pretty One Day by David Sedaris

My Dad Tried to Kill me with an Alligator by Harrison Scott Key

(A memoir essay, available to read online:

<https://www.outsideonline.com/1979226/my-dad-tried-kill-me-alligator>)

Boy: Tales of Childhood by Roald Dahl