

A CRAFT BOOKLET FOR WRITERS

Writing the Life

A Student's Guide to Memoir

Memory and material. Scene, summary, and reflection. Voice, structure, and the ethics of telling a story that belongs partly to other people.

Art of Telling · Nonfiction Craft Series

For workshop, independent study, and the first honest draft

Revised Student Edition

Writing the Life: A Student's Guide to Memoir

Revised Student Edition · Art of Telling Course Series

This booklet is published by Silver Current Press for students of the Art of Telling course. It is offered as a free, downloadable craft resource for personal and classroom use.

You are welcome to print it, write in it, share it with classmates, and quote short passages in workshop with attribution. Please keep the booklet intact and credit Art of Telling and Silver Current Press if you pass it along.

The exercises, checklists, and worksheets are meant to be used, marked up, and returned to. Nothing in these pages is a substitute for the guidance of your own instructor.

© Art of Telling and Silver Current Press. Student-use edition.

A Letter Before We Begin

Dear writer,

You are holding a booklet, not a syllabus. It was built for the particular, unglamorous work of turning memory into pages someone else will want to read — which is a different task from remembering, and a harder one.

I wrote this for the room I have taught in for thirty years: some of you arriving certain you have no story, others arriving with too much and no shape for it. Both of you are in the right place. Memoir does not reward the most dramatic life. It rewards the most closely observed one.

Use these pages the way you would use a good workshop — take what helps, argue with what doesn't, and keep writing regardless. The booklet will still be here when the draft gets hard, which it will.

Welcome in.

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet is a workshop companion, not a formula. It assumes you already have material — a childhood you half-remember, a year that turned, a person you cannot stop thinking about — and that what you need is a way to shape it. Everything here is meant to be argued with. Memoir is a genre of exceptions, and the best exception is usually the one you can defend on the page.

Work through it in one of three ways.

THREE WAYS IN

- **As a course.** Read one section a week, do two or three exercises from that territory, and use the 14-day practice plan to build a daily habit alongside the reading.
- **As a repair kit.** When a draft stalls, find the section that names your problem — flat voice, no stakes, a scene that will not move — and use the checklists there.
- **As a workshop text.** Bring the do-and-don't pages and the revision checklists to critique; they supply a shared vocabulary, which is most of what a workshop needs.

HOW TO USE

Write in this booklet. The ruled spaces are not decoration — they are the fastest place to catch a sentence before it evaporates. If you are working from a screen copy, keep a single notebook beside you and label each entry with the exercise number.

What you need: a notebook you are willing to ruin, twenty to thirty uninterrupted minutes most days, and one reader who can tell you what they actually experienced on the page.

A note on the examples: every illustrative passage here was written for this booklet, and all are deliberately ordinary — a kitchen, a car, a hospital corridor — because ordinary material is where craft becomes visible. Nothing is quoted from a published memoir; for models, use the reading shelf at the back and read whole books slowly.

Before You Begin: Three Commitments

Memoir writing asks something of you before it asks for talent. Make these commitments explicit, even if only to yourself.

1. **Commit to the page before the polish.** A messy true draft is worth more at this stage than a smooth vague one.
2. **Commit to your own vantage.** You are not required to be objective — you are required to be honest about the angle you are writing from.
3. **Commit to finishing before judging.** Let a full draft exist before you decide whether it is any good.

A Note on Access and Safety

Some of the material this booklet invites you toward may be difficult — grief, illness, family conflict, harm. You are always allowed to write at a distance, to skip a prompt, or to write around a subject rather than through it. Craft tools like scene, structure, and reflection exist partly to give you control over how close you stand to hard material, not only to make it vivid.

WATCH FOR

If a prompt brings up something that feels unsafe to sit with alone, stop, and talk to your instructor, a counselor, or someone you trust before continuing. This booklet is a craft guide, not a substitute for support.

Contents

01.....	A Letter Before We Begin	3
02.....	How to Use This Booklet	4
03.....	What Memoir Is — and Is Not	7
04.....	The Central Questions	9
05.....	The Memoirist's Stance	11
06.....	Finding the Material	12
07.....	Voice and the Narrator	15
08.....	Scene, Summary, and Reflection	17
09.....	Structure, Time, and Pattern	20
10.....	Effective Beginnings and Endings	24
11.....	Character on the Page	26
12.....	Truth, Memory, and Ethics	28
13.....	Do and Don't: Twelve Pairs	31
14.....	The Memoirist's Rules	32
15.....	The Drafting Workflow	33
16.....	Revision: Macro, Line, and the Revision Ladder	35
17.....	Workshop Protocol and Feedback Prompts	37
18.....	Exercises	39
19.....	A 14-Day Memoir Practice	43
20.....	Before You Share: A Self-Assessment	45
21.....	A Glossary of Craft Terms	46
22.....	Where to Read Next: A Reading Shelf	47
23.....	Begin Here	48
24.....	My Philosophy of Writing and Teaching	49
25.....	About the Author	50
26.....	Index	51

Headings also appear in Word's Navigation Pane, so you can move through the booklet while you draft. In Word, hold Ctrl (or ⌘) and click an entry to jump there.

What Memoir Is — and Is Not

Memoir is a shaped account of lived experience, written from a particular angle, for a reader who does not know you. That last clause does most of the work. A journal is written for the self; a memoir is written for a stranger, which means it must be selected, ordered, and made to matter to someone who has never met your grandmother.

Shaped matters too: memoir is not the sum of a life but a slice taken deliberately — one summer, one obsession, one illness, one migration — and it earns its shape by leaving nearly everything out.

Four Neighbors, Four Different Contracts

Form	What it promises	How it moves
Memoir	A true account of a bounded stretch of the writer's life, told with the shaping of a story.	By scene and reflection, toward a change in understanding.
Autobiography	A fuller, more chronological record of a life, often anchored in public achievement.	Cradle toward present, weighting completeness over compression.
Personal essay	An honest mind thinking on the page about a question, using the writer's life as evidence.	By association and argument; experience serves the idea.
Autobiographical fiction	Nothing factual. It borrows from a life and is free to invent.	By whatever the invented story requires.

These borders are porous in practice — many memoirs essay for pages, many essays contain a memoir's worth of scene. What cannot be porous is the contract with the reader.

THE CORE PROMISE

A memoir promises: this happened, to me, as best I can reconstruct it, and I am telling it honestly — including the parts that do not flatter me. Three commitments follow from that promise.

1. **Factual good faith.** You do not invent events, invent people, or move a death to a more convenient year. Where memory is thin, you say so on the page.
2. **Interpretive honesty.** You do not tidy your own motives. If you were cruel at sixteen, the sixteen-year-old on the page is allowed to be cruel.
3. **Craft.** The reader's time is real. Truth is not a substitute for structure, tension, and a sentence worth reading twice.

WATCH FOR

The two most common misreadings of the genre: that memoir requires an extraordinary life, and that it requires forgiveness. Neither is true. A memoir needs a specific consciousness and an honest angle. Ordinary lives, closely seen, are the tradition's deepest vein — and unresolved feeling, rendered precisely, is more truthful than a resolution you have not reached.

MEMOIR IS NOT

- A settling of scores. Revenge flattens the antagonist, and a flat antagonist flattens the book.
- Therapy, though it may be therapeutic. Therapy serves the writer; memoir serves the reader.
- A confession that ends with an apology. It ends, usually, with a clearer view.

The Central Questions

Before structure, before style, four questions decide whether a memoir has anywhere to go. You will answer them badly at first. Answer them anyway, in writing, and return to them at every stage of revision — the answers usually sharpen as the draft does.

01 • Why This Story?

Not: is it interesting to me? Everything about our own lives is interesting to us. The question is what pressure this material contains — what was at risk, what was in conflict, what could have gone otherwise. Locate the pressure and you have found the story's spine.

- What did I want during this period, and what stood in the way?
- What is the smallest unit of time that still contains the whole problem?

02 • Why Me?

This is a question about vantage, not authority. You are not writing because you suffered most or knew best; you are writing because you stood in a particular place and saw something from there that no one else could see. Name the vantage precisely — the youngest of four, the new kid, the one who translated for her parents, the one who stayed.

- What did my position let me notice that others in the room missed?
- What did it prevent me from seeing? (This is often the more useful answer.)

03 • Why Now?

Two clocks are running. One is the clock of the story: why does it begin the day it begins? The other is the clock of the telling: why are you able to write this now, and not five years ago? The second clock often supplies the narrating voice — the distance, the irony, the tenderness that the younger self could not have had.

- What made the material available to me now — time, information, safety, courage, loss?
- What can I now understand that I could not understand then?

04 • What Has Changed?

Memoir moves from one state of understanding to another. The change may be small and internal: a person you blamed becomes a person you can see. But without it, the pages accumulate rather than build. The change belongs to the narrator as much as to the events.

- What did I believe on page one that I no longer believe on the last page?
- What cost did that change carry?

TRY IT

Answer all four questions in four sentences — one each, no hedging — then write them on an index card and tape it above your desk. When a draft wanders, the card usually shows you where it left the road.

YOUR FOUR SENTENCES

The Memoirist's Stance

Before technique, memoir asks for a posture toward your own material. Four qualities of attention recur in writers whose work holds up under revision and under workshop — not as personality traits, but as working habits you can practice.

Curiosity Over Certainty

Approach your own past as a subject you do not yet fully understand, not a case you have already closed. The most alive drafts are written by people still finding out what happened, even when the events are decades old.

Specificity Over Atmosphere

General weather (it was a difficult time) asks the reader to trust an adjective. A specific fact (the electricity was shut off twice that January) asks nothing — it simply hands over evidence. Train yourself toward the second habit in every sentence that claims a feeling.

Uncertainty as a Tool

You do not remember everything, and pretending otherwise costs you credibility. Naming uncertainty precisely — I remember it as June, though the letters suggest July — is a voice strategy, not a confession of weakness.

Good Faith Toward Your Material

Good faith means you are not writing to win an argument with your own past. You are writing to see it more clearly, which sometimes means the villain gets a good paragraph and the version of yourself you like least gets the most honest one.

TRY IT

Before your next drafting session, write one sentence naming what you are still curious about in your material — not what you already know it means. Keep that sentence in view while you write.

Finding the Material

Material is not the same as memory. Memory is the raw store; material is what can be built with. The work of this stage is to convert vague recollection into things a reader can see, hear, and hold.

Memory: Trust It, Then Check It

Memory is associative and image-based. It arrives as a smell, a phrase in someone's voice, a shape of light in a room. Take the fragments as they come and resist explaining them; write the image first, because the meaning is usually hiding underneath and will surface in revision.

Then check what can be checked. Photographs, letters, texts, school records, weather archives, old maps, the sibling with the better recall. Verification is not a betrayal of the imagination — it almost always yields a better detail than the one you would have invented.

Scene: The Unit of Memoir

A scene is a specific event, in a specific place, at a specific time, with change inside it. If a passage could begin we would always or every summer, it is summary, not scene. Learn to feel for scene-shaped memories — the afternoon my father sold the truck, the twelve minutes in the principal's office. Those have edges, and edges are what you build with.

Sensory Detail: The Specific Over the Beautiful

Detail earns belief. But not all detail is equal; the good ones are load-bearing. Compare:

FLAT

The kitchen was old and depressing, and my mother seemed tired all the time.

LOAD-BEARING

The kitchen faucet ran warm no matter which way you turned it. My mother stood with her hands under it anyway, watching the yard, and only when the phone rang did she reach for the towel we had been meaning to replace since March.

The second version does not use finer words; it uses facts with weight — the broken faucet, the unreplaced towel, the month. The reader infers exhaustion, and the writer never has to claim it.

A WORKING TEST

Can it be photographed or recorded? If not, it may be interpretation dressed as detail.

Is it particular to this room, this year? A warm summer day is furniture; tar bubbling in the driveway seems is evidence.

Objects, Settings, and the Recurring Story

Three shortcuts into material that students consistently underuse:

1. **Objects.** Make a list of ten objects from the period you are writing about — not symbols, just things. A cracked thermos. A hospital bracelet. A cassette labeled in someone else's handwriting. Objects carry compressed time and are almost impossible to sentimentalize if you describe them accurately.
2. **Settings.** Draw the floor plan of a place that matters. Where were the doors? Where could you hear from? Rooms determine what a child can overhear, which determines what a narrator can know.
3. **Recurring stories.** Every family has anecdotes it tells at every table — polished, funny, slightly false. Write one as it is usually told, then write what the telling leaves out. The gap between the two versions is frequently the real material.

CRAFT NOTE

Look for contradictions and stay with them. The generous uncle who never paid anyone back. The year you remember as the happiest, which your brother remembers as the year he stopped speaking. Contradiction is not a flaw in your material — it is the place where a memoir stops being a report and starts being a mind at work. Do not resolve it too early, and do not resolve it at all if the truth is unresolved.

Memory Maps and Verification

A memory map is a simple visual inventory of a period, a place, or a relationship — built to surface material faster than linear narration does. Draw a rough map of a house, neighborhood, or year, and label it with fragments as they surface: names, sounds, arguments, smells, objects. Do not organize it. Let it stay messy; the mess is the point.

Once you have a map, separate what you remember from what you can verify. Keep a simple two-column research log as you draft.

What I remember	What I can check, and how
The summer we lost the house	Mortgage or news records; ask a sibling or parent for the year
A green car in the driveway	Old photographs; my mother's memory of the model

What I remember	What I can check, and how
The fight happened on a Sunday	A calendar for that year; a journal entry, if one exists

TRY IT

Build one memory map this week for a single place. Give yourself twelve minutes and do not lift the pen to judge an entry. Then choose the three labels that surprise you most and turn each into a one-line scene idea.

Voice and the Narrator

The most common diagnosis in a memoir workshop is not nothing happens here. It is I cannot hear anyone. Voice is not personality sprinkled over events; it is the felt presence of a mind selecting, weighing, and telling.

The Experiencing Self and the Narrating Self

Every memoir has two versions of you on stage. The experiencing self is the person inside the events, limited to what she knew at the time. The narrating self is the person writing now, who knows how it turned out and has had years to think about it. Most flat drafts collapse the two — usually by letting the narrator explain what the child is going through instead of letting the child act.

COLLAPSED

At nine I was already learning that adults lie, which would shape all my later relationships and make me guarded for decades.

TWO SELVES

At nine I believed him about the fishing trip. I packed a bag on Thursday and slept on top of the covers so I would be ready. It took me another twenty years to understand that he had meant it when he said it, and that meaning it had never been the same as doing it.

In the second version, the child gets to be innocent and the narrator gets to be wise — and the reader feels the distance between them. That distance is where the emotion lives.

Distance: How Close, How Far

Distance is a dial, not a setting. Close in, the prose stays inside the moment's sensations. Far out, the narrator gathers years into a sentence and comments. A memoir that stays close reads breathless; one that stays far reads like an essay about a life you never got to see.

- **Close:** "The hallway smelled like floor wax. I counted the tiles to the door and got to nine."
- **Middle:** "That was the spring we learned to be quiet in the afternoons."
- **Far:** "I have come to think of that year as a kind of negotiation, though no one involved would have used the word."

Move deliberately between them. A reliable rhythm: enter close, widen to place the moment in time, then return close for the turn.

Reflection Without Conclusion

Reflection is the narrator thinking, and it is where memoir does what no other genre does. Weak reflection announces a moral (I learned that family is everything). Strong reflection stays specific, admits difficulty, and often ends in an open hand rather than a fist.

ANNOUNCED

That day taught me the value of forgiveness, and I have carried the lesson ever since.

EARNED

I have told this story as a funny one for years, and it works. What I leave out of the funny version is that I did not call her back for six weeks, and that I still do not know whether I was protecting myself or punishing her.

CRAFT NOTE

Uncertainty is a voice tool, not a weakness — if it is specific. “I may be wrong about the color of the car” is honest. “Maybe none of this happened the way I say” is an evasion that quietly cancels the reader’s investment. Doubt the detail; do not doubt the enterprise.

DIAGNOSING A FLAT VOICE

- Read a page aloud. Where your own voice goes bored, cut.
- Ask: is there a single sentence on this page that only I could have written? If not, write one.

Scene, Summary, and Reflection

These three modes are the whole toolkit. Nearly every problem of pace in a memoir draft is a proportion problem among them.

Scene	Summary	Reflection
Does: puts the reader inside a single event as it happens. Signals: a day, a room, dialogue, present-tense sensation, a turn. Risk: every moment dramatized, so nothing feels chosen.	Does: compresses time and supplies the facts a reader needs. Signals: for two years, we always, by then, that winter. Risk: pages of information no one asked for; a life reported at a distance.	Does: lets the narrating self interpret, question, and place the event in a life. Signals: I have come to think, what I did not know then, I still cannot say. Risk: commentary that outruns the evidence; tidy morals.

Scene Anatomy

A working scene almost always contains five parts. Missing one is usually the reason a scene feels flat or unfinished.

Part	What it does
Place	One room or bounded location the reader can stand in.
Time	A specific, continuous stretch — minutes or hours, not years.
People	Who is present, and where their bodies are in the space.
Turn	What is known, decided, or lost by the end that was not true at the start.
Exit	The moment the scene ends — usually earlier than feels comfortable.

SCENE DIAGNOSTIC

If a scene you have drafted is not working, check it against these five parts before you touch a single sentence. Most flat scenes are missing the turn, not the description.

- ☐ Can I name the place in one clause?
- ☐ Does the time stay continuous, without a hidden jump?
- ☐ Do the people in the room want different, specific things?
- ☐ Does something change — a fact known, a decision made, a thing lost — by the scene's end?
- ☐ Does the scene end at the turn, or does it keep going after the turn has already landed?

Finding the Proportion

No ratio is correct, but a useful starting point for a short chapter is roughly half scene, a quarter summary, a quarter reflection — with reflection distributed rather than piled at the end. Two diagnostics:

- **Highlight test.** Print a chapter and mark scene in one color, summary in a second, reflection in a third. Long single-color stretches are where readers drift.
- **Sequence test.** Reflection lands hardest immediately after a concrete image. If a paragraph of thinking has no image within three sentences behind it, move it or ground it.

Before and After

The passage below does what early drafts do: it summarizes an event, then explains its meaning. Nothing is untrue, and nothing is felt.

BEFORE — SUMMARY AND EXPLANATION

My grandmother moved in with us when I was twelve, after her fall. It was hard on everyone. She and my mother argued constantly about small things, and I usually stayed in my room. Looking back, I realize they were both frightened, and that their arguments were really about losing control of their lives.

AFTER — SCENE, THEN REFLECTION

My grandmother came to us in March with a walker and two suitcases, one of them full of shoes she would not be wearing again.

The first fight I remember was about the toaster. She wanted it on the left side of the counter, where it had been in her own kitchen for forty years. My mother moved it back twice, and the third time she left it where my grandmother had put it and went out to the car and sat in the driver's seat without starting the engine. From my window I watched her hands on the wheel. She stayed eleven minutes. I know because I counted, the way I counted everything that year.

They were not arguing about the toaster, and I understood that even then. What I did not understand was that neither of them had chosen this, and that a person can love someone and still resent the room they take up. I have moved a toaster twice in my own kitchen since then. Both times I thought of my mother in the car, and both times I put it back.

WHAT CHANGED

- One event replaced a general claim: they argued constantly became a toaster, a counter, a car — and a number did the emotional work: eleven minutes, counted by a child who counts.
- The insight arrived after the image, and it stopped short of absolution.
- The ending reached into the present, which is where the narrating self lives.

Structure, Time, and Pattern

A memoir's structure is an argument about meaning. Chronology says this caused that. Braiding says these belong together. Fragmentation says this could not be told smoothly. Choose the shape that matches what the material knows, and be willing to change your mind once, late.

Five Shapes

1. **Chronological.** Events in the order they happened, with compression. Strongest for coming-of-age, because growth is genuinely sequential. Danger: the middle sags where life was merely continuous.
2. **Braided or lyric.** Two or three strands — a family history, a personal timeline, a body of research or lore — alternating so each illuminates the others. Strongest when the meaning is comparative. Danger: strands that never touch.
3. **Framed.** A present-day situation (a drive to a funeral, a clean-out of a house) opens and closes the book, with the past told inside it. Strongest when the act of remembering is part of the subject. Danger: a frame so thin it becomes an excuse.
4. **Segmented or fragmentary.** Numbered or white-space-separated sections, sometimes short, without narrative glue between them. Strongest for material about rupture, illness, or unreliable memory. Danger: fragments that hide, rather than enact, a refusal to be whole.
5. **Quest or arc.** A stated pursuit — find the birth father, walk the trail, learn the language — gives the book forward motion and an obvious question. Strongest for reader momentum. Danger: the quest answered halfway, with a hundred pages left.

CRAFT NOTE

Whatever the shape, the reader needs three things early: a person to follow, a place to stand, and a question to carry. If your first five pages provide only atmosphere, the structure is not the problem — the opening is.

Patterns Worth Naming: Chronology, Braid, Collage, Frame, Return

Five recurring patterns account for most successful student memoirs. Naming the pattern you are working in — even provisionally — helps you notice when a draft has drifted into a different one by accident.

Pattern	What holds it together	A student-scale test
Chronology	Time itself; one thing leads to the next.	Could a reader draw a single timeline from your pages without confusion?
Braid	Two or three strands that comment on each other.	Does at least one strand change how we read another within a few pages of alternation?

Pattern	What holds it together	A student-scale test
Collage / fragment	Juxtaposition and white space rather than transition.	Do the fragments accumulate meaning, or just avoid the work of connecting?
Framed journey	A present-day frame (a trip, a task, a return) that holds the past inside it.	Would the frame survive if you described only what happens in the present tense?
Return	A repeated place, image, or phrase revisited with new understanding.	Is the final return demonstrably different from the first — in fact, not just in mood?

Four Sample Outlines

Each of these is a shape for a short memoir (roughly 8,000–15,000 words) or a chapter sequence. They are formatted differently on purpose: notation influences how you think.

OUTLINE A • SEQUENCE — CHRONOLOGICAL COMING-OF-AGE

Ch. 1 The last ordinary summer. Establish the household, the narrator's position in it, and one small unexplained thing (a locked drawer, an uncle no one calls).

Ch. 2 The change arrives — a move, a diagnosis, a departure. Scene-heavy. End on the narrator misunderstanding what she has seen.

Ch. 3 Adaptation, then a misstep that is genuinely the narrator's fault. Do not soften it.

Ch. 4 The turn: the narrator chooses something for herself, at cost.

Ch. 5 Aftermath, then a short leap forward. The present-day narrator reappraises Ch. 2. End on an image, not a lesson.

Where it fails: the middle chapter flattens into diary. Fix: give it a real antagonist scene, or cut it and lengthen Ch. 2.

OUTLINE B • THREE STRANDS — BRAIDED FAMILY STORY

Strand X — the narrator's year of asking questions. Strand Y — the grandmother's migration, reconstructed.

Strand Z — the documents: a ship manifest, a mistranslated name, a photograph.

X1 A phone call that will not be returned. The narrator begins looking.

Y1 1961, the departure. Reconstructed carefully, with its uncertainties named.

Z1 The manifest: two spellings of one surname. Short section, factual, quiet.

Y2 The version the family polish covers — what the narrator can and cannot verify.

X2 The confrontation that turns out not to be one.

Y3 / Z2 The strands converge on a single decision made in 1961 whose consequence the narrator is living inside.

Coda Present tense. The narrator says the name correctly, out loud.

Rule of thumb: each strand must change the reader's understanding of at least one other strand within twenty pages, or it is a separate book.

OUTLINE C • MAPPED BY LOCATION — PLACE-BASED MEMOIR

Organized by rooms and thresholds rather than by years. Time moves, but place governs.

The porch Arrival and the family's public face. Who is allowed to sit here.

The kitchen Economy and labor. Money conversations overheard from the stairs.

The back bedroom The sibling. Whispered negotiations; the geography of a shared room.

The hospital corridor The break. Institutional space against domestic space.

The empty house The clean-out, years later. Objects reappear and are reassessed.

The porch, again Same place, changed narrator. The last paragraph refuses the easy homecoming.

Where it fails: description without event. Fix: every location must host one scene with a turn in it.

OUTLINE D • SIX DAYS, TIGHT FRAME — COMPRESSED CRISIS

The whole book occupies six days. Backstory arrives only when the present forces it — never more than a paragraph at a time.

Day 1 The call. Ordinary morning interrupted; the narrator does something small and wrong.

Day 2 Travel. Interior monologue; the first two-sentence flashback.

Day 3 Arrival, and the family as they now are. Longest scene in the book.

Day 4 The narrator is asked for something she does not want to give.

Day 5 She gives it, or she does not. Either way, irreversibly. The room after: silence rendered concretely.

Day 6 Departure. One paragraph of the narrating self, years on, no more than 150 words.

Why it works: a short clock makes every hour matter and licenses very little summary. Watch for: backstory that swells past a page and dissolves the tension.

Effective Beginnings and Endings

Openings and closings carry disproportionate weight: a reader decides whether to trust you within a page, and decides what the whole piece was worth in the final paragraph.

Five Doorways In

Draft more than one opening before choosing. Try beginning with:

- **A person in motion.** Someone doing something specific, before any context is supplied.
- **An object.** A single thing, described precisely, that the rest of the piece will earn the meaning of.
- **A place.** A room or threshold rendered so exactly the reader can stand in it immediately.
- **A line someone said.** A warning, a joke, an instruction — quoted exactly, without immediate explanation.
- **The present moment.** The now that makes the past urgent — why you are telling this today.

TRY IT

Write three openings of 100–150 words each for a piece you are working on, each using a different doorway above. Read all three aloud before choosing.

What Makes an Opening Fail

The most common opening problems are not technical — they are matters of trust and pacing.

- Beginning with birth, ancestry, or three pages of throat-clearing before the story starts.
- Explaining what the piece is about instead of demonstrating it in a scene.
- Opening with weather or atmosphere with no person in it yet.

Four Ending Moves

1. **Return, changed.** Revisit an image, place, or phrase from the beginning, now altered by what the reader has learned.
2. **Echo, compressed.** Repeat an earlier scene in shorter, altered form — the same moment seen with new information.
3. **Action over statement.** Show a changed action rather than naming a lesson. What the narrator now does is more convincing than what she now believes.
4. **The honest aperture.** Leave a question legitimately unresolved, but more clearly seen than at the start — not tied off, just better lit.

WATCH FOR

An ending that announces a moral the pages have not earned is the single most common weakness in student endings. If you can state the lesson in one tidy sentence, the piece is probably not finished finding what it actually thinks.

Character on the Page

In memoir, the people are not characters you invented; they are people you owe something to, rendered by someone with a stake. That double bind is the craft problem. The solution is not neutrality — you are allowed a point of view — but sufficiency: giving each person enough on the page to exceed your judgment of them.

Render, Then Complicate

A person becomes real in three or four moves: an action, a habit of speech, a contradiction, and something they are good at. Notice that description of appearance is not on the list.

CARICATURE

My father was a stubborn, angry man who never listened to anyone and made our lives miserable.

RENDERED

My father kept a level in the glove compartment. He would stop the car to straighten a neighbor's mailbox, then not speak to my mother for two days over a comment about the lawn. He could fix anything with a motor and could not, in my hearing, ever say the word sorry.

The second version is not kinder. It is more damning and more human at once, because it gives evidence and lets the reader judge. The rule underneath: grant every person one dignity and one flaw the reader did not expect.

Dialogue and Reconstructed Scenes

No one remembers dialogue verbatim, and readers know it. What they ask for is fidelity to how a person spoke — rhythm, vocabulary, evasions, the phrases they wore out. Reconstruct with that fidelity and keep the exchanges short; two or three lines usually carry a whole relationship.

- Use dialogue for turns and refusals, not for information the narrator can summarize faster.
- Keep attribution plain, and let people talk past each other — real conversation is mostly missed connections.

RECONSTRUCTED

"You didn't call," she said. "I called Tuesday." "Tuesday," she said, and went to look for the good scissors.

WATCH FOR

Three caricature traps. The villain who exists only to harm the narrator — usually a sign of unfinished thinking. The saint whose flaws have been sanded off out of loyalty. The extra who appears once, unnamed and undifferentiated, doing something plot-shaped. If a person can be replaced by any other person, cut or combine them (and see the note on composites in the next section).

Rendering Yourself

The hardest character to write fairly is the narrator. Self-flattery is obvious to readers; so is performed self-loathing, which is flattery in a darker coat. Aim for the same standard you apply to everyone else: actions, contradictions, and a refusal to explain yourself into the clear.

- Show yourself doing something you would rather not report.

Truth, Memory, and Ethics

This is the section students most want rules for, and the one where rules are least available. What is available is a practice: be accurate where accuracy is possible, be transparent where it is not, and be deliberate about the harm your pages could do. None of what follows is legal advice; the end of this section says who to ask.

Accuracy: The Part That Is Not Negotiable

- **Do not invent events.** Not a fight that never happened, not a conversation you wish had occurred, not a death moved for shape.
- **Do not invent people,** and do not attribute to a real person actions or words that are not theirs.
- **Check what is checkable.** Dates, place names, ages, weather, the year the plant closed. Readers who catch one wrong fact begin auditing everything. Keep a source note file as you draft; it takes minutes and saves weeks.

Uncertainty: Say So, on the Page

Memory is reconstructive, and admitting that can strengthen rather than weaken a narrative. Useful moves, used sparingly:

- I remember it as a Tuesday, though the calendar makes that unlikely.
- My brother says the dog was already gone by then. I have decided to trust my version and to tell you his.

Two cautions: overuse turns a narrator fussy, and blanket disclaimers (none of this may be true) cancel the contract that makes the reader care. Doubt specifics; keep faith with the whole.

Composite Characters and Other Alterations

Practices vary across the field, and different instructors, editors, and publishers draw different lines. The workable standard for student work is simple: alter as little as possible, and disclose what you alter.

1. **Changed names and identifying details** are widely accepted and usually disclosed in a brief author's note.
2. **Composites** — merging two or more real people into one figure — are contested, because a reader cannot tell where the seam is. If you use one, many editors expect an explicit note. Consider first whether the person can simply be cut.
3. **Compression** of two occasions into one scene is common, but it changes causation and should be acknowledged if it alters the account materially.
4. **Invented dialogue** presented as recollection crosses the line; reconstructed dialogue, understood as reconstruction, does not.

CRAFT NOTE

A note to the reader costs you one short paragraph and buys durable trust. A plain example: “I have changed several names, and in two places I have combined events that took place over a single week. Dialogue is reconstructed from memory and, where possible, checked against letters.” Say what you did; do not apologize for it.

Privacy, Permission, and Other People's Stories

Your life overlaps other lives, and those people did not choose to be written about. Their claim is real even when it is not legally enforceable. Questions worth answering before you circulate a draft:

- **Is this person's private material necessary, or merely interesting?** Necessity is the test that survives scrutiny.
- **Does the person have less power than I do** — a child, a student, someone dependent on me, someone who cannot answer back? Raise your standard accordingly.
- **Would I be willing to stand behind this in the person's presence?** Not: would they enjoy it.
- **Am I disclosing something dangerous** — immigration status, sexuality in an unsafe context, a health condition, a criminal history — that could cost someone a job, a relationship, or safety?

Permission is a spectrum, not a formality. Some writers show relevant pages to the people in them; some tell them the book exists and offer no veto; some wait until publication is real. Showing pages can improve accuracy and cost you nerve. Decide consciously, and decide before you are under deadline.

Legal and Institutional Awareness

You do not need to be frightened, and you do need to be aware. Published nonfiction can raise questions of defamation (false statements of fact that damage a reputation), privacy (disclosure of private facts), and, in classroom or clinical settings, confidentiality obligations. Standards differ by jurisdiction, and details matter more than any summary can convey.

WATCH FOR

For anything you intend to publish — in a journal, an anthology, a book, or online — talk to your instructor or editor first, and seek advice from a qualified legal professional for questions specific to your material and jurisdiction. This booklet is craft guidance, not legal advice. Institutional programs often have their own policies for work involving minors, patients, or research subjects; ask early rather than after acceptance.

Writing About Harm

If your material includes violence, abuse, illness, or loss: craft protects you — specificity, scene, and control of distance let you write hard things without re-inhabiting them wholesale — and so does pacing. Shorter sessions,

planned stopping points, and someone to talk to afterward are parts of a process, not failures of toughness. You may write the hardest scene at a wide distance first and move closer later, or never.

Do and Don't: Twelve Pairs

Read the left column while drafting and the right column while revising. None of these are laws; each is a default a strong writer will break knowingly, for a reason they could name in workshop.

Do	Don't
Anchor every claim in a scene.	Don't assert emotion (it was devastating) and move on — readers believe evidence, not adjectives.
Start in motion, on a specific day.	Don't open with your birth, your ancestry, or three pages of setting.
Give the narrating self a job on every page.	Don't let the narrator vanish for twenty pages of pure reenactment.
Let dialogue be short and oblique.	Don't use dialogue to deliver exposition no one would speak aloud.
Compress the continuous parts of life into summary.	Don't dramatize every meal and car ride at equal length.
Name the stakes early — what could be lost.	Don't assume the reader will supply urgency your pages have not earned.
Give the antagonist a real argument.	Don't build a case; build a person.
End scenes a beat earlier than feels comfortable.	Don't explain the scene you just wrote.
Say when memory is uncertain, specifically.	Don't hedge the entire book with a blanket disclaimer.
Cut backstory to the minimum the present scene demands.	Don't front-load history because you researched it.
Read every page aloud before workshop.	Don't send out prose your own mouth stumbles over.
Let the ending change something small and true.	Don't resolve what your life has not resolved.

The Memoirist's Rules

Twelve rules, each with one sentence of reason. Pin them up. Break them individually and on purpose.

#	Rule and reason
01	Choose a slice, not a life. Bound the material in time or theme so the book can end.
02	Write toward the thing you are avoiding. The paragraph you keep postponing is usually the center of the book.
03	Put the reader in a room. Before you interpret, let us stand somewhere with you.
04	One detail beats three adjectives. Accuracy of thing, not intensity of language, produces feeling.
05	Keep both selves on stage. The one who lived it and the one who is telling it need different voices.
06	Earn every abstraction. A word like grief must be paid for with a specific twenty minutes.
07	Give away information early. Withholding a fact the narrator obviously knows reads as a trick, not suspense.
08	Let people be more than your judgment of them. Include the evidence that complicates your own case.
09	Prefer the true detail to the good one. When they conflict, keep the truth and cut the flourish.
10	Structure is a claim — make it consciously. If you cannot say why the parts are in this order, the order is not finished.
11	Stop before the moral. Trust the reader to arrive; your job is to make arrival possible.
12	Finish drafts. Revision can only work on a whole thing, however bad the whole thing is.

The Drafting Workflow

A repeatable six-step process. It is designed to be run more than once — for a whole book, for a chapter, for a stubborn section — and to keep generation separate from judgment, which is where most drafts die.

Step 1 — Inventory

Two sessions, no drafting. Empty the material onto paper so you can see what you have before you decide what it means.

- List 30 scene-shaped memories in one line each: the night the car wouldn't start behind the church. Then list 10 objects, 8 places, 6 people, 4 family stories.

Step 2 — Frame

One session with the four central questions. Produce a paragraph, not an outline.

- Write a one-paragraph statement: whose story, over what span, moving from what to what.
- Name the boundary: the earliest and latest moment the book will contain.

Step 3 — Draft Scenes Out of Order

Two to six weeks. Write the scenes you can see, in any order, without transitions. Transitions are a revision problem; scenes are the asset.

- One scene per session, 600–1,200 words, single event, ending on a turn.
- Leave brackets for anything you must check: [what year did the store close?]. Do not stop to research.

Step 4 — Assemble

One long session. Print everything, spread it out, and build a sequence with your hands.

- Give each scene a card: time, place, who changes, what the reader learns. Arrange them, then read only the cards — is there a question that carries from first to last?

Step 5 — Fill and Connect

Two to four weeks. Write the missing scenes, add the summary that carries time, and place reflection where an image has just landed.

- Draft the connective summary last; it is easiest once the scenes are fixed.
- Resolve every bracket. Where a fact cannot be recovered, write the uncertainty into the sentence.

Step 6 — Revise in Passes

Three or more passes, each with one job. Mixed-purpose revision produces polished paragraphs inside a broken shape.

- Pass A — structure and stakes. Pass B — scene and reflection balance. Pass C — line and voice.
- A separate fact-and-ethics pass, late, with fresh attention.

TRY IT

Run the whole cycle at small scale before you trust it at large scale: one week, one 2,000-word piece, all six steps compressed to a day each. You will learn where your own process leaks.

Revision: Macro, Line, and the Revision Ladder

Revision is not correction. It is re-vision — seeing the material again, at a scale large enough that whole sections can move or go. Do the macro work first; polishing sentences in a chapter that will be cut is the most expensive way to procrastinate.

Macro Pass

STAKES

- ☐ By page three, can a reader say what the narrator wants and what threatens it?

SHAPE

- ☐ Can I state the structural logic in one sentence — why these parts, in this order?
- ☐ Does each section change the reader's understanding, or only add information?
- ☐ Does the ending land on the change I claimed in my four sentences?

SCENE

- ☐ Is every major turn dramatized rather than reported?
- ☐ Does each scene have a place, a time, a change, and an exit before the explaining starts?

REFLECTION

- ☐ Is reflection distributed, or stacked at the ends of chapters?
- ☐ Does each reflective passage follow a concrete image?

BACKSTORY AND PACING

- ☐ Does any backstory run longer than a page in the first thirty pages?

Line Pass

Only after the shape is stable. Work with a printout and read aloud; the ear catches what the eye forgives.

VOICE AND SENTENCE

- ☐ Is the narrating self audible on every page — in diction, in judgment, in what gets noticed?
- ☐ Have I cut the abstractions I did not pay for (trauma, journey, closure, connection)?
- ☐ Are there at least a few sentences per page only I could have written — and no sentence I am keeping because it is pretty?
- ☐ Have I removed I remember that, I realized that, I could see that where the plain image is stronger?

FACT AND ETHICS REVIEW

- ☐ Every date, name, place, age, and public event verified or explicitly marked as remembered?
- ☐ Every alteration — changed name, composite, compression — recorded in my notes and, where needed, disclosed in an author's note?
- ☐ Have I flagged anything requiring my instructor's or editor's guidance, or qualified legal advice, before publication?

CRAFT NOTE

Keep a cut file, never a delete key. Everything you remove goes to a document called offcuts. It makes cutting emotionally possible, and roughly one in five offcuts turns out to be the opening of the next piece.

The Revision Ladder

When a draft needs everything at once, work down the ladder in order. Each rung assumes the one above it is provisionally settled — provisionally, because you may have to climb back up.

Rung	Question you are answering
1. Premise	Do I still believe the one-sentence claim I am making about this material?
2. Structure	Is the material in the order that best argues that claim?
3. Scene selection	Are these the right scenes, and are any load-bearing scenes missing?
4. Proportion	Is the balance of scene, summary, and reflection doing what pacing requires?
5. Character	Does everyone on the page exceed my judgment of them?
6. Voice and sentence	Does every page sound like a specific mind, at the sentence level?
7. Fact and ethics	Have I verified what can be verified and disclosed what I altered?

TRY IT

Pick your stalled draft and identify, honestly, which rung you are actually working on — not which rung feels most comfortable to work on. Most stalled drafts are being line-edited when they need rung 2 or 3.

Workshop Protocol and Feedback Prompts

A memoir workshop needs slightly different ground rules than a fiction workshop, because the writer's actual life is the material. Good workshop practice protects both the honesty of the feedback and the dignity of the writer.

Before the Workshop

- The writer states, in one or two sentences, what kind of feedback is wanted: line notes, structural response, or simply a witness.
- Readers finish the piece before forming an opinion about the opening.
- Readers separate two questions: is this true to the writer's experience, and is this working as a piece of writing? Only the second is the workshop's business.

During the Workshop

- Describe what you experienced on the page before you prescribe a fix. "I felt closest to the narrator here" is more useful than "add more emotion."
- Speak to the craft choices, not to the people described. The uncle in the piece is a character on the page during workshop, whatever he is in life.
- Name what is working with the same precision you bring to what is not. Vague praise is as unhelpful as vague criticism.

Feedback Prompts Worth Borrowing

Prompt	What it surfaces
Where did you believe the narrator most, and least?	Voice consistency and earned authority.
Which scene would you want to read at twice the length?	Where the material is strongest.
What did you expect to happen that didn't?	Whether stakes are legible early.
Where did you feel told rather than shown?	Summary or reflection standing in for scene.
What question are you left with at the end?	Whether the ending is earning its ambiguity or avoiding a decision.

TRY IT

Before your next workshop, write down the one question above you most want your readers to answer about your piece, and ask it directly instead of waiting to see what comes up.

Exercises

Twelve exercises across observation, memory, scene, character, voice, structure, reflection, and revision. Do them in any order; do the uncomfortable ones twice. Ruled space follows several prompts — begin there, then move to your notebook or screen.

EXERCISE 01 • OBSERVATION

Fifteen Minutes of the Actual World

Sit somewhere public and write only what is verifiable: what people do with their hands, what the light does, what you can hear with your eyes closed. No interpretation, no metaphor, no feelings. When you catch yourself explaining, draw a line and return to the observable.

Time: 15 minutes

Try this: Go back to the same place at a different hour and write the same page. Compare which details were the place and which were you.

EXERCISE 02 • MEMORY

Twenty Doors

Write twenty one-line memories, each beginning with the words the day or the night. Do not develop any of them. Speed matters more than quality; aim for twenty in twelve minutes. Then circle the three that made you uncomfortable.

Time: 20 minutes

Try this: Take one circled line and write the fifteen minutes immediately before the event, not the event itself.

EXERCISE 03 • MEMORY

The Story Your Family Tells

Write a family anecdote exactly as it is usually told at the table, with its punchline intact. On a fresh page, write what the polished version leaves out — who is not in it, what happened afterward, who does not laugh.

Time: 25 minutes

Try this: Write the same anecdote in the voice of the person it is usually about, in first person, generously.

EXERCISE 04 • SCENE**Twelve Minutes, One Turn**

Choose an event that took less than twelve minutes and write 700 words of scene: one place, continuous time, at least one line of dialogue, and a change by the end — something known, decided, or lost. No backstory, no reflection.

Time: 30 minutes

Try this: Cut the first paragraph entirely and see whether the scene starts better without it. It usually does.

EXERCISE 05 • SCENE**Summary into Scene**

Find a sentence in your notes that summarizes years (we were poor that decade, my parents fought a lot). Write the single afternoon that most fairly stands for that sentence. Then delete the summarizing sentence.

Time: 30 minutes

Try this: Write the same afternoon in 100 words. Decide which version your draft needs and why.

EXERCISE 06 • CHARACTER**One Dignity, One Flaw**

Write 300 words on a person from your material. Include: one habitual action, one phrase they overused, one thing they were good at, and one contradiction. You may not describe their eyes, and you may not state your judgment of them.

Time: 25 minutes

Try this: Give the same person a page in which they are right and you are wrong.

EXERCISE 07 • CHARACTER**Two Lines and a Refusal**

Reconstruct an exchange of no more than six lines in which two people want different things and neither says so directly. Attribution: said only. End on an action rather than a line of dialogue.

Time: 20 minutes

Try this: Rewrite it with half the words. Then decide which cut lines the reader can actually infer.

EXERCISE 08 • VOICE**Then and Now, Side by Side**

Write a paragraph fully inside your younger self — present-tense sensation, no hindsight. Then write a paragraph in your narrating voice about the same moment, using what you know now. Do not reconcile them.

Time: 25 minutes

Try this: Interleave the two paragraphs sentence by sentence. Note where the friction becomes interesting and where it becomes noise.

EXERCISE 09 • VOICE**The Uncertainty Pass**

Take two pages of an existing draft and mark every claim you cannot verify. Rewrite three of them so the uncertainty is specific and in the voice — I remember a green car; my sister remembers no car at all.

Time: 20 minutes

Try this: Now find one place where you hedged out of timidity rather than honesty, and commit.

EXERCISE 10 • STRUCTURE**Index Cards on the Floor**

Write each existing or intended scene on a card: time, place, who changes, what the reader learns. Lay them out in chronological order, then rearrange into a braided or framed order. Photograph both. Write 150 words on which order argues better, and for what.

Time: 30 minutes

Try this: Remove your three favorite cards. Does the sequence still stand? If yes, they may be decoration.

EXERCISE 11 • REFLECTION**Stop Before the Moral**

Take a reflective passage you have written and delete its final sentence. Then delete the new final sentence. Read what remains aloud. Restore only what the reader genuinely cannot supply.

Time: 15 minutes

Try this: Replace the deleted conclusion with an image from the same day and nothing else.

EXERCISE 12 • REVISION**The Three-Color Read**

Print a chapter. Mark scene, summary, and reflection in three colors. Measure the proportions and find the longest single-color stretch. Revise that stretch by introducing the mode it lacks.

Time: 30 minutes

Try this: Do the same with a published memoir chapter and compare its proportions to yours.

A 14-Day Memoir Practice

Twenty to thirty minutes a day for two weeks. The point is not to produce a chapter; it is to build the habit of arriving, and to accumulate enough raw material that structure becomes a real choice rather than a guess. Set a timer and stop when it rings, mid-sentence if necessary — an unfinished sentence is the easiest door to walk back through tomorrow.

Day	Assignment (20–30 minutes)
Day 1	Inventory. Twenty one-line memories, beginning the day or the night. No developing. Circle three that unsettle you.
Day 2	Objects. Ten objects from one period; 150 words on one of them, physical only.
Day 3	Place. Draw a floor plan and write the thing you overheard from a doorway.
Day 4	Scene one. 700 words: twelve minutes, one place, one turn. No reflection.
Day 5	Framing. Answer the four central questions in four sentences. Keep the card.
Day 6	Person. 300 words on someone in your material: action, phrase, competence, contradiction.
Day 7	Read, do not write. Reread the week aloud. Mark the two liveliest paragraphs and note what they share.
Day 8	Scene two. Convert a summarizing sentence into the single afternoon that stands for it.
Day 9	Voice. Two paragraphs on one moment — younger self, then narrating self. Do not reconcile.
Day 10	Dialogue. Six lines in which two people want different things and neither says so.
Day 11	Structure. Cards on the floor: chronological order, then a braided or framed order. Photograph both.
Day 12	Reflection. Write 200 words of thinking that begins from an image and stops before the moral.
Day 13	Revision. Three-color read of your longest piece; fix the longest single-color stretch.
Day 14	Ethics and next steps. Run the privacy questions; note every alteration; write the one sentence that names what your book is about.

TRY IT

At the end of the fourteen days, read everything in one sitting without a pen. Then write one page answering a single question: what is this material about that I did not know on Day 1?

Before You Share: A Self-Assessment

Run this before workshop, before submission, and again before anything goes out into the world. Check what is true. Where you cannot check a box, write one line beneath it naming what you would need to do — that line is your next revision task.

THE STORY

- ☐ I can say in one sentence what this is about, and it is not a summary of events.
- ☐ A reader knows by page three what is wanted and what is at risk.
- ☐ Something has changed by the end — in the events, in the narrator, or in what can be seen.

THE CRAFT

- ☐ Every major turn happens in a scene rather than in a report.
- ☐ The narrating voice is audible on every page and sounds like a person, not an essay.

THE PEOPLE

- ☐ Everyone in the draft is more complex than my judgment of them.
- ☐ I have applied the privacy questions to every living person here.
- ☐ I would be willing to stand behind each portrayal in the person's presence.

THE RECORD

- ☐ Dates, names, places, and public facts are verified or explicitly marked as remembered.
- ☐ Every alteration — changed name, composite, compression — is recorded, and disclosed where it matters.
- ☐ I have listed what to raise with my instructor or editor, including anything that may need qualified legal advice before publication.

THE WRITER

- ☐ I know what I want from this reader: line notes, structural response, or a witness.
- ☐ I have two questions written down for my workshop, and a date to start the next pass.

THE NEXT THING I WILL DO

A Glossary of Craft Terms

Short definitions of terms used throughout this booklet, gathered in one place for quick reference.

Term	Definition
Braided structure	A structure that alternates two or three strands of material — timelines, subjects, or documents — so that each illuminates the others.
Composite character	A figure created by merging two or more real people; contested in the field and, where used, best disclosed to the reader.
Distance	How close or far the narrating voice stands from the events being told, ranging from present-tense sensation to years-later summary.
Experiencing self	The person inside the remembered events, limited to what they knew at the time.
Frame / framed structure	A present-day situation that opens and closes a piece, holding the past narrative inside it.
Load-bearing detail	A specific, verifiable detail that carries emotional or thematic weight without stating it outright.
Memory map	An informal visual inventory of a place or period, used to surface material before it is organized into narrative.
Narrating self	The present-day writer telling the story, who knows how events turned out and can reflect on their meaning.
Reflection	Passages where the narrating self interprets, questions, or places events in a larger context.
Scene	A specific event, in a specific place, at a specific time, containing a change; the basic unit of memoir.
Summary	Compressed narration that covers time quickly, supplying facts a reader needs without dramatizing them.
Vantage	The particular position from which a writer observed events — what it allowed them to see and what it prevented.

Where to Read Next: A Reading Shelf

Suggestions only, offered for range rather than ranking; nothing here is required, and nothing here is a purchase list. Borrow, share a copy with a classmate, or find these through a library before you buy. Read for structure as much as for story — note where each writer places scene, how far the narrator stands from events, and how the book decides to end. Ask your instructor and your library for more, especially for work close to your own material.

COMING-OF-AGE AND FAMILY

The Liars' Club · Mary Karr — childhood rendered in scene, with a narrator who refuses sentimentality

This Boy's Life · Tobias Wolff — a young narrator's self-invention, told without excuse

Fun Home · Alison Bechdel — graphic memoir; braided structure and recursive returns to one death

PLACE, MIGRATION, AND BELONGING

Hunger for Memory · Richard Rodriguez — essayistic memoir on language, schooling, and distance from home

Brother, I'm Dying · Edwidge Danticat — two lives braided with the writer's; documents and family testimony

ILLNESS, LOSS, AND THE BODY

The Year of Magical Thinking · Joan Didion — grief examined by a mind that audits itself

When Breath Becomes Air · Paul Kalanithi — a compressed crisis memoir with a short, unforgiving clock

WORK, OBSESSION, AND QUEST

H Is for Hawk · Helen Macdonald — grief braided with training a goshawk and with another writer's life

CRAFT ON CRAFT

The Art of Memoir · Mary Karr — a practitioner on voice, memory, and the ethics of telling

The Situation and the Story · Vivian Gornick — what happened versus what the writer makes of it

Handling the Truth · Beth Kephart — a practical companion for writing responsibly from memory

Read three of these all the way through this term, then reread ten pages of one with a pencil, marking only where the mode changes. That will teach you more than any list.

Begin Here

You will not write the whole thing today. That is not a failure of ambition; it is how the work is actually done — one bounded session, one honest scene, one afternoon you finally see clearly enough to put on paper.

Everything difficult about memoir comes down to a single trade: you give up the version of the story that protects you, and in exchange you get a book that is worth someone else's time. It rarely feels like a good deal in the moment. It always is.

So keep the standard modest and specific. Tell the truth as closely as you can reconstruct it. Put us in the room. Let the people be larger than your case against them. Stop before the moral. Finish the draft, then find out what it was about.

A PLEDGE

For the next fourteen days I will sit down for twenty minutes, whether or not I feel ready.

I will write what happened before I decide what it means.

I will not spare myself, and I will not caricature anyone else.

When I do not know, I will say so on the page.

I will finish something, and then I will revise it.

SIGNED

Name and date

THE FIRST THING I WILL WRITE ABOUT

Begin.

My Philosophy of Writing and Teaching

I think of memoir as shaped lived experience rather than a complete life. No one can put a whole life on the page, and no reader wants one; what a memoir offers instead is a single, honestly examined slice, carried by a voice worth spending time with.

For me, writing begins with attention — with specificity, and with discovery. I do not start with a thesis about my own experience and go looking for proof. I start by looking closely, and I let the meaning arrive the way it arrives in life: late, and only partly.

I ask my students to explore the full circumference of their lives — not only the dramatic parts, but the ordinary rooms, the overheard conversations, the small rituals — and to write from experience without apologizing for it. Part of what a course like this should do is help a student celebrate themselves: to take their own material seriously enough to shape it with care.

I believe literature should make connections and meaning — between one life and another, between a private memory and a larger human pattern. That belief shapes how I read student work: I am listening for the place where a personal detail opens onto something a stranger can recognize.

I also believe a well-made sentence is a moral instrument. How you choose to say a thing — what you include, what you withhold, whose voice you privilege — is itself an ethical act, not just a stylistic one. Precision on the page is a form of respect for the reader and for the people you are writing about.

Teaching, to me, is communion and discovery. It is not the transmission of rules from a person who knows to a person who does not; it is a shared act of finding out what a piece of writing is actually doing, together, in the room.

TELL IT SLANT

I ask students to tell it slant — to approach difficult or central material indirectly, through point of view, scene, dialogue, metaphor, and strategic withholding, rather than through direct statement alone. Indirection is not evasion; used well, it is often the most honest way to approach what is hardest to say plainly.

These are the convictions behind every exercise, checklist, and page in this booklet. I do not expect you to share all of them. I do expect you to write as though your own experience deserves this much care — because it does.

— James F. Mulhern

About the Author

James F. Mulhern is a Philadelphia-based novelist, poet, and essayist. He is professor emeritus and the founder of Silver Current Press.

His work has appeared in more than 300 journals and anthologies, and in 2015 he held a writing fellowship at Oxford.

He taught for three decades, including work with inner-city and immigrant students, before turning fully to writing and to projects like this one.

His fiction is shaped by inherited family voices, silence, faith, and memory — the same materials this booklet asks its students to take seriously in their own lives.

Index

An alphabetical guide to the booklet's central craft terms and concepts. Page numbers refer to this edition.

About the Author.....	50
Access and safety note.....	5
Beginnings, five doorways.....	24
Braided structure.....	20, 22, 46
Central Questions, the four.....	9–10
Character, rendering.....	26–27
Checklist, macro revision.....	35
Checklist, self-assessment.....	45
Collage / fragment structure.....	20–21
Composite characters.....	28, 46
Dialogue, reconstructed.....	26–27
Distance (narrative).....	15, 46
Do and Don't: Twelve Pairs.....	31
Endings, four moves.....	24
Ethics of memoir.....	28–30
Exercises.....	39–42
Experiencing self.....	15, 46
Fourteen-day practice.....	43
Framed structure.....	20, 22, 46
Glossary of craft terms.....	46
Load-bearing detail.....	12, 46
Memoir, definition of.....	7–8
Memoirist's Rules, the twelve.....	32
Memoirist's Stance, the.....	11
Memory maps.....	13–14
Narrating self.....	15, 46
Patterns and forms.....	20–23
Philosophy of writing and teaching.....	49
Privacy and permission.....	29–30
Reading shelf.....	47
Reflection, craft of.....	17, 35
Return (structural pattern).....	22
Revision Ladder, the.....	35–36
Scene anatomy.....	17

Scene diagnostic.....	17-18
Scene, summary, reflection.....	17-19
Self-assessment.....	45
Sensory detail.....	12
Structure, five shapes.....	20
Tell it slant.....	49
Uncertainty, as voice tool.....	16, 28
Verification of memory.....	13
Voice.....	15-16
Workshop protocol.....	37-38