

Write to
Remember:
Memoirs From
Writing Territories

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Ozarks Writing Project

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Rationale

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In my English II class for the past two years, I have taught a 2-4 page research-based thesis paper with MLA documentation, note cards, outlines, etc. The writing project goes well, but by the end of the 3-4 weeks we spend on the project, my students (and me!) are burnt out. We're tired of research, and we're tired of professional writing. That's where this assignment started.

The research paper is a component of a nonfiction unit I have developed called "Discovering Truth," and I decided to include a memoir writing assignment to wrap up the study of nonfiction, allowing students the opportunity to discover some truth about themselves. Because many of my students like to talk and write about themselves, I thought this type of writing would be a great motivator to reward them for working so hard on their research papers.

Another practice that inspired me to have a memoir writing project was my belief in reading aloud to my students. One of my mentor teachers, Judy Holmes, reads aloud to all of her classes from freshman to seniors, and I immediately saw the benefits of this in her classroom so I adopted her ideas for my own classroom. When we studied nonfiction, I read *Night* by Elie Wiesel, his true account of his experience during the Holocaust, a book categorized as "memoir." When I ask my students at the end of the year which books they have enjoyed for read-alouds, *Night* is the overwhelming winner. Not only are they interested in reading about the Holocaust, but they are entranced by Wiesel's voice as he describes the events he endured. (And I'm usually not the only one crying when I read about the death of his father.) I knew that finishing up *Night* to begin our study of memoir was the perfect segue.

During the time that I was reaching these conclusions, I was reading *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell. In this resource about teaching secondary Language Arts, Atwell outlines the value of writing memoirs with her students. Her idea for creating writing territories really jumped out at me at this time as well, and I was anxious to combine the territories strategy along with a memoir assignment in order to get my students involved in some personal writing.

Finally, in having my students keep daily journals, it has become clear to me that every student has a story to tell. From Chelsea describing her tenuous relation with her alcoholic mother to David describing the first time he made a three-pointer in a basketball game, they were always anxious to write their own stories in their journals. I truly believe that writing can be an invaluable tool in helping our students discover their own identities and personalities, and I wanted to provide another opportunity for that to be developed in the classroom. A memoir writing assignment would help me to achieve that goal as well.

Time Frame

Day 1: After finishing the book *Night*, my students and I discuss what we thought a memoir might be. (This takes some work because many of my students are still struggling to figure out the difference between fiction and nonfiction.) We brainstorm a list of characteristics on the overhead. I then share examples from *In the Middle* by Nancie Atwell of a "good" memoir and a "bad" memoir. After those examples, we continue to add to our list of what a makes a memoir work. (It's important during this stage to read examples that aren't just sad and depressing so the students don't begin to think that "depressing" is a characteristic of a memoir.) Next, I take my students through my own "Writing Territories" that I had already shared with them (Atwell 120). I model how I could use that list to think of a topic for my own personal memoir. Students then look at their own "Writing Territories" to begin thinking about their own topics. I allow them to think about these ideas overnight.

Day 2: Now I take my students through a few different prewriting activities. This can vary from class to class. This could include creating a neighborhood memory map, formulating an emotional line graph of a specific period or event in life, and generating a list of memories from a predetermined event (adopted from an activity in *After the End* by Barry Lane). This experience allows students to narrow down a topic for their memoirs. After a topic has been narrowed down, we spend the rest of class working on our “down” draft. This is an idea I’ve adopted from *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott that really seems to connect with my students. They just work on getting their ideas down.

Day 3-???: The rest of the time is spent going through the various phases of the writing process for the students. I also throw in mini-lessons about the importance of a good lead and brainstorming for a good title. After the “down” draft, students work on their “up” drafts where they work on fixing up their writing. We also work on peer revision skills with this assignment, and I really enjoy listening to my students as they dialogue about their own experiences and writing. This eventually becomes a polished piece that students can share with the class, if they choose. I really knew I wanted to teach this lesson again when I heard my students share their writing with the class. We cried together as Mark read about the death of his mother, and we laughed together when Larissa recounted falling off her horse in the creek. This final “celebration of learning” at the end of our study of nonfiction made the entire project worthwhile.

What is memoir?

“The story of your life is not your life. It is your story.”

-- John Barth, *Where Three Roads Meet*

“A memoir is how one remembers one’s own life, while an autobiography is history, requiring research, dates, facts double-checked.”

-- Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest*

“Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense – childhood, for instance – or that was framed by unique events...memoir is a window into a life.”

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

“A memoir is a memory from an author’s life that is crafted into a piece of writing that can exist in different forms and genres.”

-- Amy Arnberg, “A Study of Memoir,” *Primary Voices K-6*

“The writer of a memoir must become the editor of his own life. He must cut and prune an unwieldy story and give it a narrative shape.”

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

“The writer of any first-person work must decide two obvious questions: what to put in and what to leave out.”

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-- Annie Dillard, in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser

“The memoir, while sharing with autobiography the notion of audience, differs from it in at least one significant way: It is not necessarily concerned with the chronology of things nor does it have to move from date to date. Rather it might be concerned with themes that recur within a chronology, such as a memoir about birthdays throughout one person’s life. Or it might be concerned with a place, or another person, or any subject chosen by the writer.”

-- Susan Carol Hauser, *You Can Write a Memoir*

Why Memoir?

“This lesson [memoir writing] is cited by more than half my students, at the end of the fall trimester each November, as one that changes them as writers.”

-- Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle*

“We read, as someone has said, to know that we are not alone, and the revelations of personal writing can reduce the loneliness of our increasingly fragmented world. . . I think that students experience a similar pleasure in personal writing. Asking them to draw upon their own lives allows students to see themselves in conscious ways, to enjoying knowing *that* they know. That visibility enables students to claim their own lives and become protagonists in their own stories. Certainly pleasure lies there.”

-- Anne Ruggles Gere, “Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing,” *College Composition and Communication*

“We write to taste life twice, in the moment, and in introspection.”

--Anaïs Nin, quoted in *After the End*, Barry Lane

Why Writing Territories and Topic Choice?

“These [writing territories] include subjects I’ve written about or might like to, genres I’ve written in or would like to try, and audiences for whom I write or would like to. The list of territories represents my self-portrait as a writer. Because I use it to model for kids to learn from, I try to make it personal, specific, diverse, and unpretentious: ideas of mine that might generate ideas of theirs.”

--Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle*

“Students add to their lists of writing territories throughout the school year, both independently, when an idea occurs to them that they might want to work with some day, and in response to prompts from me.”

--Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle*

“Writers who discover their own topics write with voice and commitment. It is these qualities that draw us to the writing and make us care what the writer has to say.”

-- Vicki Spandel, *The 9 Rights of Every Writer*

“My list gives me a window on who I am as a writer, person, woman, teacher, learner, mother, wife, and daughter. It also gives me a place to go when I’m trying to figure out what I’m going to write about next. It’s my ideas bank. It’s my big prompt, to remind myself, ‘Oh, yeah, I wanted to do that as a writer.’ And when I have an idea, and I know I’ll lose it if I don’t write it down, this is where I capture it.”

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--Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle*

“What we know best is ourselves, our families, the most vivid memories, places, times, smells, and sounds of childhood. I am comfortable writing about my mother playing chicken with a truck driver in Montana because she did not want her new Pontiac sprayed with gravel. I am an authority on that story because I was there.”

-- Vicki Spandel, *The 9 Rights of Every Writer*

Why the Emotional Line Graph?

“A graph is a simple table aimed at showing the progress of a character or characters in a particular area. All stories are about people changing. If we graph the line of a character through the story we see a pattern of change.”

--Barry Lane, *After the End*

“Graphing helps us to focus our interest to a particular issue and to see the shape of a story by the terms of that issue.”

-- Barry Lane, *After the End*

Memoirs to Read

Angela's Ashes, Frank McCourt

Night, Elie Wiesel

Farewell to Manzanar, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing, Maya

Angelou

The Summer of the Great-Grandmother, Madeleine L'Engle

My Life In Dog Years, Gary Paulsen

Bad Boy, Walter Dean Myers

Through My Eyes, Ruby Bridges

The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston

Knots in My Yo-Yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid, Jerry Spinelli

Hole in My Life, Jack Gantos

Dangerous Minds and *The Girls in the Back of the Class*, LouAnne Johnson

When I Was Puerto Rican, Esmerelda Santiago

Freewriting: How do you as a writer come up with topics for various pieces of writing? How do your students (real or imagined) determine topic choices for their writing? What do you do with reluctant writers who struggle to find topics? How much choice do you involve in your classroom when it comes to topic and genre?

My Writing Territories

Topic:

Genre:

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Audience:

My Writing Territories

Topic:

Genre:

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Discussion of Memoir

A Month in Paris with Christa

by Kimberly Witt

Christa and I were good friends for a long time. We met in college during French class, and we formed an immediate bond. We even went to Paris together when we were 19. It was an unforgettable experience.

When we were in Paris, we visited Père-Lachaise Cemetery one afternoon. The weather was beautiful. We pretended we were sisters as we looked at the different grave sites. Imagining we were descendants of the great French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix, we made up names for ourselves – Harmony and Melody Delacroix. It's cheesy, I know, but it was who we were.

That was an incredible month, and we became even better friends than we were to begin with. We had many adventures together, and even though we've gone through some rough patches, we're still friends today.

Emotional Line Graph: This is a revision tool. Carefully read through your partner's writing. Think about any emotional changes that happen throughout the course of the writing. Using the provided descriptors below, make a line graph that charts the emotional progress of your partner's writing. Be sure to focus on only what is written and described; do not infer emotional change. If no emotional changes seem to occur, make that clear on the graph as well.

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Very Happy

Happy

Sad

Devastation

Freewriting: Look carefully at the revision chart you have created. What kinds of emotional changes take place (or don't take place) in this memoir? Why doesn't "A Month in Paris with Christa" work as an effective memoir? Try to be as specific as possible. How can you turn these negatives into positives? In other words, what makes a GOOD memoir?

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Very Happy

Happy

Sad

Devastation

Freewriting: Carefully examine the emotional line graph created for you by your partner. What does it reveal about your writing? Does it show any areas that may be a good focus for revision? What kinds of details could be inserted into your moments of change, if any? Can you think of other areas that could be graphed besides emotion that would give you insight into your writing?

Memoirs

“Memoir is how writers look for the past and make sense of it. We figure out who we are, who we have become, and what it means to us and to the lives of others: a memoir puts the events of a life in perspective for the writer *and* for those who read it. . . . Memoir recognizes and explores moments on the way to growing up and becoming oneself, the good moments and the bad ones. . . . Memoir celebrates people and places no one else has ever heard of. And memoir allows us to discover and tell our own truths as writers.” --Nancie Atwell, *In the Middle*

Step One: Draft – Focus on getting ideas on your paper. Don’t worry about crafting a lead. Don’t fix errors as you go. Just write! Remember that part of the goal of writing a memoir is to make sense of the past, to tell us something about life through the story of YOUR life. Anne Lamott writes in *Bird by Bird*, “Almost all good writing starts with

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terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something – anything – down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft – you just get it down.”

Step Two: *Revise* – This is the time to go back through. Read your paper out loud. Think about what works and what doesn’t work. Don’t be afraid to cut your own words. Sometimes it takes pages of “crappy” writing to get to what we’re really trying to say. Focus on your VOICE. Make sure it is clear that this is your writing – it should sound like you. Have you exploded some moments, made your story come alive for the reader? If not, now is the time to make those changes. Invite your reader into your memory. According to Anne Lamott, “The second draft is the up draft – you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately.”

Step Three: *Confer* – Now that you have a version of your paper that you’re pleased with, it’s time to conference. We will do some in-class writing groups where you can share your writing and bounce ideas off of one another. The key to this step is that you listen to your peers and use their suggestions to make your memoir even stronger.

Step Four: *Polish* – Read through your paper again. Work on making smooth sentences and transitions while organizing your writing. This is also the time to check for grammatical errors. Did you use the proper form of words (their, there, they’re)? Did you punctuate compound sentences correctly? Did you stay in the same tense throughout? Did you always write in the first person? This, according to Anne Lamott, is the “dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it’s loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.”

Step Five: *Publish* – We will be going to the lab to type beautiful final copies of your memoir. It’s easy to type it, turn it in, and be done with it. However, I urge you to read through your typed copy one final time. I make typos all the time. (Some of you take great pleasure in pointing this out to me.) Reading through carefully will catch many of those little careless errors we’re all guilty of making. Those of you who are comfortable will have the opportunity to share your memoirs with the class. A celebration of writing!

Student Excerpts – The Lead

“I think every little girl dreams about having the perfect little sister. A sister who is just like her in every way. A sister whom she can share jokes and laugh together with. A sister she can tell her secrets to. A sister who can be her best friend. I’ve always wanted a sister. So, naturally I was ecstatic when my mother announced that she was having a baby girl. I spent hours daydreaming about all the things my new sister and I would do together. I imagined we would be exactly alike. But, as my sister grew up, I realized we were complete opposites.”

-A.M.

“Like most 13-year-olds, death was an abstract concept that could never happen to those close to me. Death conjured up pictures of people in black suits and dresses crying, shielded from the gloomy rain all around them by black umbrellas. Never does any picture or movie display the stages of grief that those left behind experience. Also, when death is displayed in movies or pictures, it could just be swept under the rug and never thought about again. Never again can I be “sad” and just move on like nothing happened. Never again can I just feel pity for those who lost someone in their family.”

-M.W.

“This is a story of ignorance. Not the sort of ignorance you’d see in people watching MTV and not stopping to realize they haven’t done anything with their lives, but a different breed of ignorance that leads people to bake cookies for Santa Claus. It’s the innocent kind of ignorance you’d only see in children and people who really *don’t* know any better.”

-R.S.

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Suggested Extensions/Mini-Lessons

- The importance of a good lead
- Choosing the right title
- Exploding a Moment (Lane)
- Shrinking a Century (Lane)
- Thoughtshots (Lane)
- Snapshots (Lane)
- Crafting effective dialogue
- Genre – creative nonfiction
- Weaving context into story
- Purpose for writing
- Creation of setting
- Point of view

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