

The Memoir Essay

What is a memoir?

Writers look for the past and make sense of it. Writers figure out who they are, who they have become, and what it means to them and to the lives of others. A memoir puts the events of a life in perspective for the writer and for those who read it. It is a way to explain to others the events of our lives — our choices, perspectives, decisions, and responses.

Assignment

Choose a memory that you would like to explore. This memory must have affected you, your life, or your personality. The memory may also have changed the way you viewed something or someone. **Overall, this memory must have meaning in your life.** Then, **explore that memory**, expressing and reflecting on the meaningfulness of that experience in a written essay. You may choose to tell the story as if it were happening now, or in past tense, but however you choose to tell it, make sure you include sensory detail. In general, show, don't tell. And tell it as if you were telling it to another student who you just met — who may or may not be interested — and who you want to realize how important this is to you: **It matters.**



Expression and Reflection

- Make sure you include both **expression** (the story itself), and **reflection** (the lesson/moral/meaning of the story). **Reflection helps readers find personal connections to your story** — you can use this section to answer the eternal question that haunts writing: “so what?”

Details in your memoir

- All writing needs **details**. The kinds of details you need are determined by the type of writing, which is in turn determined by your purpose, audience, and topic. **A memoir is meant to bring a story alive in the reader's mind**, so the details a memoir needs are the same as you will find in fiction.
- **Characters** come more alive when we see them do things, not just hear that they did something; when you quote dialogue instead of just telling us what the conversation was about; when we see images of them instead of just hearing their names.
- **Setting** can be made more real for the reader by using **imagery** (appealing to any of the five senses), by describing the physical location, the social world, the time of your life that is involved, the time in history that is involved. Show us objects, sights, sounds, aromas, textures, and flavors that are part of this world.

- 500-750 words typed, MLA format.
- This is a short essay, so you need a narrow focus. Write about one, specific thing that has been important to you: a person, day, idea, belief, experience, event, day, moment, action, relationship, work of art, or another specific thing.

In fiction, the main character is usually more interesting if he or she changes during the story. The same is true in a personal narrative. Choose a focal point which was also a turning point: how did this thing help make you who you are now? What were you like before, and after this thing entered your life? Personal topics are stories you feel comfortable telling in public, do NOT write a story for this class that leaves you feeling highly embarrassed, panicked, scared, or so on.

Tell a story? Write a narrative? Learned a lesson? No problemo! You know exactly what you're going to write about because the image of the little girl remains with you today.

You think back to last year when the basketball season did not turn out as you'd hoped. You had just returned from a collarbone injury. You were excited to get back out on the court after a three-month break (no, pun intended). It was practice, and in your excitement, you skillfully dribbled the ball up and down the court, better than ever. But, an errant basketball made its way under your left foot, and you felt a sharp pain shoot through your leg. Lying on the ground, unable to move, you saw your leg hanging limply, and realized that it was broken.

You were rushed to the hospital and surgery was performed. You were sorely disappointed, and as you adjusted to homecoming, a wheelchair, and restrictions, you became increasingly discouraged. More and more, you asked why this had to happen to you. Two heartbreaking injuries! And, no more basketball for another three months! Being confined to a wheelchair was overwhelming. Your usual cheerful demeanor was replaced with an ever-present scowl.

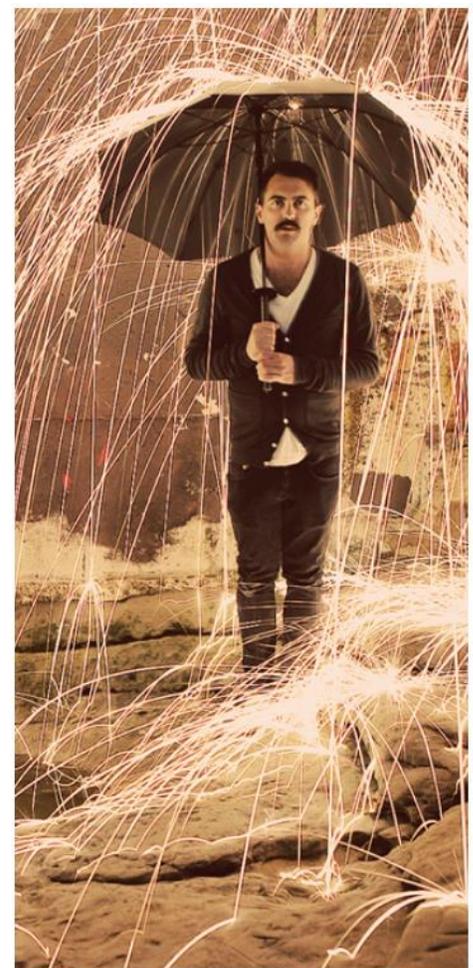
Until the day of your three-week checkup. Until you saw the little girl standing in front of you. Until you saw her bald head, her skinny arms and legs, and her pale face. It was the smile you'll never forget, for there was this tiny girl who, despite her cancer, was able to give you the biggest smile in greeting. That's when you learned that things could have been a lot worse. That's when you decided that it's important to remain upbeat and positive, to earn your place on this earth. That's when you learned broken, didn't mean done.

This essay will come easily for you, you think. You'll be the narrator of this real experience by describing the events through vivid descriptions and details. Your teacher offers you great advice. Make your reader be right on the court with you: PANT PANT. Sitting beside you in the ambulance: BUUUUJUMMPYEEEE. Pushing you in your wheelchair: UGH! Let the reader take in the hospital smells: YUCKY. Feel the pain in your leg: OUCH. See the little girl: SHOCKING.

You'll use chronological order to tell your story, though you might inject comments of how you feel about what's happening as you go. Be sure to think about the pace of your story. Indicate fast action as you dribble down the court and are whisked away in the ambulance with short sentences. Then, slow the story down just as you were slowed down by the cast, using longer sentences to linger on this action.

Build suspense through clear details about your disappointment. You might ask *Why did this have to happen to me?* several times within the essay. This will create that feeling-sorry-for-yourself impression you're trying to develop. Describe the features of the little girl to shock and sadden your reader just as you were. Then, at the story's end, reflect on the lesson you learned through the experience, how you grew as an individual, and how this experience impacts your life today.

Click here for [500 memoir prompts](#) to get your creative juices flowing.



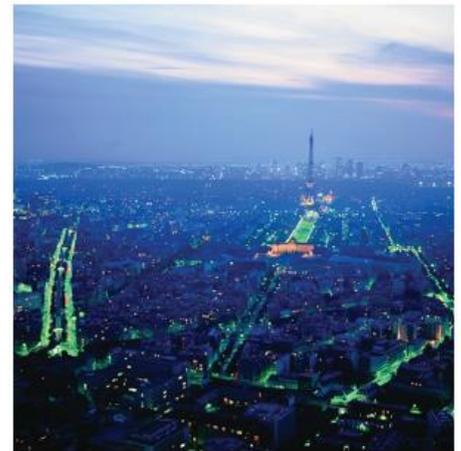


Starters

- An experience that challenged me was...
- One of my biggest successes was...
- One of my biggest failures was...
- I realized that I had a talent for...
- The worst thing that has ever happened to me is...

- One of the happiest times in my life was...
- One of the saddest times in my life was...
- I came to the important realization that...
- I realized that I was no longer a child when...

- My favorite place is...
- When I was little, I used to...
- I was proud of myself for...
- I was ashamed of myself for...



- I spent time with someone who was much different from me when...
- A time when I decided to do something differently from everyone else around me was...
- The person who has had the biggest influence on me is...



Characteristics of a Memoir

- Focuses on a brief period of time or series of related events
- Narrative structure, including many of the usual elements of storytelling such as setting, plot development, imagery, conflict, characterization, foreshadowing and flashback, and irony and symbolism
- The writer's contemplation of the meaning of these events in retrospect
- A fictional quality even though the story is true
- Higher emotional level
- More personal reconstruction of the events and their impact
- Therapeutic experience for the memoirist