



Section Two: Analyses of Specific Genres

Making Memoir

Eileen Wiedbrauk

Memoir writing floats around our lives, settling itself in different places, taking on different names and shapes, letting us glance at it, experience it and engage in making it—sometimes without even recognizing that what we’re making is memoir. Some of the more obvious places to find memoirs are, well, in books labeled *memoir*, or in literary magazines that label stories as *creative non-fiction*.

Other places in real life to find memoir or memoir-based texts:

- Humor columns in magazines or newspapers
- Political opinion pieces
- Facebook note phenomena “25 Things”
- Personal blogs
- Dating website profiles
- Stand up comic’s routines

Despite having undoubtedly come in contact with some of the above aspects of memoir at some point in our lives, most of us freeze when we are asked to create memoir in a classroom writing setting. *Whadaya mean ‘memoir?’ Nothing interesting enough’s happened to me to*



Eileen Wiedbrauk is the editor of creative non-fiction for *Third Coast Magazine*. She likes to write unclassifiable little stories that people tend to classify as fantasy, science fiction, or magical realism. Occasionally, she writes about real life, books, cats, coffee and the antics of her idiot neighbors—most of which ends up on her blog,

SpeakCoffeeToMe.blogspot.com.

Analyses of Specific Genres

make a memoir. But really, an assignment called memoir—often titled the less scary but still ambiguous “personal narrative”—is just an essay about the subject matter we know the best: ourselves.

Describe an experience that had meaning or significance to you ...

Focus on a person, place, object or event that is important to you and tell me a story from your life ...

Choose a significant moment from your life that took place in ten minutes or less; try to choose a moment that was not obviously life-altering...

All of these statements have made their way into descriptions of memoir assignments at one time or another.¹ Many—okay, I’d say most—of the wordings lend themselves to writing about *one thing* that *happened*. Since the implication is that there has to be *action*, we start thinking about events. Writing about an event seems like a good idea because we’re guaranteed that something will have changed by the end of the story, that there will be action—and our instructors want essays with action. And describing a single event seems like a good notion for a paper that’s going to be somewhere between three and seven pages (length varies by instructor). So keep it simple, right? But what constitutes an event?

When we boil our lives down to update emails or phone calls back home—better yet, a phone call to the grandparents—we tend to highlight the big stuff.

I graduated this weekend. The ceremony was really boring but I decorated my cap to look really cool...My spring break trip was awesome. First the cruise ship stopped at St. Johns, then Key Largo, and then we went parasailing.

But “events” don’t necessarily have to be something momentous, or something you’d even bother to tell your grandmother, they can be completely mundane. Opening my toothpaste cap this morning was an event. I don’t think anything was directly connected to it, but it could have been the event that made me late and set off the worst day ever. Going to the Animal Rescue the day I got my kitten is an event. Not a major one—a day slightly out of the ordinary, yes, but certainly not the kind of essay with a long list of events/steps to narrate.

→ What does this mean anyway? **WORD: Narrate (v).** In its most basic form **narrating** is describing, building the world in words ... narrating is the difference between telling and storytelling.

It’s also not the kind of writing that lends itself to a cheesy summation in the final line such as *it was one of the most wonderful days of my life*, or *I’ve learned so much from my kitten, my kitten and I have learned so*

much from each other... The truth is that I've only had her for two weeks and the most I've learned is to watch where I step (she is constantly underfoot) and she's learned that meowing long enough will produce someone with opposable thumbs to pour more kibble. And the *truth* is much more interesting. But the even bigger, brighter truth is that our instructor isn't looking for a neat, clean, tidy "end line," she's looking for a thoughtful narrative. →

There I go again using that term.

WORD: **Narrative (n)**. A **narrative** is not a mere retelling of facts. A narrative is a story. It is narrated (see above) by a narrator (you).

It's a story about you.

It's you as a story.

It's a story like "hey, tell me a story about yourself" ... except more **thoughtful**.

...and by **thoughtful** I mean it's a story with a **focus**.

Part One: Thesis vs. Focus

Here's where the notion of a memoir as a personal essay gets tricky: **it doesn't need a thesis → it needs a focus.**



Real World Example: In Geeta Kothari's "If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?" Kothari focuses on food to tell her narrative. In fact, each of her numbered sections are about food in one way or another—and she uses these anecdotes, this string of mini-stories, to describe her social awkwardness as an immigrant to the United States and her false sense of security as a visitor to her parents' native India. Though Kothari never gives us a thesis statement that says *this is an essay on food, family and culture, this essay will demonstrate the difficulties of living in a non-native culture as proven through the differing uses of food*, we fully understand that she has shown us exactly that by narrowing her focus to food.

She opens the entire memoir by leaping directly in to one of her food mini-stories:

The first time my mother and I open a can of tuna, I am nine years old. We stand in the doorway of the kitchen, in semi-darkness, the can tilted toward daylight. I want to eat what the kids at school eat: bologna, hot dogs, salami—foods my parents find repugnant because they contain pork and meat by-products, crushed bone and hair glued together by chemicals and fat. Although she has never been able to tolerate the smell of fish, my mother buys the tuna, hoping to satisfy my longing for American food.

Analyses of Specific Genres

And then, in a one line paragraph, Kothari hits us with the main conflict of her entire piece, the single fact that gives her memoir tension *and* focus:

Indians, of course, do not eat such things.

(So) if we need a focus, not a thesis, writing down the step-by-step actions of a single event would be a bad idea. Example of a bad idea:

< ---- STEP BY STEP ACTION----> →

(Action 1) I put on my gown and cap. (Action 2) Outside the auditorium my friends and I took lots of pictures. (Action 3) Then my parents had to go inside to get seats while I lined up with the rest of the graduating seniors. (Action 4) We processed into the auditorium. (Add subjective detail) It was really hot inside. (Action 5) The ceremony took over an hour but I can't remember anything the speaker said, I was too anxious to walk across the stage and get my diploma.

< ---- I THINK THIS ONE'S OUT? ---- >

This example is packed with step-by-step telling (it would be step-by-step **narration** if the author described more physical and emotional details and explained their importance in the context of the scene), but there is no **theme** or **focus** ... unless this turns into a memoir about someone with memory loss problems, then it's a little better.

Consider: What makes facts boring and stories interesting?

(So) if we can't just jot down the events in chronological order, how are we ever going to come up with 3–7 pages to turn in? I suggest **starting with detail**, and allowing ourselves the chance to have detail lead us to everything else we need.

[Take freewrite time in class to jot down things you remember in detail]

Let's say I'm writing about a time when I was sixteen and I get to a point where I write: *We got into the car.*

What about that sentence is narration? Yes, it is a listing, in written form—but is it narration? Does it give the reader any insight into my life at the time? Does it let the reader see what I saw? Does it tell show the feelings produced by getting into the car?

A specific, useful detail will paint a picture for the reader. It means that if you put the reader down in the time and place of the actual story, they wouldn't be disoriented. So what if we broke it down to give the reader more detail...

Part Two: Detail

Let's say we start by thinking of an event, and the start of that event involves getting into a car and driving someplace. We write *We got into the car.* Yes, that's what we did, but what a boring sentence! Why is it boring? There's absolutely nothing interesting being told to the reader. There's no detail. To be more interesting we need to elaborate.

Detail Elaboration:

We got into the car.

The car we got into was my first car.
→ **unhelpful detail**

the maroon car → generic detail

a maroon 1986 Dodge Dynasty → **specific** = yes
→ **useful** = not really

The detail about the year is good...but it's relative to something we don't yet know. The meaning of a "1986 Dodge Dynasty" changes drastically if I received the car in 1986 or in 2006... I'll need to then give my reader a reference point in the text if I want this to have any useful meaning

Unhelpful detail: The car is described, "my first" provides more detail than simply "the". However, that description means something to the writer and NOTHING to the reader. How would anyone else know what my first car looked like if I didn't tell them?

Generic detail: Well, at least color is something the reader can visualize, but it's still not much to help the reader see it—we can do better

My first car was a 1986 maroon Dodge Dynasty that had rolled off the production line back when I was still in diapers. I never did call it the Dynasty, although it was a huge boxy, beast that could easily be compared to an ancient empire, I called it the 'ynasty because the D had fallen off the driver's side decal. I'd been taught in driver's ed. to adjust the seat to see over the wheel, reach the peddles and feel comfortable, but there was no doing that in the 'ynasty. It had one long, maroon bench seat that didn't slide, didn't tilt, just sported a depression worn in by other drivers over the past fourteen years. Instead of adjusting the seat, I had to ask my grandmother for a pillow to prop behind my back to drive it home. My grandfather gave it to me free and clear once he realized I was about to turn sixteen. He was the kind of man who always had extra cars sitting around. The kind of man who thought if he held onto enough stuff he could buy, sell or trade his way to the better deal.

→ detail level = happiness

Woah! now that's detailed! I can see it, as a reader, I really know what I'm dealing with!

But we're not done yet.

I've written down a lot of specific, descriptive details here, but to what end? What's the point? All of the things I've written are good details – but just because something really was a certain way doesn't mean it's important to my memoir.

Items that are important to my memoir should somehow relate to my focus. Is the bit about my grandfather being *the kind of man who always had extra cars lying around* a **useful detail** or a **digression** that would lead the reader away from the main focus of my essay? That depends on what my focus is.

Analyses of Specific Genres

In the description of my car I have two things going on:

- (1) the physical description of the car
- (2) my grandfather giving me the car.

Which is important?

This is where editing the first draft comes into play. I can walk away from this description and come back to it in a few days or a few hours and after rereading I can ask myself what it is that I want to develop this memoir into. Remember, we're letting the details lead us into something bigger. I can look at all the details I have lined up and decide if the memoir going to be about:

- (1) me and the cars I've owned and driven, perhaps the road trips that the car(s) have seen me through?
- (2) myself, my car and my grandfather?

If my focus is my first car, then the detail about my grandfather's habits becomes an unnecessary digression that leads the reader away from the focus of the **story** narrative: experiences with my car. A focus should be just that: something to focus the reader's attention on.

But what if this isn't an essay focused on my first car? What if this is really an essay about my relationship with my grandfather as focused through cars?

Describing a relationship as focused through cars is extremely impersonal, mechanical even. Consider the difference between telling a story through cars and telling a story through puppies we raised together or baseball games that he coached me through. Except, in this case, using something impersonal is perfect. He never raised puppies or coached baseball. He wasn't that kind of man. And he and I were never close. I think we stumbled on something brilliant here.

Idea in hand, I start jotting down notes, thinking of all the car stories I've heard about my grandfather (there are lots):

- Taxi service he owned
- Tour bus company...the only successful business he ever had
- Car he gave to me

CONSIDER: What am I willing to share about my personal life? This piece is going to be read by the instructor and most likely by other students if there is a peer review session

Wiedbrauk / Making Memoir

- That the sheriff issued him a driver's license when he was 14 because they knew he and his twin brother were driving without one and wanted at least one of them to be legal
- The year that he drove a riding mower because he'd had his license suspended for putting his car up on the rail of the 9th Street Bridge on the way home from the bar ↓

CONSIDER: Am I revealing something that is going to make me uncomfortable? In my case, the whole town knew—both about the riding mower and the drinking problem even if they didn't call it that—and now my family jokes about the stupidity of it so I'm okay with including it in my memoir.

CONSIDER: Names as details. Specific names tell the reader more than you might think. Consider if I had just said "bridge" – we wouldn't know if it was a covered bridge or the Golden Gate Bridge. Using specific given names instead of generic names has an amazing way of *placing* the reader even if the reader has never been there before.

Part Three: Order

↓
So what about the order? Do I make the events chronological and start with my grandfather at fourteen? Or do I relay the anecdotes to the reader in the same order they were relayed to me by my family?

In this case, I think the second option suits my purpose better (check out the lists on the next page to see how order changes the feel of a story). I'll start with my car, then why he had cars lying about

- they were old taxis.
- taxi business to charter bus business
- then other stories anecdotes
- car stories
- then...?

My plan seems to have a good start, but now it's getting ambiguous. Where do I go from here?

↓
Perhaps I'll write each story separately and then make sense of where they go after they're written.

↓
I need to keep in mind what will grab an audience's attention.

-
- exotic detail
 - shock value (scandal)
 - witty phrasing (comedy)
 - tugging on heartstrings (puppies)

Analyses of Specific Genres

There are a couple different ways to organize these small anecdotes into one long memoir. I've jotted down some notes to compare how two different orders affect the overall feeling of my memoir.

Chronological Order

Start with first event that happened

- At 14, my grandfather and his twin roared down the country roads without a license. The Sheriff knew it was going on and came to talk to their father; might as well make one of them legal.
- He'd lose that license but he'd never give up driving.
- 20 years later he put the car up on the side of a bridge while drunk
- Another 20 years pass and thanks to the AA he's not losing his license anymore, he's driving taxi in his own business
- It turns into a bus business
- He still has extra cars in his yard because they're left over taxis when he realized I'm about to turn 16 and gives me one.
- The car is a piece. I describe in detail why it's so crappy.

Flowing from one detail to another

Start with descriptive, personal detail

- My grandfather had a gritty, phlegmy laugh. "You're turning 16, eh?" He laughed. "Want a car?"
- I was floored. Of course I did!
- Describe car...finish with: the car was left over from the taxi business
- The taxi started because there wasn't one in Alpena at the time. It turned into a bus and a courier service.
- Bridge incident.
- Riding lawn mower. He was gonna show them. They couldn't keep him from driving. And they couldn't. They didn't. No one ever did show him.

After reading my rough outline for a chronological order I'm not very satisfied. By this account I know *what happened* but they're just events. I don't get the chance to tell the events in a sequence that would make meaning. They're just events. They don't relate to each other, instead they're connected only by the person that lived them. There's no emotion. As a reader, there's nothing I can take away from it. I'm bored with this order and I'm the one telling the story! If I'm bored now there's no hope for my audience staying awake.

This order lets me link the events together as I see fit. The sequence (order) of events allows me to further develop certain details that would have been hard to do in a chronological version. It also allows me to withhold information until later to produce a dramatic finish.

Don't bore the reader!

The **purpose** of memoir is usually to entertain or instruct the **audience**, not to reiterate your vacation itinerary or the year-by-year account of my grandfather's life.

CONSIDER: A long series of "and then ...and then...next...then..." might bore the reader. Try to find ways of connecting that are *more* than just chronological.

CONSIDER: How can one detailed event connect to the next without "and then"?

CONSIDER: Which events need to be cut because they're too mundane?

But I still don't have an **introduction**.



Part Four: Writing the Introduction

I tend to see two methods to opening a memoir.

(1) A generic "ramping up" method

Ex: *Blueberry, Casper the friendly white car, Katerina, Phoenix, Sparkle and the Black Devil who leaked carbon-monoxide through the air conditioner. These are the names of all my cars.*³

The "ramping up" method tends to produce a thesis-like statement at the end of the paragraph:

The author builds up the reader with a generic list of items (car names) to give the reader a general sense that this will be about cars without actually touching on any of the specifics of the actual memoir.

They've taught me that no matter what's happened before, the next car will have its own adventure in store.

which is sad because we like specifics

Given this "ramping up" followed by a thesis-like statement, we can assume that this memoir would look like an extremely traditional essay and deliver the adventure(s) experienced in the narrator's car(s).

(2) The "diving right in" method

Often starts with:

ACTION → *My grandfather put the keys in my hand and I couldn't believe it: my own car.*

-OR-

SPECIFIC DESCRIPTION OF A PLACE/OBJECT/PERSON → *He had a course, gritty laugh that sounded like a combination of being an old man and a smoker. I'd never heard of him smoking, though he'd certainly spent enough time in the VFW bar to accumulate all the health problems of a smoker.*

This method reads more like a story than an essay.

Both methods work. They both get things started with detail. Since I want my memoir to be a story told in a series of anecdotes

→ **WORD: ANECDOTE (n.)**
a short account of a particular incident or event of an interesting or amusing nature, often biographical.

of which I am a main character, I'm going to go with the action driven second option of "diving right in" and completely ignore the "ramping up" before the thesis statement because I don't need or want a thesis statement; I want a focus.

Analyses of Specific Genres

Part Five: Trajectory



So we've got a memoir, but where is it going to go? The memoir itself—the document you made—that can go as far as you like, places are publishing memoirs all the time under the term “creative non-fiction.” However, that's not the only path for these skills and ideas, almost all of them can be used to your advantage when writing in other genres.

Specific, useful details are necessary in any form of writing that hopes to be clear and concise. Can you imagine writing a “for sale” ad about your car without using specific detail? Or a police report? A crime scene investigation? What if you just told your tattoo artist you wanted “a bird”? Would you get a fighting eagle or a cartoon canary? Using specific, helpful details is always important.

Deliberate order is equally important. We should consider (re)ordering everything we write because how it occurs to us isn't necessarily the clearest way of understanding. Sometimes, an alternative order is clearer than a chronological one. Since there's no cut and dry rule for order we will always have to develop a reasonable order for our thoughts every time we write.

Appreciating the audience may just be the biggest concept we can take away from writing memoir. →

Appreciating the audience means giving them specific details that they can wrap their minds around and concrete terms to sink their teeth in to. Appreciating the audience means constructing an order that fits the audience's need for clarity and understanding not our own. It means keeping them engaged and making them want to read more. It means dropping boring, redundant parts that don't add to the meaning or story. It means telling the story in a tone that makes them empathize with us or laugh with us. It means doing everything right to connect with someone else.



Such a big concept that it didn't get its own section; instead, it underscored every part of our memoir writing.

END NOTES

1. Assignments from real classes provided courtesy of Amy Newday, Amanda Stearns and Eileen Wiedbrauk.
2. Advanced Skills: This type of “retelling of step-by-step action” *could* be part of a good narrative. You could intentionally try to create a staccato rhythm because you want to make the reader sleepy-bored and then spring a BIG event on the reader that they didn't see coming. This would be a way of using rhythm and pacing to create “shock

value,” not unlike when a movie gets very tense and quite and then all of a sudden the camera cuts to a ringing phone and everyone in the audience jumps.

3. List of names and details graciously provided by Katheryn Dyll Nicely for this article. Mrs. Nicely has actually owned all those crazy cars.