

Elements of Memoir Writing

By

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Elements of Memoir Writing **by Maureen Murdock**

Memoir is not an autobiography but rather a selected aspect of a life. How you select that aspect is crucial to the success of your piece. You have to know – not necessarily right away, but at some point – what it is that you really want to write about, which in turn will tell you what to leave out. Being willing to leave things out is vital.

Memoir = Insight and Dramatic Tension

- **remembered event:** no event is too small. Give as many details about the event as possible. What happened (what were the facts), who was involved, what was the interaction (drama or tension); how did you feel, how did you react? Become aware of what sense you use to enter a memory. Put remembered event in a historical, cultural, or social context; what was going on in the family, in the world at the time?
- **universal idea:** there is a universality to memoirs. We have all experienced personal successes and joys as well as personal loss and grief; alienation; turning points; the longing for meaning, as well as the longing for our roots, home, love.
- **intimacy:** the hallmark of memoir is its intimacy with its audience. Imagine that you are telling your story to a friend. In memoir the writer speaks directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom.
- **conversational style:** language in memoir is conversational, everyday, direct. Use short, direct sentences. Feel free to use dialogue.
- **honesty and sincerity:** is the narrator authentic? When you are talking about yourself, you are talking about all of us to a certain degree. The struggle for emotional truth is central to memoir. The reader must trust that you have done a fair amount of introspection and that you're trying to give us your best understanding of the event. If you stay at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be smooth but will not awaken a sense of self-recognition.
- **humor:** learn to laugh at yourself; reveal your foibles; we all have them. The trick in memoir is to realize that you are not important, except insofar as your example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make the rest of us feel a little less lonely and freakish!

- **self-reflection:** the essence of memoir is the track of a person's thoughts struggling to achieve some understanding of a particular life event. It isn't necessary when you begin writing to know what you've learned from this event; just give yourself the opportunity to grapple with it. Dialogue with the reader about what you're trying to find out: "I wonder if..."
- What is the **purpose** in writing this memoir? Self-discovery, telling a story that must be told, understanding another, healing a relationship, healing yourself, finding a broader perspective, etc. Is there some mystery you wish to discover?
- **Character:** what do you want to know about the people you write about including yourself? In writing memoir, you begin to learn more about yourself and others.
- **Voice & Tense:** start with personal I (1st person narrative). Start in past tense. You are writing about the past in the present. The past deepens and gives authority to the present. The present by virtue of being invoked creates a depth of field that enables you to see the past.
- **Scene:** vignettes, episodes, slices of reality are the building blocks of memoir. The uninspired writer will *tell* the reader about a subject, place or personality, but the memoir writer will *show* that subject, place, or personality in action. A scene contains action; something happens. Dialogue constitutes action.
- **Theme:** mythic themes and examples of some memoirs:

Who am I as reader and writer?

Where am I Going? How have I become the reader and writer that I am? What metaphorical path have I taken? Think about describing the journey the process.