

Crafting A Narrative From Life

Teaching the Memoir

KAREN ULRICH

MANY YOUNG OR NEW WRITERS who wish to write from their own life experience confuse memoir writing with journal writing, not realizing that the scripting of a memoir (Fr. *memoire*) requires the passing of time. When describing recent experiences, inexperienced writers tend to prioritize passion and raw emotion over craft. Yet it is only when we have had time to reflect upon our experiences that we can recognize themes and plot; only when we have gained some distance from the experiences we write about that we can fully understand our characters' true nature. It is the passage of time that allows writers to create characters of depth and to see how the details of a story's setting might mirror a character's plight, but time also does something else; it helps us forget.

But wait! Your students might protest—if we're using character, setting, plot, and theme, and I have to make up dialogue, because who can remember what anyone said five or ten years ago, then aren't we just making stuff up? And in some sense, your students have a point. Memoir does require the writer to script a narrative that evolves from his protagonist's quest, just like fiction. Unlike fiction, however, memoir requires that the writer adhere to a contract with his audience—a commitment to tell the truth.

The truth. There's been a lot of discussion since the somewhat recent popularization of memoir about what one can and cannot consider true. When it comes to scripting memoir, I advise my students to be as honest as they possibly can—not to lie or make things up; to avoid constructing two-dimensional characters that evolve from the writer's opinions and judgments; and to try to illustrate the essence of the experience. One can interpret past experiences as one does dreams—the meaning lies in the interpretation, in what the writer has taken from the experience, in what he has observed or learned.

If your student is writing about an exchange that occurred with his mother when he was ten or fifteen, it's not important that he recall word-for-word exactly what she said. It's more relevant that he capture the setting, the situation, the characters, and the essence of the exchange—the mood, the physical interactions, the tone of voice and speech. If the writer can bring the reader into the story, make her feel as if she is at the

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But how can your students arrive at this truth if memory is so tricky? And what constitutes memory, after all? If five people were in the same room, witnessing and experiencing the same situation, after six years each person's recollection of that moment would be different. Into memory we bring our personal histories and knowledge, our biases, loves, skills, and fears.

How can your students best access the realities of their pasts?

I am a fan of lists. I often ask my students to make lists, beginning with memory triggers. Let's say you want your students to work on character development. After they have decided upon their subject, I would ask them to explore how their relationship with this person began, and how it evolved over time. You might even suggest a timeline. How did this individual affect the writer, how did she disappoint, inspire, influence, support, hurt, accept, reject, or inform? Were any secrets kept or were there any regrets? What character traits did your student adopt from this individual and of these traits, which were cherished and which were left behind? Ask your students to consider what their lives were like before these encounters, or how the relationship changed them over time. When writing about relationships, one should consider the qualities that this individual illuminated or enhanced—jealousy, compassion, determination, or rage. Was there a significant event that preceded the beginning of the relationship—a life-changing moment? Was the relationship balanced, or did one person contribute more than the other?

Once your students have taken the time to consider their character in relation to themselves, then it's time to take a few steps back. The key to employing objectivity when developing a character on the page is to practice the writer's remove and let go of all judgments; it's quite a literary offense to subject a reader to a writer's obsessive idealization or rage. If your student has chosen to write about a difficult relationship then she must be willing to accept responsibility for the possible wrongdoings or wrong choices that lead her to this relationship. Just as the memoir writer seeks to understand her own motivations, her history, and her patterns of behavior, she must strive to apply the same level of understanding to her character, no matter how horrible his or her deeds. Troubled individuals often have difficult pasts, and an insufficient attempt to understand this cause and effect will lead to flat characterization on the page. This is just one example of how the passage of time benefits memoir writing—it helps you let go of negative feelings and gain perspective on past events.

Now that your students have established distance, it's time to consider how one might show a character in a story so that he or she resembles no other and actually leaps off the page. This is another exercise that might begin with list making, before the student begins to incorporate character traits into his or her story. While you don't want to encourage your students to lump all of their character descriptions into one paragraph, or onto a single page (it's best to introduce these characteristics as they become relevant to the story, a slow bleed of information), it's beneficial to have these descriptions on hand so that the student might consider or insert them as they become pertinent.

You might begin with a list of questions for the student to answer regarding his character, such as:

- How would you physically describe your character (including dress, physical traits, gestures and facial expressions, and tics)?
- How did she physically fill a room and interact with others?
- What was his tone of voice and inflections when speaking, and did he use certain phrases?
- What were his political views, his heritage, his culture, relationships, and views on life?
- Did she have a tragic flaw, such as a history of making wrong choices or trouble perceiving reality?
- What were her fears, habits, favorites, hates and loves, secrets, faults, and expectations?
- Did he have any contradictions, such as a profound ability to help others while neglecting himself?
- How did her behavior when alone differ from when she was with others?
- Did this character serve in any way as the student's antagonist—one who opposed or obstructed his or her goals?


With this information in hand, the student will be able to more clearly recall how each character reacted in a specific moment or situation. The writer should take care, however, never to overwhelm the reader with such details, only providing information that furthers the narrative or seems relevant.

Once the character's traits are identified, the student should then consider her character's objective—what is he/she after, what does he/she hope to achieve? Just as in a short story or novel, the memoir must lead the reader on a journey with a beginning, middle, and end; though this isn't to imply that it must be chronologically written—you might encourage your students to incorporate flash-forwards and flashbacks. Throughout this journey, it is imperative that the protagonist (and perhaps other minor characters) encounters obstacles along the way (things that might prevent her from realizing her quest). Obstacles might take the form of specific individuals, society, religion, nature, or even the character's own self or past. While traversing this journey, the stu-

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dent should consider how his character changes, and if she fails to change, then the writer should know why.

Discuss with your students the various ways in which this information might be revealed—through description, dialogue, action, and by exposing the character's thoughts. The student might choose to describe how a character observes or reacts to a situation or scene, which can potentially reveal more than that character would normally allow.

While I have employed all of these methods when teaching memoir, I have also encouraged students to use them when composing personal essays, fiction, or poems. One doesn't have to be scripting a memoir to consider character development or the cause and effect of events within relationships. A list created from one of these exercises might become a poem; a real life situation or character might inspire a short story; or a research paper on a historical figure might be brought to life when the student is taught and encouraged to consider any of these techniques. 

Finding Your Story

Helping Students Begin Their Memoir

KAREN ULRICH

MOST MEMOIRS, unlike most autobiographies, cover a slice of the author's life, and not the entirety of his or her existence. This means that scripting one's memoir begins with making a choice about what particular point in time the writer wishes to explore. For younger students, this might seem daunting if they have only been around for ten or twelve years, but you can begin with a classroom exercise to help your students (regardless of their age) select a topic that seems worth writing about.

How should one begin? Begin by making lists. Provide your students with a list of suggestions that will help trigger a collection of memories. Such a list might include:

- Turning points—at what moments did your life change?
- Emotional extremes—when did your feelings reach great highs and/or lows?
- Regrets—what decisions do you wish you could undo?
- Photographs—explore the moments behind your favorite images.
- Individuals—which people have had the greatest impact on your life?
- Goals—achieved or failed.
- Vivid memories—what life events are most clear to you?

As a teacher, you might consider discussing your own life with your students, and the specific events, individuals, and decisions that led you to become the person you are today. Chances are there are universal terms to describe these experiences, words or phrases that can be used to inspire your students' memories.

Once your students have completed their lists, have them choose one item for which they can script a timeline. If they've chosen an individual, then they might outline the relationship from beginning to end—how they met, what the student's life was like before the encounter, how this person helped them change, and what valuable lessons they learned. If it's a turning point or an emotional extreme, have them consid-

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er things like setting, characters involved, actions, feelings, and cause and effect. The timeline can begin at any point. The more the student contemplates the experience, the more he or she will recall and fill in the gaps, whether these details precede the event that began the timeline or follow it.

With the timeline complete, the student now has a skeletal frame upon which she or he can hang her/his story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Perhaps, for the sake of further development, the student can now examine each stop on the timeline beneath a writer's microscope. This might mean creating an additional list for each item on the original timeline; or you might assign a short exercise that requires the student to write in depth and detail about each individual, moment, feeling, decision, and place. These memory builders (perhaps written on note cards) can then be configured into some kind structure and strung together to create a memoir chapter or story. Using such small steps to lead your class from list-making to story telling will make writers out of all your students, before they've had the chance to realize what they've done. 