

College Writing
One ENG 101

Essay Assignment
#2 The Memoir

We write memoirs to explore our past --- about shopping for a party dress with Grandma, or driving a car for the first time, or breaking up with our first love. Memoirs focus on events and people and places that are important to us. We usually have two goals when we write a memoir: **to capture an important moment and to convey something about its significance for us** (NFG).

Recall a time when a person or event taught you something about yourself, something that you could not fully understand until now. Write a memoir that describes the person and/or narrates the event. Include vivid details that would allow your reader to experience your memoir fully. **Be sure to make clear what significance the person or event had on your life** (NFG).

Writing about yourself sounds simple. But it could also be the hardest essay that you will write this semester. Unlike more formal genres of the essay where the format is already given, in a memoir you must develop your own structure. Unlike academic essays where a formal voice is appropriate, here you must find a voice that suits your personality and your story. Here are some guidelines for those who aren't sure what topic to choose, or what structure to give their essay:

Choosing a Topic for your Memoir:

This is a short essay (at least 2 ½ -3 pages), so you need a narrow focus. Write **about one, specific thing that has been important to you such as:** a person, place, experience, event, day, moment, relationship etc. Review the examples we covered in our class text (NFG), in particular, "Us and Them", "All Over but the Shoutin" and "Black Men and Public Space". After finding a focal point that interests you, find a use of language — either written or spoken or both — that is involved in the story.

Remember that in fiction, the main character is usually more interesting if they change 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?

Audience:

Personal topics are stories you feel comfortable telling in public. Private topics are stories you do not want to share in public. **Do not write a story for this class that leaves you feeling highly embarrassed, panicked, scared, or so on. You may need or want to write about that topic, but not in public.**

Structuring the Memoir:

Just as a research paper has an introduction, body, and conclusion, you might find it easiest to have a "before" section (introduction), a detailed story, and an "after" section that reflects on the story and concludes. You are free, however, to jump right into the story and explain the background later; to use flashbacks and flash forwards and to use other techniques of fiction. In regard to organization, consider the following:

You can organize by time: what happened in chronological order.

You can organize by space: a story about each different room in a house, for instance.

You can organize other ways: a list of the meanings a thing had for me, with a story about each one, for instance.

Finally, make sure you include both narration (the story itself), and reflection (your thoughts and feelings about the story). Reflection helps readers find personal connections to your story — you can use this section to answer the eternal question that is said to often haunt writing: "so what?" or in the case of a memoir "Why is this significant?"

Evaluation:

I will be evaluating you on several elements including the following:

The sharpness of the details you use to evoke experience

The thoughtfulness with which you reflect on the experience

The grace of your language

And - The mechanical correctness of
your prose