

# 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.

A memoir essay is centered on a significant memory from the past. The essay details that memory and explains how and why it is meaningful, as well as the influence the memory had on your life. When creating a memoir essay, it is important to illustrate the significance of the memory through specific and engaging details. If you need some ideas about where to start, here are some suggestions:

**It Paid Off:** Think of a time when you achieved a personal goal. Tell your readers about the story of how you met your goal. Be sure that your readers understand why the goal is important to you.

**The Good, the Bad, and the Completely Unexpected:** Think about an event in your life that seemed bad but turned out to be good. Tell the story of the event that you experienced and help your readers understand how an event that seemed negative turned out to have valuable consequences.

**Oh, Crap.** Because you have been sick, out of town, busy at work, or working on other homework, you didn't have as much time to prepare for something incredibly important — maybe you didn't train enough for an event/game, or maybe you didn't study for an important test. Think of a specific time that you felt unprepared and narrate the events. Your paper should help readers understand what it felt like to be unprepared.

**Suddenly, It All Became Clear:** Think of an experience when you realized that you suddenly understood an idea, a skill, or a concept you had been struggling with. Write a narrative that tells the story of your movement toward understanding.

**Tradition!:** Describe a personal ritual that you, your friends, or your family have. Narrate the events that take place when you complete your ritual so that your readers understand the steps that the ritual includes and why you complete them.

**One is the Loneliest:** Choose a time when you did something that took a lot of nerve, a time when you didn't follow the crowd or a time when you stood up for your beliefs.





# 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