

# Memory Poem

A **narrative poem** is one that tells a story. A **memory poem** is narrative in that it tells a story about a single event in your past that affected the way you understand yourself and/or the world around you (a type of self-portrait poem).

Writing this type of poem gives you the chance to paint with words a significant incident in your life, the feelings you associate with it, and the way it affected you. The narrative aspect of this poem allows you to tell the story to allow the reader to experience the incident vicariously along with your feelings and ideas associated with it. Do not explain how you felt or what you concluded about it. Use your diction and imagery, your metaphors and syntax, your line breaks and title to reveal your speaker's tone. **Always choose showing over telling.**

Since many of our memories are connected to objects, you might find a good subject if you look through that shoe box or the drawer where you keep the souvenirs of your life. Bear in mind that not all your memories or stories will be pleasant. Some of our most vivid memories are unhappy ones. Family members die. Neighbors move away. Friendships end. We fail at things that are important to us. We say or do things we regret later. These sorts of things happen to everyone. Writing about these memories can give us insight into how what we experience shapes who we become. So whether you remember this event "with twinklings and [or] twinges" (Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Bean Eaters"), write it. If you are troubled or sad or lonely, pick up your pen and tell the page about how you feel. Don't think. Just write. Poems are made from what life gives us, good or bad.

When you write about memories, keep one thing in mind: you do not need to stick to the facts. You are writing poetry, not history, so it's alright to change some details to make your poem more dramatic or entertaining. We have no idea if the memory George Bogin shows us in "Cottontail" is factually accurate. It doesn't matter. The important thing is that the poem rings true.

## Cottontail

A couple of kids,  
we went hunting for woodchucks  
fifty years ago  
in a farmer's field.  
No woodchucks  
but we cornered  
a terrified  
little cottontail rabbit  
in the angle  
of two stone fences.  
He was sitting up,  
front paws together,  
supplicating,  
trembling  
while we were deciding  
whether to shoot him  
or spare him.  
I shot first  
but missed,  
thank god.  
Then my friend fired  
and killed him  
and burst into tears.  
I did too.  
A little cottontail.  
A haunter.

*George Bogin*

### Try this—

Start working toward this poem by drafting it as a story. Put in all the specific details, all the vivid language, all the honest feelings that will make the incident come alive. When you are satisfied that you have included what's important, read through your draft and draw a circle around every word and phrase that is absolutely essential to your story. When you have drawn all your circles, copy all those words on a new sheet of paper, writing whatever was in a circle on a new line. For example, if you circled a single word, it goes on one line of your new draft. If your next circle included several words, they go on the next line. And so on. When you have finished recopying all the encircled words, your draft will look like a poem.

Now you are ready for the real work—revising. Read over what you have written. Does it make sense? You will probably need to add some connecting words—but be careful to add only what's absolutely essential. You will need to cut out and change other words. Since setting, or place, might be important in your narrative poem, be sure to include details that appeal to your senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Identify places in the poem where you see abstractions (telling about your feelings/ideas) or vague writing, and replace them with specific concrete images and metaphors. Help your reader to experience and connect!

How do you do that? Whenever you find an abstraction, ask yourself: “How can I show what this idea/feeling/concept specifically looks or tastes or smells like to me?” *If you are having trouble identifying abstract or vague language, have other writers go over it with you.*

*Example:* In “Cottontail,” instead of saying, “I felt sympathy for the rabbit,” how does Bogin show it and re-create that sympathy in the reader?

*Altered from original source (Carrie Joyce, [wikioyce.pbworks.com](http://wikioyce.pbworks.com))*