

What is a Memoir Essay?

Memoir, obviously, has to do with memory, and though that might mean writing about an event in your childhood, it is well worth remembering that you are by no means so limited. A successful memoir essay might be written about the two years you spent just out of high school working in a small town five-and-dime (back when every small town had a five-and-dime), or it could relate the story of your successful two-year battle with cancer at age forty. You could write a memoir at age seventy looking only at the previous five years and the adventure of building your perfect retirement beach house on Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula. Memoir simply means it happened in the past.

Often, when nonfiction is taught or studied, memoir and the personal essay are placed apart, as separate genres, but the truth is that these two strands have considerable overlap. In theory, one might write memoir and not essay; if, for instance, all that you did was re-create previous events from memory, with absolutely no embellishment or reflection. In practice, however, writers almost never do this. They re-create the past and then reflect on what they have learned, or haven't learned, about what now makes sense or what continues to be a mystery.

This use of personal experience for reflection—not just “this happened to me,” but “this happened and it gave me occasion to ponder”—distinguishes that thin line between pure memoir and the memoir essay.

Or as James Baldwin reminds us, we are always writing from our own experience, but it is up to us and indeed, our responsibility as writers—to squeeze from our experience “the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give.”

Three Quick Tips for Writing a Memoir Essay

- **When writing your memoir essay, remember the crucial importance of details.** Don't tell us what happened, show us. Don't just claim that Uncle Clem was a kooky prankster; show him blowing up your family's garbage cans on the Fourth of July. Don't assert that your grandmother's lasagna was the most savory meal ever served, show us the lasagna, layer by layer, and let us smell the tomato sauce, see the flecks of oregano in the ricotta cheese. More importantly, let us see your grandmother, her eyes, her hands, the stoop of her back, the pattern on her apron, and the days she spent preparing ahead for the holiday meal because she believed, as if it were her religion, that food was love.
- **Do your research.** Historians can go to the collected papers of famous politicians when they want to re-create the past, but perhaps what you are writing about is so obscure that no one kept a record of any sort. Goodness knows if you are old as me, there are no videotapes of every childhood event, just occasional, out of focus black-and-white photos. But there is still research to be done. First, ask people. If family members are alive, ask them what they remember. Even if the memories seem faulty, they will spur you to remember your own versions. Ask friends from the old neighborhood how they perceived your family. Tell them to be honest. Even if your family no longer owns that small farm out on Butter Churn Road, you can perhaps drive out there, park across the street, and let the contour of the landscape and the placement of the trees jog your memory. Sit a while with those old blurry photographs. The more you remember, you will find out, the more you remember beyond that. Each small memory is a string; pull on it, and something new comes up out of the fabric.
- **Don't be a hero or a victim.** If the story you share is all about how wonderful you are, why should the reader believe you? And why, other than self-flattery, are you even exploring it on the page? Likewise, if you are pure victim, the dish towel tossed around by unfair family and fickle fates, then what is there to be learned? In truth, most of us are flawed folks who try our best, and on some days we do pretty darn well. On other days? Well, maybe it is best to just go to sleep and start over tomorrow. The struggle! That's what's interesting.

from *Crafting The Personal Essay* by Dinty W. Moore