

Memoir Tips: How to Get Started with Scenes

Step 1: Brainstorm

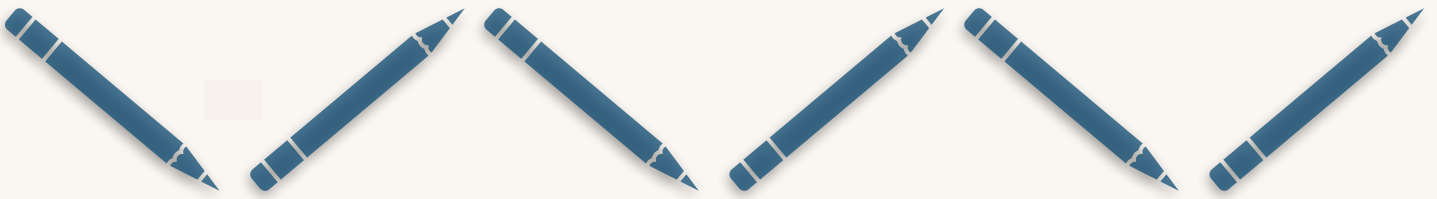
Try to get a clear idea about your memoir's purpose.

1. Why do you want to write a memoir?

2. What is the topic of your memoir?

3. What are some recurring words, images, memories, and emotions from the past that might belong in your memoir?

4. What messages might be extracted from your memoir? In other words, what do you hope people will learn or understand by reading your memoir?

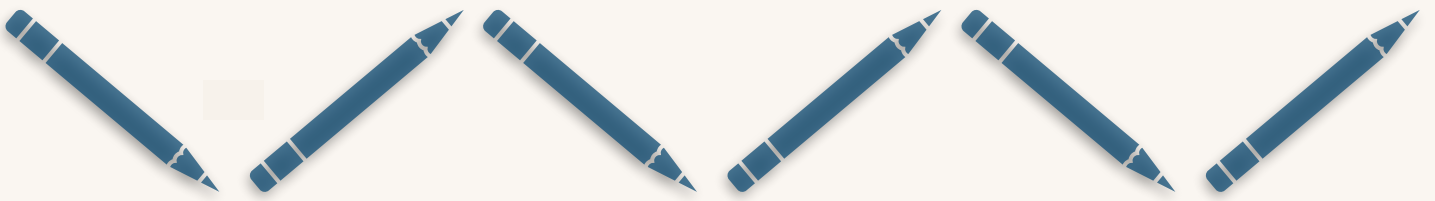


Step 2: List the Scenes

A memoir is not an autobiography. A memoir is a story (often told as a narrative or in vignettes or essays) about a time in your life, a particular period of growth, or a grouping of events that share similar themes. A memoir often creates tension between the past (events) and the present (the writer's growth or understanding as a result of those past events).

1. Make a list of the most prominent and meaningful events from the past that are related to the topic of your memoir.

2. Make a list of emotions you recall experiencing during the times listed above. You may wish to draw lines to connect the emotions to the event listed above. These emotions will help you pull meaning from those events. Try to specify how you felt at the time of the event (or shortly after) and how you feel now when you think back. What have you learned about people, life, or the universe in the years that have elapsed since the events occurred?



Step 3: Draft a Scene

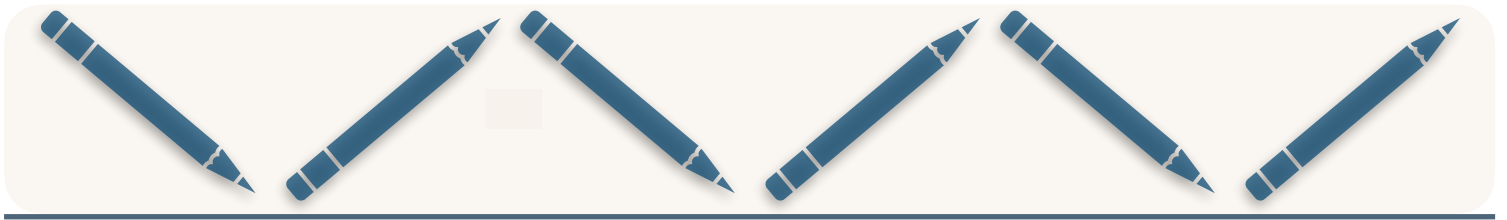
You do not have to draft the scenes in order. Write them as they come to you and order them later. Start with the event that is the most memorable or emotionally troublesome. Simply write what happened. Now is a good time to decide the following:

1. **Point-of-view** (Will you narrate the story from your child-self perspective, using language and tone appropriate for a child? Or will you narrate the story from your adult-self perspective, using language and tone of your grown self?)
2. **Tense** (Do you want to tell the story in present-tense? past-tense? a combination of the two (for example, write dreams in present-tense and narrative in past-tense?) These details can be changed, but doing so provides a challenge. You might refer to a few of your favorite memoirs as examples and choose the style you prefer. Or you might draft a quick scene twice to get a feel for what seems more natural to you or more appropriate for the story.)

Remember to include the following elements of a good story:

1. The scene should include a beginning, a middle, and an end. What is the point of the scene? The conflict? How does the conflict get resolved? How does this scene contribute to the overall story in terms of narrative arc and character development? (Some of these are questions you, the writer, must know the answers to even if you do not share them with the reader at this time.)
2. Write some dialogue for the characters, keeping in mind to choose dialogue that moves the story. Avoid including dialogue of pleasantries such as "How are you?" "I'm fine." Nobody cares. Stick to meaningful words and responses that reveal character and drive the main ideas you wish to communicate to your reader. A word about dialogue in memoir: Your reader knows you don't remember everything that was said years ago, so your goal should be to write dialogue that captures the essence of character, mood, emotion, and event. Aim to recreate the tension you felt at the time.

Notes:



Step 4: Add Sensory Detail

Often, the best stories to read are those that contain sensory details that bring the scenes to life. Consider the scene you wrote for Step 3. Make a list of sights, sounds, scents, tastes, and textures you remember from the event. Aim to be as specific as possible. Usually it is true that the more specific and personal a story is, the more universal it becomes. Make it your goal to transport the reader to that time and place in the past. Let the reader experience it as you did (remember to write from the point-of-view you've chosen--either that of your child-self at that time or that of your adult-self looking back at that time).

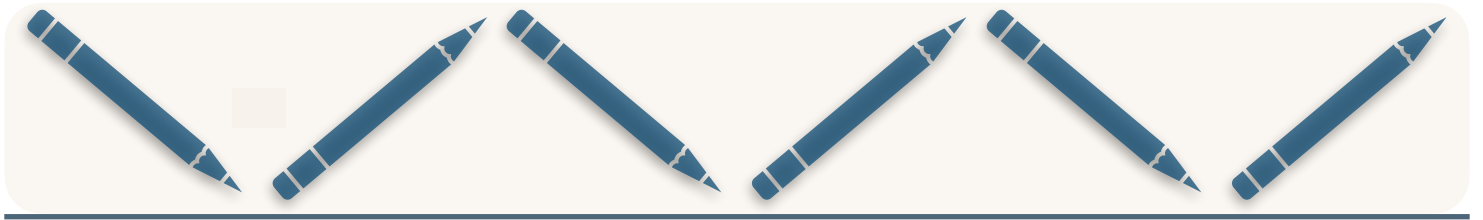
Sights:

Sounds:

Scents:

Tastes:

Textures:



Step 5: Consider Theme and Motif

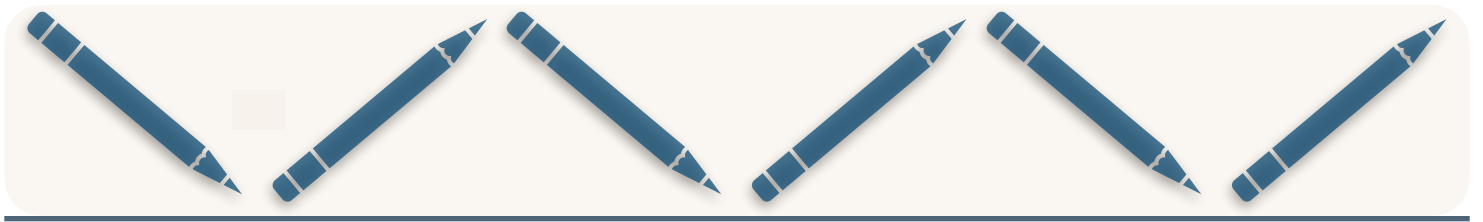
Two crucial aspects of memoir are theme and motif. **Motif** refers to recurring ideas, images, symbols, etc., that become meaningful simply through their placement and repetition. **Theme** refers to the ultimate message that runs through the story, or the universal truth about life, society, or people that becomes apparent in your story and with which your readers will connect. Themes and motifs usually do not happen by accident. They are intentionally incorporated by the writer.

For example, maybe in the scene, a doll becomes very important to the main character (the memoirist as a young girl, her past-self). **On a superficial level**, this doll is a toy that a young girl wants her mother to buy for her. **But on a deeper, more meaningful level**, this doll symbolizes her mother's love and the young girl's desire to care for something all her own. If the mother buys the doll, the girl feels loved. The girl also feels the doll will love her unconditionally, further highlighting the girl's isolation and reliance on a fantasy-world as well as her need for comfort during a stressful time.

In this example, **the doll has become a symbol and a motif** (recurring object of importance in the scene), and **the manner in which the young girl behaves regarding the doll illustrates a theme**.

Thinking about this first scene you've drafted, what seems to be of importance to the main character (your past-self, the subject of the memoir)? Maybe there is more than one item, word/words, place, song, idea, image, etc., that is significant. These "items of importance" are great to consider as symbols and motifs. You might also see patterns--"items of importance" (such as toys) that recur throughout the memoir.

Possible Motifs:



Step 6: Create Meaning

Every powerful memoir contains tension between the past and the present. One way to do this is to create meaning through theme.

Go back to Step 1, where you brainstormed about messages you hope people will learn by reading your memoir. Now, review the possible motifs list you created on the previous page. Choose one "item of significance" from this list to analyze. Then, consider a message that might be reinforced in this scene as a result of how your past-self behaved regarding this "item of importance."

First, what does this item mean to your past-self on a literal, superficial level?

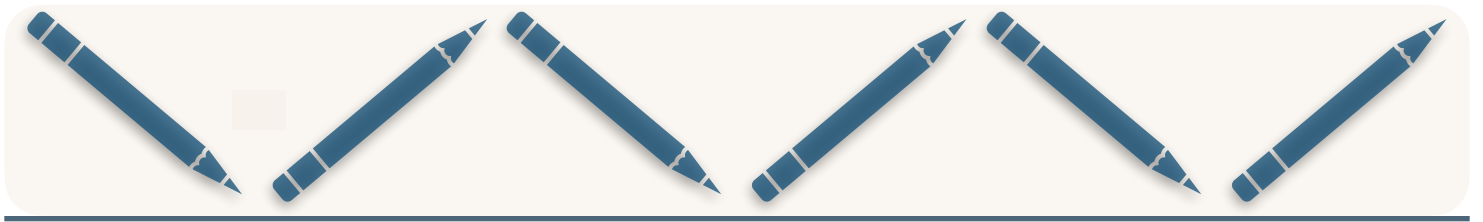
Superficial Meaning:

Next, think about the words, emotions, and behaviors of your past-self regarding this item. Thinking back to the doll in the example, the young girl might kiss the doll and tell her she loves it. The girl might drop the doll on the floor of the car and panic when she can't find it. The important thing here is to avoid being overly obvious about stating the point or the message. Instead of, "I was so scared when I lost my doll because it represented my fear of becoming lost to my mom," show the girl's fear, her panic, and her need to find the doll.

Words, Emotions, and Behaviors:

Lastly, what does the "item of importance" mean to your past-self on a deeper level? Try to tap into your desires, fears, hopes, and disappointments at the time. **This example scene with the doll becomes thematic:** When children don't get what they need from their parents, often, children become easily distressed over seemingly small matters. They may even seek comfort to preoccupy themselves from feelings of isolation the fear that they have become unlovable. Theme is not revealed directly by stating the deeper meaning. Theme is revealed through tension and a careful recreation of real events through memory and "items of importance."

Deeper Meaning:



Step 7: Repeat Steps 1-6

A memoir is a story, told in first-person point-of-view, that recounts a period of time or explores a significant aspect of the life of one person. If you focus on writing meaningful scenes, showing rather than telling (through vivid details and dialogue, and illuminating themes), your story will hold many powerful truths, and it will affect readers for years to come.

Often, the hardest part of beginning a new project, especially one as important as a personal memoir, is knowing how to begin. I hope this workbook helps jumping in a little less daunting!

Ten More Things to Consider

1. After drafting your scenes, organize them chronologically. There are alternative organizational structures, but if you aren't sure, sticking to a chronological timeline is a great way to tell a story.
2. If your past story aligns with more recent events in your life, consider alternating between past and present chapters. A great example is the beautiful memoir, *Grand*, by Sara Schaefer
3. Don't assume your book needs a prologue or an epilogue. Prologues are often unnecessary. When you near the finish line, you can hire a good editor who may suggest an epilogue to create a sense of finality (if your story doesn't already have that).
4. Joining a read-and-critique group with other memoirists who are revising their memoirs. This can be a great way to get helpful feedback about how to revise and improve your scenes.
5. Use the search feature on your word processing device to eliminate overused words
6. Read your story from beginning to end in a short period of time. This will help you catch inconsistencies and other errors, such as erroneous character names and timeline problems.
7. Read your chapters aloud for flow and rhythm and to catch unnecessary words, clichés, and grammatical errors.
8. When the time comes to query agents or to self-publish, hire a good editor to help you tighten your prose and catch mistakes you may have missed.
9. If you are self-publishing, pay a good designer to design your book cover. Covers sell books!
10. Have fun, and enjoy the process. Writing a memoir is a courageous labor of love. You have decided to understand your past and share your story with the world! Congratulations!