

How to Write a Memoir: 7 Creative Ways to Tell a Powerful Story

by [BROOKE WARNER](#)

Whether you curl up with memoirs on a frequent basis or pick one up every now and again, you know powerful memoirs have the capacity to take you, as a reader, for an exhilarating ride.

When I teach people how to [write and sell memoir](#), we talk about how to tell a compelling story. While all memoirs are different, the best memoirs all have certain elements in common.

My goal with this piece is to review some of those common elements, so you can weave them into your own memoir.

How to write a memoir

If you're planning to write a memoir, you'll want to take your readers on a journey they won't forget. In this post, we share tips for writing a memoir well, as well as plenty of memoir examples.

Here's how to write a memoir.

1. Narrow your focus

Your memoir should be written as if the entire book is a snapshot of one theme of your life. Or consider it a pie, where your life represents the whole pie, and you are writing a book about a teeny-tiny sliver.

Your memoir is not an autobiography. The difference is that an autobiography spans your entire life, and a memoir focuses on one particular moment or series of moments around a theme. You want your readers to walk away knowing you, and that one experience, on a much deeper level.

Perhaps you are familiar with *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt. This memoir focuses on Frank's life as a first-generation immigrant child in Brooklyn. Angela is his mother, and much of the storyline focuses on her and how Frank saw her, as well as the role she played in trying to hold the entire family together.

2. Include more than just your story

Even as you narrow your focus, we also need to think bigger in our writing pursuits.

For example, if Hillary Clinton wrote a memoir about raising a child in the White House, she would be pulling in tidbits about how she handled the media, who she let visit her daughter during sleepovers and how she navigated the politics of parenting during her time in the White House.

Likewise, if Madonna was writing a memoir about reinventing herself after 20 years away from the public spotlight, she most likely would include what it felt like to return to the music scene and how she continued to travel and perform while raising her children.

How does this apply to you? Imagine you are writing a memoir about your three-week trek through the Himalayan Mountains. While the focus is on your trip, as well as what you learned about yourself along the way, it would be wise to also include other details about the place, your experience and your thoughts.

You could describe the geography and history of the area, share interesting snippets about the people and donkeys you interacted with, and discuss your exploration of life-and-death questions as you progressed along your arduous journey.

Your readers want to know about *you*, but it's the backstory and vivid details that make for a powerful memoir.

3. Tell the truth

One of the best tips for how to write a memoir that's powerful is to be honest and genuine. This is often tricky, because we don't want to hurt or upset the people (our family and friends!) we've written into our books. But it's important that you tell the truth — even if it makes your journey as an author more difficult.

When Shannon Hernandez wrote her memoir, *Breaking the Silence: My Final Forty Days as a Public School Teacher*, she knew she had a major dilemma: "If I opted to tell the whole truth, I would pretty much ensure I would never get a job with New York City Public Schools again."

But she also knew teachers, parents and administrators needed to hear why great teachers are leaving education in droves and why the current educational system is not doing what's right for our nation's kids.

"I wrote my book with brutal honesty," she said, "and it has paid off with my readers. It's bringing national attention to what is happening behind closed school doors."

One more note on honesty: **Memoirs explore the concept of truth as seen through your eyes.** Don't write in a snarky manner or with a bitter tone. The motivation for writing a memoir shouldn't be to exact revenge or whine or seek forgiveness; it should simply be to share your experience.

Don't exaggerate or bend the truth in your memoir. Your story, the unique one that you hold and cherish, is enough. There is no need to fabricate or embellish.

4. Put your readers in your shoes

Powerful writers show, not tell. And for a memoir writer, this is essential to your success, because you must invite your reader into your perspective so she can draw her own conclusions. The best way to do this is to unfold the story before your reader's eyes by using vivid language that helps him **visualize each scene**.

Perhaps you want to explain that your aunt was a “raging alcoholic.” If you say this directly, your description will likely come across as judgmental and critical. Instead, paint a picture for your audience so they come to this conclusion on their own. You might write something like this:

“Vodka bottles littered her bedroom, and I had learned, the hard way, not to knock on her door until well after noon. Most days she didn't emerge into our living quarters until closer to sunset, and I would read her facial expression to gauge whether or not I should inquire about money — just so I could eat one meal before bedtime.”

5. Employ elements of fiction to bring your story to life

Think of the people in memoirs as characters. **A great memoir pulls you into their lives: what they struggle with, what they are successful at and what they wonder about.**

Many of the best memoir writers focus on a few **key characteristics of their characters**, allowing the reader to get to know each one in depth. Your readers must be able to love your characters or hate them, and you can't do that by providing too much detail.

Introduce intriguing setting details and develop a captivating plot from your story. Show your readers the locations you describe and evoke emotions within them. They need to experience your story, almost as if it was their own.

While your memoir is a true story, employing these **elements of fiction** will make it far more powerful and enjoyable for your readers.

6. Create an emotional journey

Don't aim to knock your readers' socks off. Knock off their pants, shirt, shoes and underwear too! Leave your readers with their mouths open in awe, or laughing hysterically, or crying tears of sympathy and sadness — or all three.

Take them on an emotional journey that motivates them to read the next chapter, wonder about you well after they finish the last page, and tell their friends and colleagues about your book. The best way to evoke these feelings in your readers is to connect your emotions, as the protagonist, with pivotal events happening throughout your narrative arc.

Most of us are familiar with the narrative arc. In school, our teachers used to draw a “mountain” and once we reached the precipice, we were to fill in the climatic point of the book or story.

Your memoir is no different: You need to create enough tension to shape your overall story, as well as each individual chapter, with that narrative arc.

That moment when you realized your husband had an affair? Don't just say you were sad, angry

or devastated. Instead, you might say something like:

“I learned of my husband’s affair when the February bank statements arrived and I realized that in one month’s time, he had purchased a ring and two massages at a high-end spa. Those gifts weren’t mine. He was using our money to woo another lady and build a new life. I curled up in a ball and wept for three hours — I had been demoted to the other woman.”

7. Showcase your personal growth

Speaking of narrative arc, the best way to accomplish that in a memoir is by showing how you, the main character, grew and changed as a person.

That experience you had carries more weight when you show how it affected not just that point in time, but the weeks, months and even years after. How did it change your approach to life? Did it change how you thought about others or yourself? Did it help you become a better or wiser person in some way?

This can be the hardest part of writing a memoir because it requires so much introspection. It’s also the reason why most writers can’t effectively write a memoir immediately after their life-changing experience; they need the passage of time to reflect on what that experience meant to them.

If you do this well, your readers will want to wrap themselves around you, root for you, help you get wherever you’re going on the life journey.

Memoir examples as inspiration

Let’s look at a few memoir examples.

We broke these into three categories of memoirs, those that can help us learn about structure, theme and takeaway. Each of these are essential elements of the genre.

Memoirs that use an effective structure

Although you’ll hear from memoirists who didn’t use an outline, or who prefer a process over a structured experience, most memoirists can benefit from having a structure in place before they start writing.

The most straightforward memoirs are those that start at point A and end at point B, moving the reader along in linear time.

Some examples include coming-of-age memoirs, like Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy* or Daisy Hernandez’s *A Cup of Water Under My Bed*, or memoirs that are narrowly focused, like Lori Gottlieb’s *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*, or Jennifer Pastiloff’s *On Being Human*.

Then there are framed memoirs, like Dani Shapiro’s *Inheritance* which chronicles the A to B linear journey of finding out that the father who raised her was not her biological father, making use of flashback and memory to piece together the front story of what’s happening as she figures out the truth of who she really is.

There are also thematic memoirs, like Lucy Grealey’s classic *Autobiography of a Face*, which spans a twenty-year period and whose timeline is neither linear nor framed, but is clearly focused on a singular issue: deformity and its impact on the author.

Examples of thematic memoirs

Thematic memoirs abound typically sell better than other memoirs because they’re what the industry calls “high-concept,” meaning that they’re easy for buyers and readers to wrap their minds around.

Countless categories of memoir point to big-picture themes: addiction and recovery; parenting; travel; cooking; coming-of-age; dysfunctional family; religious experience; death and dying; divorce; and more.

Your theme (or sometimes themes) infuses every chapter you write, and it/they can be quite nuanced. For instance, a theme might be healing through running.

Once you identify your theme, you must always keep sight of it. I liken this to wearing a pair of tinted glasses. If you put on glasses with purple lenses, you can still see the entirety of the world around you, but you will never forget that you’re wearing the glasses because everything you look at is tinted purple.

The same should be true with good memoir: introduce the reader to your world, but keep your memoir contained and on point by keeping your principal (and sometimes secondary) themes front and center.

Addiction memoirs like *Tweaked: A Crystal Meth Memoir*, by Patrick Moore; *Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood*, by Koren Zailckas; and *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, by Marya Hornbacher are great examples.

So are single-destination travel memoirs, or issue-specific books, like Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which is about life after loss, or Laura M. Flynn’s *Swallow the Ocean: A Memoir*, about growing up with an mentally unwell parent.

Examples of memoirs with strong takeaways

Takeaway is your gift to the reader. It’s a message, reflection, or truism.

Sometimes these fall at the end of scenes or the end of chapters, but that’s not always necessary.

Takeaway can happen at any moment, when the author shares something heartfelt, universal, and true.

It’s those moments in reading memoir that hit you hard because you can relate — even if you haven’t had the exact experience the author is describing.

Understanding takeaway is a long process, and some authors, when they first start thinking about takeaway, make the mistake of being too overt or trying too hard.

These are subtle moments of observation about the world around you, a wrapping up of an experience through a lesson learned or the sharing of the way something impacted you. The idea is to sprinkle these moments into your chapters, without overwhelming or spoon-feeding your reader.

Good writers do this so seamlessly you don't even realize it happened, except that you feel like he or she has burst your heart, or crushed you with the weight of their insight. You feel like you know the author because it's as if she's speaking directly to you.

Good takeaway is, in fact, mirroring. It's a way of relaying that we are not alone and the world is a crazy place, isn't it?

As an example, here's a reflective passage from Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*: *But is it such a bad thing to live like this for just a little while? Just for a few months of one's life, is it so awful to travel through time with no greater ambition than to find the next lovely meal? Or to learn how to speak a language for no higher purpose than that it pleases your ear to hear it? Or to nap in a garden, in a patch of sunlight, in the middle of the day, right next to your favorite foundation? And then to do it again the next day? Of course, no one can live like this forever.*

Not all reflective passages have to be questions, but you can see that this technique is effective. Gilbert is ruminating over the life she's living, but which she cannot maintain; in her experience — through the vantage point of her American understanding of the world — it's not possible, and undoubtedly 99% of her readers agree.

We all know what it feels like to be saddled by the burdens of everyday life. Gilbert's readers would feel this passage on a visceral level, even if they'd never before been to Italy, because everyone understands the longing that's wrapped up in allowing yourself to just let down. And that's what makes this a takeaway; it's a universal connection to the reader.

Now get out there and write!

When you follow these guidelines while writing your memoir, you will captivate your audience and leave them begging for more.

But more importantly, you will share your own authentic story with the world.

*The original version of this story was written **Brooke Warner**, along with assistance from The Write Life team. We updated the post so it's more useful for our readers. This post contains*

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