

The Micro-Memoir: Start Your Memoir With A Moment

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A micro-memoir focuses on one moment – maybe only seconds long. Whether it’s the actual start to your book, or just a way to get you to start the writing process, these little scenes will set the stage for the larger story.

So you want to write your memoir, and you’re ready to get started. In a previous post, [“Four Things To Decide Before You Write Your Memoir,”](#) I detailed the points you ought to have decided before writing. They include:

1. Decide which span of time you are describing.
2. Decide whether you are sticking with pure fact, or whether you are going to embellish.
3. Decide how personal you are going to get.
4. Decide the message of your memoir.

Now that you’ve figured out these four design principles, you are ready to determine the exact content to include. Maybe you’ve made a list of scenes, lessons to impart, characters to include, and the essence of the “plot.” Even though it is non-fiction, there is still very much a story to tell and storytelling tenets to adhere to.

Now the time has come to start putting words to paper. Where to start? The time leading up to the span of your story? An especially memorable scene for you? The most painful part of your story? The ending, so you can work backwards?

Every writer and each project will inspire a different approach to the beginning – this is just the nature of writing. One good place to start though, particularly in a memoir, is with a single moment. Think of it as a micro-memoir.

In this micro-memoir, you can introduce the pace, style, and voice you will use in your story. Because it is such a defined moment in time, you can apply the same four design questions that you'll use to inform your larger memoir: What's the start and end? How true to fact will you be? How personal will you get? What is your take-home message?

Moments aren't spans of time. They are literally moments – maybe 30 seconds or less. That is what makes them so powerful. They are emotional or physical turning points. The second a car crashes into you, you come home to find your house burning, get the first sight of a newborn, the slammed door that let you know for sure you are getting divorced after years of doubt, the lightning bolt of clarity that told you to leave your job, propose, climb Mt. Everest, etc. These make great reading, but they also make great writing, especially if you are just starting. You know exactly what happened, it is a brief period in time, and it's exceedingly interesting.

Events that qualify as moments can also be key realizations and decisions that define you. They will explain to readers who you are, why you acted the way that you did, and hopefully provide life lessons or inspirations they can use in their own lives.

Whether you are a novice to writing or a seasoned author, it can help tremendously to start with a charged scene. The art of telling a good story is deciding exactly what to share and what to leave out. If your memoir is about coping with a bad marriage, you may have had endless fights, but you don't need to describe them all to make your point in the book. Which do you chose, and why? Which ones make the most telling and poignant moments and give the reader the clearest insights into your challenges and internal workings? Might you actually need a composite fight, in which the details are drawn from truth, but the actual fight is fictional?

Learning to pull out iconic moment is key to the art of memoir writing, just as it is for fiction.

Either a moment will pop into your head as the obvious place to start, or you may need to make a list and think about them for a while. Either way, you are doing the work of writing your memoir. You are sifting through and prioritizing your memories. Unless you've kept a diary with all the details you need, you'll be doing a lot of this – pulling

information, thoughts, feelings, and memories from your personal archive. You'll be filtering, morphing, and polishing them for public consumption.

Once you pick a perfect moment to work with, find its essence and start to write. You don't need to aim for a word count. It can be short. Use the space and time you need to get it down. You'll learn a huge amount from the process and be able to apply it to writing all the other scenes. Do the hairs stand up on your neck when you write? Is it spilling out of you so fast you can't type quickly enough? Are you feeling pain, happiness, or anger? Is it transporting you back to the moment? Is the process leading you to remember other things you might have repressed or simply forgotten?

You are learning what writing your memoir might feel like. No matter what you've done before in life, you can't fully predict what it will be like to write part of your life down in words – until you've done it, that is.

How quickly do you finish writing the moment? Does it take hours, days, weeks? Or are you done in minutes and ready to write up the next moment? Is your head exploding with material or calm as a still lake?

Another great thing about starting with a standalone moment is that it's easy to share. When you are ready, give it to someone to read. Are you getting your message across? Do they feel the message of the moment like you do?

Ideally, your memoir will be a **chain of gripping moments**, beautifully strung together like pearls on a necklace. Do one, and then another. Find the connective tissue between them as a next step. If you have many of these moments, and you get good at rooting them out of your life experiences, you'll be on your way towards finishing your memoir in no time.