

memoir = author
narrative = message

What Is the Difference Between a Memoir & Personal Narrative?

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Personal narrative is a term used to describe any narrative that tells the story of the author, and memoir is merely one type of personal narrative. The differences between memoirs and the other types of personal narrative -- autobiography, personal essay and fictionalized memoirs and novels -- usually have to do with the purpose of the narrative rather than the way in which it is written.

Memoir

Memoir, in the simplest of terms, is nonfiction's answer to the novel. A memoir is a story that relies on scenes to communicate character, conflict, plot and theme just as it would happen in a novel. More specifically, a memoir is when the author uses specific events of her own life to distill and extract meaning, and communicate that meaning to the reader. For example, in Lucy Grealy's memoir "Autobiography of a Face," Grealy chronicles her lifelong battle with disfigurement after having one-third of her jaw removed during her bout with cancer as a child. What makes it a memoir is that she uses these events to show how she finally comes to understand that she is not defined by her face, but by the person she is underneath.

Autobiography

Autobiography is a mode of nonfiction similar to memoir, except that autobiographies focus more informing the reader about the remarkable life of the author rather than selecting specific events for the sole purpose of communicating an emotional theme. In this way, autobiography can be said to deal with "just the facts." An example of autobiography would be Bill Clinton's book "My Life: The Presidential Years."

Personal Essay

Personal essay is often confused with memoir, and for good reason: The difference is a fine shade of definition. A personal essay, like the memoir, uses the author's experience to communicate a theme that will -- if the author has done her job well -- resonate with her readers. The difference, however, is focus. The memoir focuses primarily on the author: It's the author's story; she is the subject. The theme is extrapolated by the reader, and is not told directly or communicated in any sort of thesis statement. In a personal essay, conversely, the message is the subject, and the author uses her experience as more of a vehicle to communicate the message. Furthermore, personal essays are usually -- as the name suggests -- essay-length and not book-length.

Fictionalized Personal Narrative

While some might disagree that personal narratives can be fiction, novelists write their own stories all the time. A famous recent example is James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces." The book -- originally printed as a memoir -- was exposed as having been written with added fictional elements. In his book "Can't You Get Along with Anyone?: A Writer's Memoir and a Tale of a

* Meaning

event - author

events
+
understanding
+
hindsight
What
does
it
mean
now?

message

Name _____ Title of Piece Revised _____

SELF-REVISION WORKSHEET FOR MEMOIRS

1. I told the names of the people involved in my memory.
List their names: _____

2. I told what the subject of my story is. (Example: I got caught sneaking out.)
List the subject: _____

3. I told when the story takes place.
List "when" here: _____

Choose one of these methods of "time":

- a) Day (Monday, Tuesday, etc.) _____
b) Time (12:00, late afternoon, etc.) _____
c) Season (spring, fall) _____
d) Other (specify) _____

4. I told where the story takes place.
List "where" here: _____

5. I told why this memory is special to me.
List "why" here: _____

6. I described what happened in five or more sentences. YES NO

7. I described what happened using at least three of the five senses, and used them appropriately. Circle the senses you used:

see hear taste touch smell

8. My story has an interesting hook.
List it here: _____

9. My story has a strong resolution.
List it here: _____

10. My Descriptive Writing
- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| • Utilizes action verbs in the present tense (underline in blue) | YES | NO |
| • Includes figurative language (underline in red) | YES | NO |
| • Incorporates sensory detail appropriately | YES | NO |
| • Does NOT revert to narrative mode | YES | NO |
| • Relates the event as if it is occurring RIGHT NOW | YES | NO |

Questions List to Use When Planning Your Memoir: What the Reader will Need or Want to Know

Questions for memoirs when the subject is a person:

1. How long have you known this person?
2. When did you first meet and how did you meet?
3. What do you like about this person?
4. How has this person helped you?
5. Is there one thing that he or she always says?
6. How do you feel about this person?
7. What have you learned from this person?
8. What's the first thing you notice when you see this person?

Questions for memoirs when the subject is a place:

1. What are your feelings when you think about this place?
2. When was the first time that you went to this place?
3. What's your favorite thing to do in this place?
4. Who else comes to this place?
5. If you could change one thing about this place, what would it be?
6. How often do you go there?
7. Does everyone feel like you do about this place?
8. Is this place the same today as it was in the past?
9. What's the most important object in this place? Why?

Questions for memoirs when the subject is an animal (pet):

1. What physical feature of this animal do you like the best?
2. What's the first thing you notice about this animal when you see him?
3. Pretend this animal is with you right now. Close your eyes. What would you be doing with it?
4. What is this animal's favorite thing to do?
5. When did you get it?
6. How did you get it?
7. How do you feel when you are with it?
8. Does everyone feel the way you do about this animal?
9. What's one funny thing that it does?
10. How does this animal help you or how do you help it?

Questions for a memoir when the subject is an object:

1. How did you get this object?
2. How long have you had it?
3. How do you feel when you're with it?
4. Where is it right now?
5. Has it changed any since you first got it?
6. What's your favorite thing to do with it?
7. Does everyone feel like you do about this object?
8. How has it helped you?
9. Is there a time when you really need it?
10. What if you lost it?

http://web2.jefferson.k12.ky.us/CCG/supp/MS_Memoir.PDF

"Narrative" is a term more commonly known as "story." Narratives written for college or personal narratives, tell a story, usually to some point, to illustrate some truth or insight. Following are some tools to help you structure your personal narrative, breaking it down into parts.

Introduction

The "Hook" Start your paper with a statement about your story that catches the reader's attention, for example: a relevant quotation, question, fact, or definition.

Set the Scene Provide the information the reader will need to understand the story: Who are the major characters? When and where is it taking place? Is it a story about something that happened to you, the writer, or is it fiction?

Thesis Statement The thesis of a narrative essay plays a slightly different role than that of an argument or expository essay. A narrative thesis can begin the events of the story: *"It was sunny and warm out when I started down the path"*; offer a moral or lesson learned: *"I'll never hike alone again"*; or identify a theme that connects the story to a universal experience: *"Journeys bring both joy and hardship."*

Body Paragraph

"Show, Don't Tell" Good story telling includes details and descriptions that help the reader understand what the writer experienced. Think about using all five senses—not just the sense of sight—to add details about what you heard, saw, and felt during the event. For example, *"My heart jumped as the dark shape of the brown grizzly lurched toward me out of the woods"* provides more information about what the writer saw and felt than, *"I saw a bear when I was hiking"*.

Supporting Evidence In a personal narrative, your experience acts as the evidence that proves your thesis. The events of the story should demonstrate the lesson learned, or the significance of the event to you.

Passage of Time Writing about the events of your experience using time chronologically, from beginning to end, is the most common and clear way to tell a story. Whether you choose to write chronologically or not, use transition words to clearly indicate to the reader what happened first, next, and last. Some time transition words are *next*, *finally*, *during*, *after*, *when*, and *later*.

Transitions In a narrative essay, a new paragraph marks a change in the action of a story, or a move from action to reflection. Paragraphs should connect to one another. For example, the end of one paragraph might be: *"I turned and ran, hoping the bear hadn't noticed me"*, and the start of the next might be: *"There are many strategies for surviving an encounter with a bear; 'turn and run' is not one of them."* The repetition of words connects the paragraphs. (What does the change in verb tense indicate?)*

Conclusion

The Moral of the Story The conclusion of a narrative include the closing action of the event, but also should include some reflection or analysis of the significance of the event to the writer. What lesson did you learn? How has what happened to you affected your life now?