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FROM
MEMORY
TO
MEMOIR

*"When you write down your
thoughts, they become your
history"*

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PEN AND I PUBLISHING

Writing a story from memory to memoir

This training is going to help you take a memory and turn it into a story. We are focusing on writing a very short memoir story, known as flash fiction.

It will **be a snapshot**; a moment in your life, and not your whole life story (which is an autobiography) so choose one moment to write about and share.

Your story can be up to 1,000 words 1,200 max. All flash fiction stories are usually under 1,500 words but normally under 1,000. When you tell your story, it must show how what happened motivated and inspired you to improve and/or change your life.

It will be a motivational/inspirational story. At the end of it you must show how your life went from one phase into another. All stories are worth writing. If you believe it changed your life, then chances are it may inspire others to change their life.

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Pre-story Prompts

Below are some prompts to help you think about your story.

Who am I? Where did you live, what are/were your dreams, what have you achieved, what are you working on, where have you been, your working life, hobbies?

My family. Children. Who are your siblings, what did your parents do, what about your cousins, an aunt or uncle who supported you? Were you adopted?

Earliest memory. Think about growing up and your earliest memories, how did they shape you

At school. High school is usually a time when a lot happens, and we learn lessons. Were you teased/bullied or were you the bully?

Where I live/where I used to live. Any neighbours, friends, anything happen where you live?

Love. Your first love, a secret crush, unrequited love, marriage, divorce, affairs

Work. People you have worked with. Unusual work you have undertaken. Jobs you have done

If only. Anything you regret, wish you had done, still want to do, no longer able to do

Significant Events. Holidays, festivals, family events, periods of depression, substance abuse, addiction, highs and lows, change points - anything that changed your life forever, second chances. Did you leave home at a young age? Move to a different country?

What life changing decisions have you made in your life so far? What made you want to make them?

Think about a photograph. That photo represents a moment captured by the camera. That person was in a particular place, doing a particular thing, attending a particular event. Your story will be about an event/place/thing that happened in your life. How can a photo help?

Getting Started

The thing to remember about writing flash fiction is we don't provide all the background information that you will get in a novel and might get in a short story. With flash fiction we usually start right smack bang in the middle of the story and go straight into what is happening.

Keep your characters to a minimum. You and one other person is a good story. You and two or three people is the most. Try not to include too many characters and don't think about explaining why they are there. Their significance to the story should naturally come out in the story.

With flash fiction you can write a whole story just telling us what happened because that is easier. No dialogue and just a story based on what you tell us. It works well because it is very short. If you are writing a story with dialogue, then do your best to show us what people are feeling.

Write a plan. Sometimes I just sit and write a story and it all flows from beginning to end. Sometimes I start writing and stall halfway through. When I never stall is when I have a plan. When I sit and write out what the story is, who the characters are and what happened. Spend time doing that and your story will flow. Write a one or two sentence summary of your

story. If you had to tell me what your story is about in less than a minute what would your summary be?

Story Title

You may find the title of your story comes first and then you write your story based on that or you may write your story and the title evolves from that.

Think about the significant part of your story and/or the motivational/inspirational part of it. Can you think of a story title from either of those?

A title can be a popular expression or a play on words using a popular expression (The Usual Suspects). It can be a person's name (Forrest Gump) or the name of a place (Brokeback Mountain). It can be a line from the actual story, it can rhyme or have rhythm (The Spy Who Came in from the Cold), it can be about an event (Finding Nemo), it can be one word (Jaws), it can be based on history (Troy).

Writing the first line

The first line is everything. It will lead us into what is about to happen so you want to make it as interesting as possible, so people want to continue reading.

‘It was a trip of a lifetime, but...’

‘I wanted her job and it would be easy enough for me to discredit her...’

‘Her text message to me simply said ‘where are you? I’m waiting’ and my heart started racing...’

‘They say everyone who looks into their family history will find a secret sooner or later but even I didn’t expect the family secret to be this huge or to turn my life around the way that it did...’

Think about books that you have read, short stories and novels, what made a great first line for you? Read the first lines of a few books and see if that can inspire you to write your first line.

Writing Your Story

Here is an outline to keep you focused on writing your story.

Remember a story usually has a plot and characters. Once you have that:

- Your story will have a beginning when you introduce us to what is happening
- Then something significant happens
- Write about overcoming what happened
- Write about the final resolution and how it all ended

If you stick to that outline it will give you enough to write your flash fiction story. Take your story through that outline. Are all those points covered? You could introduce us straight into something significant happening. It makes for an exciting start if we can understand why what is significant is happening.

Show us (the reader) what happened don’t tell us

This may take a little time (or not) to master and you may want to get in touch via email if you think you need help. What can make something that

should be excited sound a little dull is if you tell us what happened rather than showing us.

For example an abusive partner has hit you, it is the final time he hit you before you took action, it was the straw that broke the camel's back and you want us to know that as the reader.

You could. . .

Tell us by

saying:

Brian hit me and I was upset. I knew I wanted to leave him.

or

Show us by saying:

I could feel my face pulsating from the pain as it grew red from the impact. Like a rising volcano the anger followed swiftly after it threatening to erupt into a sea of rage. At that moment I knew I either had to spend the rest of my life feeling afraid, strike back and risk being beaten even more or seek help to leave him. Leaving would mean ending five years of physical abuse that started two days after our honeymoon ended.

(NOTE: *The above paragraph could also be the significant event that starts a story*)

Whenever you are writing about how you felt or how someone in the story is feeling, what they are thinking in their head do your best to explain it by showing us. It might not always be possible but see if you can.

Keep us informed

When people are talking to each other what is the other person doing? Are they just listening or are they shifting uncomfortably, or rolling their eyes, maybe they are not listening and looking off into the distance? In the story below called *"The Potential Do-Over"* - A 48-year-old woman is talking to her

younger self age 18. She has come back to change the path of their life so her 18-year-old self makes different choices:

'This is going to sound really, really strange so let me finish before you say anything.'

She turned, looked at me and nodded in agreement.

'I am you. Thirty years from now.' Younger me shifted in her seat and her eyes dropped as I continued. *'I am – or maybe I should say, we are – 48 years old. I am you. Just older. And I am here to get you to end the shy girl act and live a little before it's too late.'*

The 18-year-old me looked up and stared in disbelief. She had been sitting on a park bench enjoying the dull warmth from the sun and was clearly bothered by the direct approach of what was, in her opinion, a perfect stranger. I knew she would sit and listen because she was too polite to move.

Notice how it mentions what the younger her is doing while she is telling the story. The story is from the perspective of the older woman and includes the movements of her younger self too.

Which Perspective / tense?

Which perspective / tense will your story be written in? First think about who the narrator is

First-person view is your own and most popular "I" or "we" – usually written in present tense

Second-person view - not very common - you refer to the reader as you, you might ask the reader questions. You make the reader feel as if they are part of the story.

Third-person view provides the most flexibility and focuses on "he", "she", "they" or "it" – can be present tense but usually past tense.

It is easy to shift tenses without realising. One minute you are saying I did this; I did that then suddenly you are talking about how she came here and he went there. Watch your tenses and keep them the same throughout.

Is it inspirational/motivational?

When writing your story remember you are focusing on something you discovered about yourself or changed your life so you should be able to answer the question

The lesson this part of my life has taught me is . . . or . . . The inspirational message in this story is. . .

Editing your story

It is easy when you are writing a story to think we need to know everything but the key to writing a flash fiction story is deciding what to leave out. Learning what to leave out is not the same thing as putting in only what's important.

Sometimes it's what you're not saying that gives a piece its shape. In fact, a story can be more interesting because we have to make up our own mind about what you are saying or what happened next.

The history, how it all started, why it had gone that far, we really don't need all of that when writing flash fiction. We just want the story. Just the necessary

facts so we can see what happened, what you did to change what happened, what the lesson was and how it changed your life.

You may end up editing your story not just once but several times. That is okay. It is important you check your grammar and how the story flows.

Be brutal with your editing and if you really think something needs to stay ask yourself:

- Is it necessary?
- Could the story do without it?
- Will the reader miss vital pieces of the story if it is not included?

Just keep reminding yourself that we don't need to know it all.

Fictionalised Memoirs

The definition of fictionalised is *“to treat or make into fiction”*. This means you take something that really happened, but you make some of the stuff up about it. Why would you do that? To protect someone in the story and/or to protect yourself.

For example: If you took drugs as a teenager or you ran away and spent time homeless you may not want your children (or anyone else) to know about that. So, you write a story about a girl who took drugs or a girl who ran away and then you let us know how her story inspired you to live your life differently.

You are still telling the story but some parts of it are made up and therefore fiction.

Another way is to change the facts. E.G. A geography teacher always laughed at you because you were an overweight teenager and he called you stupid.

Years of verbal abuse made you doubt yourself but eventually you overcame that and started your own business, you now employ more than 50 local people. You may want to change the geography teacher to a maths teacher and change it from a male teacher to a female one. Or instead of a teacher make the character a neighbour, a friend etc. If you went to school in the area you live in now, you might want to say you went to school in a different state. So, the story becomes about a female neighbour in a state you have never lived in, who was always verbally abusing you. You tell the same story, but the character and location are different.

It is important that you understand if you tell a sensitive story which involves other people only you are liable if they are not happy.

Pen Name

If you want to write a story exactly as it happened but you do not want to use your real name, consider a pen name. A fictional name that you use as the author of the story. For example, the author of Fifty Shades of Grey is E.L. James, and her real name is Erika Leonard.

Other useful tips

- Keep a journal handy in case a new memory comes to you. Write everything down in whatever order it comes out, you can put it in the correct order later.
- Never censor what comes up or judge it. Just write it down. You may never use it.
- Keep all your notes in one place. Get a folder to ensure they stay together.
- If possible, add a twist or make sure **something unexpected happens** at the end of the story.
- You don't always have to be good – write the story from the position of being anti something.
- Think about the way you are now from the standpoint of who you used to be. The past is only useful in that it shows us our present moment.

Motivating yourself

Chances are you may get stuck during the process. You might believe your story is boring or that it isn't worth reading. You may even think people will not understand or judge you. Here are a few quotes that I hope will help to keep you writing.

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“99.9 percent of people lead boring lives. But every single one of them is trying to make some sense out of his or her existence, to find some meaning in the world, and therein lies the value and opportunity of memoir. It’s therapeutic for the writer, and it eventually even helps his or her descendants understand themselves better.”

“And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt” - Sylvia Plath

“Memoir is about handing over your life to someone and saying, This is what I went through, this is who I am, and maybe you can learn something from it,”

Jeannette Walls

“You think that you’ll never remember the details of what happened so long ago,” she explains, “but all you have to do is find a quiet, comfortable place and write one line. That’s when you’ll start to see the whole scene right in front of you. It’s incredible.”

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<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Memory-Memoir-Notebook-looking-memoirs/dp/B083XGJRLK/>

"When the storyteller tells the truth, she reminds us that human beings are more alike than unlike... A story is what it's like to be a human being - to be knocked down and to miraculously arise. Each one of us has arisen, awakened."

- Maya Angelou