**What is a memoir?**

A memoir is a very centralized story about a specific memory. It's a story about a time in someone's life or a major event that occurred, or maybe it focuses on a special place that the writer liked to visit during the summer.

***“The research for a memoir can be done in an easy chair. Close your eyes and try to recapture the moment you bought your first car, learned you were pregnant, met the President or wobble down the street on a two-wheeler.”*** Lou Willet Stanek, ‘Writing Your Life”

**4 Major Memoir Elements**

**1. Narrow your focus. Know that memoirs are not autobiographies.**

While an autobiography (like Agatha Christie’s *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography*) covers the entire trajectory of one person’s life from beginning to end, memoirs are much more focused and exploratory. A memoir author’s first task is to determine the specific theme he wants to pinpoint and investigate, or the precise time period in his life that encompassed a great personal transformation that he wants to show.

Examples are Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, or *Running With Scissors* by Augusten Borroughs. Each does not chronologically list the author’s life events. Thank goodness — trying to squeeze too much into one book would have diluted the stories and smothered the themes and messages. You want the reader to come away with both a sense of enlightenment and a yearning to know more.

**2. Borrow fiction techniques…**

Anyone who’s gotten lost in a mesmerizing memoir knows that fiction methods like scene description, sensory detail and dialogue are what draw readers into the author’s own personal world. Even larger story-structuring techniques synonymous with novel writing (like constructing a story structure and plotting a character arc), can helpfully frame the memoir around life events you find significant.

Ask yourself: What was the moment in my life that sent me on a whole new trajectory? Were there moments of great conflict in my life? See how you can make them the key moments that your memoir’s structure revolves around.

**3. …but, don’t invent.**

Warning: While embracing the [flowery nature](http://www.writetosellyourbook.com/writing-advice/poetry-and-fiction-writers) of fiction writing can enhance your memoir, it’s important to make sure you don’t get carried away with fiction techniques. You cannot invent events that did not happen (e.g. a marriage that never occurred, a death in the family). While dialogue may not be 100% accurate, be sure that the conversation actually took place.

Being honest with your readers is important for many reasons. Remember the controversy surrounding James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*? Crossing the line of embellishment into deception not only cheats your readers, but can also damage your future as an author.

**4. Show More; Tell Less.**

I often urge this rule to *show, not tell* with [my fiction authors](http://www.writetosellyourbook.com/working-together), but for memoir authors, this concept is *essential*. Putting the reader in your shoes is the most effective way to not only share your perspective in the most meaningful way, but also to invite the reader to draw her own conclusions about your life. Unfolding a scene before readers instead of simply telling a series of events best deals with the often sensitive, emotional content of many memoirs.

When you show more, you avoid the trap of judging. For instance, instead of inserting your own opinion by caustically labeling someone an “abusive alcoholic,” or a “spiteful lover,” (which can mark *you* as a negative, potentially bitter voice in your reader’s eyes), *show* the reader how this character acted wrongly. Paint a scene where this person abused alcohol and then abused you. Show readers a scene where your former lover acted maliciously. Strive to make them feel the emotions you yourself felt. By using this technique to plant readers in your own point-of-view, readers will come to their own conclusions about your experience; this is much more powerful than simply telling them what happened.