



Reading and Writing Memoirs

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PWP 597: Invitational Writing Institute



Writing Into the Day

Think of a memoir or a personal narrative that you enjoyed reading. What made it memorable to you? To help you with your response, think about:

- The topic/content
- The author's writing style (e.g., tone, word choice, etc.)
- The theme(s) explored and/or lessons shared by the author



Learning Objectives

Student Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to clearly define the term “memoir”.
- Students will be able to explain how memoirs differ from other genres.
- Students will be able to reflect on personal experiences that could serve as appropriate topics for memoirs.



Learning Objectives (continued)

Teacher Learning Objectives:

- We will be able to explain the importance and value of having students read and write memoirs.
- We will be able to analyze mentor texts that can guide students through the memoir writing process.
- We will be able to utilize a variety of strategies for helping students generate ideas for memoirs.



Introducing Memoirs to Students

“A memoir is an invitation into another person’s privacy.”

- Isabel Allende

- Students must first understand that memoirs differ from other forms of storytelling.
- A memoir can be defined as a narrative in which the author writes in-depth about an important part of their life.



Introducing Memoirs to Students (continued)

- The author recreates this pivotal moment through storytelling to the best of their memory.
- Memoirs combine factual information about a specific moment in time with the author's thoughts and emotions.



Why Teach Memoirs?

- Everyone has unique, personal, and powerful stories to share, making this form of writing easily accessible to all students.
- Reluctant writers often become more engaged and increasingly confident in their writing abilities when given the opportunity to share meaningful moments with an audience.



Why Teach Memoirs? (continued)

- Though writing memoirs tends to be more individualistic, sharing them with peers allows for commonalities between the writer and their audience to emerge (Gibney, 2012, p. 244).
- Reading and sharing memoirs fosters a supportive classroom community in which students feel emboldened to take risks with their writing (Gibney, 2012, p. 244).



Using Mentor Texts to Introduce Memoirs

Expose your students to mentor texts that model literary elements commonly found in memoirs (Sychterz, 2009, p. 32).

- **Word Choice** - Creating rich and descriptive language through the use of strong adjectives, adverbs, verbs, etc.
- **Characterization** - Using vivid action, description, and dialogue to depict characters



Using Mentor Texts to Introduce Memoirs (continued)

- **Setting** - Establishing a clear sense of location and time so that the reader can visualize when and where the story takes place
- **Theme** - A central idea that the author conveys to their audience through storytelling
- **Mood** - Setting a tone and evoking an emotional response from the reader to the text



Using Mentor Texts to Introduce Memoirs (continued)

- **Voice** - The point-of-view of the author that helps the reader better understand their identity and personality
- **Structures** - Examples include vignettes, “single event” stories, “circular structure” stories, and graphic novels
- **Techniques** - Examples include “hooks”, repetition, flashbacks and flashforwards, and opening a memoir with dialogue



Write and Discuss

Read an excerpt from one of the provided memoirs. Which literary element(s) do you think the author successfully uses? Identify some examples of the literary element(s) within the text.

Memoirs	Literary Elements
<i>The Other Wes Moore</i> by Wes Moore	Word Choice
<i>Born a Crime</i> by Trevor Noah	Characterization
<i>Semi Well-Adjusted Despite Literally Everything</i> by Alyson Stoner	Setting
<i>Educated</i> by Tara Westover	Theme
<i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel	Mood
	Voice
	Structures
	Techniques



Strategies for Finding Inspiration

- Students should spend a majority of the writing process (about 85%) on prewriting (Murray, 1972, p. 4).
- Dedicate ample time to introducing several strategies to your students to help them discover important and interesting moments throughout their lives (e.g., joys, traumas, epiphanies, paradoxes, etc.) (Conter et al., 2026, p. 11).

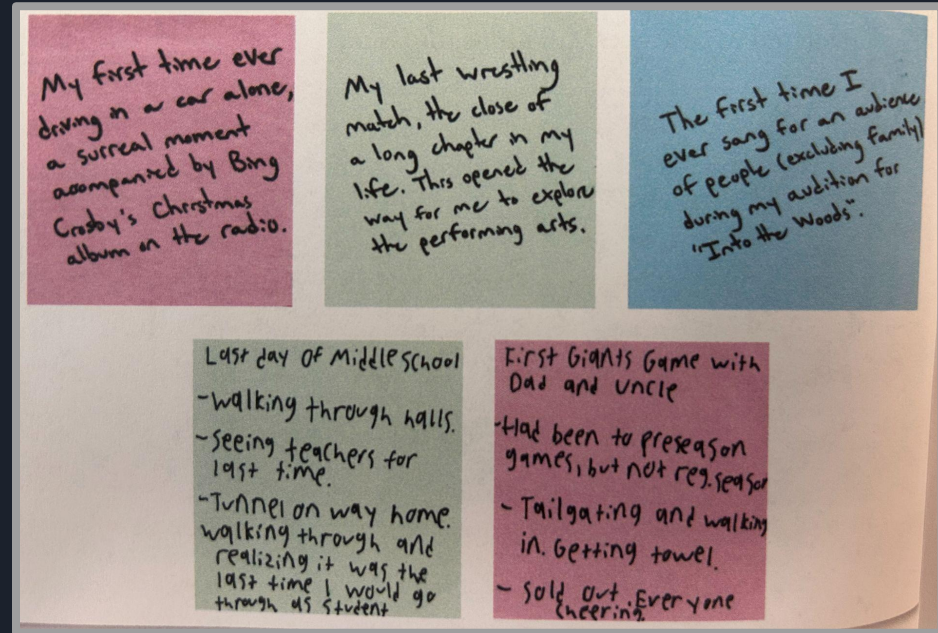


Strategies for Finding Inspiration (continued)

- Encourage students to write about as many moments as possible. Ultimately, they may detect patterns within their life experiences and choose to combine various moments and/or ideas into a single cohesive story (Conter et al., 2026, p. 12).
- Model these strategies with your own writing so that students witness you taking risks, reflecting, and arriving at new realizations (Conter et al., 2026, p. 12).

"Firsts and Lasts"

- "Firsts and lasts" refers to either the first or last time someone felt, realized, or experienced something meaningful (Conter et al., 2026, p. 19).
- Students can also choose to write about the first time they experienced/became aware of social issues or norms (Conter et al., 2026, p. 19).
- Encourage students to write their firsts/lasts on sticky notes and to consider why these moments mattered in the past and why they matter now.



(Conter et al., 2026, p. 20)

Exploring Issues, People, and Moments

People	Emotions/Issues	Moments
Kendall	Embarrassment Lying Good times- middle school	Our lying moments- even recently with her
Mom	Disappointment in my grades- under appreciated.	Calling mom to talk about grades when she's taking care of grandma- didn't go well.
Yankee (Dog)	My forgetfulness with walks	Always waiting by door but forget to go straight home- then think of him and feel bad.
Monroy	Being mean and feeling bad	Best friend, but moments when I take things too far. Moments of support system, like with grades.

(Conter et al., 2026, p. 27)

- Have students create a list of issues and people that have “moments of strong emotions” attached to them.
- As students identify these moments, they might begin to realize that a single moment contains multiple emotions and themes. These types of moments can be the basis for interesting and complex memoirs (Conter et al., 2026, p. 26).
- Encourage students to list people that they spend a lot of time with or things that they do frequently. Then, ask them which positive and/or negative emotions they associate with those people/things.



Write and Discuss

- Immediately after students practice these strategies, provide time for them to free-write in their writer's notebooks to expand upon their ideas. Once they have written about 2-3 entries, they will have a better sense of which story to choose for their memoir (Conter et al., 2026, p. 13).
- Now, choose one of your ideas from either the “First and Lasts” strategy or the “Exploring Issues, People, and Moments” strategy to expand on in a free-write. When writing, go into a higher level of detail to explain the topic itself and why it matters. This entry could be the start of your memoir!



Closure

What do you think is the value in having students, especially adolescents, read and write memoirs? What can they gain from engaging with this specific genre?