

The Memoir: Preserving the Past

A memoir is a personal essay about a significant memory in the author's life that uses narrative devices, like:

- **setting**
- **character**
- **dialogue.**

Strong memoirs are written by finding an **appropriate structure**, using **vivid detail** and examining the memory's **significance**.

Material

Memoirs do not need painful or traumatic incidents to make powerful, effective stories. Great stories come from some vivid recollection that causes us to explore our own understanding of the world. Stories can come from:

- a favorite place
- a favorite interest or hobby
- interesting family, friends
- community, cultural, or social relations

Poet and author Joyce Carol Oates wrote her essay "They All Just Went Away" about her love of exploring old, abandoned houses. Choose a memory that has special significance or meaning to develop into an essay.

Structure

Memoirs portray your experience using a creative structure. You can tell the story:

- as a flashback
- out of sequence
- in different, related sections

Try to structure the story to fit the memory's essence or theme. If you are writing about the joy of camping, or spending time at the beach, you might start in the present day sitting on the shore looking out to sea, then flash back to a memory of taking a family holiday to the ocean.

Specific Detail

Vivid, specific detail transforms a memory into a memoir. Use the five senses throughout your telling of the story:

- colors

- smells
- sounds
- textures
- flavors

Use those details to create the story. A story about the beach might describe the cold brace of salt on the skin drying in the hot sun, the warmth of sand between your toes, the grit of the wind whipping across the shoreline. Making the details as specific as possible will make them come alive for the reader.

Character and Conflict

Stories should include:

- dynamic, memorable characters
- deal with conflict
- describe key players physical attributes
- create their voices in dialogue

In memoirs, conflict is typically the emotions the author is attempting to sort out or make sense of. Conflict in the beach story could be the sense of nostalgia you feel because your whole family is rarely together anymore, perhaps because siblings have gone off to college. Telling the story can be your way of returning to a happy moment in the past.

Conclusion and Significance

By the end, readers should have a clear idea of why this memory is so important to you. Conclude your essay in a way that fits the piece. Don't explicitly state that the beach vacations taught you the importance of family time. Instead, maybe contrast the feeling of togetherness in the past with the solitude you feel by yourself. Whether you state it directly or use literary devices like imagery, make sure your audience knows why the event was significant.

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