



## Writing a Memoir

A memoir is similar to a narrative essay in that it tells a story about a personal experience using narrative devices such as setting, character, and dialogue. However, memoirs focus on an individual and include multiple events, whereas narrative essays typically center on one specific event.

### Memoirs in College Writing

#### Prove a Point

In college writing, memoirs should prove a point by discussing, in a logical order, events or a time in a person's life.

*Example:* In a memoir about a semester abroad, the purpose might be to show what the author learned about the country's culture while living internationally.

#### Do Not Just Tell a Story

Choose specific events or a time in a person's life that can be organized in a logical manner to support a thesis.

*Example:* In a memoir above a semester abroad, the author would choose events and details that *specifically demonstrate* what he or she learned about the country's culture.

### Types of Memoir Organization

#### Chronological Order

A memoir may present events in the exact order in which they occurred. Chronological order moves from the beginning to the end, from first to last.

#### Begin with the Middle or End

A memoir may also begin with the middle or end of the story for variety. Then, the events prior to that particular point in the story may be presented.

#### Flashbacks

A memoir can begin with the present and use a series of flashbacks to tell the story.

*\*\*Regardless of organizational style, memoirs written for college courses should always include an introductory paragraph and thesis statement.*

### Make the Memoir Interesting

#### Use Detail

The reader needs to visualize the details discussed in the essay. Use imagery and give specific information, such as the time of day, precise dates, and exact locations to inform the thesis.

#### Vary Sentences

Do not begin every sentence the same way. Also, avoid using sentences that have the same pattern; instead, use a variety of sentence structures, like a novel would.

*Instead of:* I traveled for a semester in Italy. I learned a lot about how different its culture is. Food is very important to people there, and they express their feelings much more openly.

*Try:* Last spring, I took a leap of faith and spent the semester studying abroad in Italy. While I studied the Italian language and people for three years in high school, nothing compares to experiencing their unique and vibrant culture first-hand. I stayed first in Rome where I took a culinary class. Preparing traditional Italian recipes with passionate chefs taught me about the

importance of beautiful and tasty food in their culture. Next, I stayed in Florence where I was hosted by a young Italian couple. They gave me many opportunities to practice my Italian and taught me that expressing feelings openly is a normal part of Italian culture.

### **Use Dialogue**

Dialogue develops characters and makes memoirs more interesting. A reader would rather hear specific people speak than read about them.

### **Use Consistent Verb Tense**

Be sure to keep verb tense consistent so that the reader can understand the sequence of events. However, there are times when intentionally changing verb tense to reflect a time shift is appropriate. For example, when using flashbacks, the verb tense may shift from present to past tense.

### **Use Transitions**

Words and phrases that connect different sentences not only help organize the essay, they also help readers know the order of the events and indicate time changes.

*Examples:* First, second, next, meanwhile, immediately, earlier, after, finally, etc. Check out our [Transitions](#) handout for more examples.

## **Basic Structure of a Memoir**

### **Introduction**

Present the topic and, at the end of the introduction, state the thesis or point that essay strives to prove. See the University Writing Center's handout [Writing a Thesis](#) for more information.

### **Body**

Present the series of events or time in a person's life that prove the thesis statement.

### **Conclusion**

Restate the thesis statement at the beginning of the conclusion and bring closure to the story.

## **Example of an Informal Outline for a Memoir**

**Introduction:** *Thesis Statement:* My time studying abroad in Italy taught me about its unique culinary, emotional, and family culture.

**Body 1:** Preparing traditional Italian recipes with passionate chefs taught me about the importance of beautiful and tasty food in Italian culture.

**Body 2:** While living with my host family in Florence, I learned that expressing feelings openly is a normal part of Italian culture.

**Body 3:** Toward the end of my trip, while living with a family in Venice, I learned that family always comes first in Italy.

**Conclusion:** *Restate Thesis:* A semester abroad in Italy taught me that its culinary, emotional, and family culture all greatly differ from culture in the United States.

*\*\*Note that it is often appropriate to use first-person voice for memoirs (I, me, we, our, etc.).*

Kirszner, Laurie G., and Stephen R. Mandell. *Patterns for College Writing: A Rhetorical Reader and Guide*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. Print.