

ART OF TELLING • CRAFT HANDOUT

Writing the Memoir

Types, Techniques, and Model Outlines — A Craft Handout

Adapted from classic and contemporary published memoirs, for students beginning their own memoir work in the Art of Telling memoir unit.

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How to Use This Handout

This handout is the craft reference for the memoir unit. It is organized in five parts, and you do not need to read them in order.

- **Part One** defines what separates memoir from autobiography. Read this first if the distinction is new to you.
- **Part Two** is the reference core: ten memoir types, each with its techniques, a published example, and a model outline. Find the one or two types that match your material.
- **Part Three** is a technique table that applies to every type. Use it as a revision checklist once you have pages.
- **Part Four** gives three general-purpose outlines when none of the ten type-specific outlines quite fits your material's shape.
- **Part Five** is the most important part. It explains how to use everything above without letting it flatten your work.

Before you start

These outlines are descriptive, not prescriptive. They map patterns visible in finished books; they are not templates the original authors filled in. Read Part Five before you outline anything.

Part One: What a Memoir Is (and Isn't)

A memoir is not a full autobiography. An autobiography tries to cover an entire life, chronologically, from birth to the present. A memoir is narrower and more deliberate: it selects one thread, one relationship, one period, or one question, and follows it closely enough to reveal a larger truth. The organizing principle of a memoir is not “what happened to me” but “what does this particular slice of my life mean, and to whom is it being told?”

Every strong memoir has three things working together:

- **A controlling theme or question** — the idea the whole book is quietly arguing (What does it mean to be free? How do you forgive a parent? What survives loss?).
- **A narrating consciousness** — the older, reflective “I” looking back at the younger “I” who lived the events. The gap between these two selves is where a memoir's wisdom lives.
- **Scene-based storytelling** — memoirists borrow the tools of fiction (scene, dialogue, sensory detail, tension) rather than simply reporting facts.

Below are the major memoir types students most often choose from, the techniques associated with each, a published example, and a model outline. Treat these categories as flexible lenses, not locked boxes — many great memoirs blend two or three types.

Part Two: Main Types of Memoir

1. The Coming-of-Age / Childhood Memoir

Focus: Growing up inside an unusual, difficult, or formative family and household; the process of a young narrator making sense of the adult world.

Key techniques

- Child's-eye narration filtered through adult understanding — the narrator lets young perceptions stand, then quietly corrects or complicates them in retrospect
- Episodic scene structure, moving forward through specific incidents rather than summarizing years at once
- Recurring objects or images that carry symbolic weight across the book
- Dark or painful material rendered with restraint, humor, or irony rather than melodrama

Published example

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls (2005) follows the author's unconventional, poverty-stricken, nomadic childhood with brilliant, unstable parents.

Source: [The Glass Castle — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Opening image/frame: a present-day moment that foreshadows the book's central tension
- Establishing the world: introduce family, place, and the “normal” the child accepts
- The cracks appear: early scenes showing instability, danger, or difference from other families
- Escalation: a series of episodes in which the family situation worsens or repeats a destructive pattern
- The turning scene: a single event that changes the narrator's understanding of a parent or of “home”
- Departure: the narrator leaves the household, physically or psychologically
- Return/reflection: a closing scene, often years later, showing what was carried forward and what was left behind

2. The Trauma / Survival Memoir

Focus: Living through and surviving a specific traumatic experience — abuse, war, captivity, disaster, violence.

Key techniques

- Careful pacing of disclosure — the writer controls when and how much the reader learns
- Present-tense or highly sensory scene-writing during traumatic moments, to convey immediacy
- Contrast between the surviving self who narrates and the endangered self who experienced the event
- Attention to the body — physical sensation, silence, dissociation — as a way of conveying what language alone cannot

Published example

Educated by Tara Westover (2018) is an account of growing up in a survivalist family without formal schooling and the psychological cost of eventually leaving.

Source: [Educated \(memoir\) — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Prologue: a charged image or scene that signals the stakes without giving away the ending
- Origins of the trauma: establish the system, belief, or relationship that will cause harm
- Normalization: show how the narrator came to accept the abnormal as normal
- Inciting rupture: the first moment the narrator senses something is wrong
- Rising danger: a sequence of escalating incidents
- The break: the decisive act of leaving, resisting, or surviving
- Aftermath: the long, nonlinear work of recovery, including setbacks
- Integration: how the narrator now carries the experience — making meaning of it, not simply moving past it

3. The Grief / Loss Memoir

Focus: Mourning a death, or another profound loss, and the process of living alongside absence.

Key techniques

- Nonlinear, associative structure that mimics how grief actually moves — looping back to the same memory from different angles
- Close, almost clinical attention to ordinary details as a way of holding on to the person
- Direct essayistic reflection interspersed with narrative scene
- Refusal of tidy resolution — grief memoirs often end in an altered relationship to loss, not a “cure”

Published example

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion (2005) was written after the sudden death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne.

Source: [The Year of Magical Thinking — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- The moment of loss, rendered in precise, unflinching detail
- Immediate aftermath: the disorientation of ritual, paperwork, and other people's condolences
- The relationship, in memory: braided scenes from the shared life, chosen for what they reveal, not for chronology
- Magical thinking: moments of irrational hope, denial, or bargaining that grief produces
- Confrontation with permanence: a scene or realization that forces acceptance of the loss's finality
- A changed self: how daily life, identity, or worldview has been altered
- Closing meditation that holds loss and continuation together

4. The Journey / Travel Memoir

Focus: A physical journey — hike, pilgrimage, expedition, relocation — that mirrors an inner psychological or emotional journey.

Key techniques

- Parallel structure: the external trip's stages map onto internal stages of healing or self-discovery
- Rich sensory and geographic detail establishing a strong sense of place
- Encounters with strangers who function as mirrors, foils, or catalysts
- Flashbacks to the “why” behind the journey, interwoven with forward movement

Published example

Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail by Cheryl Strayed (2012) is a solo backpacking memoir undertaken after the death of the author's mother and the collapse of her marriage.

Source: [Wild \(memoir\) — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Departure point: what crisis or emptiness sends the narrator on the journey
- First steps, first doubts: early physical and emotional struggle establishing real stakes
- Flashback thread begins: interwoven scenes revealing the backstory that motivated the trip

- Midpoint low point: a crisis on the journey that seems to confirm the trip was a mistake
- A shift in relationship to the land or journey: the external challenge starts to become manageable, or meaningful
- Parallel resolution: the internal wound and the external journey reach convergence
- Arrival: not a perfect ending, but a changed relationship to the original loss or crisis

5. The Addiction / Recovery Memoir

Focus: Descent into and recovery from addiction — substances, behaviors — often including relapse.

Key techniques

- Unreliable or self-deceiving narration during the addiction period, later corrected by the reflective narrator
- Dark comedy or irony used to keep material from becoming self-pitying
- Precise cataloguing of rituals, rationalizations, and the addict's internal logic
- Honest depiction of relapse and non-linear recovery, avoiding a falsely triumphant arc

Published example

Dry: A Memoir by Augusten Burroughs (2003) chronicles alcoholism, an advertising career, and rehab.

Source: [Dry \(memoir\) — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Rock bottom, glimpsed early: a brief flash-forward scene showing the low point
- How it began: origins of the behavior, often tied to family or trauma
- The seduction stage: scenes showing what the addiction offered or provided
- Escalation and cost: mounting consequences the narrator minimizes or hides
- Rock bottom, in full: the scene that finally forces a reckoning
- Treatment or attempt at recovery, including resistance, humor, and setbacks
- Relapse or near-relapse, if applicable: honest acknowledgment that recovery isn't linear
- A provisional peace: an ending grounded in ongoing effort rather than a “cured” state

6. The Illness / Medical Memoir

Focus: Living with, treating, or dying from a serious illness; often written by the patient or a close caregiver.

Key techniques

- Merging of clinical/medical language with lyrical or philosophical reflection
- Use of the illness as a lens for re-examining the narrator's values, career, and relationships
- Direct address to mortality, often including passages written in full awareness of an approaching ending
- Structural urgency — shorter chapters, present-tense immediacy, or a race against time built into the pacing

Published example

When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi (2016) was written by a neurosurgeon during his own terminal cancer diagnosis, reflecting on medicine, mortality, and meaning.

Source: [When Breath Becomes Air — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Life before diagnosis: establish who the narrator was and what they valued
- The diagnosis scene, rendered with clinical precision and emotional weight
- Reordering priorities: how the narrator's sense of time and purpose shifts
- Treatment and its toll: scenes of medical experience from the patient's, not just the doctor's, side
- Philosophical interlude(s): direct reflection on meaning, mortality, identity, or vocation
- Relationships tested and deepened by illness
- Closing reflection, often addressed to the future rather than resolved for the narrator alone

7. The Identity / Cultural Memoir

Focus: Navigating race, ethnicity, immigration, gender, class, or cultural dislocation; often moving between two worlds or languages.

Key techniques

- Code-switching in language, tone, or structure to reflect movement between cultures
- Juxtaposition of personal anecdote with cultural, historical, or political context
- Myth, folklore, or family legend woven into personal narrative to show inherited identity
- Humor and irony used to navigate serious material about prejudice or displacement

Published example

Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood by Trevor Noah (2016) traces growing up mixed-race under and after apartheid; *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston (1976) blends Chinese folklore with a Chinese-American girlhood.

Source: [Born a Crime — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Two worlds established: show the cultural, linguistic, or social duality the narrator lives inside
- A defining incident of difference: a scene where the narrator is made to feel “other” or caught between worlds
- Family/inherited history: draw in ancestral story, myth, or historical context
- Navigating both worlds: episodes showing strategies of code-switching, resistance, or adaptation
- A crisis of belonging: a moment forcing a choice or reckoning between identities
- Synthesis: not choosing one identity over the other, but arriving at an integrated sense of self
- Closing statement, often a direct claim about what the narrator's hybrid identity has taught them

8. The Career / Vocational Memoir

Focus: Life inside a demanding profession or industry, using the workplace as the memoir's central world.

Key techniques

- Insider vocabulary and detail that builds authority and immersion
- Character sketches of colleagues and mentors as vivid as any family member elsewhere in memoir
- A through-line of ambition, disillusionment, or mastery tracked across the career's stages
- Anecdote-driven chapters, often loosely chronological rather than tightly plotted

Published example

Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly by Anthony Bourdain (2000) recounts the restaurant industry through the author's own rise through professional kitchens.

Source: [Kitchen Confidential — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Origin of the calling: the early scene or exposure that pulled the narrator toward the profession
- Apprenticeship: scenes of learning the trade, often under a difficult mentor

- Insider world-building: chapters devoted to how the profession actually works, rendered vividly
- Rise and success: the narrator's growing competence or status
- The cost: what the profession demanded — personally, physically, or ethically
- A reckoning: a moment of crisis, disillusionment, or clarity about the profession's true nature
- Where it leaves the narrator: closing reflection on what the career gave and took

9. The Family / Relationship Memoir

Focus: A single relationship — a parent, sibling, spouse, child — examined in depth, often across many years.

Key techniques

- Structure organized around the relationship rather than strict chronology
- Dual timelines: the relationship as it was, and the process of writing/understanding it now
- Visual or hybrid forms, as in graphic memoir, to represent complex emotional material
- Willingness to hold contradictory truths about a beloved but flawed person

Published example

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel (2006) is a graphic memoir examining the author's relationship with her closeted father and her own coming out.

Source: [Fun Home — Wikipedia](#)

Model outline

- Introduce the relationship's central paradox — the contradiction that will drive the book
- Formative early scenes: the texture of the relationship in childhood or its early stages
- Recurring patterns: scenes showing the relationship's repeating dynamic
- A hidden truth surfaces: a secret, revelation, or long-unspoken fact that changes the narrator's understanding
- Confrontation or estrangement: a scene of open conflict or distance
- The other person's inner life imagined or investigated
- Resolution or acceptance — not necessarily reconciliation, but a settled understanding of who this person was and what they meant

10. The Place / Nature Memoir

Focus: A specific landscape, ecosystem, or physical practice — falconry, farming, mountaineering — used as the vehicle for personal transformation, often during grief or crisis.

Key techniques

- Deep naturalist detail and precise vocabulary for landscape, weather, and animal behavior
- Braiding of natural history or science writing with personal narrative
- The nonhuman subject as a structuring metaphor for the narrator's inner state
- Slow, contemplative pacing that mirrors immersion in a place or practice

Published example

H Is for Hawk by Helen Macdonald (2014) interweaves the author's grief over her father's death with the process of training a goshawk.

Source: [Analysis of memory and grief in H Is for Hawk](#)

Model outline

- The crisis that sends the narrator to the place or practice: loss, burnout, or dislocation
- Learning the practice or place: detailed scenes of acquiring skill or knowledge
- The practice as displacement: show how immersion in the nonhuman world is also an avoidance of grief or pain
- Parallel narrative thread: interwoven material — literary, historical, biographical — that comments on the main story
- A moment of danger or failure that mirrors an emotional setback
- Breakthrough: mastery of the place or practice coincides with emotional insight
- Integration: the narrator returns changed to ordinary human life, carrying what the place or practice taught

Part Three: Techniques Common Across All Memoir

Regardless of type, strong memoirists reliably use these craft tools. Identify which of these you are using — and which you are neglecting — in every draft.

Technique	What it does	How to practice it
Scene vs. summary	Scene (dramatized, moment-by-moment with dialogue and sensory detail) creates immersion; summary compresses time. Memoirs balance both.	Mark each paragraph in a draft as “scene” or “summary.” Aim for scenes at emotional peaks, summary in between.
The double perspective	The narrating “I” (who knows how things turned out) and the experiencing “I” (who didn’t) create irony, foreshadowing, and depth.	Write one paragraph from inside the moment with no hindsight, then one where the older narrator comments on it.
Selective memory / emotional truth	Memoir is not a transcript; writers select, compress, and reconstruct dialogue in service of the story’s larger truth, while staying honest about essential facts.	When reconstructing dialogue you can’t remember exactly, note in the margin: “reconstructed for essential truth, not verbatim.”
Sensory and concrete detail	Specific, physical detail — smell, texture, sound — makes remembered scenes vivid and credible.	Revise a scene by adding at least one detail from a sense other than sight.
Structure and time management	Memoirs rarely run strictly chronologically; framing devices, flash-forwards, and braided timelines control pacing and meaning.	Outline the same material two ways — strict chronology, then braided/nonlinear — and compare which serves the theme.
A controlling theme or question	The single idea the book is really about, which every chapter should serve even indirectly.	Write the theme as one sentence and pin it above your desk; test each chapter against it.
Character on the page	Real people become vivid characters through action, dialogue, and specific behavior — not just description or judgment.	For each major person, list three specific behaviors, not adjectives, that reveal who they are.
Voice	The narrator’s particular way of seeing and saying — diction, rhythm, humor, formality — that makes the book unmistakably theirs.	Read a page aloud; if it could have been written by anyone, revise until it sounds like no one but you.

Part Four: Sample Master Outlines

These three general-purpose outlines work across most of the types above. Pick the one whose shape matches your material, then adapt it using the type-specific outline that fits your subject.

A. The Classic Arc Outline

Best for a single, bounded experience.

- Opening scene / hook — a moment that contains the book's central tension in miniature
- Establishing context — world, relationships, “the way things were”
- Inciting incident — what disrupts the status quo
- Rising complications — a sequence of escalating scenes
- Crisis / turning point — the moment of greatest stakes or change
- Falling action / consequences
- Resolution and reflection — what the narrator understands now that they didn't then

B. The Braided / Nonlinear Outline

Best for grief, illness, or identity material.

- Present-day frame — where the narrator is now, and why they're telling this story
- Thread A: the past narrative, told mostly in scene, moving roughly forward
- Thread B: reflective, essayistic material — research, memory fragments, other people's stories — interwoven at intervals
- Points of convergence, where Thread A and Thread B illuminate each other
- A late scene where past and present meet directly — a return, a confrontation, a discovery
- Closing meditation that holds the past and present together, without fully resolving the tension

C. The Thematic / Episodic Outline

Best for career, place, or long-span family memoirs.

- A frame chapter establishing the book's central theme or metaphor
- A series of self-contained episodes/chapters, each illustrating a facet of the theme, loosely chronological but not plot-driven
- A recurring image, object, or question that reappears across episodes to create unity

- A “turn” chapter roughly two-thirds through, where the narrator's understanding of the theme visibly shifts
- Later episodes that reflect the shifted understanding
- A closing chapter that names, directly, what the whole book has been circling

Part Five: How to Use These Models — Not Follow Them

The single most important lesson

No published memoir was actually written from an outline like these. These outlines are retrospective maps — patterns critics and teachers can see after the fact — not formulas the original writers filled in. Use them the way a sculptor uses an armature: as an internal support structure that will be entirely invisible in the finished work.

1. Choose the type by instinct, then test it

Ask which of the ten types your material most resembles. Don't force material into a category it resists — a story of childhood illness might really be a family memoir, not a medical one, depending on where the emotional center actually sits.

2. Identify the real theme before outlining

Write your theme as a single sentence before choosing an outline. The outline exists to serve the theme, not the reverse. If a scene doesn't serve the theme, it can be cut even if it “really happened.”

3. Draft scenes first, structure second

Write five to eight of your most vivid, specific scenes before trying to sequence them. Sequencing raw material is far easier than outlining an empty structure and trying to force memory into it.

4. Blend types freely

H Is for Hawk is both a nature memoir and a grief memoir; Fun Home is both a family memoir and an identity memoir. Two types combined honestly is stronger than one type forced.

5. Let structure follow the shape of the material, not the calendar

If the true emotional shape of your story is circular, associative, or centered on a single relationship rather than a single timeline, choose the braided or thematic outline over the classic arc — chronology is a tool, not an obligation.

6. Protect the double perspective

Whatever outline you use, build in deliberate moments where your older, reflective narrator speaks directly — this is often what separates memoir from mere reportage of the past.

7. Revise the outline after the first draft, not just before it

The outline made before drafting is a hypothesis. After a full draft exists, re-outline what you actually wrote, scene by scene, to see where structure has drifted from theme — and revise accordingly.

8. Use the model as a diagnostic, not a cage

If a draft feels inert, check it against the relevant outline: Is there an inciting incident? A turning point? A moment of double perspective? Often what's missing is one specific structural beat, not an entirely new plan.

Sources

Published memoirs referenced throughout this handout, with sources for the summaries given:

- *The Glass Castle* — Jeannette Walls (2005). [Wikipedia](#)
- *Educated* — Tara Westover (2018). [Wikipedia](#)
- *The Year of Magical Thinking* — Joan Didion (2005). [Wikipedia](#)
- *Wild* — Cheryl Strayed (2012). [Wikipedia](#)
- *Dry* — Augusten Burroughs (2003). [Wikipedia](#)
- *When Breath Becomes Air* — Paul Kalanithi (2016). [Wikipedia](#) and [NPR](#)
- *Born a Crime* — Trevor Noah (2016). [Wikipedia](#)
- *The Woman Warrior* — Maxine Hong Kingston (1976). [Wikipedia](#)
- *Kitchen Confidential* — Anthony Bourdain (2000). [Wikipedia](#)
- *Fun Home* — Alison Bechdel (2006). [Wikipedia](#)
- *H Is for Hawk* — Helen Macdonald (2014). [Scholarly analysis of memory and grief in the book](#)