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books, cats, coffee and the antics of her idiot neighbors—most of which ends up on her blog,

make a memoir. But really, an assignment called memoir—often titled the less scary but still ambiguous "personal narrative"—is just an essay about the subject matter we know the best: ourselves.

Describe an experience that had meaning or significance to you ...

Focus on a person, place, object or event that is important to you and tell me a story from your life ...

Choose a significant moment from your life that took place in ten minutes or less; try to choose a moment that was not obviously life-altering...

All of these statements have made their way into descriptions of memoir assignments at one time or another.¹ Many—okay, I'd say most—of the wordings lend themselves to writing about *one thing* that *happened*. Since the implication is that there has to be *action*, we start thinking about events. Writing about an event seems like a good idea because we're guaranteed that something will have changed by the end of the story, that there will be action—and our instructors want essays with action. And describing a single event seems like a good notion for a paper that's going to be somewhere between three and seven pages (length varies by instructor). So keep it simple, right? But what constitutes an event?

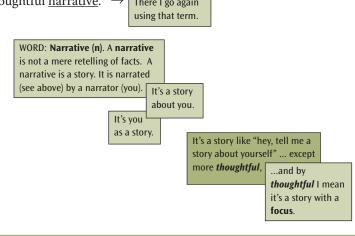
When we boil our lives down to update emails or phone calls back home—better yet, a phone call to the grandparents—we tend to highlight the big stuff.

I graduated this weekend. The ceremony was really boring but I decorated my cap to look really cool...My spring break trip was awesome. First the cruise ship stopped at St. Johns, then Key Largo, and then we went parasailing.

But "events" don't necessarily have to be something momentous, or something you'd even bother to tell your grandmother, they can be completely mundane. Opening my toothpaste cap this morning was an event. I don't think anything was directly connected to it, but it could have been the event that made me late and set off the worst day ever. Going to the Animal Rescue the day I got my kitten is an event. Not a major one—a day slightly out of the ordinary, yes, but certainly not the kind of essay with a long list of events/steps to narrate.

What does this mean anyway? WORD: Narrate
(v). In its most basic form narrating is describing, building the world in words ... narrating is the difference between telling and storytelling.

It's also not the kind of writing that lends itself to a cheesy summation in the final line such as *it was one of the most wonderful days of my life*, or *I've learned so much from my kitten*, my kitten and I have learned so *much from each other*... The truth is that I've only had her for two weeks and the most I've learned is to watch where I step (she is constantly underfoot) and she's learned that meowing long enough will produce someone with opposable thumbs to pour more kibble. And the *truth* is much more interesting. But the even bigger, brighter truth is that our instructor isn't looking for a neat, clean, tidy "end line," she's looking for a thoughtful narrative. \rightarrow There I go again



Part One: Thesis vs. Focus

Here's where the notion of a memoir as a personal essay gets tricky: it doesn't need a thesis \rightarrow it needs a focus.

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Real World Example: In Geeta Kothari's "If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?" Kothari focuses on food to tell her narrative. In fact, each of her numbered sections are about food in one way or another—and she uses these anecdotes, this string of mini-stories, to describe her social awkwardness as an immigrant to the United States and her false sense of security as a visitor to her parents' native India. Though Kothari never gives us a thesis statement that says *this is an essay on food, family and culture, this essay will demonstrate the difficulties of living in a non-native culture as proven through the differing uses of food,* we fully understand that she has shown us exactly that by narrowing her focus to food.

She opens the entire memoir by leaping directly in to one of her food mini-stories:

The first time my mother and I open a can of tuna, I am nine years old. We stand in the doorway of the kitchen, in semi-darkness, the can tilted toward daylight. I want to eat what the kids at school eat: bologna, hot dogs, salami—foods my parents find repugnant because they contain pork and meat by-products, crushed bone and hair glued together by chemicals and fat. Although she has never been able to tolerate the smell of fish, my mother buys the tuna, hoping to satisfy my longing for American food. And then, in a one line paragraph, Kothari hits us with the main conflict of her entire piece, the single fact that gives her memoir tension *and* focus:

Indians, of course, do not eat such things.

(So) if we need a focus, not a thesis, writing down the step-by-step actions of a single event would be a bad idea. Example of a bad idea:

the auditorium my (Action 3) Then my seats while I lined u seniors. (Action 4) V (Add subjective deta The ceremony took	ny gown and cap. (Action 2) Outside friends and I took lots of pictures. parents had to go inside to get p with the rest of the graduating Ve processed into the auditorium. iil) It was really hot inside. (Action 5) over an hour but I can't remember er said, I was too anxious to walk I get my diploma. DNE'S OUT ² >	This example is packed with step- by-step telling (it would be step- by-step <i>narration</i> if the author described more physical and emotional details and explained their importance in the context of
	Consider: What makes facts boring and stories interesting?	

(So) if we can't just jot down the events in chronological order, how are we ever going to come up with 3–7 pages to turn in? I suggest **starting with detail**, and allowing ourselves the chance to have detail lead us to everything else we need.

[Take freewrite time in class to jot down things you remember in detail]

Let's say I'm writing about a time when I was sixteen and I get to a point where I write: *We got into the car*.

What about that sentence is narration? Yes, it is a listing, in written form —but is it narration? Does it give the reader any insight into my life at the time? Does it let the reader see what I saw? Does it tell show the feelings produced by getting into the car?

A specific, useful detail will paint a picture for the reader. It means that if you put the reader down in the time and place of the actual story, they wouldn't be disoriented. So what if we broke it down to give the reader more detail...

Part Two: Detail

Let's say we start by thinking of an event, and the start of that event involves getting into a car and driving someplace. We write *We got into the car*. Yes, that's what we did, but what a boring sentence! Why is it boring? There's absolutely nothing interesting being told to the reader. There's no detail. To be more interesting we need to elaborate.

Detail Elaboration:

We got into the car. The car we got into was <u>my first</u> car. → unhelpful det	tail	Unhelpful is describe provides n simply "th that descri something and NOTH How would know wha looked like them?	ed, "n nore e". <i>H</i> ptior to th ING t d any t my	detail thar owever, n means ne writer to the read yone else first car	ı
the maroon $car \rightarrow$ generic detail a <u>maroon 1986 Dodge Dynasty</u> \rightarrow specific = ye \rightarrow useful = not really	s t	Generic detail: Well, at least color is something the reader can visualize, but it's still not much to help the reader see it—we			
The detail about the year is goodbut it's relative to something we don't yet know. The meaning of a "1986 Dodge Dynasty" changes drastically if I received the car in 1986 or in 2006 I'll need to then give my reader a reference point in the text if I want this to have any useful meaning		can do better			
My first car was a 1986 maroon Dodge Dynasty that the production line back when I was still in diapers. call it the Dynasty, although it was a huge boxy, bear easily be compared to an ancient empire, I called it t because the D had fallen off the driver's side decal. I in driver's ed. to adjust the seat to see over the wheel peddles and feel comfortable, but there was no doing 'ynasty. It had one long, maroon bench seat that did tilt, just sported a depression worn in by other driver past fourteen years. Instead of adjusting the seat, I h grandmother for a pillow to prop behind my back to My grandfather gave it to me free and clear once he about to turn sixteen. He was the kind of man who do extra cars sitting around. The kind of man who thou onto enough stuff he could buy, sell or trade his way deal. \rightarrow detail level = happiness	I ner st th the ') 'd be I, rea g tha g tha driv reali alwa ght	ver did vat could ynasty een taught ach the at in the slide, didn't er the to ask my ve it home. ized I was nys had if he held	deta it, a real I'm	h! now th ailed! I can is a reader, Ily know w dealing wi	see I hat

But we're not done yet.

I've written down a lot of specific, descriptive details here, but to what end? What's the point? All of the things I've written are good details – but just because something really was a certain way doesn't mean it's important to my memoir.

Items that are important to my memoir should somehow relate to my focus. Is the bit about my grandfather being *the kind of man who always had extra cars lying around* a **useful detail or a digression** that would lead the reader away from the main focus of my essay? That depends on what my focus is.

In the description of my car I have two things going on:

- (1) the physical description of the car
- (2) my grandfather giving me the car.

Which is important?

This is where editing the first draft comes into play. I can walk away from this description and come back to it in a few days or a few hours and after rereading I can ask myself what it is that I want to develop this memoir into. Remember, we're letting the details lead us into something bigger. I can look at all the details I have lined up and decide if the memoir going to be about:

- (1) me and the cars I've owned and driven, perhaps the road trips that the car(s) have seen me through?
- (2) myself, my car and my grandfather?

If my focus is my first car, then the detail about my grandfather's habits becomes an unnecessary digression that leads the reader away from the focus of the story narrative: experiences with my car. A focus should be just that: something to focus the reader's attention on.

But what if this isn't an essay focused on my first car? What if this is really an essay about my relationship with my grandfather as focused through cars?

Describing a relationship as focused through cars is extremely impersonal, mechanical even. Consider the difference between telling a story through cars and telling a story through puppies we raised together or

baseball games that he coached me through. Except, in this case, using something impersonal is perfect. He never raised puppies or coached baseball. He wasn't that kind of man. And he and I were never close.

I think we stumbled on something brilliant here.

Idea in hand, I start jotting down notes, thinking of all the car stories I've heard about my grandfather (there are lots):

- Taxi service he owned
- Tour bus company...the only successful business he ever had
- Car he gave to me

CONSIDER: What am I willing to share about my personal life? This piece is going to be read by the instructor and most likely by other students if there is a peer review session

- That the sheriff issued him a driver's license when he was 14 because they knew he and his twin brother were driving without one and wanted at least one of them to be legal
- The year that he drove a riding mower because he'd had his license suspended for putting his car up on the rail of the <u>9th</u> <u>Street Bridge</u> on the way home from the bar

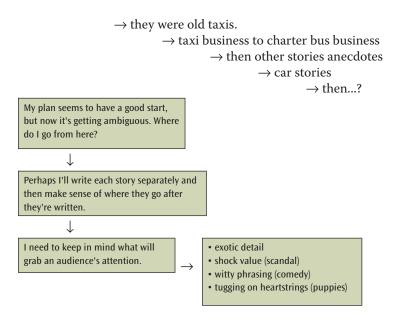
CONSIDER: Am I revealing something that is going to make me uncomfortable? In my case, the whole town knew—both about the riding mower and the drinking problem even if they didn't call it that—and now my family jokes about the stupidity of it so I'm okay with including it in my memoir. **CONSIDER:** Names as details. Specific names tell the reader more than you might think. Consider if I had just said "bridge" – we wouldn't know if it was a covered bridge or the Golden Gate Bridge. Using specific given names instead of generic names has an amazing way of *placing* the reader even if the reader has never been there before.

Part Three: Order

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So what about the order? Do I make the events chronological and start with my grandfather at fourteen? Or do I relay the anecdotes to the reader in the same order they were relayed to me by my family?

In this case, I think the second option suits my purpose better (check out the lists on the next page to see how order changes the feel of a story). I'll start with my car, then why he had cars lying about



There are a couple different ways to organize these small anecdotes into one long memoir. I've jotted down some notes to compare how two different orders affect the overall feeling of my memoir. **Chronological Order** Flowing from one detail to another Start with first event that happened > At 14, my grandfather and his twin roared Start with descriptive, personal detail down the country roads without a license. > My grandfather had a gritty, The Sheriff knew it was going on and phlegmy laugh. "You're turning 16, came to talk to their father; might as well eh?" He laughed. "Want a car?" make one of them legal. > I was floored. Of course I did! > He'd lose that license but he'd never give > Describe car...finish with: the car up driving. was left over from the taxi business > 20 years later he put the car up on the > The taxi started because there side of a bridge while drunk wasn't one in Alpena at the time. > Another 20 years pass and thanks to the It turned into a bus and a courier AA he's not losing his license anymore, service. he's driving taxi in his own business Bridge incident. > It turns into a bus business Riding lawn mower. He was gonna > He still has extra cars in his yard because show them. They couldn't keep him they're left over taxis when he realized I'm from driving. And they couldn't. about to turn 16 and gives me one. They didn't. No one ever did show The car is a piece. I describe in detail why him. it's so crappy. After reading my rough outline for a This order lets me link the events together as I see fit. The sequence chronological order I'm not very satisfied. By this account I know what happened but (order) of events allows me to they're just events. I don't get the chance further develop certain details that would have been hard to do in a to tell the events in a sequence that would make meaning. They're just events. They chronological version. It also allows don't relate to each other, instead they're me to withhold information until connected only by the person that lived later to produce a dramatic finish. them. There's no emotion. As a reader, there's nothing I can take away from it. I'm bored with this order and I'm the one telling the story! If I'm bored now there's no hope for my audience staying awake. Don't bore the reader!

The **purpose** of memoir is usually to entertain or instruct the **audience**, not to reiterate your vacation itinerary or the year-by-year account of my grandfather's life.

CONSIDER: A long series of "and then		
and thennextthen" might bore		
the reader. Try to find ways of connecting		
that are <i>more</i> than just chronological.		

CONSIDER: How can one detailed event connect to the next without "and then"? **CONSIDER**: Which events need to be cut because they're too mundane? But I still don't have an **introduction**.

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Part Four: Writing the Introduction I tend to see two methods to opening a memoir. (1) A generic "ramping up" method Ex: Blueberry, Casper the friendly white car, Katerina, Phoenix, Sparkle and the Black Devil who leaked carbon-monoxide through the air conditioner. These are the names of all my cars.3 The author builds up the reader with a generic list The "ramping up" method tends to of items (car names) to give the reader a general produce a thesis-like statement at the sense that this will be about cars without actually end of the paragraph: touching on any of the specifics of the actual memoir. which is sad They've taught me that no matter what's happened before, the next because we like car will have its own adventure in store. specifics

Given this "ramping up" followed by a thesis-like statement, we can assume that this memoir would look like an extremely traditional essay and deliver the adventure(s) experienced in the narrator's car(s).

(2) The "diving right in" method

Often starts with:

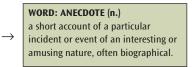
ACTION \rightarrow My grandfather put the keys in my hand and I couldn't believe it: my own car.

-OR

SPECIFIC DESCRIPTION OF A PLACE/OBJECT/PERSON \rightarrow *He had a course, gritty laugh that sounded like a combination of being an old man and a smoker. I'd never heard of him smoking, though he'd certainly spent enough time in the VFW bar to accumulate all the health problems of a smoker.*

This method reads more like a *story* than an essay.

Both methods work. They both get things started with detail. Since I want my memoir to be a story told in a series of anecdotes



of which I am a main character, I'm going to go with the action driven second option of "diving right in" and completely ignore the "ramping up" before the thesis statement because I don't need or want a thesis statement; I want a focus. Part Five: Trajectory ↓

So we've got a memoir, but where is it going to go? The memoir itself the document you made—that can go as far as you like, places are publishing memoirs all the time under the term "creative non-fiction." However, that's not the only path for these skills and ideas, almost all of them can be used to your advantage when writing in other genres.

Specific, useful details are necessary in any form of writing that hopes to be clear and concise. Can you imagine writing a "for sale" ad about your car without using specific detail? Or a police report? A crime scene investigation? What if you just told your tattoo artist you wanted "a bird"? Would you get a fighting eagle or a cartoon canary? Using specific, helpful details is always important.

Deliberate order is equally important. We should consider (re)ordering everything we write because how it occurs to us isn't necessarily the clearest way of understanding. Sometimes, an alternative order is clearer than a chronological one. Since there's no cut and dry rule for order we will always have to develop a reasonable order for our thoughts every time we write.

Appreciating the audience may just be the biggest concept we can take away from writing memoir. \rightarrow

Appreciating the audience means giving them specific details that they can wrap their minds around and concrete terms to sink their teeth in to. Appreciating the audience means constructing an order that fits the audience's need for clarity and understanding not our own. It means keeping them engaged and making them want to read more. It means dropping boring, redundant parts that don't add to the meaning or story. It means telling the story in a tone that makes them empathize with us or laugh with us. It means doing everything right to connect with someone else.

> Such a big concept that it didn't get its own section; instead, it underscored every part of our memoir writing.

END NOTES

- 1. Assignments from real classes provided courtesy of Amy Newday, Amanda Stearns and Eileen Wiedbrauk.
- 2. Advanced Skills: This type of "retelling of step-by-step action" *could* be part of a good narrative. You could intentionally try to create a staccato rhythm because you want to make the reader sleepy-bored and then spring a BIG event on the reader that they didn't see coming. This would be a way of using rhythm and pacing to create "shock

value," not unlike when a movie gets very tense and quite and then all of a sudden the camera cuts to a ringing phone and everyone in the audience jumps.

3. List of names and details graciously provided by Katheryn Dyall Nicely for this article. Mrs. Nicely has actually owned all those crazy cars.