

(Re)Making Memoir: A Story of Small Victories and Even Bigger Failures

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In this article, Amy Hicks explains the intricacies of and heartache associated with revisiting a genre of writing, the memoir, that she wrote (and abandoned midway through) years ago. She references Eileen Weidbrauk's "Making Memoir" during her quest to understand what went wrong when she attempted to compose a memoir, and then she looks to other published texts in this genre and online resources in order to identify generic conventions. But she doesn't stop there. Amy (valiantly) attempts to understand not only the features of the genre, but also how these traits "work" in the larger narrative and how they inform the world-building quality of memoir.

WARNING: This is not a story of girl meets memoir, girl and memoir fall in love, and the two of them move into a house with a white picket fence and live happily ever after. It's more like a story of girl meets memoir on a blind date; girl and memoir have differing opinions about politics, religion, and appropriate table manners; and they part with empty promises, such as "I'll text you" and "we should really do this again."

Tucked away in the deepest, darkest recesses of my computer's saved document folders, along with notes from my sophomore history class and a junior level poetry course, is my one and only attempt to write a memoir. I never sent these documents to my recycle bin because of a plaguing fear that I might need these documents again in order to recall certain historical events or recite a stanza from a T.S. Eliot poem as cocktail party tricks. But my attempt to write a memoir remains tucked away for a different reason: it's a story about a moment in my life that is not especially momentous, but memorable nonetheless. In my mind, this moment exemplifies love, courage, perseverance—the stuff "good" stories are made of. This story (about how my dear, sweet mother told a particularly odious referee to take a hike after

making my brother cry during a flag football game) is one that still comes up around the dinner table at home, one that still makes me laugh when it's retold. Dinner table tales typically sound a lot better, well, around the dinner table than after writing them down. Two paragraphs into "Pom-Pom" and I quickly realized that the title was the only aspect of my story that I actually liked. The details were clumsy, and the narrative's trajectory was stuck at point A, with no indication that the plot would move forward to point B, much less C, D, or E. I just couldn't get the story to communicate the elements of love, courage, and perseverance I mentioned above, even though I can call these things to mind through an oral recollection. Needless to say, my first stab at memoir left me frustrated. I was so frustrated that I tucked it away in my saved files, and the story has gathered (digital) dust for years.

I had failed at writing memoir. Miserably.

<Deep cleansing breath> But I think I'm ready to give it another try, or at the very least, to try and figure out what went so horribly, horribly wrong. After reading Eileen Wiedbrauk's "Making Memoir" in *The ISU Writing Research Annual* (2010), I realized that maybe I *could* gain a better understanding of this genre. Wiedbrauk explains the various criteria for memoir (which I will reference throughout this article), and this criteria should be able to help me successfully revisit "Pom-Pom." I also did some basic Google searches about memoir writing dos and don'ts so I can get an even better idea of what the conventions/features of this genre are and if they match up with what Wiedbrauk identifies in her article. And I've read some published memoirs, like Koren Zailckas's *Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood* and James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, and can use them as points of reference or examples of how the genre "works." (My assumption is that these memoirs have to be good examples, or they wouldn't be published and so widely read. I could be wrong about this, but nevertheless, it won't hurt to look at these as sample texts.) I am officially armed and ready.¹

First things first. I finished reading Wiedbrauk's article, and now I definitely know that a memoir should be a story about an aspect of my life or an event in my life. As Wiedbrauk explains, memoir centers on the idea that something has happened, some sort of *action* is described by recording a story about *an event*. Ok. I think I've got that covered: I've attempted to write about what I mentioned above—how my mom blessed out (which is the Southern equivalent to cussing out) the referee at a flag football game. I can consider that the ultimate *action* that occurred at a *specific event*, in this case, a flag football game. Check!

But Wiedbrauk also states that this story about an event, in which some sort of action occurs, informs the idea that writing memoir is all

about “narrating,” or “describing, building the world in words” (46). That’s intimidating...especially since I typically write in genres that do not require any sort of world-building through the creative use of language, like seminar papers, a tricky academic genre that doesn’t privilege the skillful brandishing of storytelling techniques. I can also write text messages, notes for class, or grocery lists, but none of these genres requires an imaginative narrative. I can write a darn good email too, asking a friend if I can have her recipe for banana bread. But writing a story about how I asked a friend for her recipe for banana bread is like asking me to juggle machetes while playing “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore” on the kazoo. Scary. Not to mention, next to impossible. Writing a story about *anything* requires skills that I might not have, juggling and kazoo playing included.

I’m running into even more trouble. Wiedbrauk mentions that memoir isn’t “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*” (46-7). Take a look at my first sentence the first time I wrote about my mother versus the referee:

Growing up, I always admired my mother: _____

Super cheesy, warm-and-snuggly sentence

Wiedbrauk mentions that including a “cheesy summation” in a memoir is a definite no-no. Mine is at the beginning, which is probably much worse than being at the end! I can just imagine someone picking up my memoir and thinking, “Why should *I* care about why this person admires her mother?”

So, how do I even begin to revise my story? What does a good opening line look like? How do I start when I know that, in the end, I want the focus to be on my mother and how wonderful she is? Should I say something about her first? Should I begin with something about myself? And let’s not forget this key question: How do I get the reader to actually care about what I’m writing about and want to read on?

I think the way to figure out how to begin is by looking at example first lines and discover not only what these opening sentences say, but also what they do. Wiedbrauk’s example opens with “*My first car was a 1986 maroon Dodge Dynasty that had rolled off the production line back when I was still in diapers*” (49). This sentence says what Wiedbrauk’s car looks like, but it also gives us a reference point so we can understand how old the car is in relationship to her. And another thing this sentence does is give the readers specific, descriptive details—what I understand to be an aspect of the world-building nature of narration. So, I know that an opening line should give the readers details that they can hold onto, details that evoke specific images in their minds.

Looking closely at Wiedbrauk's first sentence was really helpful, but I'd like to look at more examples just to see if I understand how opening lines in a memoir work and how they function to draw readers in. In Zailckas's *Smashed: Story of a Drunken Girlhood*, the first line is "This is the kind of night that leaves a mark" (1). Wait a minute! This sentence has no explicit details about the night itself, what kind of mark might be left by this night, nothing. It's a line stripped of detail. It's not really saying much...but maybe that's the point. What this line might be doing is acting as a slightly ambiguous opening statement meant to engage readers, so that they are left asking, "What do you mean? What's happened here?" Leaving the readers with questions may be a strategic way to engage them, to prompt them to read on.

Instead of marking the example from Zailckas's text as an X on the memoir criteria checklist, perhaps I should look at another example, this one from Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*.² Frey writes, "I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin." What is this first sentence saying? Well, we, as readers, know that Frey has been asleep, he wakes up hearing an airplane engine, and he feels some unknown warm substance dripping down his chin. What this opening line is saying is pretty straightforward, but what it's doing is an entirely different matter. There's some detail here, although not extremely evocative, but like Zailckas's first sentence, we know that something has happened to Frey. This sentence, again, acts as a way to draw readers in and prompts them to ask, "What in God's name is on his face? Why is he on an airplane with grossness on his face?"

The opening lines that I've examined thus far show me that there are no hard-and-fast rules to beginning a memoir, except it seems that they all work to grab the reader's attention. But all three reaffirm my belief that my first sentence is not working. But maybe there's something salvageable in my introductory paragraph. Let's see:

I know this first sentence doesn't work, but I'll keep it around for now.

There are some details here, like how my Mama is a Southern Belle. That's good, right? Yay?

Growing up, I always admired my mother. I still do. She's what I would call a true Southern Belle. She taught me that "pee" was a dirty word that ladies don't say, you must look your very best at all times because lord knows who you'll run into at Wal-Mart, and any particularly nasty comment about someone could be softened with a sweetly uttered "bless your heart." Despite all of her consideration of appearances, the image of her shaking a green and white pom-pom to emphasize each impassioned word she yelled at a flag football referee is ingrained in my mind.

Ignoring my problematic opening sentence, I can see that I'm easing my readers into my memoir and don't really get to the point, or thesis, until the

end of the first paragraph. This last sentence establishes that my mother acted completely out of character on this particular day, and since this image of her “is ingrained in my mind,” it must have been memorable, affecting me in some poignant way.

Looking again at the “moves” I’m making in the first paragraph, it seems like I’m following the “ramping up method,” as described by Wiedbrauk (53). She explains that this method of writing an introduction involves a certain “building up,” or providing the reader with some general statements, followed by a thesis-like statement at the end of the paragraph (53). This seems to be what I’ve done above, even though I tried to provide more specific details. Well, that’s not so bad, is it? I followed a method, and I stated a main point. Check? The problem is that the “ramping up” method relies heavily on the conventions of school-based narrative genres, such as having a clear thesis statement, instead of a focus.

Great. I am now reminded *again* of how important it is to world-build with words, to narrate, to describe this event vividly so that the reader is swept away into flag-football-game-is-interrupted-by-mother-screaming-leaving-her-daughter-scratching-her-head-in-dismay land. It all seems to come back to that idea: storytelling. Not only does Wiedbrauk stress that over and over *and over* again, but the various (seemingly credible) sources on the Internet also emphasize this integral component to writing a successful memoir.

I’ve got enough fire in me (courtesy of the headstrong, dare I say bullheaded, gene passed along from mother to daughter) to not give up completely. I should probably try to emulate the “diving right in” method, which Weibrauk claims is more “action driven” (53). That sounds like something I want to do with my memoir because another reason my original introduction fails is that the story is not propelled into action. Remember my saccharine sweet “I admire my mother” blah de blah blah? Those sentences, while nicely described in adequate detail, weren’t sufficiently setting my memoir in motion. Reading them leaves the reader with probably little to no interest in wanting to read on, to figure out why I feel that way. My earlier memoir attempt is not a story—it’s a statement of ideas or thoughts. What can I do to remedy this problem and tell a story with words? Weidbrauk gives two examples of how to “dive in”: “*My grandfather put the keys in my hand and I couldn’t believe it: my own car*” and “*He had a coarse, gritty laugh that sounds like a combination of being an old man and a smoker*” (53). The examples

show a way to begin a memoir with action. So, maybe my first sentence could look like this:

Something is actually happening in my memoir!

I never saw my mother stomp onto the field, but when I turned around, there she was amidst a mass of sixth grade boys in their football uniforms. Face-to-face with the referee, both of them red faced and screaming. My mother, the genteel Southern Belle, shaking a green and white pom-pom to emphasize each word she pushed out through tightened lips painted her signature deep red.

Phew. I think that's better, at least according to the "diving right in" method. In these first three sentences, I see that there are things going on: stomping, moving, standing, and yelling. It's starting to sound like a story, one that might actually draw readers in and compel them to continue reading.

Does this opening really work though? This revision follows the criteria established in "Making Memoir." Action. Check! Detail. Check! But even though I seem to be following the criteria, it's still not perfect. It seems like I begin with the real heart of the story, the ultimate action. I feel like I'm delivering a punch line without setting up the joke. I'm three sentences into the memoir and I'm already revealing the climactic moment of my tale.

How do I continue my story after I've seemingly already gotten to the real "meat" of the event in the first few sentences? Is this something I can fix? Well, I think so. Maybe fixing it means that I should rethink what my memoir will ultimately accomplish. Maybe what my story is really about is not just what actually happened on that fateful fall day, but also the results of that day. My mother's actions at that flag football game allowed me to fully understand what was beneath that genteel exterior: a strong, resilient, multifaceted Mama. I was able to see her as an actual person, not just my mother. I was just a kid, but I saw this clearly when she acted in a way that I thought was so out of character for her. I learned that this was just part of her, this impassioned outburst, this stomping, yelling, shaking a pom-pom Mama. That's the real story, and I'm not sure if I can convey that in a way that other people would care to read about. Because the way I told you the "real" story just now is definitely kind of mushy-gushy and perhaps a bit cheesy.

So, how do I negotiate between the story I want to tell, and how am I supposed to tell this story according to memoir conventions? I'm not sure I have the answer for that. And it's become clear to me that knowing the criteria of memoir is not the same thing as knowing how to follow that criteria. I can read Wiedbrauk's article for the umpteenth time, keep doing Google searches, and read more examples, but I don't know if I can

create an effective, successful memoir. I feel like I can come to terms with the fact that I'm not the best storyteller, though. I can freely admit that I don't know if I even *want* to be the best storyteller. I'd almost rather stick to dinner table tales.

But I think it's pretty obvious that my first and second attempts at (re) making memoir will not be lost in the black hole of my computer's document folders. (You're reading this, right?)

Endnotes

1. Perhaps I'm making my research process seem a bit too simple. Being able to analyze genre—and knowing where to begin—takes practice and lots of it.
2. I know, I know. *A Million Little Pieces* is packed full of lies. Oprah made sure to let the entire nation know this, but Frey still wrote a *story* about himself, whether it's true or not. I suppose readers expect a memoir to be a true reflection of events in someone's life, and I think we might even consider the “truth factor” as a convention of the genre. And for Frey, there were some consequences for deviating from this feature. God forbid anyone feel the wrath of Oprah.

Works Cited

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Amy Hicks is a doctoral student specializing in children's literature at Illinois State University. Her idea of a perfect evening is sitting on her sofa watching old musicals while eating cookies. Due to her unwavering dedication to her studies and teaching, Amy rarely gets to enjoy such an evening. But she always finds time to eat cookies.