

## The Memoir as Inquiry to Self Discovery

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In this article, Maggio asks readers to revisit their memories of life-changing moments, breaking down the rigid walls of confusion that separate them from their past. Maggio suggests that, by writing in genres that allow for creativity, we can relive the past and discover who we are and where we have come from, adjusting our future actions in light of our past tendencies.

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Think about that special event that changed your life. For the most part, each of us has had an event in our life we can call a “turning point.” Whether it happened over a few minutes or a few years, this was a time in which we fundamentally changed as an individual. How beneficial would it be to analyze this “turning point”? Well, consider all the actions and decisions you will encounter in your future. Each of these choices will depend on your past experiences. Having an understanding of the tendencies of your past and their consequences will allow you to have a better understanding of your future. For example, if my tendency is to underestimate how many spelling errors I make and the consequences have been red ink on my papers, then I will, after reconciling the problem through an “isolating method,” realize that I should proofread cautiously.

### Why Write About Your Past?

The “isolating method” I am referring to is writing. There are many studies (cf. Chinn, 1994; Ganea, 2007; Schaller, 1997) that indicate that the

same part of our brain that allows us to think methodically also helps us remember our past. The part of your brain that distinguishes between you and your environment is the same region of your brain that uses past experiences to project your possibilities into the future (Radiolab, 2010). More to the point: these studies indicate that using language (more specifically, writing) as a mechanism to articulate past experiences is very accommodating to fully developing—and therefore better understanding—these past experiences (Chinn, 1994). For example, neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor wrote her book, *My Stroke of Insight*, about the morning of her stroke that temporarily caused her to lose her language, memories of the past, and sense of self (Taylor, 2011). In her book, she describes the transparent relationship between losing language and losing her own identity. She indicates that without language there are no “inner voices” that allow us to do just about anything with our past. Consequently, without language there are no “inner voices” that allow us to speculate about our future. Therefore, we could guess that encompassing our past into a language format makes it more concrete or rigid in our mind—like focusing the camera.

Though these examples don’t specifically suggest writing as the mechanism we should use to invoke our past, writing is the best language format for this analysis for many reasons. For one, writing is slow enough to allow the memories to emerge (Chinn, 1994). Nursing journals, such as *Advances in Methods of Inquiry for Nursing*, also advocate for the use of writing as inquiry to learn about past experiences. Allowing time to recall your past enables the authentic story to be displayed (authenticity is vital to the writing process, as indicated later). If we talk about our past, it’s much more likely that we will run across something we can’t recall immediately, so, for the audience’s sake, the story being told is made up or guessed.

In my young, naive perspective, I recalled a past experience in my memoir, *On the Tree Branch*:

Grandpa asked me to stay in the living room because the adults were going to talk about adult things. I felt kind of left out, so I sat in the middle of the living room where I could hear sounds coming from both ends of the kitchen as they traveled around the staircases and kitchen closet. I started looking through the comics section as they talked.

I could pick up little snippets of the conversation like a “court date” coming up and some “legal stuff.” I kind of tuned out to do some well-needed thinking before I realized they were talking about mom—alcoholism and divorce. “Yeah, we’re going to have to get a divorce. There is no way around it,” Dad said, almost unemotionally.

That was it for me; when I heard those words, my thoughts started to pour out. I tried to hold it in despite the fact that there was no one around—I just couldn't. It was too much. My parents were getting a divorce and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't understand why they couldn't just get over their differences and make up. It wasn't that hard—so many stories ended up that way in the movies.

It was hard to believe that this was actually going to happen; in movies I'd seen, situations got much worse than this, yet they still ended up getting back together in the end. When he said this, I knew it was reality and that there was no going back. It hurt to think about but felt good to cry about. Garfield was about to drown under the tears I'd been bombarding him with. He still seemed to say the things he wanted to say; I don't know why I had a problem speaking up.

Before I knew it, Dad left without saying goodbye. He seemed extremely rushed and anxious to get things moving along. He just kind of blurred in and out of my life real fast. He must have been real busy.

This experience was merely part of the larger turning point; however, while writing about this memory, I realized a few key things about the experience that I hadn't discovered before. For starters, why is this event so vivid in my mind several years later? Before I started really reflecting on the scenario through this writing process, the memory was frail. Fortunately, the only one who experienced my naive perspective was me, so I began the process. In doing so, I realized important aspects of my thoughts such as why I thought divorce was such a horrible thing, why I thought that my parents could make up so easily, and of course, why I didn't have the confidence to speak up. I now realize, for example, that divorce isn't as terrible as I thought it was going to be. It had major financial implications, but my parents' divorce put my siblings and me in a somewhat more stable environment. Through this process, I was able to derive the lesson that I should be less concerned about other people's decisions because they may see many components of the situation that I do not. This method of writing about my past really allowed me to think critically about how I think in comparison to others.

An additional perk to writing about your past includes the mere fact that you can find your own genre. As our society continues to become more specialized, it almost demands writers to become better at specific genres of writing. I wrote a book-length memoir, but you can literally write in any genre and at any length you want to. This engaging process will allow you to find the genre you are inherently drawn to and/or the genre you enjoy writing in. The best part about this method is that you can strengthen your confidence,

allowing you to build your confidence in an engaging and meaningful way. Some writers might say that when they write, they feel consumed and/or surrounded by the plot. Writing a memoir of my childhood certainly allowed me to figuratively surround myself with past experiences, thus allowing me to better understand it. Knowing who you are is key to recognizing and therefore resolving your inherent tendencies for a stronger foundation in the future.

### **How Do I Find My Genre?**

While choosing your genre, there are a few questions you can ask yourself:

- What genre will fit best with my career or interests?
- What genre do I want to get better at?
- What genre am I best at writing in or do I know the most about?
- What genre will fully display such an event in my past? Or, is this genre fitting for the scene?
- What genre will my audience best react to?

These are only guidelines intended to be taken loosely, but try imagining the genre being spoken or performed. Will you be satisfied with the results? If you are still having trouble deciding which genre may be yours, ask a friend or someone who knows your personality. If you have a BFF (best friend forever) or BBF (best bro forever), and he or she knows you well enough, ask him or her to choose your genre. As a last resort, just start writing in a genre and if you find that it doesn't accommodate your interests or writing goals, try another one. Remember that once you start writing in that genre, it does not mean you are married to it for the rest of your life. Take this time to discover another part of yourself and your style. That's what writing should be about.

### **How Do I Write About My Past In My Genre?**

Once you have chosen your genre you may need to continue to get that turning point in your mind. If you need to write out a chronology of an event (or set of events), go right ahead. Though not everyone may need a chronology, it can be important for more elaborate plots because understanding the direction of your changing perception and moods during events allows you to better understand who you are today. For example, when I was ten pages into my book, many important events were swirling in my head, yet I couldn't remember which one came first. Finally, I took three lined

pieces of paper, sprawled them out on a table, and evenly spaced out the years. I drew segments on the time line according to when an event took place, labeled the segments, and gave a brief description of each segment. You do not necessarily need to go to that degree, but it certainly worked for me.

Next, you might check out some other writers that write in your genre. Generally, writers write in a tone that makes their audience relate to and be comforted by the plot, so we should look to experienced authors for tone in helping us relate to the audience. For example, during the imminent loss of a loved one, the author may present a tone of denial, speaking as if the loved one will be there next week until the all too familiar tone of reality sets in, allowing the audience to relate to the tone. As a kind of reference point and inspiration to my writing, I reread sections of *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah and many other memoirs as I paid close attention to style and tone. Just for dialogue styles (the way conversations are written), I also read sections from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. The more authors you reference, the easier it'll be for you to connect to your audience in your given genre. Make sure that you do not try to write in the exact same tone as another author though because your audience is reading about your past to get your unique perspective on life. I couldn't even get close to the tone of the narrator in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but even if I could, it wouldn't be mine.

Now you may have noticed while reading this article that I have changed my tone. I have gone from a professional tone (to provide you with research on the topic) to a more conversational and colloquial tone (to demonstrate how this process might fit you personally). While on the journey of life and as we grow and learn from our experiences, reactions and perspectives toward new events should also differ from earlier ones. Use your tone to reflect your new outlook in a situation. Although you are not necessarily informing your audience directly, you will have a theme that lets the reader hear about a life lesson of some sort. It's important to analyze these new reactions and perspectives because they are the primordial synthesis of your current day reactions and moods. Understanding your past reactions can allow you to better understand your reactions and moods today, and therefore, enable you to adjust accordingly. In the passage from my memoir above, I changed tone according to the mood of the narrator because I had new moods, reactions, and outlooks towards my dad and his divorce. Analyzing these changes or "turning points" helped me better understand my place in life at that time, and now. In essence, without fluctuations in tone there would be no direction of thinking. This may take a bit of practice but in time it can make your writing much more nuanced.

While keeping that in mind, let's return to a point that I mentioned earlier: you must be authentic in this form of writing. Try not to worry about adding, deleting, or manipulating your writing in any way. While I was writing,

I made sure I could picture the scene in my head before I wrote it. If I wasn't authentic, I would have been reshaping my past in my mind in a way that didn't correspond to my true experiences. If I have an incorrect reflection on my past, I have a false sense of self that will not prove fruitful when coming to terms with myself and my experiences. Remember: the whole purpose of this process is to discover you, not someone you want to be. And because this kind of writing is meant solely for your own use, there is no reason to falsify it for audience's sake. As stated before, the design of this method will allow us to put our past into writing, which is a more concrete and rigid structure than memory, allowing us to better understand ourselves. With this sense of self comes the confidence needed to handle future projects and events as well as a better perspective to move forward. When we recognize and internalize our own tendencies, we are better equipped to plan and execute future ones. It matters that I realize this tendency, the cause of the tendency, and that I can take a second guess at the consequences of future situations. Along with that comes the benefit of writing in the genre that best fits you. Much like my experience with writing about divorce, you too can receive a much better understanding of how we react to turning points in our life. Another, more straightforward trend that I discovered was my tendency to underestimate how bad I spell. I've been getting better at that, too.

Give exploring your memory through writing a try. You don't need to write over two hundred pages for this method to work; just pick your genre, "turning point," and representative tones, and then allow your memories to emerge. In the context of utilizing this method, stay true to your past, and you should be able to figure out your trends in life. When you're finished, write them down and make your future goals accordingly. I noticed that the process improved my confidence, and I'm confident that it can help you, too. Because I explored my past and wrote it all down, I can now look at it again and again, whenever I want to, to help me develop a more concrete foundation for my future.

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