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March 2023

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Recommended Citation

Mirriam-Goldberg, Caryn, "Finding the Heart and Body of Your Memoir" (2023). *Workshop Handouts*. 6. https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/cm_g_handouts/6

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Finding the Heart and Body of Your Memoir with [Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg](#)

Workshop Description: One of the biggest challenges in writing memoir or creative nonfiction essays is finding the focus and structure. Often, we need to feel out all the related directions we're called in to find our best way forward. In this invigorating seminar, we'll explore tools and approaches for sussing out the heart of the memoir, and from there, consider possibilities for organizing it (including chronologically, thematically, as an essay collection, or even as a collage of vignettes). We'll also do some short exercises to clarify what our memoir or essay wants to be and how we can unfold it from there. Ample handouts will be provided.

BEGINNINGS: WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

1. Heart of the Memoir Development

Writing is a way of knowing, and so often as we write memoir (books or essays), we can discover what the heart of the story is by putting words after word. It's also essential—especially after our initial blush of writing—to have a sense of the main focus of your memoir, which isn't everything on a topic or in a life but one specific strand or story you're unfolding.

Some tips to help you get clearer on what your piece is about if you're not already there:

- Free-write for a set length of time (7 or 10 minutes or so) on the general focus that's calling to you.
- Write a dialogue between you and the essay or memoir, asking it what it wants to be and what you can do to help get it there.
- Brainstorm a list of all the ways you might focus the piece.
- Consider the scope (what you're covering) and limitations (what's related that you're not covering). You might also list out other memoirs or essays you'll write or consider writing another time.
- Write some one-sentence summaries of your focus until you find what's most accurate (e.g. "I'm writing about how dogs save our lives" isn't as precise and focused as "I'm writing the story of my beloved dog who both ruins and saves my life over six years when I'm a hot mess of a young man").
- Walk, shower, talk, dream, and otherwise engage with your memoir or essay's focus, asking it to reveal itself more clearly to you.
- Make a big sloppy map of how a specific focus might unfold, which can often help illuminate where you don't feel called to go. You can also make a collage out of words and images (tear up some magazines) to give you a deeper sense of the project.

2. From Macro to Micro: Big Picture to In-Depth Moments

Pivoting from a big view of what you're writing—by keeping a running outline, table of contents, or map— to the specific moments embodied in paragraphs enable you to build necessary scenes in an organized way while keeping in touch with your main focus. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to call this your map. Having a running map can also help you stay more in the zone of calm creativity.

Speaking of maps, you can draw out a real map, which is more like a horizontal outline, in which you start with the beginning on one side of your paper, the ending on the other, and then add in all the places the memoir or essay needs to stop (specific scenes) along the way. You may find making a map helps tremendously in building a table of contents. Or you might benefit more from a more vertical outline or table of contents.

Considerations:

- As you realize there are more places to stop, you can fill them in; likewise, you may edit out some scenes.
- If you don't have a specific idea of the ending of the memoir/essay, you can consider some potential destinations you'll bring the reader to by the conclusion. Sometimes have various options ahead of time is helpful to guide you.
- It's also fine to only have a few notions you're heading toward in the beginning, such as a good sense of your opening and the first few scenes. Then as you write—a lot like driving in the fog when you can only see a little further ahead of where you are as you get there—you can determine what's next.
- Moments (momentary interactions, realizations, etc.) build up to scenes or small stories (such as flashbacks or happenings in the present). In a memoir, these can build up to chapters, and in an essay, these illustrate and unfold where the essay is going.
- In your map, start opening up destinations along the way, such breaking down something that's likely a chapter into scenes that compose that chapter, then (as needed) moments that compose that scene. Fill in pitstops (supplementary scenes) as you go.
- On the other hand, some people find such detailing cumbersome and not so helpful, so go with what process enhances your writing!
- Whatever your process, toggle back and forth as it serves you. As you write scenes, you may update your map and vice-versa.

3. Side Notes To Siphon Off Anxiety and Confusion and Keep All the Goods

For just about all of us, there's all kinds of auxiliary writing that might or might not fit into the essay or memoir. You may have scenes you've written, then removed but aren't sure if you want to put them back in. Or you could well have of things to add.....or not, names and incidents you want to remember, links you want to research to bring in more authentic details.

While some people find using apps like Scrivener helpful, and others may have their own organizational systems to hone, for just about all of us, it's very useful to have a place for side notes—things that may or may not make it into the next or final draft.

Putting the maybes into one big pile—and organizing your side notes (sometimes different colored fonts can be fun and useful)—also can help lessen pressure or anxiety you may be feeling about how to get everything (including the kitchen sink) into the essay or memoir. Of course, this is especially helpful for book-length projects, but it can be equally helpful for short pieces since you have to be very discerning in an essay about to include.

Consider setting up your side notes in the way that best fits and supports your process, such as:

- Organize events you might fold in chronologically or in the same way your evolving map/outline is organized.
- Set up various categories, such as, “Repetition” (am I repeating this phrase or story or characteristic too much?), “Fold in Later” (I know I want to include this but I don't know where or how yet), “Maybes” (this may or may not fit), “Character Development” (Name the main players you want to be sure to show vividly and succinctly through characteristics, gestures, ways of thinking and talking), “Setting Development” (list places the piece travels and notes you have about what to include about what these scenes look like), or other categories that make sense for you.
- Research can be its own section or page, including links, questions, or topics you want to revisit or delve deeper into later on.

Another very important aspect of side notes is that they free you up to follow the energy of writing your memoir or essay without getting bogged down in details! Consider side notes an anxiety-busting practice.

REVISION LAND

1. Bird's Eye Outline

Whether you have a coherent and detailed table of contents or a scrappy map with lots of scribbles on it guiding you by the time you're done with your first draft, it's helpful to make a bird's eye outline of what you created.

In other words, the map is not the territory, so why not make a more accurate map of where you've traveled in this writing? Here's several approaches.

For an essay:

1. Print out your essay and number your paragraphs.
2. Make a list of what's in each paragraph by number, such as “1. story of dog dying, 2. why this led me to move to Montana....” and so on.

3. When you're done, look at the list and see how your essay is organized and how it unfolds. Are they sections to shift to other locations in the essays? What needs more development? What needs editing down?

For a memoir:

1. Yup, it helps to print it out, even if it's many pages.
2. Make a list of each chapter, and then underneath each chapter heading, number each scene in the memoir (1. Going to get ice cream in a hail storm, 2. Falling in love with person scoping the ice cream...")
3. Look at the list, chapter by chapter, and see how each chapter unfolds. What needs more or needs editing down for less? What's out of order? Where do you need more of an introduction or conclusion (remember that each scene and each chapter needs a beginning and ending)? What else pops out and ready for shifting or revision?

2. Multiple Journeys Through the Writing:

Overall it makes sense to start with the big sweep of the memoir or essay, then get down to the nitty-gritty. Think of revision as a funnel in which you start with the big picture and get down to word choice and punctuation eventually.

I find it helpful to read through my drafts multiple times, the first time for overall coherence (making sure the main focus is threaded through everything in some way) and for the writing to show me what it's about and wants to be about. Then I move into fleshing out everything I can. From there, I go to chapter or—in an essay—a scene or section, making sure it has a coherent shape that usually entails a beginning, middle, and ending. Eventually, I go through everything again to further develop characters, scenes, and the focus until I move toward the end of my sojourn in Revision Land. When it feels ready, I read it all aloud (even if it takes weeks), highlights sections to go back and work on later. Then it's off to Edit Land, which is a different animal.

Important note: Many of us (me too!) edit out or down language as we go through each sweep of the writing.

All that said, your process is what works for you. Maybe you like to work intensely on everything one scene or chapter at a time, then move on to what's next.

Revision Land stops often include:

- The whole enchilada with an eye toward the main focus threaded throughout everything (or everything included there for a reason that builds toward that main focus).
- Scene and chapter development as well as shaping each chapter, section, and sub-section to have its own mini introduction, middle, and conclusion that leads to the next thing. Related to this, look at each scene, section, and chapter as its own whole thing that's part of the larger essay or memoir.
- Character, setting, and time (historic or not) development to make sure all the places you travel, people you meet, and times you live through are vivid.

- Tone listening as you read to make sure it reads in a coherent way with a similar tone, hue, or vibration. This is trickier to suss out, but you can hear this more easily when you read your writing aloud (what sounds like it's in the same feel of language and what needs tweaking?).

The Space Between Revision and Editing Land includes:

- Looking into the writing one paragraph and one sentence at a time to make sure the writing is alive, fresh, coherent, and singing in the right key (tonally fitting where it is and what it's doing).
- Squeezing out excess words and bringing alive what's here so that its originality can shine. This also entails seeing where you discussed various aspects previously in the writing (which can be confusing in a long piece, but that's why we have the bird's eye outline) so determine how to bring enough weight but not too much repetition to various insights and unfoldings.

Reading It All Aloud:

- For all of us, there's no substitute for reading your entire piece aloud, yes, even a long memoir (take your time, reading ten pages each day for a while). We can hear things when we speak the words that we can't read on the page.
- It's even more helpful if we're reading to someone—a sleeping spouse, a cat, a dog, etc. (seriously, it doesn't matter if your listener is human or awake as much as you'd think).
- As you read, note what you'll go back into to work on later. I highlight things when I'm reading from the screen and circle words or paragraphs when I'm reading from paper, sometimes making notes about what's not quite right. It helps to notate things like this quickly and keep reading so that you can hear the whole thing, even if over many days or weeks, as a whole.

Editing Land includes:

- Editing for grammar, punctuation, and the other mechanical aspects.
- Proofreading (best done by people who aren't us and can bring fresh eyes to their reading experience).

SOURCES TO WRITE AND REVISE

While there are a lot of good books (see some below) on essay and memoir writing, one of the most useful guides I've found is looking at how other people organized their collections of essays (and individual essays) and memoirs. You can even do a quick and dirty bird's eye outline to get inside the structure of something that really speaks to you to find out how the writer built this writing.

A second great way to learn more about memoir and personal essays is to immerse yourself in reading them, including books and essays from way outside your comfort zone. This can educate you deeply and open up veins to your own writing.

Finally, here are some good guides to writing creative nonfiction:

Imaginative Writing: The Elements of the Craft by Janet Burroway

Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg

The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative by Vivian Gornick

You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction by Lee Gutkind

The Art of Memoir by Mary Karr

Good Prose: The Art of Nonfiction by Tracy Kidder and Richard Todd

Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott

Naked, Drunk, and Writing by Adair Lara

The Art of the Personal Essay by Phillip Lopate

Writing For Your Life by Deena Metzger

The Memoir Project, A Thoroughly Non-Standardized Text for Writing & Life by Marion Roach Smith

Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir by Sue Williams Silverman

Writing About Your Life by William Zinsser

MY OFFERINGS

I'm a long-time writer in many genres, including memoir, poetry, and fiction. I also founded [Transformative Language Arts](#) (TLA), an emerging field to help people cultivate work, community, and meaning toward the written, spoken, and sung word, and for 20 years, I ran a MA program in TLA at Goddard College. I make my living as a facilitator, coach-mentor, collaborator, and occasionally, I even get a royalty check. Here are some of the projects and classes I have coming up this summer and fall:

- **[The Art of Facilitation](#)**: With Joy Roulier Sawyer (another Lighthouse teacher and poet), I'm launching a comprehensive training in facilitating workshops, meetings, retreats, and more. Join us for "Facilitating for Love & Money" on Tues., June 28 (6 p.m. MT/ 7 p.m. CT/ 8 p.m. ET/ 5 p.m. PT for only \$9.99. Our first of five classes, "Facilitating for Community," sets sail July 10. Please visit our site for all the details.
- **[Your Right Livelihood](#)**: Please join Kathryn Lorenzen (career and creativity coach) and me for an in-person retreat Sept. 30 – Oct. 2 on what work is calling to you and how to bring that work to fruition, including setting goals and detailing them for the year ahead. We're meeting at

Unity Village in Kansas City, Missouri – a beautiful retreat center with close access to the Kansas City airport. [More here.](#)

- **[Writing or Right Livelihood Coaching](#)**: I love helping people find their own most powerful words and work, and I offer encouraging and focused coaching (mostly via Zoom but also in person for locals) based on what's calling to you on the page or in the world. I regularly help people finish and organize books of memoir, poetry, fiction, and more; create websites and marketing campaigns for their writing; design and facilitate meaningful workshops; and sojourn into where their gifts meet their community's needs.
- **[Writing Your Life Road Trip](#)**: Join an online (with some Zoom sessions) workshop Sept. 12 – Oct. 30 to deepen your memoir, poetry, or essays as we explore how to write about our life's journeys, departures, and arrivals in a welcoming community.

Please feel free to email me about your interest in any of the above! I offer free 20-minute discovery calls too. I'm at carynmiriamgoldberg@gmail.com