



# Memoir Writing Lesson Plan

Sponsored by the [Wayne Dyer Family Foundation](#)

## Topic:

Teaching Memoir (Excerpt) Writing

## Duration:

90 minutes

## Materials Needed:

- Writing materials
- Internet access

## Grade Level(s):

6-12

## KUD Objectives:

By participating in this lesson, students will:

- **Know** what memoir writing is, including its core techniques such as scene, reflection, sensory description, backstory, foreshadowing, and dialogue.
- **Understand** that memoir writing differs from personal narrative writing, and that a memoir excerpt must reference past and future in a way that stands alone yet situates itself within a larger work.
- **Be able to** write a compelling memoir excerpt of 400-1000 words for Write the World's competition sponsored by the [Wayne Dyer Family Foundation](#).

## Outline:

1. Define & Describe
2. Compare & Contrast
3. Take a Stand
4. Write
5. Share
6. Revise

## Standards:

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts:

The following lesson aligns with these standard codes across 6-12 grade bands:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3.a](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3.b](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3.c](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3.d](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.3.e](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.4](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.5](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.6](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-12.10](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-12.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-12.2](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-12.4](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6-12.6](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.4](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6-12.5](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.6](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.10](#)

## 1. Define the Genre - 15 minutes

As you welcome students to class, engage them in a **5-minute free-writing activity** in which they keep their pencils moving or fingers typing in response to the prompt: *“What is a memoir? Why, and for what purpose(s), do authors write memoirs?”* You might create a welcoming atmosphere by streaming classical or lo-fi music in the background as students write.

After students have completed their brainstorming, ask them to form pairs or trios and spend 10 minutes reviewing [Personal Narrative Sample Openings](#). As they examine these textual excerpts, facilitate a **concept attainment-inspired activity** by asking them to create shared definitions of **memoir** and **personal narrative** using a shared document (e.g., Google document, handwritten worksheet, etc.) based on their observations (to make this a true concept attainment activity, feel free to include nonexamples as well, such as personal narrative essays, poems, etc.). For more information on the theoretical underpinnings of this inductive approach to facilitation, please see [this resource](#).

Once students have finished, ask one representative from each group to **popcorn-share** their definition with the class. As the teacher, write down similarities and differences between definitions on the board, helping to construct a shared classroom definition of the genre.

## 2. Jigsaw: Memoir Techniques - 20 minutes

Building on students’ opening group work, transition them—now with a shared definition and understanding of the memoir genre (and how it is similar to/different from personal narrative)—into a **Jigsaw activity** exploring key memoir techniques: backstory, scene, reflection, and foreshadowing.

First, divide students into four small groups, one group per craft technique. Ask them to select a **notetaker, timekeeper, and presenter**. Then, for **10 minutes**, ask them to conduct collaborative research (using the internet, a school library database, or course texts) on their given technique. Optionally, you could provide a preselected pamphlet of articles/mentor texts/resources according to your students’ research skills/background.

The group should work together to become experts in their craft technique—to define it, share examples, and ultimately teach their fellow students about its function in memoir writing. For the **second 10 minutes** of this section, invite group presenters to present their findings to the rest of the class. Ask listeners to jot down one idea per “lesson” about how they might apply or incorporate the technique into their own memoir writing (feel free to collect these ideas and respond to them; use a tech tool to create a class idea board; or invite a rapid popcorn share if time allows).

### 3. Reflect & Represent - 10 minutes

Using the Write the World blog post “[3 Ways to Teach Memoir Writing in Grades 6-12](#),” select **either** the **identity map activity** or the “**I Am From**” **poem activity** as the next step in this lesson (feel free to save the other activity for homework or a follow-up lesson—or, if time allows, to offer students choice over which activity they pursue).

Building on students’ conceptual understanding of the memoir genre and four of its core techniques, orient them now toward brainstorming *content* for the plot of their own memoir. **Diagrams and poems** offer shorter, arguably more accessible formats for scaffolding students’ metacognitive thinking about their lived experiences. You’ll notice that the blog post linked above, which describes these activities in full, encourages active sharing through either a class open mic (for the poems) or a Gallery Walk (for the diagrams).

Get creative with how you invite students to share their work, but do make all self-disclosure optional; students who do not feel comfortable sharing might call upon a peer or instructor to stand in as a surrogate reader, or could instead share a reflection on their process: *What surprised them about this activity? What might they like to probe further when writing their own memoir excerpt, and why? What felt easiest and/or most difficult for them, and why?*

### 4. Write - 15 minutes

Next, ask students to use their map or poem to examine the places, people, events, and memories that have most influenced their identities and worldviews thus far. Engage them in three five-minute **writing sprints** in response to the following prompts:

1. *Pick one aspect of your poem or identity map to focus on. Now, keeping your pencil moving or fingers typing, transform that moment/memory/place/object/conversation into a **scene** on the page. Use sensory details, dialogue, and other craft techniques to recreate this moment and carry your readers into it. How can you help your readers feel as if they were really there? Write for 5.*
2. *Next, consider what this moment/memory/place/object/conversation means to you now. Maybe it shaped your value system; perhaps the people in the memory have since passed away, and you view the interaction differently in their absence; or maybe national and global events—climate change, immigration, policymaking—have alchemized how you view a certain geography. Write a **reflection** on what your scene means to you, and why—go for 5.*

3. *You know from our class jigsaw activity that timelines are important in memoir: backstory and foreshadowing help to situate individual scenes, sections, and chapters into the whole of a full-length memoir. For this prompt, return to your scene and add one moment of **backstory** and one element of **foreshadowing** to gesture toward the past and future. Consider how these elements can provide readers with “just enough” information while prompting them to read more. Write for 5.*

## 5. Discuss - 20 minutes

Transition back to a whole-group format. For 10 minutes, invite students to engage in a **think-pair-share** activity with the peer to their left/right, in which they share or summarize their scene, reflection, and additions of backstory/foreshadowing. Ask them to share with their partner what went well, what felt challenging, and what they might do next if they were to fill out this freewriting and turn it into a full memoir excerpt.

Peer listeners should practice active listening and make craft suggestions based on their observations of their partner’s work/process. At the five-minute mark, ask students to swap the sharing/listening role.

For the next 10 minutes, give all students a 1-2 minute chance to **jot down takeaways** from their think/pair/share that they would like to remember and apply to their drafts. Return to a **whole group discussion** and ask for volunteers to share a summary of their process and takeaways. As students talk, **reinforce the main concepts** introduced in today’s lesson: scene, reflection, backstory, foreshadowing, and the differences between memoir and personal narrative essay writing.

## 6. Revise - 10 minutes

For the final 10 minutes of class, ensure students are registered on the Write the World website and able to log into their accounts to access the memoir writing competition; remind them that they can click on the competition prompt to start writing and can work on their drafts directly in the text box on the website.

Ask them to complete these steps before leaving class, so that you can field any questions, and invite them to begin outlining a first draft of their submission if they have time.

Finally, assign a competition entry as a student homework assignment—optionally including a round of peer and teacher feedback on a rough draft in advance of final submission (remind students that peer reviews of competition submissions on the WtW platform are also eligible for cash prizes and recognition!).

Let them know that they have the opportunity to either flesh out their in-class writing, turning their scene and reflection into a memoir excerpt, OR have the creative freedom to pick an entirely new experience to explore—perhaps using their poem or identity map as a reminder of other possible directions (which are, no doubt, intricately connected!).

*We invite you to use any or all of the activities above to scaffold students' understanding of memoir writing in preparation for [Write the World's May competition](#). If you've done so, we'd love to hear from you! Reach out to [educators@writetheworld.org](mailto:educators@writetheworld.org) to share how it went, ask any questions about the activities, or to celebrate with snapshots of student work—you might even be featured on our blog or social media channels!*



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*"Transcending labels, particularly those that have been placed on you by others in your past, opens you to the opportunity of soaring in the now in any way that you desire." -Dr. Wayne Dyer*