

Your Memoir Should Tell a Story That Only You Can Tell

Unlike autobiography, memoir offers a focus or theme. What is your “what”?



Photo by [Aaron Burden](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Lots of people have an important story to tell, and in recent years, memoirs have evolved to tell true stories in creative new ways. Take, for example, Thi Bui's acclaimed graphic novel memoir [The Best We Could Do](#), which she illustrated herself.

Whether your memoir is a genre-bending form like Bui's

or a traditional exploration of the personal, there are crucial elements to structuring and writing your story that can help you get started or refine a manuscript in progress. Some of these elements are global, while others are local, and you can think about them in any order, but it will be most helpful if you think about them before and during your writing.

One important caveat: don't let the "rules" get in the way of writing — even if you think something you're writing is off-topic or won't fit, let it flow. You can always come back and refine it or cut it and save it for another future piece.

When I wrote [my memoir](#), I did not have any of this advice in mind. These are things I discovered after I had a book-length manuscript, which mean it took more work to revise and tighten it. I'm sharing my hard-earned lessons with you in hopes that these guidelines will improve your experience and timeline toward a memoir you love.

As you think about your memoir and what you want to write about, you need to consider the *What*. Memoir differs from autobiography because it offers a focus or theme, and depicts some aspect of the author's development. A memoir like [Educated](#), by Tara Westover, develops a thesis (in this case, about education) through the personal story. The theme does not relate to every memory the author conveys, but it does guide the story as a whole and shape the social message that extends

beyond the author's individual experiences.

To help you brainstorm or sharpen your memoir's *What*, ask yourself, "Why am I the perfect person to write this?"

Besides being about *you*, your memoir will involve experiences or a perspective that is valuable to your reader and unique in the telling. To help you determine a theme you can work with, consider the following questions:

- What insight do you have about a specific topic or human experience?
- How has your personal life given you a unique perspective on the topic/experience?

The answers to these questions will, of course, vary widely, and the possibilities are endless. My memoir focuses on several themes, including Appalachia and personal transformation. The great thing about writing a memoir is there is so much that is universal within the human experience, but we each have a unique perspective and history of that experience. Thus, topics like parenting, overcoming hardship, grief, and relationships, all have wide appeal and relatability. The trick is to find your voice, and to determine exactly what sets your voice apart from the others who have spoken on these themes.

For instance, being raised by a single mother in a small

town in Florida might have some bearing on your experiences as an elementary teacher in the Midwest. Or the loss of your father may have given you insight into an aspect of the politics of healthcare for terminally ill patients. Perhaps your love of baking provides you with the language you use to understand and interact within your romantic relationships.

Your memoir should tell a story that only you can tell. If you think early in the process about this aspect of your *What*, it will help lay the groundwork for other aspects of your writing, such as tone, persona, and symbolism. Defining this aspect of yourself as an author is a great early step to help you write or revise a memoir with power. Happy writing!