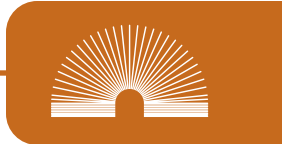


Activity 1A: Lend Me Your Ear



Sequence

1A.1:
Introducing Memoir

Students listen to an audio story and discuss what makes it compelling. They are introduced to the unit and the unit project.



1A.2:
What's My Storyline?

Students write in their journals in response to a quotation about the value of personal narratives.

Understandings

- An autobiography is the story of a person's life written by that person.
- Writers often use the techniques of fiction writing to tell autobiographical stories.



Materials Needed

- Audio story (or stories) (see Advance Preparation)
- Equipment for playing the audio story
- **Handout 1: Journal Assignments**
- Equipment to project or display the story's narrative arc
- **Handout 2: Unit Overview**
- **Assessment Checklist: Memoir**

1A.1: Introducing Memoir

1. Introduce the first task: listening to an audio story.

Tell students that they are beginning a unit on writing stories drawn from real-life experiences. They will start by analyzing stories taped for radio broadcasts or podcasts and those published in books. They will then apply what they've learned to a story of their own.

Note: If you plan to have students record, present, or publish their final work, you may want to let them know now.

Discuss any radio stories that students might have heard, and introduce the example you've chosen. Ask students to listen carefully to the story and to who is telling it, and to be prepared to answer questions about the story.

Distribute **Handout 1: Journal Assignments**. Direct students to the questions under Journal 1, which they will answer for the audio story.

2. Play the audio story.

As students listen, have them jot down answers to the journal questions.

Journal 1

Listen carefully to the audio story, and jot down answers to the following questions:

- What is the story about?
- Who is telling the story?
- Why do you think the storyteller chose to tell this story?
- What do you "take away" from the story, or how does it make you feel?

Think about the story, and add any other thoughts that occur to you. Be prepared to share your responses with the class.

Provide time for students to finish writing their responses. Call on some volunteers to share their answers.

Teacher's Notes:

Possible Responses to the Journal 1 Analysis Questions

These answers are for the *Prison Visiting Hours* audio story.

What is the story about?

A girl visiting her brother in prison.

Who is telling the story?

A girl named Jennifer, whose older brother is in prison.

Why do you think the storyteller chose to tell this story?

It's an important, very sad part of her life. Maybe she hopes that someone else will identify with her experience.

What do you "take away" from the story, or how does it make you feel?

Listeners are likely to feel sad for the narrator and to sympathize with her brother in prison when he realizes the mistakes he's made. Listeners might also think about how one person's actions can unintentionally hurt others in his or her family.

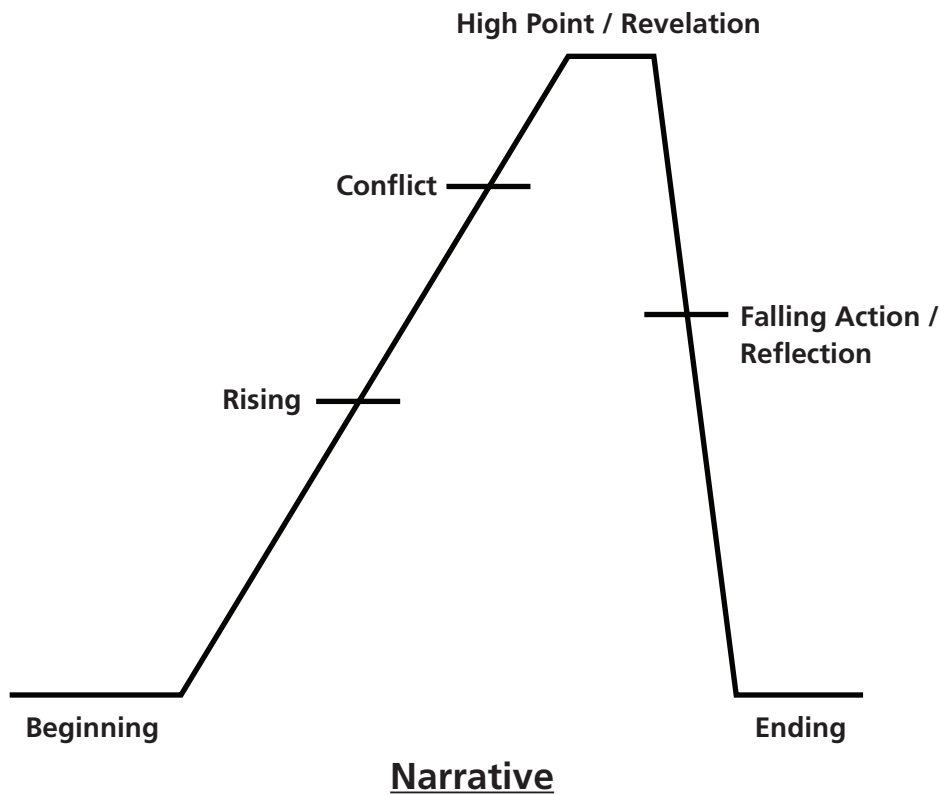
3. Model the story's narrative arc.

Play the audio story a second time. Tell students to listen very carefully to the plot of the story and to write down everything that happens that they think is important.

Ask students:

- How does the story begin?
- What is the major conflict, issue, or situation on which the story centers?
- What other important things happen in the story?
- Is there a high point in the action, or a moment of revelation? If so, what is it?
- How does the story end? Does the author reflect on the experience?

As students answer the questions, project or display the story's narrative arc. Write in the beginning, high point, and ending, as well as other important events in the story. Explain that what they have created is a diagram of the story's *narrative arc*, a sketch of the main storyline, including the high and low points in the story's development.



Narrative arc diagram

Teacher's Notes: Possible Responses to the Narrative Arc Questions

These answers are for the *Prison Visiting Hours* audio story.

How does the story begin?

The narrator tells about entering the visiting room at the prison, and she remembers something her brother once told her.

What is the major conflict, issue, or situation on which the story centers?

The narrator is sad but also upset that her brother is in prison for something he has done. She feels like he has betrayed her.

What other important things happen in the story?

She tells her brother how much he has disappointed her, and he gives her advice about how not to end up like him.

Does the story have a high point in the action, or a moment of revelation? If so, what is it?

There is no action-oriented climax, but the narrator confronting her brother with her sadness and disappointment is an emotional high point, and also an important moment of self-revelation.

How does the story end? Does the author reflect on the experience?

The brother cautions the narrator to avoid ending up like him, and the interview ends. The narrator realizes that they can never get any closer and that now she must be strong for her brother.

4. Wrap up discussion of the audio story.

Note: If time and interest allow, have students analyze a second audio story before wrapping up the discussion.

Discuss the following questions as a class.

- Did the story hold your interest? If so, what about it kept you interested? If not, what about it made you lose interest?
- You observed that this true, or nonfiction, story has a plot, or narrative arc, just as a fictional story does. What other techniques does the storyteller use that are similar to those used in fiction?

Possible answers: *Characterization, setting, conflict, suspense*

List all the storytelling techniques the author used, and tell students to copy the list in their journals. Explain that they will consider these techniques again when analyzing written stories and when writing their own.

Teacher's Notes: Possible Responses for Storytelling Techniques

In the *Prison Visiting Hours* example, the narrator uses sensory language to describe what life is like in prison. She uses dialogue when she introduces the voice of the prison guard. She takes what she remembers her brother saying at the beginning of the story, and circles back to it at the end, giving it a new, deeper meaning. The narrator also uses irony when she concludes that her brother, who had promised to never let anyone hurt her, became the person who hurt her the most.

5. Introduce the terms *autobiography* and *memoir*.

Tell students that the story they just heard is an example of *autobiographical narrative*. Autobiographical narratives may be structured in ways very similar to fictional stories.

Project or display the two word parts *auto* and *biographical*. Tell students that *auto* is a prefix meaning *self*. An *autobiography* is a *self-biography*, or a biography written by and about oneself.

Tell students that in this unit they will learn about a genre of autobiography known as *memoir*. They will explore how and why authors write personal narratives, in preparation for writing memoirs drawn from their own life experiences.

Project or display the word *memoir*. Explain that the word *memoir* is derived from the Latin *memoria*, which means *memory* or *recollection*. Tell students that they will delve into their memories to discover material for their memoirs.

Note: To expand students' vocabulary, ask them to think of other words they know that use the prefix *auto* and to come up with a definition that includes the word *self*. (**Possible answers:** *Automobile: a vehicle you drive yourself; autograph: your name written by yourself; automatic: something that runs by itself*)

6. Present an overview of the unit and assessment criteria.

Distribute **Handout 2: Unit Overview** and have students read it.

Point out the vocabulary list, and tell students that they should refer to this list when they encounter unfamiliar words.

Distribute the **Assessment Checklist: Memoir** and go over the criteria with students. Answer any questions.

Teacher's Notes: Assessment Criteria

Narrative Structure

The unit emphasizes narrative arc as a tool to support students in structuring their memoirs and to help them identify the use of storytelling techniques in nonfiction writing. Use unit activities as an opportunity to teach and reinforce other elements that you would like to emphasize, for example:

- Using descriptive writing and sensory language to evoke settings and moods
- Using irony or tone to achieve a specific effect
- Developing a writing style or voice

Writing Mechanics

The Assessment Checklist includes criteria relating to grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph structure, although the unit does not explicitly teach these skills. Use the activities in the unit to teach and reinforce any writing skills that your students find challenging, for example:

- Writing in the first person
- Using details to develop paragraphs
- Using transitions to maintain a story's narrative momentum or suspense

Adjust the weight of the assessment criteria related to writing elements, mechanics, or any other area as you see fit.

1A.2: What's My Storyline?



1. Have students consider the value of writing a personal narrative.

Direct students to Journal 2 on Handout 1. Have them read the assignment, and answer any questions they may have.

Journal 2

Read the following quotation:

Personal narrative gives us a storyline. It helps us see how we belong, how we are—or aren't—safe in the world, and how we love, how we fear, how we want to change, too . . . Personal narrative reveals to us our hearts and gives us all we need to know to understand ourselves and one another. I always say, it's hard to make someone your enemy when you have shared your stories honestly with one another.

—Deborah Wiles

Write one or two paragraphs in response to Deborah Wiles's ideas about writing about ourselves. You can use the questions below to guide you, but feel free to present your own ideas about the value of writing personal narratives or memoir as well:

- What might it mean for your life to have a “storyline”?
- Which statement or statements of Wiles's do you most strongly identify with, and why?
- Do you disagree with anything she says? Why?
- What else do you think is valuable about writing about your own life?

2. Have students write responses to the quotation.

Provide class time for students to complete Journal 2.

3. Have students share their journal entries.

Invite students to share their responses to the quotation and any other ideas they have about the value of writing and reading personal narratives. Use the journal questions to initiate the discussion, or ask students for their ideas in a more open-ended discussion.

Teacher's Notes: Possible Responses to Journal 2

What might it mean for your life to have a "storyline"?

Your life is like a story, or a series of stories, with plots, suspense, humor, and all the other elements that stories have.

Which statement or statements of Wiles's do you most strongly identify with, and why?

Writing about things that happened helps you understand them better.

Do you disagree with anything she says? Why?

It's not fully clear how writing about our lives keeps us "safe in the world."

What else do you think is valuable about writing about your own life?

Writing about your life helps other people understand you. Reading what other people have written about themselves helps you understand them.

Encourage students to continue to think about the value of writing and sharing personal narratives, as they analyze published works and consider the memoirs they will write.



Handout 1: Journal Assignments

Complete the following journal assignments when you are instructed to do so by your teacher.

Journal 1

Listen carefully to the audio story, and jot down answers to the following questions:

- What is the story about?
- Who is telling the story?
- Why do you think the storyteller chose to tell this story?
- What do you “take away” from the story, or how does it make you feel?

Think about the story, and add any other thoughts that occur to you. Be prepared to share your responses with the class.

Journal 2

Read the following quotation:

Personal narrative gives us a storyline. It helps us see how we belong, how we are—or aren't—safe in the world, and how we love, how we fear, how we want to change, too . . . Personal narrative reveals to us our hearts and gives us all we need to know to understand ourselves and one another. I always say, it's hard to make someone your enemy when you have shared your stories honestly with one another.

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- Which statement or statements of Wiles's do you most strongly identify with, and why?
- Do you disagree with anything she says? Why?
- What else do you think is valuable about writing about your own life?





Journal 3: Character Video Observation

Write a chronology of the incident you have chosen for your memoir. The chronology should be a brainstorm of all your ideas, so don't worry about whether everything is important or whether it will all be part of your final memoir. Just write down everything you can remember about the incident in chronological order.

And don't just write about the physical actions, such as "I walked six blocks to the store" or "I bought a magazine." Write about what you remember *seeing*, *thinking*, and *feeling* as things were happening. If there were any smells or sounds, or if you remember touching or tasting anything, include those sensations too.

While you're writing, you may remember something that occurred earlier in the chronology. If this happens, just draw an arrow to where the new item belongs in the sequence.





Handout 2: Unit Overview

Everyone Has a Story

Have you ever said to a friend, “You’ll never guess what happened to me!” and then proceeded to relate a story based on your own experience? Even if you never wrote it down, what you were telling was a little piece of autobiography, the story of your life. Authors write stories about their lives all the time. If they change enough of the details, the finished piece might end up being a work of fiction. But if they stick to their memory of what really happened, the result will be an autobiography or a memoir.

What gives us such a strong desire to tell stories about ourselves? Some people may have experienced a life-changing event or gone through a difficult struggle. Maybe they lost—or found—something precious to them, or overcame daunting challenges to become a leader in their community. Some people may want to tell humorous stories from their childhood, or write about their relationships to special people or places. No matter what prompts us to create and share our personal narratives, through the telling and the listening we learn something deeper about ourselves and what connects us to the world and to one another.

What stories do you have to tell?

Here are some of the questions you’ll explore in this unit:

- How do writers craft interesting stories from their lives?
- What are the characteristics of a memoir?
- How can I make a personal story compelling for other people?

What You Will Do in This Unit

Learn what makes an anecdote worth remembering. Listen to audio stories and to your classmates to discover the elements that keep you riveted.

Experience real-life struggles of some master writers. Peer through the window into some fascinating lives.

Delve into your past for the seeds of stories. What interesting stories have you lived, and why are they important to you? Will they make your audience laugh, learn something new, or cry along with you?

Craft a mesmerizing memoir of your own. Use the storytelling elements that professional writers use to spice up your stories and keep your audience on the edge of their seats.





Project Description

For the unit project, you will write a short memoir in which you relate a significant or dramatic incident or moment from your life. You will begin by selecting several potential story ideas, and then work in a group to choose the best one for writing and polishing as a memoir. You will apply literary techniques, such as narrative arc, point of view, characterization, and the use of sensory and figurative language, to make your personal story engaging to an audience. As part of the process, you will critique your own work and then read your revised memoir aloud to a partner to learn how to make it even more compelling.

Vocabulary Used in This Unit

Anecdote: A short narrative that tells about an interesting or amusing incident; often biographical or autobiographical.

Audience: A group of people who listen to, read, or view a piece of writing, or a work of art or media. An audience can be as small as a single person, or it can encompass the entire reading or viewing public.

Autobiography: A book that tells the story of the author's life. Autobiographies differ from memoirs in that they include the subject's entire life, or at least the most significant portions of it; they generally span a longer time period and are larger in scope.

Biography: A book that tells the story of a person's life other than the author's. Biographies may be collaborations between authors and subjects, or they may be written without the assistance or support of the people they are about.

Chronology: An arrangement of items in the order of their occurrence. A chronology of a day begins with what happens first thing in the morning and ends with what happens last at night.

Memoir: A true story that usually recounts just one aspect of an author's life—often, a life-changing event, the fulfillment of a dream, a physical or emotional struggle, or an insight about a special person, place, or time.

Narrative arc: The main plot of a story, including the high and low points of the action and turning points or moments of suspense.





Assessment Checklist: Memoir

Use this assessment to help you write and revise your memoir. Make sure to include all the requirements. Your teacher will use this assessment to evaluate your work.

| Requirements | Percentage of Total Grade | Comments | |
|---|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Memoir | | Student Comments | Teacher Comments |
| Narrative Structure. Has a narrative arc, with strong beginning, middle, and ending, including a clear high point in the action or a moment of revelation. | 40% | | |
| Reflection. Reveals why the author has chosen this moment or incident to write about and what it means to him or her. | 20% | | |
| Characteristics of Memoir. Uses first-person point of view, characterization, figurative and sensory language, and other characteristics of memoirs that are appropriate to the story. | 30% | | |
| Writing Mechanics. Demonstrates proper grammar, punctuation, and sentence and paragraph structure. | 10% | | |
| Total | 100% | | |

