



Reminiscence: A Creative Writing Workshop



Great characters need to be real, engaging, and motivating; they need to keep the reader reading. They need to touch something in the reader so that they are remembered.

— Magdalena Ball



Who are these characters?

- **The characters who make up our memoirs are part of our lives. Because we know them so well, it's easy to skimp on characterization as we write our stories. We may expect the reader to find the person interesting because he or she is interesting to us, yet we don't allow the reader to get to know the character in the way that we know him or her. It's easy to take character traits for granted, leaving the reader in the dark.**
- **Remember that your readers know nothing about any of these people until you describe them. Therefore you must be absolutely vigilant in thinking about, and presenting, all the real people you write about--including yourself--as characters, first and foremost. Remember, every good story is character-driven.**
- **You don't need to elaborate on every detail of character in the story. However, you do need to know enough that you can choose what to include and what to omit.**



Guess what? People who inhabit our memoirs are called characters.

Some ways to capture a character:

Describe

- What the character looks like
- What the character says
- What the character does (how she or he acts)
- What the character thinks or feels



Descriptive paragraph on character:

Agatha had a narrow, oblong face with angular cheekbones and a pointed chin. Her slit-like eyes were a clouded hazel, and her thinly plucked eyebrows were shaped into a deceptively perfect arch that followed the slight curve of her eye. A long nose hooked over continually pursed lips, which were painted a bright red in an unsuccessful effort to mask their natural thinness. Bleached blonde hair, made thin from too many years of hair dye, hung straight down into an angular cut at her jaw. The sharp features of Agatha's face were merely a reflection of her entire body structure, and everything—from her skeletal arms to her paper-thin waist—screamed of unnatural skinniness. She walked in long strides, her shoulders back and face held forward, wearing tall stiletto heels and a bold leopard-print mini-dress.

Session 4, 5/11/17: Writing Prompt on Character

Choose one of the following possibilities:

- Who was your favorite teacher?
- What schoolmate had the most impact on your life? In what way?
- Who was your first best friend? How did he/she influence your life?
- Who was your first love or is your current partner
- Who is someone you think is really attractive or really unattractive
- Who are your parents or grandparents
- Write about anyone else that stands out for you

Make a long list of objects, actions, verbal expressions, physical characteristics, habits, interests, and behaviors that capture the essence of the person. How does s/he usually dress? What are his/her verbal tics? And so on. Limiting yourself to 500 words would be a great exercise in conciseness. Focus on appealing to all five senses. As always, **aim to show as much as tell.**



Critiquing guidelines:

- *Meet in small groups of four plus the writer. I'll meet with one of the groups.*
- *Choose a moderator who will keep the group focused and working within our time frame (aim for 10 mins per person)*
- *Read the pieces silently and make brief notes.*
- *Share your comments orally.*
- *When you finish, jot down on my copy what your group told you so I can review what people have already said.*



Critique questions:

In these responses, you will not be pointing out grammar or spelling errors—and nor will I. We are interested in helping each person improve the content of his/her submission. Since there are no grades, you needn't feel in competition with one another. Remember, we are all in this together. Nasty or unnecessarily negative comments don't help the writer to improve. Instead of telling the writer “you should do this or do that,” just point out if you felt confused or needed more details.

- **What stands out about the piece? What caught your attention?**
- **Is there anything you don't understand about the narrative? If so, explain.**
- **What changes would you suggest to strengthen this piece based on elements we've covered so far that make for strong narratives?**
- **Has the writer appealed to multiple senses. Are there places where more showing rather than telling is needed?**