



Reminiscence: A Creative Writing Workshop



I write to make sense of my life.

—John Cheever



Memory versus Reminiscence:

- **Memory is relative depending upon our emotional state or point of view in the present moment.**
- **Our past is altered by both our position in time and the emotional and intellectual lens through which we view it.**
- **The lens we use brings certain aspects of the past into focus and eliminates others.**
- **This selectivity of memory helps us to shape the randomness of experience into a story, and the lens through which you tell it is as interesting as what happened in the past.**
- **You have the power in the present to affect the past by how you remember it. That means when writing memoir, we need to be honest about negative feelings as well as the more positive ones.**
- **Reminiscence allows us to shape our pasts and to learn from our experiences beyond the mere recollection of facts.**
- **Reminiscence is the truth of now and then, not strictly the truth of then.**
- **Reminiscence involves reflection.**

Making meaning in memoir through reflection:

- **Memoir is a journey of investigation, a person's attempt to make meaning of and reconcile with life events and their purposes in her life. That process of investigation—the journey of the writing itself—must be transparent to your readers who want to understand what you learned from these experiences. This involves reflection.**

Reflection can appear in many places and forms:

- **Sometimes it occurs in snippets in the narrator's voice of a particular time (the younger self in the middle of the experience).**
- **Sometimes it takes up paragraphs as the narrator discusses his current understanding of what happened.**
- **Sometimes it is presented within a scene, within dialogue and gestures, though this is less common than the first two.**



Here is an example from from Maya Angelou's *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*. In this excerpt, she writes of moving to North Carolina after her divorce and buying a house in which to live. She reflects upon the healing that occurs in the shift from living in a house to living in a home.

➤ *This is no longer my house, it is my home. And because it is my home, I have not only found myself healed of the pain of a broken love affair, but discovered that when something I have written does not turn out as I had hoped, I am not hurt so badly.*

Revision strategies incorporating reflection:

Select one of the memoir assignments you have written. Answer the following questions, as well as any new ones that arise while you are freewriting:

- How did this event/character/place change me and influence who I have become?
- How has my understanding of this event/character/place changed between when it happened and now?
- Why did it happen?
- What lessons did I learn, if any, from what happened?
- If I could go back in time, what would I do differently?

Incorporate some of your reflection into what you have written. You can incorporate it into the passage directly, using sentence starters such as “Looking back ...” or “If I had known ...” Or you can write a separate paragraph including your thoughts about the event.

- Only incorporate reflection that illuminates meaning not already evident in the scene.
- Keep your reflections short and to the point. Too much reflection can feel like a lecture and bore your readers.

Additional Revision Strategies:

Revision requires increased awareness of each word on the page and of how it will strike your reader. Slow down and ask how your reader will understand what you're saying. Use the break-it-down approach when revising.

- ▶ Where does my story really begin? Could I get there sooner?
- ▶ Where is the chronology confusing?
- ▶ Where can I cut deadwood, unnecessary words, adverbs and adjectives, repetitions, or dialogue that rambles?
- ▶ Where have I narrated something (was telling) where showing it as a scene would be better?
- ▶ Where have I used generalization when specific details would be stronger?
- ▶ Where do my transitions seem inadequate?
- ▶ Where is the meaning of a sentence or paragraph unclear or garbled? Ask yourself "what am I really trying to say here?" and write what you say.
- ▶ Where do I need to add more of my own feelings and reflections?
- ▶ Tell them about using quotation marks around dialogue: one thing to check for.



Next time: June 8

- Bring a 750 word completely revised narrative to read aloud in class. If you prefer not to read your own piece, you can have someone else read it.
- For those of you who also want to discuss *This Boy's Life* during our last class, I'll be happy to stay an extra half hour or so and lead a discussion. While you're reading the book, please notice how the author incorporates all the strategies that we've been covering this semester. Try to highlight passages that demonstrate a particular technique that you found effective so that we can look at these things together.



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?**



Critique 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.***