

# The Memoir

Just what is a memoir? It is the story of a **significant moment** in your life told from a mature, **reflective standpoint**. Such a moment may center around a person, event, or object that is important to you.

## Why is it important to write about a significant moment?

A memoir usually contains many of the **elements of story**:

- Setting (place, time)
- Sensory detail (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell)
- Dialogue

1. Just like any other essay, you don't want your topic to be too broad in a memoir. Some topics are too general to be manageable, no matter how true they might be.

**Too general:** *My grandmother was a huge influence on me when I was growing up.*

You probably couldn't sum up all of the reasons your grandmother had such an impact on your life in three or four pages, especially while using the elements of story listed above. That's not an essay, that's a book! Even a topic addressing one or two personality traits is awfully broad.

**Still too general:** *My grandmother taught me the values of responsibility and patience.*

If your grandmother's influence on your life is enough for a book, then responsibility and patience would have to be a thirty-page chapter. In addition, without a **specific moment** of your grandmother in mind, the body of your essay will probably sound vague.

**Vague:** *My grandmother was a very patient woman. She never yelled at me when I didn't understand something or made a mistake, only explained it to me over and over again.*

2. Your essay will be much more effective if you explore, in detail, one **significant example** of how the values of responsibility and patience were made clear to you. Take a look at another thesis statement:

**Specific focus:** *My grandmother had a huge influence on me; even when she was showing me how to bake cookies as a child, she was teaching me responsibility and patience.*

If you use a thesis statement like the one above, the body of your memoir will almost automatically include more specifics.

**Specific detail:** *The unpleasantly sweet smell of burnt cookies filled my grandmother's kitchen. Frustrated almost to the point of tears, I put on the familiar sunflower-patterned potholders and opened the oven. The 425° heat blasted me in the face when I reached in and removed the baking tray. As I placed it on the top of the stove and surveyed my latest*

*cooking disaster—the third batch I’d ruined that day—my grandmother patted my seven-year-old shoulder.*

*“It’s all right, dear,” she said. “Next time, just remember to set the timer as soon as you put the cookies in the oven instead of waiting until after you set up the next batch on the other tray.”*

Just what does the second example have that the first one lacks? Well, we’re in a specific place (your grandmother’s kitchen) at a specific time (when you were seven). We smelled the cookies, saw the potholders, felt the heat from the oven, and heard your grandmother talking. The only thing we didn’t do was taste (and that would be a bad idea because the cookies were burned anyway). We also have dialogue.

Those specific details make your paper *much* more interesting to read. Most people could say their grandmothers are patient—only *your* grandmother said what she did after you burned the cookies three times.

### **What is a “reflective standpoint”?**

If you’re telling a story now about something that happened to you years ago, you can see and understand things about the situation that you didn’t at the time. That’s reflection. In the grandmother example, you probably didn’t realize at the time that you were learning patience; you were just glad your grandmother didn’t scream at you for ruining the cookies. Now that you’re older, you understand more.

This is why it’s generally best to write about something that happened to you at least a year ago—two or more is even better. If you haven’t had that time to reflect on the experience, then you might not be capable of understanding its significance yet. Some things take time for their meaning to become clear.

For example, making your memoir about the nice girl you just met in your Comp I class doesn’t make much sense because you probably don’t know her very well yet, and the long-range significance of your encounter is unclear. Similarly, writing your memoir about your high school graduation or moving to college will probably present problems as well; these events are most likely very recent, making their overall long-range impact on your life not so easy to see.

However, telling the story of the first girl who was nice to you when you moved into a new school in the fifth grade—a girl who became your best friend through middle and high school—would be a great choice for a memoir, with lots of memories and significance to choose from.

A good memoir is probably about a 50/50 mix of **moment** and **reflection**. Why? It is important that your reader be able to picture the scene. However, it is equally important to know *why* you picked this particular moment at this particular time in your life. Consider these questions when approaching a topic for a memoir:

- Why does this moment continue to be important to you?
- What do you understand now that you didn’t then?
- How can you apply this new understanding to your life today?