Making Memoirs, Making Sense
English Language Arts (ELA), Grades 6-12

Standard 5: WRITING: Applications
Through the exploration of different types of writing and the characteristics of each, students become proficient at narrative (stories), expository (informational), descriptive (sensory), persuasive (emotional appeal), argumentative (logical defense), and technical writing. Writing demonstrates an awareness of the audience (intended reader) and purpose for writing.

Objects of Significance Writing Exercise

Day 1: Begin this project by first asking students to think and ink. On their own sheet of paper, ask students to answer the following question…What is a memory?

Day 1: Next, collectively share those answers and generate additional answers by displaying the answers on a sheet of butcher paper or a Smart Board or a computer with a digital projector. List any and all ideas provided by the students and feel free to expound upon those.

Day 1: Read aloud the children’s book Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox. After you have finished reading aloud this short but powerful work, ask students to develop a list of objects that they own which have strong memories for them. Offer personal examples such as your father’s hammer, your grandmother’s watch, a favorite toy, etc… Ask them to then choose one of those objects to write about. Present the following questions and guidelines as a way to help students focus the writing prompt, Tell the story of your chosen object: Describe the object. Why is this object so important to you? Why is it special? What memory does this object hold for you? Ask students to write at least 500 words. Don’t worry about grammar or mechanics or even paragraphs. Just write. Bring in the object with your 500 words the next day for show and tell.

Day 2: Ask students to gather in groups of four or five. In those groups, place one chair in the center of each smaller group. Within the small groups, ask students to show their object and read their writing aloud to their designated small group. As each student reads aloud, ask the other students to complete the following peer review for each author. They need to listen carefully and take notes as the author reads.

Author’s Chair: Memoir Peer Review

Read or listen to the author’s memoir. Consider telling the writer…

1. What details in the memoir helped you to see the object? What was vivid and descriptive and interesting? List words and/or phrases.
2. What details helped you to understand how important the object was to the writer? Again, list words and/or phrases.

3. What is good about the memoir? What should not be changed? Why is it good?

4. What questions do you still have? As you were listening, what were you wondering about? What do you need more information about to be able to see this object or understand the significance of the memory better? What doesn’t make sense to you? What would you change to make it more interesting?

Day 2: After each author reads, ask each student in the group to share his or her answers with the author. Ask the reviewers to turn those in to you as well.

Day 3: Ask each student to put a star next to one line that they think is vivid and descriptive and ask each student to share his or her line with the entire class. As students read their lines, jot down adjectives that are shared on a butcher sheet of paper, a Smartboard, or via the digital projector. Again, expound on good word choices.

Day 3: Ask students to redraft their object memory based upon input given by their group. As they work, meet with each student and complete the peer review form as you listen to them read their work aloud to you.

Day 4: Ask students to again participate in Author’s Chair but this time with a different small group.

Day 5: Turn in final draft.
This assignment can easily be extended:

- Ask students to write about more than one found object.

- Expand the memory of the found object into a longer narrative piece of writing.

- Consider asking students to take a photograph of their object and integrate the photo with their writing for a more formal graphic design presentation.

- Finally, an oral reading or speech can be given about the object using the writing as a prompt.

Additional Ideas for Teaching the Memoir:

Define the difference between memoir and autobiography. The dictionary among other meanings views memoir as synonymous with autobiography and in a general sense that is true. But a memoir has a more restrictive meaning: it’s the story of a person’s life or a part of a person’s life. In practice it is shorter than the typical autobiography. Autobiographies usually tell the story of a well known person and are long, detailed chronological accounts of the life of that individual, sparing few important details.

A memoir is a more condensed life story often of an ordinary person and may focus on one important period of that person’s experience, merely summarizing the rest of the life. An autobiography proceeds evenly in an “I was born” until “the present” format. A memoir may do this also if the author wishes; but it will usually not be as long as a detailed autobiography. A memoir may emphasize certain anecdotes above others and skip parts of the life. Because it is focusing on what the author believes important in his/her life, there is often an enhanced emotional quality to the memoir.
Memoir-writing generally has more in common with story-telling than with conscious creative, expository or journalistic writing. So story-telling techniques are probably more important than stylistic writing instruction, though some of that can be included too.

Whenever teaching memoir writing, offer students several models of memoirs written by teen writers or about teen characters to help students frame their own memoirs. Consider the following model:

1. Choose a literary work to read aloud. Choose a selection that will become the model for students to use for their writing. It might be a poem, an excerpt of a fiction or non-fiction young adult novel, an editorial, or an essay. All of the reading selections will be memoirs or have elements of the memoir so students can hear and see different examples. The instructor will read the piece aloud and provide writers with a copy so they can follow along and reread if they wish. **10 minutes**

2. *Think* and *Ink*. Ask students to respond to what was read aloud using a set of connections. For example: What does this remind you of? What connections can you make to your life? What passage or section struck you? Why? What question(s) do you have for the writer? **5 minutes**

3. Discuss and share those responses in small groups of 3-4. **10 minutes**

4. Discuss and share small group conversations with the larger group. The instructor should point out and instruct on the writing style, organization, and format of a memoir. Writing process and language in use should also be discussed at this point. **10 minutes**

5. Present a writing prompt that builds on or draws from the read alouds and ask students to write. **10 minutes**

6. Author’s Chair- Read entire piece or a portion of the piece aloud to the rest of the group. Ask the large group to respond to each author. **15 minutes**

**Read Aloud Titles and Possible Writing Prompts for Memoir Writing**

*Think…Places, people, and events*

1. Read Aloud the children’s book *More than Anything Else?* by Marie Bradby

   What do you remember wanting more than anything else when you were younger?

2. Read aloud from *Getting Near to Baby* by Audrey Couloumbis
Describe a person you tried desperately to get near to- why and how have you tried? Or describe a person you were near to but aren’t anymore. Why was that person special? Or Why aren’t you close to that person anymore?

3. Read aloud from I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou.

What memory do you wish to forget? What memory do you wish to remember?

4. Read aloud the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes.

What has your life not been? What has it been?

5. Read aloud the essay “Power of the Powerless: A Brother’s Lesson” by Christopher deVinck

Describe a moment in your life when you have felt powerful. And, describe a moment when have you felt powerless.