

Using Memoir in the Writing Workshop  
By: Lisa Eickholdt

A memoir is not what happens, but the person to whom things happen” Virginia Wolf

### Introduction

One of my favorite genres in children’s literature is memoir. I only recently learned of the power and beauty of memoir. Five years ago, I had the privilege of spending two weeks in New York City at Columbia University. It was there at Lucy Calkin’s Teacher’s College Writing Project for teachers that I learned of the power of this genre. At that time, I was a first grade teacher and had read *The Art of Teaching Writing* by Calkins. Her book served as a guide to implementing and running a Writing Workshop in my own classroom. At first I felt that my workshop was going well. My students loved to write and were able to write each day for 45-60 minutes. In fact they enjoyed writing so much that each morning as we read our daily schedule it was not uncommon for students to cheer or clap as we read the words Writing Workshop and later to groan with disappointment when I announced that writing time was over. However, I felt that things were not going as well as they could be. Though my students were happy, I didn’t feel I was getting their best work. Many students seemed to be writing basically the same thing day after day. I recall that monster stories were popular among my male students, the bloodier, the better. Many students wrote imaginary stories that went with the season: Christmas stories at Christmas; Halloween stories at Halloween. Though there was nothing particularly bad about these stories, there wasn’t anything particularly good about them either. I felt that I, as well as the children, were in a rut and needed some assistance. It was then that I decided to attend The Writing Project in New York City.

Columbia University held its annual Teacher’s College Writing Project that summer in June. The project lasted for two weeks. During that time participants who teach similar grade levels were grouped together to learn about the process of writing for themselves as well as their students. I was very fortunate to have Lucy Calkins as my instructor. Each day we spent time listening to lectures, writing our own pieces, and working with our instructor. One of the first things I learned was that the concerns I had about the lack of quality in my students’ writing, was also a common concern for many other participants at the project. This problem was so common that Dr. Calkin’s had coined a term for it, she called it ”happy garbage.” She explained that “happy garbage” refers to writers who love to write and can do it for hours a day, but who produce stories that aren’t very good, or that are “garbage.” I was relieved to learn that I was not the only teacher whose students suffered from this affliction. Throughout the project, Dr. Calkins taught us many ways to improve the quality of our students writing. However, the most powerful technique I learned was how to conduct genre studies in my Writing Workshop. Genre studies occur when the teacher chooses a genre for herself and her students to focus on for a month or more. The class then reads many books from that genre and discusses the features unique to it. These books then serve as models for the students’ own writing. An important factor in choosing a genre to study is whether students will be able to successfully write under it. Though there are many genres in children’s literature that one could use, the most popular genre studies at the Writing Project were: poetry,

memoir and informational texts. The reason that the instructors at the Project favored these genres was due to the fact that each of these genres is nonfiction. The prevailing theory at the Project is that children should not be encouraged to write fiction because students can only truly write well about things that they have lived. Hence, nonfiction is encouraged almost exclusively. I currently follow this same principle and have found that by encouraging students to write about what they know, the quality of their writing quickly improves.

In the following article I will explain how educators can conduct a genre study using memoir. In the past I have used this study with both first and fifth-grade students and have found it to be very effective in improving the quality of writing with both groups.

#### How to begin a memoir genre study

Begin a genre study by immersing your students in that genre. Read many memoirs to your students. Once you begin to look for memoirs in your classroom, you will be surprised at how many you probably already have in your collection. Ask students to bring in any memoirs they have at home and set aside a special bookshelf or tub to hold all of the books.

#### Discuss and list the features of your genre

Before your students write, you will want to discuss the features of memoir. Address such questions as: What makes a story a memoir? How are memoirs different from autobiographies? I have found it very helpful to make a chart that lists the characteristics of memoir. I then keep the chart up for the duration of the study. This allows me to refer back to the chart as I conference with students throughout the study and point out examples in their writing that exemplify the characteristics of memoir. A list that cites the characteristics of memoir might include the following:

1. A memoir is a story about something that happened to the writer.
2. The author is in the story somehow (either physically or is telling it from their point of view).
3. Many memoirs are stories about the author's family or friends.
4. The story will make you feel something: happy, sad, mad, etc.
5. Memoirs are stories about events that are important to the writer.
6. Often, the book will end with the writer explaining why that event is important to them now or how it changed their life.
7. The author doesn't tell you how he or she felt about the event, but shows you through the actions and conversations of the characters in the book.

8. A memoir is not an autobiography. It is a story about one important event in the author's life.

#### Set a starting date

Setting a date to start writing is important because it gets the students mentally ready to start writing memoirs. It also reminds students that they need to finish any other piece they are currently working on in Writing Workshop. It is a good idea to circle the date on your calendar.

#### Write

During the rest of the study students will write memoirs each day during writing workshop. The study will last between four and six weeks. Throughout the study students will have many opportunities to observe how others write memoirs. Continue to read memoirs to your students and model writing some of your own memoirs. Another powerful way to model is to ask students who have written good memoirs to do a mini-lesson for the class or share their piece in the author's chair.

#### Celebrate

Conclude your memoir study with a celebration. An author's tea is always nice. I like to invite parents to come and hear their student's pieces.

#### Other Ideas to Assist Students With Writing Memoirs

Request that students:

1. Bring in photographs from home of important events in their lives to write from.
2. Bring in an object that was given to them by someone special in their lives. This object should be chosen because it evokes powerful memories for them. They can then choose to write about the time that the object was given to them, or a special memory about the giver.
3. Interview family members about special memories that the child and the relative share. Record these in a Memory Log. This log will then be used as inspiration for the student's own books.
4. Choose an important time in their life (for example, moving to a new school) and write a time-line of entries that evolve around that time and place. Choose one or several to write about in more depth.
5. Reread past writings to see if any other pieces could be reworked into a memoir (Calkins, 1994).

#### Conclusion

Incorporating genre studies into my Writing Workshop has vastly improved the quality of my students' writing. As writing teachers perhaps the most important thing we can teach our students is that they have something important to say. This not only improves students' writing, but also improves their self-esteem.

#### Children's Literature that are Memoirs or Memoir Like

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