

Louise Nayer: Fall 2026
Building a Great Memoir
Text: Barrington *Writing the Memoir*
Instructor will also use excerpts from memoirs
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Course Outline

In a comfortable and encouraging environment, every class will move between introductions to specific elements of memoir writing using excerpts from well-known authors and the text, in-class prompts, break-out time where students share work with peers and time for those who want to read to the whole class (everyone is encouraged to do this but not mandatory). Each student will get constructive critiques from both the instructor and peers.

Writers can also send work to me every other week for individual critiques. We will also save some time for questions.

Week One—Sensory Detail

After getting to know each other a bit and a general introduction to memoir, the class will learn about sensory detail—and how using strong verbs, adjectives, and all the five senses can enhance your writing. Excerpts from successful memoirs and Barrington (Chpt. 7) will be discussed. Exercises show how to incorporate sensory detail into your writing and lead students to create vivid, memorable scenes.

Week Two—Scene and Summary

To create a great memoir, writing must move between scene and summary. We'll review Chpt. 5 in Barrington and again look at memoir excerpts. How does summary function as the "long shot" as in a movie and a scene as a more intimate portrayal? How does too much summary slow down the writing? How can you transition from summary to scene and back? Students will be given clear

direction in how to write a summary and then a scene and thus transform their writing.

Week Three--Dialogue

Scenes come alive with dialogue. How do you eliminate tag lines? How do you condense dialogue? When is it appropriate to use dialogue? Handouts on effective dialogue as well as excerpts from memoirs will clearly show students how to write great dialogue. Through exercises and prompts, students will then learn how to work on their scenes and make them sing off the page with their characters' voices.

Week Four—Time Shifts and Flash back

Do you always have to use past tense? How do you use flashback so it's not overdone? Where do you start and end your memoir? How do you create time lines to help you deal with "time"? We'll discuss Chpt. 6 in Barrington and the challenges of time shifts. Exercises will help students learn to seamlessly transition from present to past.

Week Five—Voice—Engaging the Reader

The "voice" of the memoir writer is what carries the writing. What point of view do you choose? Does the voice sound clichéd or false? How do you find the true voice that will draw your readers into your story? How can you separate yourself from the "I" in the memoir thus creating the necessary distance to work on your piece, especially if it's about a difficult time. We'll go over memoir excerpts and later exercises to help you choose the right voice.

Week Six—Arc--Review—Final class and Reading

Review of the basic elements of memoir writing including "arc." What is learned along the way? Acceptance? Forgiveness? Revelations? How is this change earned without sounding too pat or false. We'll look at one of the NYTimes Modern Love pieces to clarify "arc."

Handouts will help students continue on their path to weekly writing as well as a final class reading by students who wish to share their pieces with the class. In many classes students form groups that continue meeting and writing together!