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Finding Your Story: Helping Students Begin Their Memoir

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Population: All

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In this essay, Karen Ulrich discusses how to help young students think about their lives from the perspective of creating a memoir; includes strategies for discussion and for helping students create an outline to work from.

Helping Students Begin Their Memoir

MOST MEMOIRS, unlike most autobiographies, cover a slice of the author's life, and not the entirety of his or her existence. This means that scripting one's memoir begins with making a choice about what particular point in time the writer wishes to explore. For younger students, this might seem daunting if they have only been around for ten or twelve years, but you can begin with a classroom exercise to help your students (regardless of their age) select a topic that seems worth writing about.

How should one begin? Begin by making lists. Provide your students with a list of suggestions that will help trigger a collection of memories. Such a list might include:

- Turning points-at what moments did your life change? Emotional extremes-when did your feelings reach great highs and/or lows?
- Regrets-what decisions do you wish you could undo?
- Photographs-explore the moments behind your favorite images.
- Individuals-which people have had the greatest impact on your life?

- Goals—achieved or failed.
- Vivid memories-what life events are most clear to you?

As a teacher, you might consider discussing your own life with your students, and the specific events, individuals, and decisions that led you to become the person you are today. Chances are there are universal terms to describe these experiences, words or phrases that can be used to inspire your students' memories.

Once your students have completed their lists, have them choose one item for which they can script a timeline. If they've chosen an individual, then they might outline the relationship from beginning to end—how they met, what the student's life was like before the encounter, how this person helped them change, and what valuable lessons they learned. If it's a turning point or an emotional extreme, have them consider things like setting, characters involved, actions, feelings, and cause and effect. The timeline can begin at any point. The more the student contemplates the experience, the more he or she will recall and fill in the gaps, whether these details precede the event that began the timeline or follow it.

With the timeline complete, the student now has a skeletal frame upon which she or he can hang her/his story, with a beginning, middle, and end. Perhaps, for the sake of further development, the student can now examine each stop, on the timeline beneath a writer's microscope. This might mean creating an additional list for each item on the original timeline; or you might assign a short exercise that requires the student to write in depth and detail about each individual, moment, feeling, decision, and place.

These memory builders (perhaps written on note cards) can then be configured into some kind structure and strung together to create a memoir chapter or story. Using such small steps to lead your class from list-making to story telling will make writers out of all your students, before they've had the chance to realize what they've done.