

LESSONS

Looking Out the Window: A Place Memoir

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GRADES 6–10

TYPE

MEMOIR
NARRATIVE

Emotions play a big role in how we remember places important to us. Students explore this notion by writing memoirs, using plot, dialogue, and description to bring their stories to life.

SESSION 1 : BRAINSTORMING IN A NEW GENRE

Students will be able to identify the differences between memoir and fiction writing and brainstorm ideas for their memoir. This activity was adapted from Girls Write Now.

YOU WILL NEED

[Memoir Brainstorming — Handout](#)

Dry erase board and markers

HOW TO BEGIN

If memoir writing is new to your students, it's important to establish a foundation within this new genre. What is memoir writing? Take a few responses and jot down key ideas as students share. Then, students should take 5 minutes to write their responses to Part 1: Exploring the Genre questions found in the [Memoir Brainstorming — Handout](#). Then do a share out with the class, adding new ideas to the board. Ask whether anyone has ever had someone else (a parent, a teacher, a friend) tell a story about them but they got it all wrong. Emphasize that writing memoir is a good way to capture our

lived experiences in our words, to take ownership over our stories.

Explain that the memoirs we'll be writing will focus on place. Students should respond to Part 2: Where's Your Happy Place? of their [Memoir Brainstorming — Handout](#) to brainstorm ideas about meaningful places in their lives. If they can't come up with an answer for every question, that's okay! They just need to brainstorm as much as they can. Afterward, invite students to share some of their ideas in pairs or small groups.

With the remaining time, students can move on to Part 3: Deep Dive Description of the [Memoir Brainstorming — Handout](#). They will choose which memory and place they'd like to write about and write a description of that place with a focus on sensory details.

SESSION 2 : MEMOIR ARC

Students will be able to outline their memoirs.

YOU WILL NEED

- Dry erase board with memoir arc + pens
- Mentor text: [Bigger Than You Think](#) by Sharoya Bracey
- [Memoir Arc — Handout](#)

HOW TO BEGIN

Remind students that last session we thought of places where we felt certain emotions and connected with clear memories. We then began to describe those places. Today, we'll discuss how we can structure our narratives. To do that, we'll read a short memoir written by a tenth grader.

In small groups or as a whole class, students read the mentor text. Use the following questions to guide discussion:

- What is the place (or setting) in this piece?
- What do we learn about the narrator through this piece?
- Why do you think the writer wrote about this particular experience?
- Have you ever felt an experience where you felt abnormal or different?

Have the class sketch out a memoir arc for *Bigger Than You Think* on the dry erase board. Help students find a beginning, middle, and end in the mentor text. Use the following questions to structure the creation of the arc:

- What makes a good introduction?
- What information do readers need at the beginning of a story?
- What is the peak or main conflict in this memoir?
- What emotions does the author feel in the middle of the narrative?
- How is the piece resolved?

Students will sketch out the structure of their own narratives using the [Memoir Arc — Handout](#). Remind students that when choosing their topic, they should choose a place and memory that they can write as a scene. Encourage students to think about the same questions as they did in Step 1 when creating their memoir arc:

- What information do readers need at the beginning of a story?
- What is the peak or main conflict in their memoir?
- How is their memoir resolved?

When students finish plotting out their memoir narratives, they can begin to write the beginning of their pieces.

SESSION 3 : SETTING

Students will be able to identify how descriptions of setting can change based on the mood of a scene.

YOU WILL NEED

- Student work/folders
- Loose leaf paper
- A bowl, hat, or container with slips of paper. Each slip of paper should list a different emotion (happy, sad, angry, excited, etc.)

BEFORE YOU START

Before you begin, create a list of emotions. Write each emotion on a separate slip of paper. Put all the slips of emotions in a bowl, hat, or other container for students to later choose a slip from. Make sure you have enough slips for each group to pick a different emotion. Note that the emotions you choose for these slips will affect the level of difficulty of the exercise (i.e. happy, sad, angry vs. grateful, anxious, disgusted).

If your students don't typically sit in groups, you may want to arrange small groups before you start.

HOW TO BEGIN

As a class, brainstorm what objects one would find in an apartment (kitchen table, paintings, windows, couch, etc.) Write them down on the board or projector for students to reference in the next activity. Depending on the size of your group, shoot for a list of 10-15 objects, or enough objects so that every student can contribute at least 2-3 descriptions to their group.

Pass around the bowl of emotions and have each group choose one. As a group, students will describe the apartment objects, using the collective list you've created, from the perspective of someone who feels their chosen emotion. For example, a happy person's apartment might have sunny yellow walls, windows that are wide open, etc.

Make sure students only discuss their emotions quietly within their own group and don't share them with other groups.

After groups have finished their descriptions for each object in the apartment, have a group spokesperson share their details with the rest of the class. Encourage the class to guess what emotion each group has based on their descriptions. For each group, ask how they were able to figure out the emotion, and what details gave away the emotion. This is a great time to explain that narrators and characters will notice and describe objects and settings based on their emotions.

Students should spend the rest of class time continuing to write the first draft of their story, including details and descriptions of setting based upon their associated emotion(s).

SESSION 4 : DIALOGUE & CHARACTER

Students will be able to use dialogue as a tool to show a character's personality.

YOU WILL NEED

- Dry erase board with memoir arc + pens
- Mentor text: [When Mean Girls Attack](#) by Tammy Fong

HOW TO BEGIN

Ask students to define the craft skill “dialogue” and ask why we might use dialogue in a story or memoir. Make sure to highlight that dialogue often helps us understand a character’s personality. It shows us how a character interacts with the people around them. Effective dialogue should reveal more about characters.

Read [Tammy Fong’s piece](#) (or an excerpt) in table groups. Either as a whole class or in small groups, lead a discussion on the piece using the following questions:

- What is happening in this story and who are the characters?
- How would you describe each character?
- What does their dialogue tell us about each character?
- If we wanted to portray Althea as misunderstood or Jeffrey as shy, how might you change what they say?

Ask each student to find one piece of dialogue in the memoir and change it to portray another personality and share in small groups, then with the class.

Explain that even if a memoir writer cannot remember exactly what someone said, they can come up with dialogue that fits that character’s personality and what they remember of the situation. Students return to their own memoir drafts and add three pieces of dialogue to illustrate their characters’ personalities. Then, they keep writing.

SESSION 5 : REVISION

Students will be able to revise a draft of their memoir pieces.

YOU WILL NEED

- Student folders
- Loose-leaf paper
- [Polish Your Piece — Handout](#)

BEFORE YOU START

Before you begin, ensure every student has their memoir and that everyone has a copy of the [Polish Your Piece — Handout](#).

HOW TO BEGIN

Explain that this is the last session we'll be working on our memoirs together, and the focus will be on revision. Have students review what they've written so far and make a list of everything they want to accomplish today.

Remind students that when they are done writing their memoirs—that means they have a beginning, middle, and an end—they can start revising. Inform students that the first step to revising your work is to first read your story aloud, either to yourself or to a peer. Before they begin, ask students, why does it help to read your story aloud?

Some answers to highlight are:

- Flow: Reading aloud can help writers notice run-on sentences, repetitive words, and areas where they can diversify sentence structure.
- Errors: Problems such as verb tense or spelling errors come to light when you read aloud.
- Missing pieces: Hearing a story read aloud can help students notice what details might be missing.

Students will revise their memoirs for the rest of the class period. For additional resources, use the [Polish Your Piece — Handout](#) to help students critically think about how they can enhance and expand their story.