

A Memoir Sample Outline

First, get an understanding of memoirs, autobiography and a hybrid of the two.¹ Then create an outline, which is the core structure of any type of writing. When working on a memoir, it is best to create an outline before setting off to write. According to Writer's Digest, a good outline will help organize the events on paper, before writing the first draft. Also, an outline will help you structure the memoir or memoirs into a coherent, chronological narrative structure. In creating an outline, remember that a memoir is a non-fiction story and usually has the basic three acts structure:

- Act 1- The Beginning, normally about 25% of the story: This sets the stage and “hook” to capture the reader’s interest.
- Act 2 - The Middle, normally about 50% of the story: This creates and builds to the drama, conflicts and problems.
- Act 3: - The Ending, normally about 25% of the story: This has the logical resolutions to the drama, conflicts and problems and should have a satisfying end, leaving the main character, you, a new understanding.

The outline should only have bullets or short sentences for the three acts to remind you of your writing plan and a structure to keep you on track while actually writing. Try not to wander off into unrelated side stories. Save these unrelated stories for other memoirs or to build on from the one you’re writing.

A suggestion some people use when developing the memoir outline is to think of the three acts in reverse. That is, think of the ending of your memoir first; then the drama and conflicts that has to be resolved for the ending to logically be reached; and then the beginning to set the players, scenes and environment.

If you plan to write memoirs about several events, organize them in a timeline that will give the reader a sense of one memoir building to the next one. Memoirs could be about changes, turning points and challenges in a person's life. Write it down so the story inspires, provokes thought or just gives the reader an insight to you.

If you choose to write a hybrid (memoir-biography) of your whole life, that is all of the factual events interspersed with memoirs, it should still be organized into a coherent chronological narrative. The outline sample found in the document: “Autobiography Outline Template.pdf” could also be used in this case as a basis for getting started. But remember the memoirs inserted through-out should follow the three acts structure.

Talk to family members about their memories of the event(s) and while everyone remembers differently, getting additional input may trigger more details into your memory. Where there is a difference in the stories, do a little research to see what seems to be more factual. But don’t spend an inordinate amount of time to prove specific detail(s). Just state that this how you remember it and get on with your story. You can always go back and modify it later with the discovery of new information.

Above all remember that writing a memoir is about telling your story from your point of view and written in the first person and while it contains facts, the language usually is informal and in the vernacular. Include facts and your remembered emotions, feelings, the ups and downs modes you went through around the story. This is your chance to be dramatic and express yourself, but truthfully. Let loose and be yourself.

¹ Reference document: “Memoir versus Autobiography.pdf”

Three Acts Outline for a Memoir

The three acts structure is the basic structure of almost all fiction and non-fiction stories (this should be non-fiction for you), books, plays, movies, and of course, memoirs. First, decide what is the event or instant that the memoir is about.

Outline Example:

- “My High School Prom”.

Act One: Here you introduce the main person, usually the protagonist (you, of course) and others (usually at least one antagonist) that are involved in the story both by names, relationships and personalities. Set the scenes and environments as descriptive as possible to create an imagery for the reader. This is also where you want to “hook” the reader’s interest. This begins the lead into Act Two which has the drama, problems, conflicts, etc. that are about to happen.

Outline Example for Act One:

- I, not popular and shy.
- My date for the prom is the most popular and best looking person in school.
- How I was asked to the prom in front of almost the whole school.
- The excitement I felt about this date and choosing what clothes I would wear.
- My next door neighbor and friend (two years behind me in school) telling me it’s all a setup to embarrass me.

Act Two: In this section, your problems become more muddled and complex as shown through scenes of actions and reactions that highlight your journey toward change, transformation and discovering of what is true or false. All of your feelings and emotions involved with this journey should be described in depth as you remember them.

Outline Example for Act Two:

- The emotions around believing my friend or trusting my date which I really want.
- I become paranoid that people in school were talking or laughing behind my back.
- My changes in feelings from everyone knowing this was a setup or that I was imagining it.
- The decision making process to talk with my date about this or keep silent and go to the prom.

Act Three: In the ending Act Three, the drama, conflicts and problems reach a climax and the main person (you) ended with a learning experience. The climax is the highest level of tension that you must resolve as the story comes to a close. It’s always nice to have a type of an epiphany in the end where you have learned a life’s lesson. There are many types of endings where the reader feels happy, sad, satisfied, hanging with something to think about, etc. But the ending should always leave the reader with the feeling that the story is concluded.

Outline Example for Act Three:

- The decision to talk to my date about what my neighbor told me.
- My date admitting it was a setup and feels bad about participating in the plan.
- The date has a change of heart and apologizes.
- The prom date is broken and now I no longer am going to the prom.
- My friend from next door comes to the rescue and takes me to the prom.
- We become even better friends, fall in love and marry.

This is a very trite example, but hopefully it will give you some ideas about writing your own outline for your memoir. Doing an outline for several of your memoirs will, after a while let you create a mental outline and then you can just begin writing the memoir. That is, unless, the memoir is a very complex and lengthy story which requires an outline to keep you focused, on track and to maintain consistency in the story line.