

Memoir & Personal Narrative — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a finished draft. Each section maps to one course module and combines guided exercises, fill-in worksheets, and checklists you can run on your own material. Work through it in order: by the last page you will have a controlling idea, rendered scenes, a calibrated voice, a structured outline, an ethics review, and an essay sent to journals.

From Lived Experience to Story

Find the one slice of your life worth telling, name its meaning, and stockpile concrete raw material.

Exercise: Situation-to-Story Sprint

Set a 20-minute timer. Draft ten candidate situation sentences from your life, then convert your three strongest into story sentences using the formula: Because of [situation], I came to understand [insight]. Circle the one that makes you slightly uncomfortable to write.

- List ten true situations from your life in one sentence each (a relationship, a year, an obsession, a loss).

• For your three strongest, complete: Because of ____, I came to understand ____.

- Apply the disagreement test: could two intelligent readers argue with this story sentence? If not, push it deeper.

- Which story sentence are you slightly afraid to write, and why might that be the live one?

Worksheet: Controlling Idea Worksheet

Lock the spine of your memoir or essay before you draft. Fill every field; revisit as the work evolves.

Working title

Situation (the circumstance, in one sentence)

Story (the meaning, in one sentence)

The slice of life this covers (time span and boundaries)

What I am deliberately leaving out

Why a reader should care (the stake)

The single image that captures the whole

Exercise: Memory Mining Run

Use the five retrieval techniques from the course to surface specific, sensory raw material. Add every fragment to a dedicated memory file without judging quality. Target fifty fragments before drafting any scene.

- Object cataloging: list ten physical objects from the period you are writing about.

- Sense laddering: pick one memory; write one line each for sight, sound, smell, taste, touch.

- The map method: draw a meaningful place from memory and note what happened in each room.

- Before-and-after list: name the moments after which you were no longer the same person.

Checklist: Foundation Readiness Checklist

- I can state the difference between my situation and my story in two separate sentences.
- My story sentence would survive the disagreement test.
- I have a dedicated memory file with at least fifty concrete fragments.
- I have identified my before-self and my after-self.
- I have drafted a one-paragraph author's note on how I handle dialogue, time compression, and altered names.

Scene: Making Memory Immersive

Build immersive scenes with concrete detail, real dialogue, and people rendered in full complexity.

Worksheet: Five-Part Scene Builder

Take one fragment from your memory file and architect a 300 to 500 word scene. Fill each field, then write the scene from it. Do not explain the meaning at the end.

Grounding: where and when, in two sentences

Sensory layer: three concrete details across different senses

Action and dialogue: what happens and is said in real time

The turn: the shift, decision, or rupture that earns the scene

The exit: the resonant image or line to end on

Summary bridge: one sentence of telling that leads in or out

Exercise: Abstraction Hunt

Open your drafted scene and run a search-and-destroy on vague language. Replace abstractions with concrete, specific, sensory evidence drawn from real memory, then cut any detail that does not also advance character or theme.

- Highlight every abstract emotion word (happy, difficult, tense, traumatic) and every generic noun.

- Replace at least five with concrete alternatives that show, not tell.

- For each remaining detail, ask: does this also reveal character or theme? If not, cut it.

- Confirm no scene relies on more than about three sensory details to feel rendered.

Exercise: Full-Complexity Character Pass

Write a 200-word exchange between your narrator and one real person. Keep spoken lines short and characteristic, bracketed by paraphrase. Then audit for complexity in everyone, including the narrator.

- Give the difficult person one genuine virtue the reader can see.

- Give the beloved person one real flaw or limit.

- Show your own narrator's blind spot or smallness in this scene.

- Cut any line of perfectly recalled speech that reads as invented.

Checklist: Scene Quality Checklist

- Each key moment is rendered in scene, not summarized.
- Every scene contains a turn that justifies its presence.
- Concrete sensory detail has replaced abstract emotion words.
- Dialogue is short, characteristic, and faithfully reconstructed.
- Every real person, and the narrator, is more than one thing.

Voice, Distance, and Reflection

Calibrate the two narrating selves, lock a consistent voice, and earn meaning without stating morals.

Exercise: Innocence and Experience Double-Draft

Take one younger-self scene and write it twice to feel narrative distance as a dial you control.

- Draft 1: write the scene purely in the voice of innocence, knowing only what you knew then.

- Draft 2: layer in two or three sentences of the writing-self reflecting from now.

- Read both aloud: how does the reflection change the temperature and the suspense?

- Decide, for this scene, how much hindsight serves the story.

Worksheet: Voice Calibration Sheet

Write a one-page voice sample on a low-stakes memory, then analyze your own choices so voice becomes a deliberate instrument rather than an accident.

Average sentence length (short / medium / long / varied)

Three signature word choices that sound like me

Default distance from the material (ironic remove / raw immersion / measured)

Level of humor and where it appears

What this narrator habitually notices

What this narrator habitually ignores

One sentence that does NOT sound like me, and its fix

Exercise: Reflection That Opens Doors

Return to your strongest scene and add three sentences of reflection after it, then test each one against the over-explaining trap.

- Write three sentences of reflection that arise from this specific scene.

• For each, ask: does it state a moral, or does it deepen a question?

• Cut anything that closes the meaning down or labels the lesson.

• Rewrite the survivors to admit uncertainty and connect to the book's larger pattern.

Checklist: Voice and Reflection Checklist

I can name my experiencing-self voice and my writing-self voice and where each appears.

Hindsight is dialed so scenes keep their immediacy.

My voice is consistent across pages when read aloud.

Reflection arises from scene and points back to it.

No paragraph states the moral or tells the reader what to conclude.

Structure, Ethics, and Publishing

Impose a structure on shapeless life, decide the ethics and legal handling of real people, and revise then submit.

Worksheet: Structure Selection Worksheet

Choose a spine for the whole manuscript and confirm the narrator changes by the end. Fill every field before outlining.

Chosen structure (chronological-with-frame / braided / hero's-journey arc / thematic-collage)

Narrator's central desire or question

Before-self (who the narrator is at the start)

After-self (who the narrator is by the end)

The crisis or turning point

Strands or timelines (if braided)

Opening image or scene

Closing image or scene

Exercise: Ethics and Legal Triage

Run your three most sensitive scenes through the four-question framework and write a one-line decision for each: keep as is, alter identifying details, anonymize, or cut. Flag any scene that may need a professional libel read.

- **Necessity:** is this person and detail essential to the truth, or am I settling a score?
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- Fairness: have I rendered them in full complexity, not as a flat villain?
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- Vulnerability: who is harmed and how badly, weighed against the work's value?
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- Disclosure and law: should I change names or anonymize, is the claim true and defensible, is the subject living or deceased?
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Worksheet: Five-Pass Revision Tracker

Revise one essay or chapter in separate passes from largest concern to smallest. Date each pass as you complete it so you never mix structure work with comma work.

Structural pass — date and notes

Scene pass — date and notes

Voice and distance pass — date and notes

Reflection pass — date and notes

Line pass (read aloud) — date and notes

Final word count

Ready to submit? (yes / no)

Checklist: Submission Readiness Checklist

- One personal essay (800 to 3000 words) has been through all five revision passes.
- Sensitive scenes have a written ethics decision and any needed libel-read flag.
- I have a target list of eight to twelve journals with word limits and themes noted.
- I have confirmed each venue's simultaneous-submission and formatting rules.
- I have submitted to at least three venues and set up a tracker for responses.

Your Action Plan

1. Week 1: Complete the Situation-to-Story Sprint and lock a Controlling Idea Worksheet.
2. Week 1-2: Run memory-mining sessions until your memory file holds at least fifty concrete fragments.
3. Week 2: Build two full scenes with the Five-Part Scene Builder and run the Abstraction Hunt on each.
4. Week 3: Do the Full-Complexity Character Pass on your three most important real people.
5. Week 3-4: Calibrate voice with the double-draft and Voice Calibration Sheet across a few pages.
6. Week 4: Add earned reflection to your strongest scenes and cut every stated moral.
7. Week 5: Choose a structure and build a one-page outline of eight to twelve scenes or chapters.
8. Week 5: Run the Ethics and Legal Triage on all sensitive material and record decisions.
9. Week 6: Take one essay through the Five-Pass Revision Tracker to submission quality.
10. Week 6: Research eight to twelve journals and submit your polished essay to at least three.

