

## The Personal Journal: A Springboard for Memoir

Anna C Rumin [anna.rumin@gmail.com](mailto:anna.rumin@gmail.com)

Hemingway said, “in order to write about life, you must live it”. Whether we call ourselves writers or not, writing gives clarity to our lived experiences. This is a workshop for those who are interested in pausing, looking back and honouring their lives through focused journal writing. **While the goal of this writing workshop is to gather memories and stories, participants can expect to learn about writing as a craft and how it is we go from writing for ourselves to writing for others.**

*There are writers who write for fame. And there are writers who write because we need to make sense of the world we live in; writing is a way to clarify, to interpret, to reinvent. We may want our work to be recognized, but that is not the reason we write. We do not write because we must; we always have a choice. We write because language is the way we keep a hold on life. With words we experience our deepest understandings of what it means to be intimate. We communicate to connect, to know community. Even though writing is a solitary act, when I sit with words that I trust will be read by someone, I know that I can never be truly alone."*

—bell hooks

**Commitment:** Six weeks is a very short time! Participants are encouraged to commit to writing five times a week for a minimum of fifteen minutes – prompts will be given. The more you write the more comfortable you will become as a writer - think of this as a “get fit” program. And of course, the more you write about your own life, the stories from your life, the more you will remember. Please choose one piece that you will share with the group at the beginning of class.

### Notes to Review Before Each Class

- This is a memoir based writing class in which we write through the lens of a personal journal to find and isolate, remember and recollect and finally write the stories that best show who we were, why we did what we did, who we are and who we are becoming
- Unlike autobiography and biography that are linear in shape, memoir can take the shape of any written form including personal essay, poetry, vignettes
- Regardless, memoir, auto and bio all fall under the umbrella of “narrative inquiry” – research that honors life stories as a way of better understanding why we do what we do
- <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jan/13/our-memories-tell-our-story> (an interesting reading)
- Rules of the Course: Keep everything and honor your writing/stories, everything gets a title, don't overthink anything, make the course work for you
- As much as you can develop a ritual of the course – while we meet once a week, our class is the “gravy” your daily writing is the meat and potatoes (or lentils and potatoes) of the course

- What I can do for you: provide structure and design – ways of thinking about HOW you might go about collecting your stories using writing strategies such as brainstorming to generate ideas, freewriting as a way of generating stories, sharing as a way of moving from writing for ourselves to writing for others
- Writing for Ourselves/Writing for Others – personal, poetic/transactional
- While we are writing for ourselves as soon as we share we tiptoe from one category to the next
- Sometimes our unique stories shed light on a shared experience

#### Writing:

- While this is not a writing course we all want to be more engaging, imaginative and clever writers so to improve : READ LIKE A WRITER, WRITE OFTEN AND WITH ABANDON, PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR VERBS, PUT IT OUT THERE
- As much as you can, create a daily writing ritual. You have been provided with at least 5 prompts per week – try and write for 15-20 minutes on each of the prompts.
- Choose one piece of writing that you will share with the class. The piece should be about 600 words in length. If you have written a longer piece, simply choose a section to share.
- I will listen and give feedback and encourage you to be active listeners of writing (not story) ie what do writers DO, how do they SHOW instead of TELL, not what they say
- Go for the small, the unique, what is truly yours and thus authentic
- Keep the photographs

#### Sharing:

- Let the writing speak for itself
- NO preamble, NO commentary

#### MAKE THE COURSE WORK FOR YOU

#### **Week One: Me Myself and I**

*As I started to write myself, I began to read stories differently, harder. Margins were marked with comments, and memorable passages were underlined, then copied down. I wanted to sense what it must have been like to write these words for the first time, so I would type them hesitantly, pretending that they had just come to me. Once, before leaving on vacation, I copied an entire page from an Alice Munro story and left it in my typewriter, hoping a burglar might come upon it and mistake her words for my own."*

*--David Sedaris*

#### **In Class**

1. My eyes have seen, my feet have walked, my hands have held, my ears have heard, my nose has smelled, my heart has felt
2. My life in three lines for each decade

#### **Weekly Reading and Writing**

1. [http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/dyer\\_sp11.html](http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/dyer_sp11.html) On Being an Only Child by Geoff Dyer. Sit down and write about your family – everyone, all your families. Who will you miss?
2. Read Eleven by Sandra Cisneros. What have been the embarrassing moments in your life? Brainstorm. Now write about an embarrassing moment from your past. <http://lcps.k12.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Cisneros-Eleven.pdf>
3. “*In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind.*” Make a list of the times you did not feel listened to. Now, choose one and write.
4. What are your secrets? Brainstorm. Write about a time you revealed a secret and detail the consequences. Why did you reveal it? Do you regret having revealed it?
5. What are your regrets? Brainstorms. Choose one and write about it with the intention of putting it to rest. What did you do or not do that led to that regret? How did you manage to put it to rest? How are you affected or have been affected by that decision?

### **Week Two: The Days of My Week**

*I certainly don't (enjoy writing). I get a fine warm feeling when I'm doing well, but that pleasure is pretty much negated by the pain of getting started each day. Let's face it, writing is hell.*  
(William Styron)

### **In Class : Ways of Knowing Exercise (unravelling learning)**

#### **Weekly writing**

Read <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/untamed-animal-friends> by David Sedaris - don't forget about the animals in your life.

1. What are your daily chores? Brainstorm the list and include them all. Choose one that you will write about but before you do, pay attention to all the steps in the process. Feel the texture of the towels as you fold them, the way you load the dishwasher, how you prepare to walk your dog. Be there in the moment, mindful of what you do. Then, write.
2. Write about your spiritual practices. Brainstorm them. How do you feel during these times? Are there practices that have changed and evolved in your life? Choose one and write about it.
3. Make a list of all the things you use in a day – your sheets, your bed, your floor, your car, your pen, your computer, your fridge, your clothes, paper, milk, toilet paper, soap. List them all. Choose one and do some research on it – honour its place in your life by getting to know where it is from, who invented or makes or grows it, and write about it weaving in your personal story with your research.
4. Make a list of all the people you see in a week – from the grocer, to your family, friends, doctor – list them all. Choose one and write.
5. What are the times when you felt your creativity flow? List them all. Choose one and write.

## **Week Three: People – Those who matter and those who don't**

### **Weekly Reading and Writing**

1. Write about the most important people in your life. Begin with a list, then make short points about importance and role. Choose one person from that list and write about the role he/she has played in your life. Read “Turns out mum still has a lot to teach us” by Sue Smith <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/turns-out-mum-still-has-a-lot-to-teach-us-1.5001254>
2. Who are the important people in your life you have never met? Brainstorm. Choose one and write.
3. In whose life do you play a role? Brainstorm the list. Choose one and write about how you have played a role in this person's life.
4. Write about the first person you knew who died. Write about the last person you knew who died. Write about a person who died who you have never written about. Write about a person who will die, this you know.
5. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/submit-a-lives-lived-column/article4231463/> Read the criteria for Lives Lived. Now do it.
6. For inspiration read this piece by a former participant <http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20180901.OBIREMEMBER/BDAStory/BDA/deaths>

## **Week Four: Facts and Arguments: What Matters and Why**

### **Weekly Reading and Writing**

1. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/28/stone-soup> Stone Soup by Elizabeth Kolbert – read and respond to this essay.
2. Make a list of 10 things you would like to change. Choose one and write about it.
3. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/i-have-an-irrational-fear-of-birds-and-they-seem-to-sense-my-terror/article29052551/> What irrational fears do you have? Make a list, now choose one and write about it.
4. Read From the Globe and Mail : Christmas didn't start until we opened our special delivery from the Maritimes by Patricia Williams - [https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/christmas-didnt-start-until-we-opened-our-special-delivery-from-themaritimes/article37370284/?utm\\_source=Shared+Article+Sent+to+User&utm\\_medium=E-mail:+Newsletters++E-Blasts++etc.&utm\\_campaign=Shared+Web+Article+Links](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/christmas-didnt-start-until-we-opened-our-special-delivery-from-themaritimes/article37370284/?utm_source=Shared+Article+Sent+to+User&utm_medium=E-mail:+Newsletters++E-Blasts++etc.&utm_campaign=Shared+Web+Article+Links) Now have a look at *First Person*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/submissions/> . Think about a story you might submit and begin writing – consider this for WEEK 6.
5. Make a list of the things that matter most in your life; write briefly about each one.

## **Week Five: Giving and Receiving**

*All suffering is bearable if it is seen as part of a story. (Isak Dinesen)*

**In Class Writing:** Three words per decade

### **Weekly Reading and Writing**

1. Make a list of all the gifts you have ever received. Choose one and write about it.
2. Read the classic [https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource\\_files/1-the\\_gift\\_of\\_the\\_magis\\_0.pdf](https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/1-the_gift_of_the_magis_0.pdf) Make a list of all the gifts you have ever given. Choose one and write about it.
3. Watch [https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey\\_kramer\\_the\\_best\\_gift\\_i\\_ever\\_survived](https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_kramer_the_best_gift_i_ever_survived) . How have you suffered? List. Make your suffering bearable by turning it into a gift. Write the story.
4. What are the best parts of your community? What would you change? Choose one idea from your list and write a 750 word piece that you would contribute to the local paper.
5. What are the ways you have given back? List them all. Choose one and write a 750 word piece that you might submit to a local paper.

## **Week Six : Writing for Others**

**Choose one piece of writing that you would like to work on, revise, polish, present and submit to an online journal, *the Globe, The Glebe Report or any other publication*. Follow these directions – please provide one copy for each participant. Double space and number your pages. Bring a stamped, addressed envelope to class.**

1. Read through your draft once. Now, read it OUT LOUD. The best way to catch grammatical errors, inconsistencies, awkward wording is by reading your work out loud.
2. Have somebody else read your piece.
3. Have you provided some kind of “hook” in your introduction? Does something happen or do you prepare the reader for something?
4. Does one paragraph logically connect to the next?
5. In your closing, have you tried to bring your piece full circle? Perhaps there is something else you have done to “complete” your piece without leaving the reader hanging in an awkward way.

Specifically:

Go through your paper and underline all your verbs twice.

1. Have you used the most powerful/effective verb?  
Eg: Instead of *she ran furiously through the door*  
***She charged through the door***

*She whispered* instead of *she spoke quietly*

2. Are **actions and reactions** in chronological order?

She drank her coffee after she poured in a shot of Kahlua

She poured in a shot of Kahlua and drank her coffee

3. Are you **overusing “seem”**?

She seemed happy when she opened her gift.

She wrapped her arms around her father and squeezed him after she opened her gift.

The boat seemed to be sinking.

The boat was sinking.

4. Are you **over-using passive verbs**? Name who did what.

Not: The bananas were left on the counter.

But: Jonathon left the bananas on the counter.

## **5. Crying, Sobbing, Tears and Other Cliches**

Where you can, have you showed the action instead of relying on clichés?

She held onto his knees sobbing “please help me!”

She sank down, clutched his knees and whispered, “please help me”.

6. **Decided to...**Have characters do things rather than decide to do things

Not: She decided to go for a swim before sunset

But: She went for a swim before sunset

7. Dialogue

**Edit dialogue to the barest of essentials** and avoid the overuse of names (remember, this is not being read out, it is being read internally)

Indent dialogue

## **8. IT**

Be careful and name things when you can

9. **THINGS** – Replace “thing” with a specific word.

10. Check for inconsistencies.

Once you have polished your piece, collect all of your writing, and give it a home. Number your pages. Write an introduction to this collection and a final reflection which includes a list of writing goals.

### **Finale : Audience and Purpose – Polished Pieces**

The well-made sentence transcends time and genre. A beautiful sentence is a beautiful sentence, regardless of when it was written, or whether it appears in a play or a magazine article. ... To talk to another writer about sentences feels like forging a connection based on the most intimate and arcane sort of shop-talk, much the way mathematicians might bond on the basis of a shared admiration for some obscure, elegant theorem. Every so often I'll hear writers say that there are other writers they would read if for no other reason than to marvel at the skill with which they can put together the sort of sentences that move us to read closely, to disassemble and reassemble them, much the way a mechanic might learn about an engine by taking it apart."  
—Francine Prose

#### [Recommended readings for continued learning:](#)

What follows are the loyal friends of all writers.

Goldberg, Natalie. [Old friend from far away](#)

Goldberg, Natalie. [Writing down the bones](#)

Goldberg, Natalie. [Wildmind](#)

Heffron, Jack. [The Writer's Idea Book](#)

Johnston, Anthony (ed). [Naming the World \(and other exercises for the creative writer\)](#)

King, Stephen. [On Writing](#)

Lamott, Anne. [Bird by bird](#)

Roorbach, Bill. [Writing Life Stories](#)

Sedaris, David. [Let's explore diabetes with owls](#)

Truss, Lynne. [Easts, Shoots & Leaves \(the zero tolerance approach to punctuation\)](#)

Ueland, Brenda. [If you want to write](#)

Zinsser, William. [Writing about your life](#)

Zinsser, William. [On Writing Well](#)

## **A Quick Brainstorm of some of my favourite memoirs**

### **Ashton-Warner, Sylvia. Teacher**

*“And the design of my work is that creativity in this time of life when character can be influenced forever is the solution to the problem of war”. (p.88)*

### **Beah, Ishmael. A long way gone.**

*When I was a child, my grandmother told me that the sky speaks to those who look and listen to it. She said, "In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything: every pain, every suffering, joy, and confusion." That night I wanted the sky to talk to me. (p.16)*

### **Gallman, Kuki. I Dreamed of Africa**

*The friends took the ropes, and slowly, inch by inch, lowered the coffin with my baby inside into the deep brown earth, where it landed with a soft and final thud. A murmur ran through the crowd, a baby cried. The music grew splendid and exalting, absorbing sounds of weeping, sounds of birds, leaving only the mute rising tide of anguish. (p.217)*

### **Gibb, Camilla. This is Happy**

*“We come to know ourselves through stories. We listen to the stories of others, we inherit the stories of those who came before, and we make sense of our own experiences by constructing a narrative that holds them, and holds us, together. Stories are how we make sense of our lives.” (p. XI)*

### **Hemingway, Ernest. A Moveable Feast**

*“When spring came, even the false spring, there were no problems except where to be happiest. The only thing that could spoil a day was people and if you could keep from making engagements, each day had no limits. People were always the limiters of happiness except for the very few that were as good as spring itself.”*

### **Huggan, Isabel. Belonging**

*“But I did not want to be good. I wanted to be a writer.”*

### **McCourt, Frank. Angela’s Ashes**

*“When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary*

*miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.”*

**Patchett, Ann Truth and Beauty**

*I was starting to wonder if I was ready to be a writer, not someone who won prizes, got published and was given the time and space to work, but someone who wrote as a course of life. Maybe writing wouldn't have any rewards. Maybe the salvation I would gain through work would only be emotional and intellectual. Wouldn't that be enough, to be a waitress who found an hour or two hidden in every day to write?”*

**Wiesel, Elie. Night**

*“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.”*

*Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.*

*Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”*

**Zinsser, William (editor) Inventing the Truth; The Art and Craft of Memoir**

*“I was looking for a way to narrate a life story of a woman that would pay due respect to her attachments to men and to family but would be about something else entirely. I wanted to convey my sense of my education, of my liberation through access to education, and of the variety of steps by which I arrived at taking charge of my own life. Philosophically, you only have to perform one free act to be a free person”. Jill Ker Conway on her memoir The Road from Coorain*

*“There’s enough misery. What readers want is experience. There’s nothing new in my book. It’s an old fashioned book – all the old elements are there.... Well, if we didn’t have a sense of humour in those days we were dead”. Frank McCourt on his memoir Angela’s Ashes*

*“I recommend that to memoir writers: Make a nice dinner for everybody – something that makes you feel you’ve done good for someone. Fortunately, most people do want to be written about. They want their lives to be known and remembered. They may be wary when you describe your project to them, especially if you look like some kind of loose cannon. But once it’s done they’re usually happy.” Ian Frazier Looking for My Family*

**PARTICIPANT PUBLICATIONS**

**The Ottawa Citizen**

[http://epaper.ottawacitizen.com/@mjc\\_edwards/csb\\_e5AwIYjXWz1rTpVcn6-3sb3um-62646Yxj4auckZ4WjB03qq9eg8rUtFst\\_n4OMF\\_Let's Shed a Little Light on Coping with Blindness by Pat Mayberry](http://epaper.ottawacitizen.com/@mjc_edwards/csb_e5AwIYjXWz1rTpVcn6-3sb3um-62646Yxj4auckZ4WjB03qq9eg8rUtFst_n4OMF_Let's%20Shed%20a%20Little%20Light%20on%20Coping%20with%20Blindness%20by%20Pat%20Mayberry)

## **Glebe Report**

White Oak Surprise by Kit Flynn in the Glebe Report  
[https://issuu.com/glebereport/docs/gr\\_june\\_2017\\_web](https://issuu.com/glebereport/docs/gr_june_2017_web)

Madeline by Tamara Levine in the Glebe Report [http://www.glebereport.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/GR-August-2017\\_web2.pdf](http://www.glebereport.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/GR-August-2017_web2.pdf)

## **The Globe and Mail**

The Birthday Gift by Diane Gorman from The Globe and Mail  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/buying-a-frilly-blue-couch-set-me-on-a-path-of-freedom-after-my-divorce/article31346719/>

The Door I Can't Open by Kit Flynn in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/i-want-my-sons-to-remember-their-father-but-its-too-hard-to-go-through-histhings/article36042548/>

A World of Breakfast Beckons by Carol Sutherland Brown in Facts and Arguments in the Globe and Mail <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/no-matter-where-i-ve-traveled-at-breakfast-there-is-always-hope/article34971103/>

The Black Hole Over My Shoulder by Nancy Wehlau in Facts and Arguments, Globe and Mail  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/my-massive-purse-is-a-black-hole-swallowing-everything-it-encounters/article30527153/>

Setting the Holiday Table by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, First Person  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/christmas-didnt-start-until-we-opened-our-special-delivery-from-the-maritimes/article37370284/>

Welcomed by War Survivors in Vietnam and Cambodia by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/welcomed-by-war-survivors-in-vietnam-and-cambodia/article34758371/>

In My Perfect-for-Italy Skirt I had my Perfect Marilyn Monroe Moment by Patricia Williams in the Globe and Mail, Dispatches <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/travel/activities-and-interests/in-my-perfect-for-italy-skirt-i-had-a-perfect-marilyn-monroe-moment/article31707879/>

Watch My Breath? I'd rather count my way through mediation by Linda Jones

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/article-watch-my-breath-id-rather-count-my-way-through-meditation/>

Hostess Gift Hell by Sarah Prospero

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/first-person/article-hostess-gift-hell-whats-with-all-the-little-jars-of-relish/#comments>

<http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20180901.OBIREMEMBER/BDAStory/BDA/deaths> by Hendrick Sire

## **STORY-QUILT.COM ON LINE JOURNAL**

Brandied Cherries by Barbara Robertson <http://www.story-quilt.com/brandied-cherries/>

Moving On by Erica Sher <http://www.story-quilt.com/moving-on/>

Getting At It: Love Letters From the Cedar Chest by Maryan O'Hagan <http://www.story-quilt.com/getting-at-it-love-letters-from-the-cedar-chest/>

Salvador Ambulando: An Ode to my Black Ballet Flats by Carol Sutherland Brown <http://www.story-quilt.com/solvitur-ambulando-an-ode-to-my-black-ballet-flats/>

Uncle Heini's Underwear by Michaela A. Keyserlingk <http://www.story-quilt.com/uncle-heinis-underwear/>

Tommy by Margaret Pimm <http://www.story-quilt.com/tommy-3/>

Mustard and First Loves by Art McLean <http://www.story-quilt.com/mustard-and-first-loves/>

Christmas on the Island by Pamela Parkin <http://www.story-quilt.com/christmas-on-the-island/>

The Sapphire Ring by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-sapphire-ring/>

Fervour Young by Dave McCabe <http://www.story-quilt.com/fervour-young/>

Little Fogo by Dave McCabe <http://www.story-quilt.com/little-fogo-june-2015/>

Dad's Mug by Marlene Luscombe <http://www.story-quilt.com/dads-mug/#comment-492>

The Pairing Knife by Marlene Luscombe <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-paring-knife/>

Nine Countries in 22 Days by Isobel Salole <http://www.story-quilt.com/nine-countries-in-twenty-two-days/>

Christmas Innocence by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/christmas-innocence/>

The One Who didn't Get Away by Edie Fauquier <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-one-who-didnt-get-away/>

My First Visit to Bloomingdales by Edie Fauquier

Gunslingers and Spies by Rhys Williams <http://www.story-quilt.com/gunslingers-and-spies/>

Will I ever return to Mount Sinai? By Graham Howard <http://www.story-quilt.com/will-i-ever-return-to-mount-sinai/>

The Telephone by Cathy Graham <http://www.story-quilt.com/the-telephone/>

Sidekicks and Sidejobs by Sarah Prospero <http://www.story-quilt.com/sidekicks-and-sidejobs/>

Turquoise, Red, Russet and a Splash of Pink by Donna Singleton

What's Inside by Donna Singleton <http://www.story-quilt.com/artist/donna-singleton/>

Motorbike Memory by David Morris <https://www.story-quilt.com/artist/david-morris/>

## **Fifty Five Plus Magazine**

<https://console.virtualpaper.com/fifty-five-plus-magazine/september-55-ottawa-2019/#44/>

Minutes to Midnight by Peggy Edwards

## **THE SUNDAY EDITION**

Sarah Prospero reads her essay :

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-sunday-edition-for-november-24-2019-1.5365364/how-poetry-helped-me-navigate-the-turbulence-of-teen-angst-1.5367031>