

## Notes from Louise Krug's presentation on Writing Memoir Essays

Monday, February 13, 2017 | 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Washburn Professor Louise Krug teaches writers how to “write about something that only you can” in a workshop on crafting memoir essays that resonate with readers, using short examples of memoir from published writers and providing guidelines for new and experienced writers.

Louise Krug's Top Nonfiction Picks

[https://tscpl.bibliocommons.com/list/share/628692720\\_miranda\\_ericsson/832053567](https://tscpl.bibliocommons.com/list/share/628692720_miranda_ericsson/832053567)

Louise Krug is an English professor at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. She has written two memoirs about her 2005 brain surgeries, *Louise: Amended* (2012) and *Tilted: The Post Brain-Surgery Journals* (2016). Publishers Weekly named *Louise: Amended* one of the best nonfiction books of 2012, calling it “an immediate, unsparring, and beautifully rendered account of loss and recovery.” Author Mary Karr also called it “a page-turner in which a person's very soul deepens before your eyes.”

### Welcome

“Not that surprising that there are so many people here.” (opening line, to a very crowded room)  
Memoir writing is something you can do at any point in your life, it makes you feel good, it makes other people feel good – *or sometimes not.*

Louise Krug recently finished reading the book “The Memoir Project” by Marian Roach Smith – she said it’s “unlike any book I’ve ever read before. No more mindless exercises!”

If you have come to this event, you are looking to get into the details of how to tell your story.

### Guidelines for writing memoir essays

Commentary on the first handout “Guidelines for writing memoir essays” (*The text of handout is included contextually here in the notes.*)

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” Emily Dickinson, poem 1129

“Good memoirs are careful acts of construction. We like to think that an interesting life will simply fall into place on the page. It won’t...Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events.” William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir.*

Everything that we read and everything that we write is carefully done, nothing just happens, you don’t just come up with the final product, you work at it.

“But the original pact, the real deal is with herself. Be honest, dig deep, or don’t bother.” Abigail Thomas, *Thinking About Memoir*

Don't bother – it's not worth reading if it's not honest. We've all written things that didn't go anywhere because we didn't feel like getting to the point,

"You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better." Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

Write about family or friends even if you're scared – How to write about your family elegantly and eloquently?

"The emotional stakes a memoirist bets with could not be higher, and it's physically enervating. I nap on a daily basis like a cross-country trucker." Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir*

It's exhausting – it's a good sign if you are exhausted – sometimes it's fun, sometimes you get upset.

Rules to remember (adapted from Marion Roach Smith)

1. Writing a memoir is about telling the truth

Keep in mind phrases like, "Here's how I see it, or "Here's how it happened to me," or "Here's How I felt."

Try to use these phrases. It may seem sort of obvious but I don't think it's that obvious.

2. Every Page Must Drive One Single Story Forward --- Galileo in Wal-Mart

Gallileo in Walmart (example from Marion Roach Smith) – You go into Wal-mart , and you are just looking for that one telescope lens that you need, but there is all the other stuff at Wal-mart, endcaps and sales and things that are distracting you. That is how your brain is, you have to ignore everything else at walmart and have tunnel vision -- in a good way -- to sift through to find what you need.

3. Just Because Something Happens, Doesn't Make it Interesting

When Louise was working on her first book, learning to walk again was taking forever, every small accomplishment was a big deal and to her, her experiences in rehabilitation was interesting every day. Her editor made her cut out the physical rehab stuff "it's a bit much" – The lesson learned was that just because it took forever for you to accomplish, doesn't mean other people want to read about it in such great detail. Collapse it.

4. You are not the story. You are the illustration. You and your story are the illustration of the theme (if you feel like you've been moved off center stage, you're doing great, as memoir is not the ego-trip that people make it out to be).

You are not the story, according to Smith.

According to Louise, memoir is not a crazy ego trip, at least it hasn't been for me.

She has heard the statement "Memoir is like the selfie of the literary genre." – NO – it's not about you, it's about something bigger than you.

## Memoir math equations on the white board

$X + y = \text{memoir}$

$Y = \text{you}$

$X = \text{the bigger thing}$ . It could be “cooking made you a better dad”, or “animals make people’s lives better”, or whatever you are writing about that is bigger than just you or more universal. Would your memoir be shelved in the books about depression, or home decorating, or parenting, or military service, or mountain climbing? That might be an indication of the “ $x$ ” in your memoir equation.

Doesn’t that make you feel better? You aren’t self-obsessed! You aren’t an egomaniac! You are just interested in telling a story by using yourself as an example. The reader will get that, and will apply whatever you write, your story, to their own life, because that is what readers do.

At the women’s prison in Topeka, Louise went to discuss her book with women who read her memoir. She was worried what they would think and whether it was relatable to these readers. The women had impossible heartbreaking lives. “They all were able to apply my book and the themes to their stories.” The readers are always going to apply the book to their own stories.

NOTE: A word about writing about family: You are the subject, even when you’re focusing on somebody else. Be harder on yourself than anybody else. You are writing to tell your own story.

## MEMOIR EXERCISE #1: The Big List

For now, make a list of all the things you want to write about. We know you have ideas -- that is why you are here. Make a simple list, get it down once and for all on paper. Make a list of all the things you have been thinking of writing in a memoir, ever. Make a list of all of the ideas you have for memoir essays. Whether they are chapters or tiny grains of an idea or a whole book on the subject of the time you joined the circus. Big ideas, small ones, or medium sized. Write them down.

Discussion from people sharing and asking questions about what they put on their lists:

- Bitter disappointment in humanity – a very broad topic, needs specific instances
- Deep feelings about some things – deep meaning to me makes it significant
- Too much on the list - significant major events in life – how are you supposed to narrow that down?
- I don’t find myself as interesting as I find other people. Consider specificity – Look at if you are really getting to the root of what it is?
- Two lists – One with wonderful thematic things in my life, and one with some evil things
- All about people who should have behaved better. Consider - Do you know how you want to write about them? If you are going to write about people who should have behaved better, you have to show yourself in your not so great moments also. If we are up here (on the pedestal) and we show everyone down there (by the floor), what happens? It’s not as fun to read, for the reader. David Sedaris is always looking ridiculous and there is something endearing about that.
- Themes – downsizing, retirement , relationships,

## But am I actually Interesting?

Comment: I began to feel terribly selfish – I wonder if there is anything about me that people want to read?

Louise as cheerleader: “You need to ignore that voice while you are getting started on this.”

If the writing is engaging, taking the trash out is exciting.

It’s all on you as the writer to make it interesting.

Use your stories to talk about a larger theme.

Why do people like Humans of New York? – Why would anyone be interested in this random person?

But sometimes, you can really identify with the story because you know what that feels like. Sometimes the reader identifies with the story of a complete stranger, a random person, and then they aren’t a stranger anymore.

It’s important to write for who can be in common with you.

A lot of great writing or good writing comes from moments of high embarrassment. – this was shared as a point taught by the poet Ed Skoog

At some point, writing about the moments of high embarrassment could transcend self-therapy and become art.

Why do people really like reading that stuff? They can relate. It’s kind of the story where they don’t have to admit they’ve been through the same thing, reading it makes them feel comfortable with their own self and their own stories.

Comment: I grew up in the city in NY and spent the winter in the city and the summer in the country and the difference between the two is totally different. The difference is black and white. My memoir would have to be a combination of both, scenery and traffic and cars and attitudes.

All of us have to get more specific.

## MEMOIR EXERCISE #2: The Top Three

We’re each making a new list, identify the top three things from your old list, but make them more specific. Whether it’s writing down names, times, dates, descriptions of the incident you talk about, writing out old dialogue that people said, anything that you can color and flush out the new top three. Recycle from the old list, identify priorities, and come up with a new top three.

## MEMOIR EXERCISE #3: The Sentence as The Outline

Now, look at your top three and you have to circle one.

Write out that sentence – write it anew. But each word is going to now be a separate chapter.

Example. Life is hard but then it gets better.

Life. Is. Hard. But. Then. It. Gets. Better.

Each of these words would be a section of the memoir, so write it out chapter by chapter.

Louise filled in that example based on her experience with brain surgery.

Life (what life was like before)

Is. (a verb. Things happen)

Hard. (in the hospital.)

But. (out of the hospital, moving, things changing)

Then. (moving to Kansas, going to grad school)

etc.

## Looking at the readings

Haven Kimmel in *A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Mooreland, Indiana*

Many people grow up in a rural place or small town, may find some common ground.

Anne Lamott in *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*

Many people give birth, are parents, may find some common ground with her memoir or be shocked by it.

### Looking at the example of the lists in *A Girl Named Zippy*

It doesn't matter what you are writing about, it matters that you are giving us great examples and that your words help us see

This is the list form, such a simple form, but she is able to make it work for her. It's a narrative, it's a story, and it's a list.

In her list, she isn't simply telling us the things, she is giving detail, she is adding words to the experience, adding to her experience, she's telling us how it looked, how she used it, how she interacted with it – these are things we could do. She is so good at explaining through the eyes of the child what the object was that we see it and relate to it and to her because of it.

In the first list, elliptical examples and ironic deflation and then the second list with shorter entries.

In Louise's classes, she has students who use pictures in their assignments all the time and it's great. Go for it, use pictures with your work.

One person commented that they feel cheated because there is a lot more that can be told, that the list is too brief.

When she adds the details to the list, she is detailing the things that are important to her. Some of the details she includes are shocking a bit. A list doesn't have to be boring or uniform – it can be the form of a story itself.

### Looking at the example of the diary entries in *Operating Instructions*

If you've ever had a newborn, it's pretty terrible at first.

Honest is not flattering. Honest makes you look really bad sometimes. In the end, you don't look good but you do look good, because you are being honest.

Presumably Anne Lamott kept a journal when she had her baby, but she didn't turn that in directly to her editor. She is using the form of a daily journal, elementary, basic, but this is an edited polished manuscript.

Question – Would you have had to have kept a journal at the time in order to write in a journal format about it now? Not required, but it would help to get the details right.

Style of this writing – makes it a little more honest because there is not a smooth transition from sentence to sentence – the writer can blurt things out in the moment, and not explain changes in mood

because of the passage of time in between entries. Daily life may not be interesting in most memoirs, but in this case, something happens every single day even if it's just her being miserable.

## When nothing interesting happens, and other participant questions

Your version of nothing and my version of nothing are different.

When I'm writing – what happens isn't always interesting.

You can't decide what other people want and don't want to read/

Use your humor, use your sensibilities, decide what contrasts to use or what to include.

Spend some time evaluating whether what you have written is interesting or not.

Consider your audience when thinking about what is interesting. A history of a place or an organization or a family may contain details that would be interesting to people reading for the detailed historical facts but less interesting to a memoir reader interested in the human elements of the story.

If you want to write a memoir family history book for your children and they are going to want to know what your mom's favorite song was and what she wore when she worked in the garden, then include that, but also get creative and have your personality and your mom's personality show in the writing.

Discussion of whether memoirs are disproportionately written and read by women. Memoirs aren't biographies. The library shelves memoirs within the topic area of the subject. For examples, in the Health Information Neighborhood, memoirs have a purple "memoir" sticker on the spine to distinguish them from medical or informational books on the same topics. Memoirs about pregnancy, cancer, Alzheimer's, etc. are available alongside health books published by research hospitals because hearing other people's experiences through their stories is one way we learn about a topic.

Who you are writing for should be yourself. Not just for practical purposes.

How are memoir and conversation different? If we were sitting across the table at the coffee shop, talking, sharing that story. And if that story was in print, then we are sharing the stories more broadly.

I think what everyone is feeling is what all writers feel. This doubt that doesn't go away until it's over. And then it still doesn't go away. We can help you narrow down your idea. Doubt isn't going to go away, you should write anyway.

People who want to pass down some stories to their children. Other people have wanted to read the 90 year old dad's stories. He really felt it was important to write it down, to tell his stories.

Certain stories in my life, if I write them down it will give my children a better understanding. Just by you choosing the way you tell those stories, that's a choice.

Choosing something to write about – at a party something comes up and you have a story about that and tell the story. How do you come up with something to write about? Brainstorming – and narrow the ideas – and until they become specific.

We have talked about honesty – is there a place for embellishment in memoir?

Yes. I prefer the term exaggerate. I would say that exaggeration works in memoir, especially when it's harmless and I'm in on the exaggeration, when I suspect the detail is exaggerated.

Another example, I'm not sure if I wore that exact thing that day, but it's harmless and I wore something like it.

Sometimes I feel like I have to embellish a little bit to make it more humorous.

I don't think there is a writer alive who doesn't embellish

Always this example comes up: *A Million Little Pieces* – James Frey – factual/not factual – his statements about having written

Vivian wrote a memoir about walks about New York City with her mother and later said some of the conversations she invented – some were true and some were not.

In Louise Krug's book *Louise Amended* – some of the chapters are from the point of view of other people – fictional interludes – from the point of view of her brother or boyfriend. Those are fictional and labeled as such.

## How to think about organizing your thoughts

- Boiling down big ideas and small ideas
- Timeline
- Writing a narrative arc for the story you want to tell –figure out where the story is going to begin, and where the action/conflict will be, and where the resolution or acceptance or lack of resolution will be
- Mapping your ideas
- Outline and move around index cards

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