

## CRAFT MATTERS

Eight Tricks of the Trade Every Memoir Writer  
Should Consider for Every Page



A Workshop by Jennifer Leigh Selig  
www.jenniferleighselig.com

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## DIALOGUE

In *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*, Beth Kephart writes, “Dialogue will become one of the greatest moral and storytelling conundrums you will face when writing memoir.” Do you need it? Will the reader believe it? Who actually remembers verbatim what someone said in the past, whole swaths of conversation? She says, “When it’s done right, it feels essential; it seems to bring us closer to the story’s heart.”

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## BENEFITS OF DIALOGUE

- It helps to break up long paragraphs or pages of prose.
- It tends to move the reader quickly through the text, building up a sense of momentum.
- It can also convey information quickly.
- It is sensory—it gives us a sense of how someone talks, and it adds an aural element to your writing (because we can hear it).
- It is a great way to develop and distinguish characters.

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## QUICK SUGGESTIONS

- Overwrite dialogue in a first draft—you can always cut it later
- Dialogue tags—“he said,” “she mumbled,” “she whispered quietly”
- Dialogue in italics, ala Mary Karr
- Always read your dialogue aloud
- Listen to someone else read your dialogue aloud
- Use contractions

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## MORE SUGGESTIONS

(1) Drop words. We don’t all speak in full sentences all the time. Consider this before and after example.

“Where is she?” he asked.

“She is in her bedroom,” I replied.

“Should I go talk to her?”

“It would be better if both of us talked to her together,” I suggested.

“Where is she?” he asked, dropping his keys on the counter. No hello, no good to see you, no kiss.

“Bedroom,” I replied.

“Should I . . . ?” he asked, gesturing toward her closed door.

“Wait.” I put down the knife, dried my hands, took a deep breath, and exhaled so hard the paper towel took flight. “Let’s do this together.”

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(2) Include the body. Most of the time, people are not just talking. They are doing something else while they talk. Even if two people are sitting down for an intimate conversation, they are still doing other things while talking. They are twisting the ring on their finger, or glancing at the clock, or noticing the stain on the carpet. Adding these details in creates a sense of verisimilitude and reveals character. Think like a director.

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(3) Consider pacing. Use rapid-fire dialogue to create a sense of urgency.

“Do you want a divorce?”

“Yes.”

“Geez, at least have the decency to pause for a second and pretend like you have to think about it.”

“Don’t need to. This marriage’s been on one long pause.”

“I thought you wanted—”

“I don’t. I never did. You wanted me to want it and. . . .”

“And?”

“Really? We’ve been over this.”

Just make sure that your reader can track who is saying what.

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#### (4) Play with punctuation

- Use comma splices, because that’s how real people talk. Ex: “I don’t want the job, you can’t afford me anyway”
- An ellipsis can suggest a thought dropping off, or a hesitancy to say something. “You’re so . . . wise,” he said.
- Use periods for emphatic dialogue. “Nope. Not today. Not tomorrow even.”
- Use a dash to suggest interrupted dialogue. “I want you to get your bags and—.”
- Use italics for emphasis (preferable over all caps which are hard on the eyes). “No. If you want to go, *you* get the bags.”

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## INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

Interior monologue is great in a memoir, which is not only about what happened to you in the past, but how you think and feel about it, both then and now. Interior monologue will take us inside how you felt about something then. It will show us your thought process, and your thought process is one of the things that makes you uniquely you. Thus, interior monologue is a great way to get at your voice, your inner voice when you’re speaking to yourself. It’s intimate and it’s vulnerable to be allowed inside of someone’s head. It’s also a great way to get at character and complexity.

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## BENEFITS OF INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

Imagine a scene where a teacher is gently scolding you in second grade for something you did wrong. Your interior monologue during her scolding will tell us so much about you. If you’re thinking *I’m so stupid I’m so stupid I’m so stupid*, that contrasted with the gentleness of the scolding tells us worlds about you. Or if you’re thinking *I want to punch that teacher in the face and rip out her tongue with a pair of pliers*, uh, yea, we learn something every different about you with that interior monologue! What’s so great about interior monologue is the juxtaposition between action and interiority, or between exterior dialogue, what is said, with interior dialogue, what is thought. It’s also a great place for humor and the unexpected. Think about comic strips—they do these so well, when they place a thought bubble above someone’s head that makes us chuckle.

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## 6 WAYS TO FORMAT INTERIOR MONOLOGUE

### 1. Thought written in first person present, italicized, tagged

Mary closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. *This summer has been so perfect*, she thought. *I don’t want it ever to end.*

### 2. Thought written in first person present, italicized, not tagged

Mary closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. *This summer has been so perfect. I don’t want it ever to end.*

### 3. Thought written in first person present, not italicized, tagged

Mary closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. This summer has been so perfect, she thought. I don’t want it ever to end.

Harvey Chapman (<http://www.novel-writing-help.com/interior-monologue.html>)

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### 4. Thought written in first person present, not italicized, not tagged

Mary closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. This summer has been so perfect. I don’t want it ever to end.

### 5. Thought written in third person past, not italicized, tagged

Mary closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. This summer had been so perfect, she thought. She didn’t want it ever to end.

### 6. Thought written in third person past, not italicized, not tagged

Mary closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. This summer had been so perfect. She didn’t want it ever to end.

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**Consider adding interior monologue to your dialogue. People are also thinking while they're talking.**

"Do *you* want a divorce?" She glared at me, daring me to be the one to say it so she could walk away the victim. Again. Men were always leaving her.

"Yes," I said softly. *Don't escalate*, I could hear my therapist saying.

"Geez, at least have the decency to pause for a second and pretend like you have to think about it."

I looked up at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and told her the truth.

"Don't need to. This marriage's been on one long pause."

Her jaw dropped open. I immediately regretted saying it. I could hear her repeating this to her sister. *And then he said the whole marriage was on one long pause, can you believe it?*

But she wasn't going to take any responsibility. Not now. Not ever. "I thought you wanted—"

"I don't. I never did. You wanted me to want it and. . ." I saw the dog, tail at half-mast, slink out of the room. *Here they go again*, she was probably thinking.

"And?"

*Bait. Don't take the bait*, I told myself. "Really? We've been over this."

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## PERSON

We can write about our lives in first person (I, we), third person (she, he, they), or even in second person (you).

First person is, of course, most common in memoir.

Sometimes we may want distance from ourselves so we write in third person.

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From bell hook's *Forward to Bone Black*, where she shifts person. "Sometimes memories are presented in the third person, indirectly, just as all of us sometimes talk about things that way. We look back as if we are standing at a distance. Examining life retrospectively we are there and not there, watching and watched."

### SUGGESTIONS

If you're stuck in a scene or having trouble remembering, changing to third person can sometimes aid in recalling details.

It's also sometimes easier to write about difficult things if we write in third person. We can always go back in and change it back to first person later.

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**Sometimes we may want to bring the reader closer so we use second person. From Jennifer's flash memoir "How Magical Thinking Works":**

That did not just happen, you think to yourself, if you're even capable of thinking at all. That did not just happen. You put your foot on the gas, drive slowly down the street, because if you just drive like nothing happened, then nothing happened.

Something happened. There's a part of you that knows something happened, but you aren't wholly functioning, so you let the nothing happened part of you maintain control of the vehicle and you try to unsee what you just saw, you try to unfeel what you just felt, you try to unhear what you just heard.

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**While consistency is the norm, there are times you may want to jump to another person.**

**First person to second person:**

When I see the photo of myself on my wedding day, I want to stop her. You can't know this now, I want to tell her, but you are about to make the biggest mistake of your life. You think you know him, but you'll soon find out his secrets because he'll stop trying so hard to hide them.

**First person to third person:**

I sat down on the porch, pale face blank with shock. If a stranger passed by, he might mistake the look on the girl's face as boredom. He wouldn't know what she had just witnessed inside the house. If he did, he would surely go to her, rescue her from what would happen next, call the police for her, wait with her until they came. But no stranger passed by, and I was absolutely alone.

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## TENSE

In general, full-length memoirs are written in past tense, for rather obvious reasons.

Memoirs can be written in present tense, which has the benefit of making them feel more immediate (Jennifer's favorite example is Mark Doty's coming-of-age memoir, *Firebird*).

**Regardless of your tense choices, what's most important is consistency.**

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### TENSE-JUMPING FROM PRESENT TO FUTURE

Doty describes sitting on a porch swing with his mother and singing hymns aloud through dusk and into the evening. “Now it seems extraordinary to me, our night singing, loud and completely unabashed.”

He describes a suicide attempt after his father insists on cutting Mark’s hair. “I cannot quite, now, put myself in the place of that boy, that stupid, fourteen-year-old boy, shorn to a military severity—humiliating in 1967, and exactly the way I wear my hair today.”

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### SENTENCE STARTERS

Later I will come to realize....

It will be years before this scene makes sense....

That girl doesn’t know that years later, she will....

In hindsight, I was so wrong in that moment...

Mom will tell me after Dad has died that this was the time he was the happiest....

**THE BENEFIT of jumping from present to future: it offers the benefit of reflection from an older self**

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### TENSE-JUMPING FROM PAST TO PRESENT

- When I was thirty, I received some news that would change my life forever. I am working on my dissertation when the phone rings.
- There is one scene from my childhood that I remember like it was yesterday, though it has been 35 years since then. I am six years old. . . .
- I can still see myself in that moment, walking into the house, not noticing that the door is slightly ajar. What I do notice is Michael, sitting on the floor. He has his head in his hands, and he is rocking back and forth.

**THE BENEFIT of jumping from past to present: it offers a sense of immediacy and drama**

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### THE SENSES

We are sensory beings who live in a sensory world, and we can bring our readers into our sensory being and our sensory world by evocating that world for them.

**SIGHT**

**SOUND**

**SMELL**

**TASTE**

**TOUCH** (texture, temperature, pressure, pain, vibrations, etc.)

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### SUGGESTIONS

- Go through a piece of your writing and highlight your use of the senses using 5 different color highlighters. Notice your go-to senses. Look for places to expand your lesser used senses.
- Look through your writing for bare nouns, and highlight them. They are great places to add sensory detail.

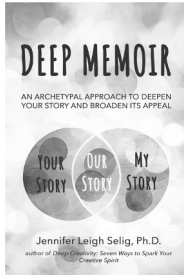
I sat in a chair and watched television. The dog was on the floor in front of the fire. I had just about finished the bag of chips when the doorbell rang.

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- See where you can reach for a richer descriptive word, or add a more specific adjective.
  - Instead of “her eyes were blue,” write “her eyes were indigo blue”
  - Instead of “his footsteps were loud,” write “his footsteps were thunderous”
  - Instead of “the sun was hot,” write “the scorching sun” or “the sun seared my skin”
- Replace a descriptive word with a metaphor

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## METAPHOR



A metaphor is a comparison between two things that are otherwise unrelated or dissimilar.

See my book *Deep Memoir* for a very long chapter where I wax poetic on the power of metaphor, and offer 7 levels of metaphors and 12 craft tips for writing them.

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**Metaphor works by comparison. It answers the question, “What is it like?”**

- What is my mother’s hair like?
- What was my childhood home like?
- What was the principal’s voice like?
- What did the hill look like?
- What did it feel like to drive the car?
- What did his touch feel like?
- What is betrayal like?

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From Gina Frangello’s *Blow Down Your House: A Memoir of Family, Feminism, and Treason*

This is what it is to have bitten the apple, and to understand for the first time why female desire and knowledge are the most feared and demonized forces in history. This is what it’s like to be a destroyer of worlds: that woman, that apple, that serpent, all at once. Even if your Eden was partially imaginary, this is what it’s like to watch the dream of it fade forever into the mist and to want to turn back the clock, to want to return, but also to never want to return, to ache to keep running. This is what it’s like to have feared your entire life becoming your martyr of a mother, and to instead have become the monster under your children’s bed. This is what it’s like to choose love.

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When Debra Marquart was writing *The Horizontal World: Growing Up in the Middle of Nowhere*, she was pressed to find a way to honor the land that her family had farmed for generations, to explain to us what that land was like, what it meant to her and the family. She did so in metaphor. “This is Logan County. While it may be just another patch of flat horizon to someone driving through, to the people of my family it’s the navel of the earth, the place from which all things flow and to which all things return in time.” What was Logan County like? The navel of the earth. The motherland. The place that nourished. The center of the world. So many associations flow from that simple yet elegant metaphor.

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## REPETITION

Repetition is a rhetorical device where a writer or speaker makes use of repeated words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. (Think Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech)

There are four reasons why repetition is a powerful rhetorical device:

1. It reinforces your points.
2. It mirrors the multiplicity and complexity of the psyche.
3. It adds lyricism to your writing.
4. It makes words and concepts memorable.

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Heather Sellers from *You Don’t Look Like Anyone I Know*

But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t bear to think of my mother loving me but unable to face me, to stare into my eyes, to care for me emotionally, to offer me her face. Like any daughter, as much as I wanted to separate from her, I wanted to be deeply connected to her, I wanted to redeem her, I wanted to protect her. I wanted to love and to understand, in that order.

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Roxane Gay from *Hunger*

I have been living in this unruly body for more than twenty years. I have tried to make peace with this body. I have tried to love or at least tolerate this body in a world that displays nothing but contempt for it. I have tried to move on from the trauma that compelled me to create this body. I have tried to love and be loved. I have been silent about my story in a world where people assume they know the why of my body, or any fat body. And now, I am choosing to no longer be silent. I am tracing the story of my body from when I was a carefree young girl who could trust her body and who felt safe in her body, to the moment when that safety was destroyed, to the aftermath that continues even as I try to undo so much of what was done to me.

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## CULTURAL REFERENCES

### BENEFITS

- Cultural references can bring more aliveness to your writing, more specificity.
- They can be a way to show, not tell.
- They can connect you to a reader who may have lived through that culture or time period.
- They can downright delight readers because it triggers their memory as well.
- It can create a mood (think music from an era).

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“It was the early 70’s, and I was going to the school where my dad was the principal for the first time. I was so happy!”

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“It was the early 70’s. Watergate was on the horizon, the Vietnam War was in the rear view mirror. Adults were buying Ford Pintos, boys were playing with Matchbox cars, and girls were cooking in Easy Bake Ovens. Men were sporting sideburns and unbuttoning their shirts to show off their chest hairs, and women donned high cut boots and low cut pants. In a few years, “Charlie’s Angels” and “Wonder Woman” would be popular tv shows, but I was already feeling girl power as I dressed in green and yellow bell bottoms and skipped down the sidewalk on my way to Clearview Elementary School where my dad, decidedly not showing off his ample chest hair, was the buttoned up principal.”

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## RISKS

- You run the risk of alienating a reader who has no idea what you are writing about, who then feels like an outsider to this world you are attempting to engage them in.
- You risk them putting down your book or your essay and going to the Google machine to figure out what the heck a Chia Pet is anyway (not always a bad thing to send your reader to do research, but something to be mindful of).
- If you try to explain every reference too much to keep the reader away from Google, you risk patronizing those who are insiders, who feel like you’re now talking down to them.

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- In addition, if you rely too heavily on the cultural reference to be a signifier of something, you risk your readers not getting the significance. For instance, if I wrote that my dad was an engaging as my pet rock and left it at that—I think everyone can get that signifier. But if I wrote that my mom was John Dean to my dad’s Nixon, a whole swath of people will have no idea what that means.
- Another risk—if you put in too many references or explain them too deeply, you run the risk of losing track of the story, sounding more like a Journalist or Historian than a Memoir Writer.

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## SUGGESTIONS

There are many cultural reference points you can bring in. Politics, geography, fashion, pop culture (including movies, tv, radio, music, books, popular figures), cars, toys, world events, fads, food, slang, inventions, technology, to name a few.

Here’s a few websites I like to use for my own research.

[www.retrowaste.com](http://www.retrowaste.com) (for fashion, television, toys, movies, music, and cars, by the decade)

<https://takemeback.to> (put in any day and year, and find out what was happening then)

<http://www.crazyfads.com/> (fads and trends by the decade)

<https://www.infoplease.com/yearbyyear> (includes categories like world events, US events, sports, economics, entertainment, and science)

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