

STRUCTURING YOUR MEMOIR

AN
EXPLORATION
(AS OPPOSED
TO A HOW-TO)

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@LShirtliffe

AGENDA

A
W
C
S

- Introducing ourselves
- Philosophy
- Gather the garbage
- Free-write
- You-know vs. You-then
- 5 possible structures
- Beginning your manuscript
- Scenes & Transitions
- Frameworks
- Resources
- Q & A

INTRODUCING OURSELVES

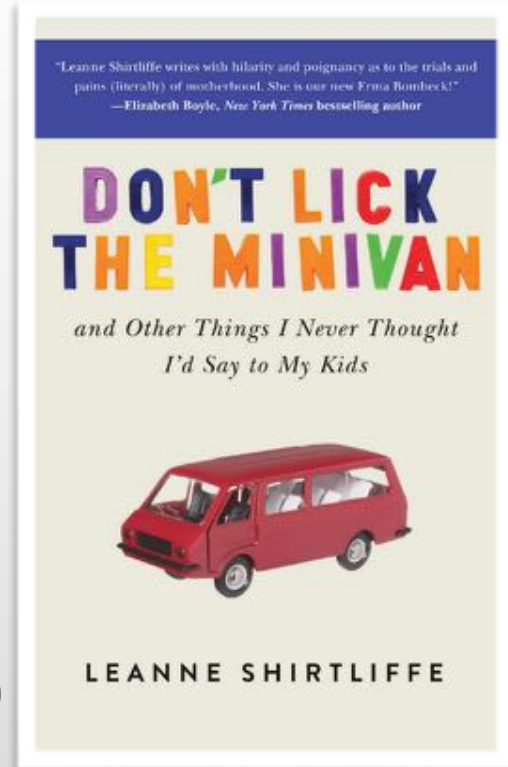
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- Who are you?
- What is your memoir?
- Where are you in your memoir project?
- What do you hope to get out of this class?

MY MEMOIR SUCCESS (AND LACK THEREOF)

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- *Don't Lick the Minivan*: published!
- Farm memoir manuscript that's so horrific I haven't looked at it for five years.
- 40s aging manuscript... paused
- Middle grade ms (fictional but...)



PHILOSOPHY

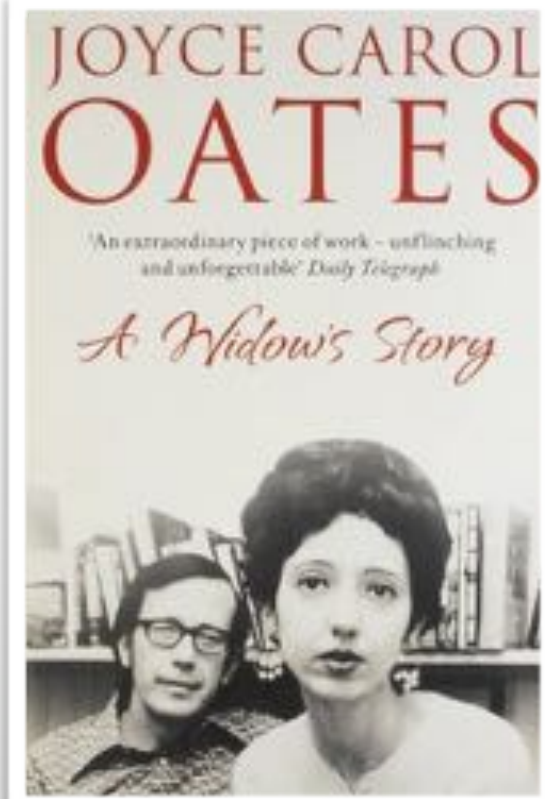
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It is very difficult to plot
an entire memoir
before writing
a number of scenes.
You need to write
yourself into a structure.

I ALSO BELIEVE THIS:

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Joyce Carol Oates said that beginning a memoir is like having a dump truck pull up and dump tons of **garbage** on your head.

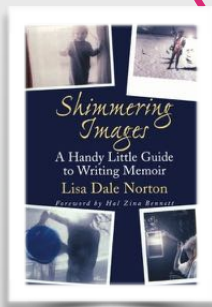


TO GATHER: LOOK THROUGH THE GARBAGE FOR

A
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“Shimmering Images”

(p. 27)

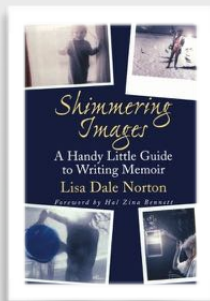




GATHER

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Collect your
shimmering images





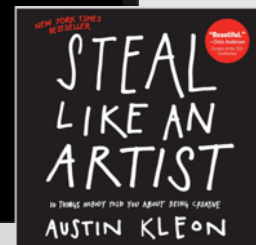
Share a
shimmering
image...and steal

GATHER SOME MORE

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GOOD THEFT	VS.	BAD THEFT
HONOR		DEGRADE
STUDY		SKIM
STEAL FROM MANY		STEAL FROM ONE
CREDIT		PLAGIARIZE
TRANSFORM		IMITATE
REMIX		RIP OFF

STEALLIKEANARTIST.COM



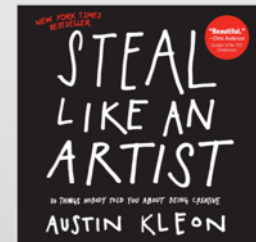


GATHER MORE STILL

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Pick a shimmering image:
is it a mountain
or a valley?

Trace some steps that lead to
that and from that.



SIFT THROUGH THE GARBAGE.

(1) Gather

(2) Write. Have fun.
Explore your voice. See
where it takes you.



SIFT THROUGH THE GARBAGE...AND WRITE

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"Start out in rough drafts, setting down stories as clearly as you can... If you trust the truth enough to keep unveiling yourself on the page...the book will naturally structure itself."

the ART OF
MEMOIR
MARY
KARR
AUTHOR OF
the Lions' Club
'Lil

NOW-YOU VS. THEN-YOU

A
W
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reflection

insight

distance

The NOW-you

death of Warren

death of Gary

death of Marcel

The THEN-you

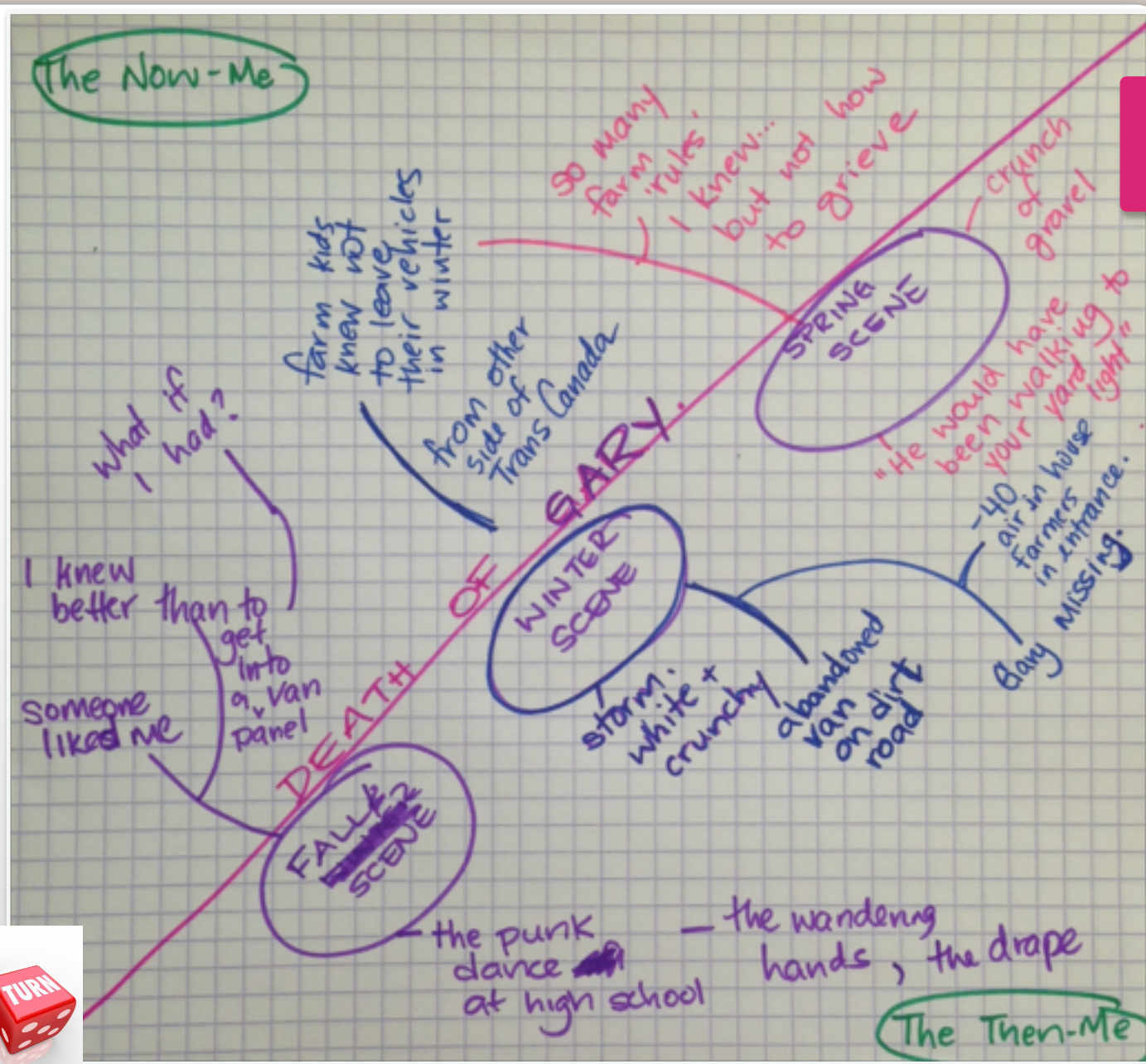
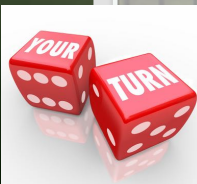
details

innocence

immediacy



NOW-YOU VS. THEN-YOU



SIFT THROUGH THE GARBAGE.

A
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(1) Gather.



(2) Write some scenes. Explore your voice. See where it takes you.



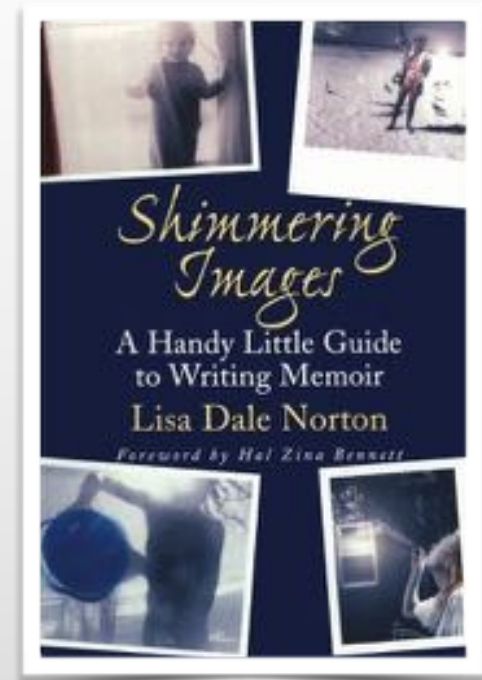
(3) Attempt to unearth a structure.

SAY WHAT?

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Lisa Dale Norton says:

"You can't get the structure until you know the meaning. You can't know the meaning until you clarify the structure."

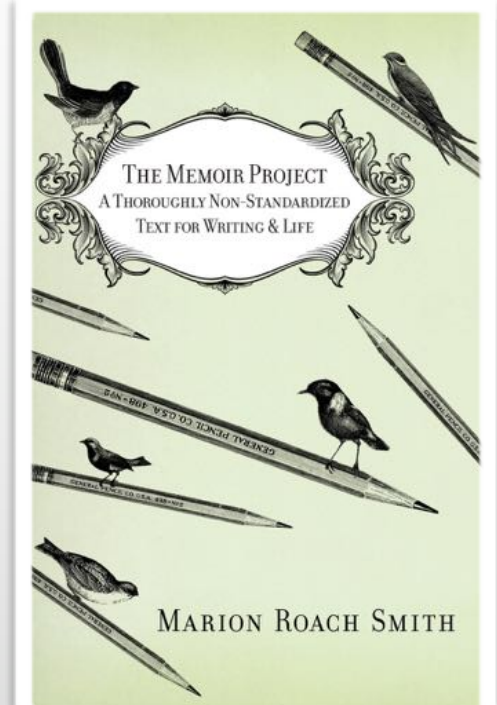


SEE YOU IN THE BAR.

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Marion Roach Smith says:

‘What’s your structure?’ has probably sent more more memoir writers home to drink gin straight out of the bottle than any other question.



BUT SERIOUSLY...

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Try on different structures.
Look for one that fits best.
Then alter it, tailor it.

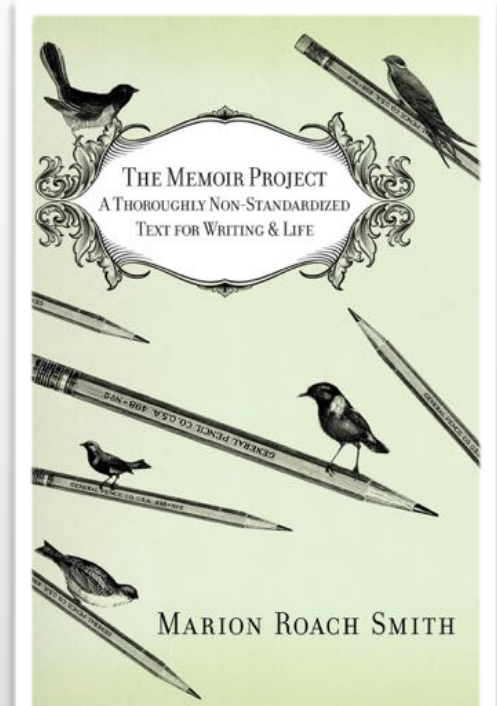


OPTION 1: SINGLE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

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Consider the question:
**How did you grow up to
become who you are?**

Answer the question in a
clear (but possibly
complex) sentence.



OPTION 1: SINGLE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

A
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**How did you grow up to
become who you are?**



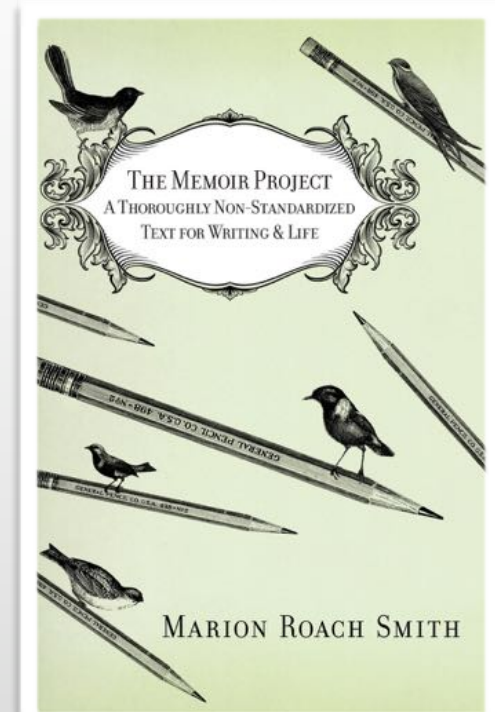
My working answer:

Through laughter, unspoken rules, and the known threat of death, I survived [my teenage years on a farm in rural Manitoba.]

OPTION 1: SINGLE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

A
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Once you have a sentence, see if you can structure your memoir around the different phrases/clauses of that sentence.



OPTION 1: SINGLE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

A
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My working answer:

Through unspoken rules, the known threat of death, and laughter, I survived.

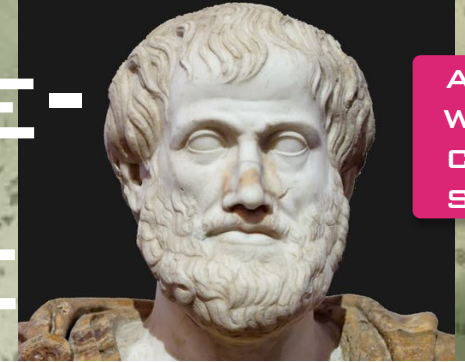
Possible Structure:

- The unspoken rules of rural life
- The very real threat of death (3)
- Laughter



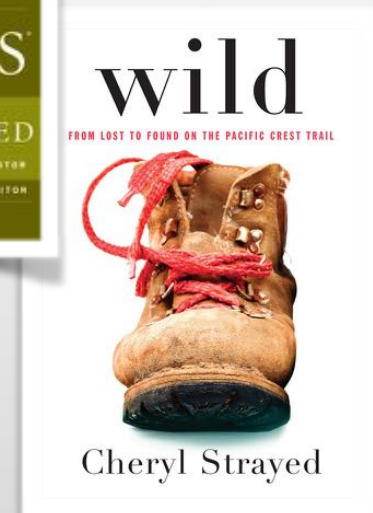
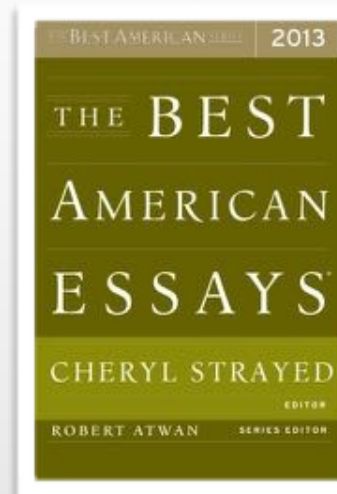
OPTION 2: THREE- ACT STRUCTURE

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Cheryl Strayed:

"The invisible, unwritten line of every essay [or memoir] should be 'and nothing was ever the same again.'"



OPTION 2: THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

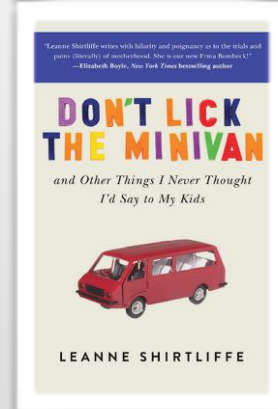
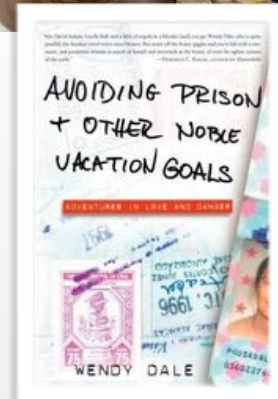


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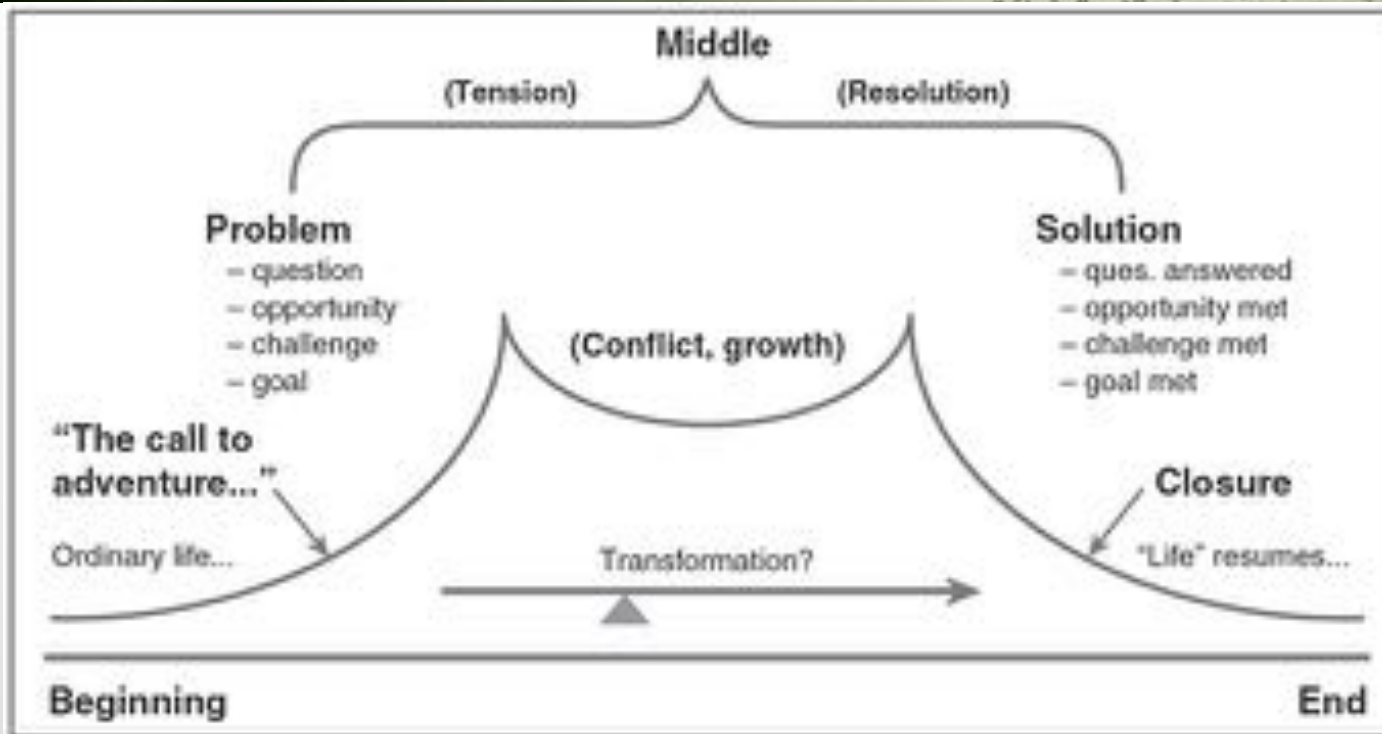
ACT 1: You “before”—setting, conflict, who you are (imply why change needed)

ACT 2: Overcoming obstacles— up the stakes; problem/solve/new problem/repeat (MC achieved *desire*, but not *need*)

ACT 3: You “after”—resolve conflict, but not perfectly; how you changed



OPTION 2: THREE-ACT STRUCTURE IMAGE



Source: Adapted by Ohler (2001), from Dillingham, B. (2001). *Visual portrait of a story: Teaching storytelling* [School handout]. Juneau, AK.

OPTION 2: 3 (OR 4!) ACT STRUCTURE IN W-SHAPE

A
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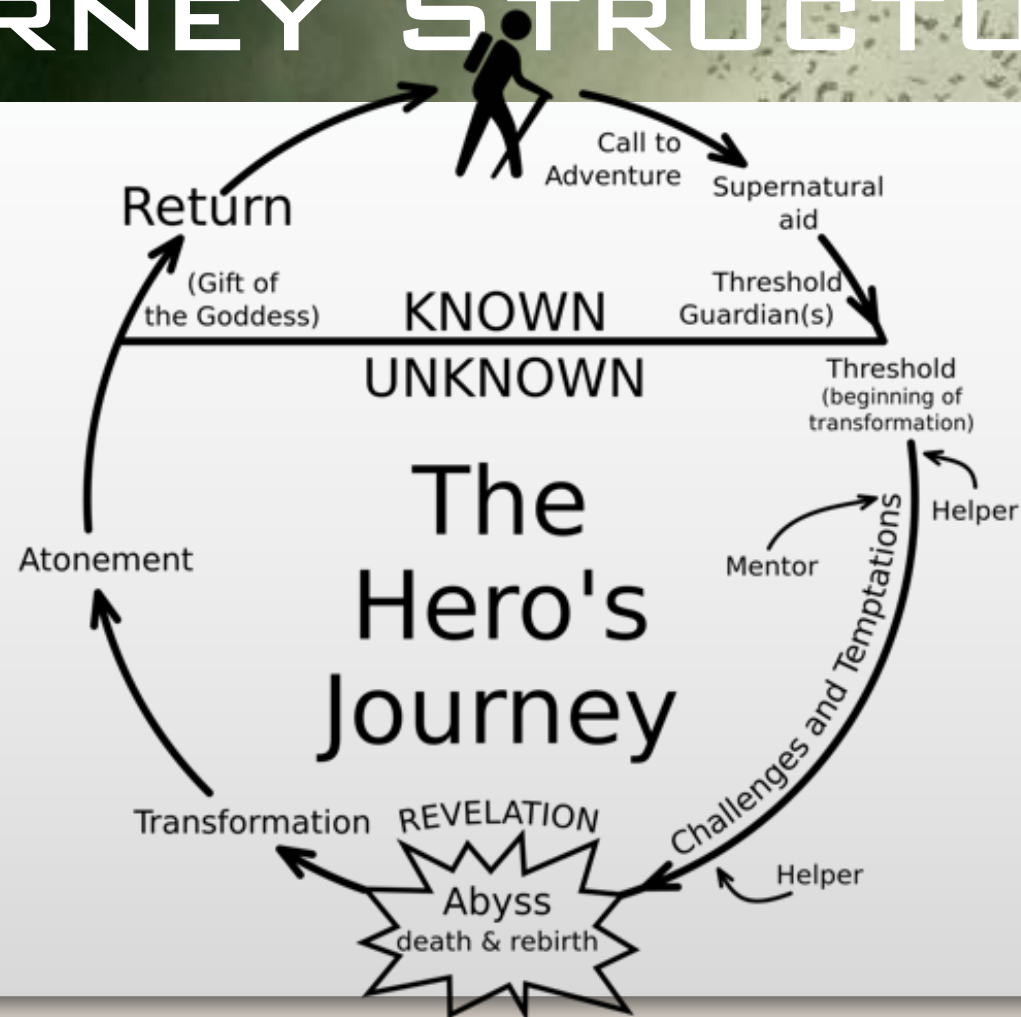
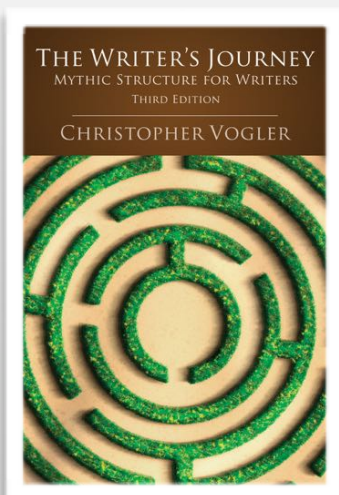


The W Plot

Image created by & for TheHowToWriteShop.com

OPTION 3: HERO'S JOURNEY STRUCTURE

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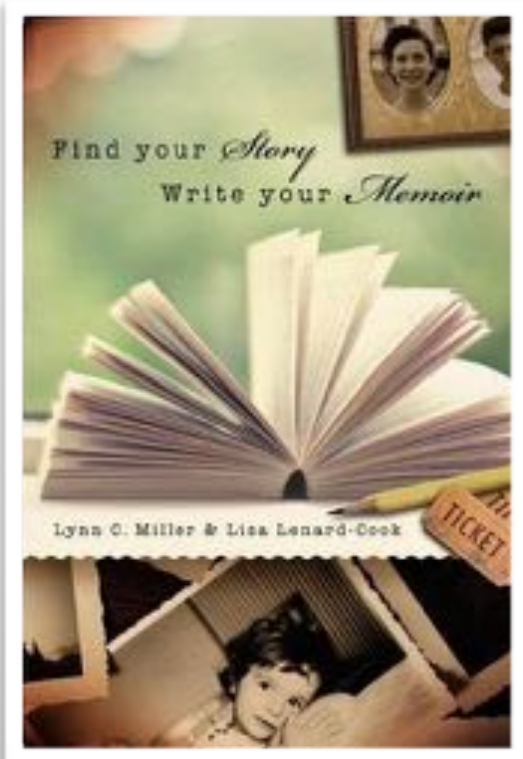


OPTION 4: ASSOCIATIVE STRUCTURE

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A collage about one topic:

- °imagistic
- °episodic
- °poetic
- °like a slide show

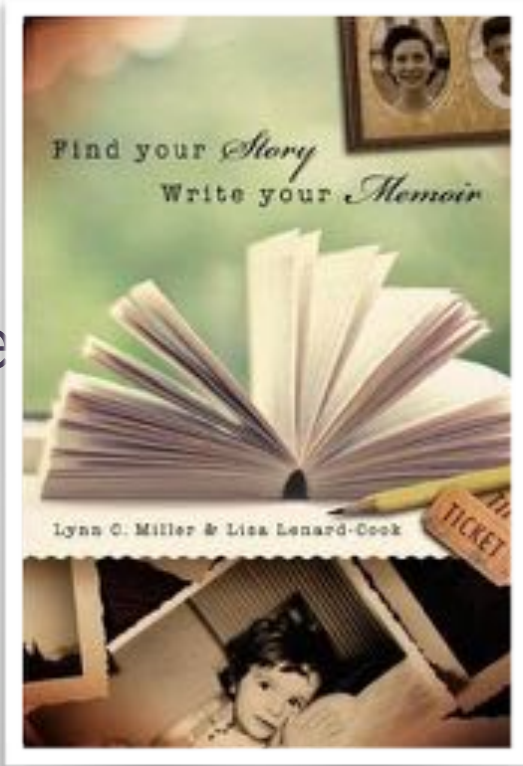


OPTION 4: ASSOCIATIVE STRUCTURE

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Or, for more structure:

Decide which memories are key and use them to find a structure.



OPTION 5:

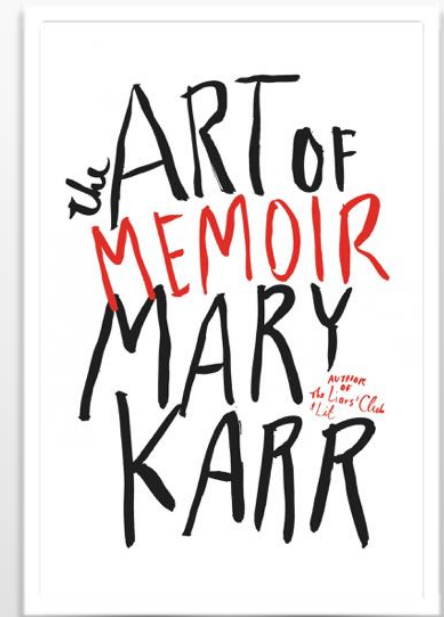
FLASH FORWARD, THEN...

CHRONOLOGY

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FLASH FORWARD: show what's at stake emotionally (or, the "occasion of the telling"— see next slide)

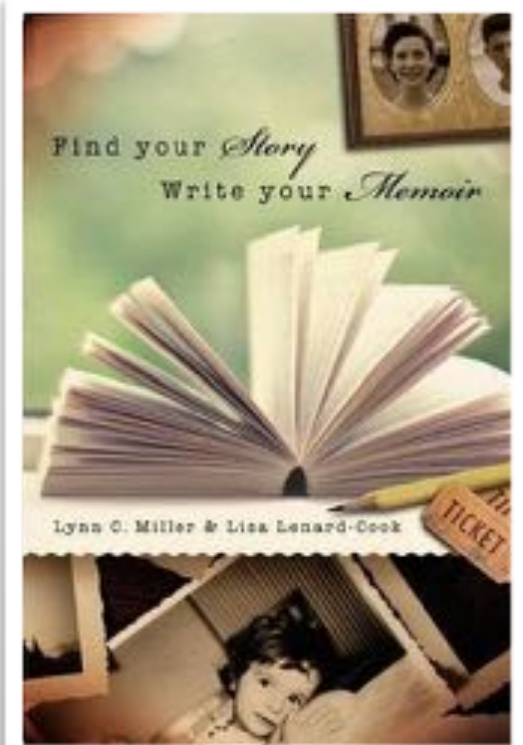
CHRONOLOGY: scene-by-scene



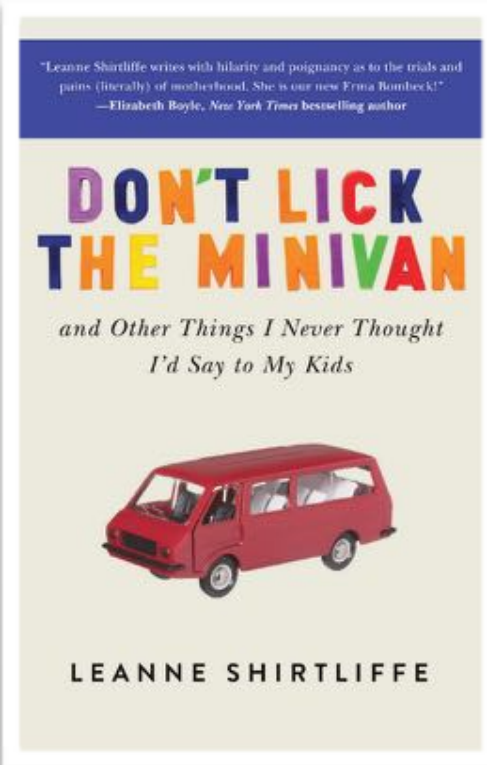
BEGINNING THE MANUSCRIPT: THE OCCASION OF THE TELLING

The **occasion of the telling**: why tell this story now?

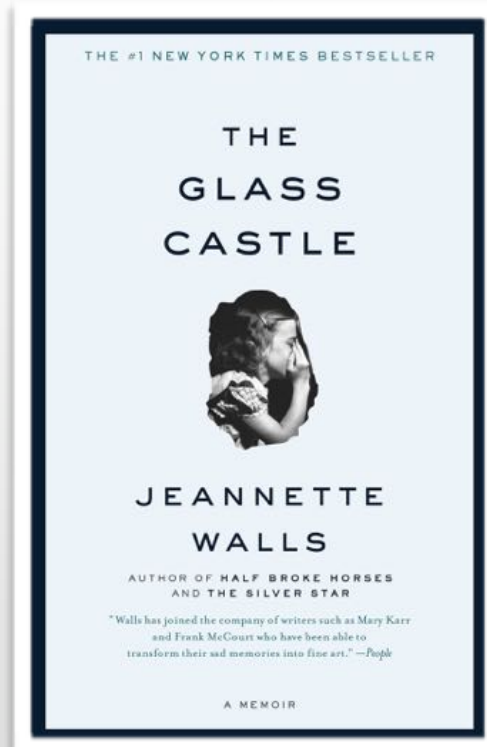
THE CATALYST



BEGINNING THE MANUSCRIPT: THE OCCASION OF THE TELLING



BEGINNING THE MANUSCRIPT: THE OCCASION OF THE TELLING



BEGINNING THE MANUSCRIPT: THE OCCASION OF THE TELLING

Why now?

Draft the occasion of the telling for your memoir.



BEGINNING THE MANUSCRIPT:

THE TWO YOU'S

A
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The **NOW-you** has occasion to go back to the **THEN-you**.

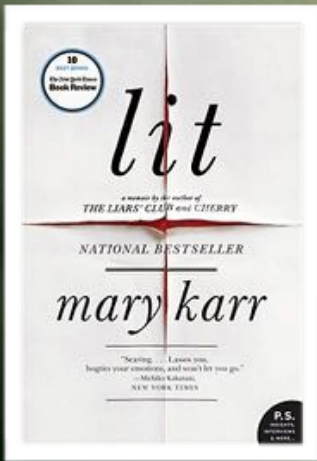
In a memoir, there is that gap.
NOW-you offers reflection/insight;
THEN-you offers immediacy.

They meet at the end.

BEGINNING:

THE TWO

YOU'S



Mother's yellow station wagon slid like a Monopoly icon along the gray road that cut between fields of Iowa corn, which was chlorophyll green and punctuated in the distance by gargantuan silver silos and gleaming, unruined tractors glazed cinnamon red. Mother told me how the wealth of these farmers differed from the West Texas dirt farmers of her Dust Bowl youth, who doled out mortgaged seed from croaker sacks.

But because I was seventeen and had bitten my cuticles raw facing the prospect of fitting in at the private college we'd reach that night—which had accepted me through some mixture of pity and oversight—and because I was split-headed with the hangover Mother and I had incurred the night before sucking down screwdrivers in the unaptly named Holiday Inn in Kansas City, I told Mother something like, Enough already about your shitty youth. You've told me about eight million times since we pulled out of the garage.

NOW-YOU

THEN-YOU

THEN

A
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BEGINNING THE MANUSCRIPT:

THE TWO YOU'S

A
W
C
S



Read the openings of 2-3 memoirs.

What do you notice?

THE RHYTHM: SCENE AND TRANSITION

A
W
C
S

“The building blocks of creative nonfiction are little scenes or stories.”



Highlighter test. Highlight each scene;
75% + of each chapter will be scenes.
The rest? Commentary, reflection,
transition, historical context, the Now-you.

THE RHYTHM: SCENE AND TRANSITION

(1) Find a scene.

(2) Search for:

- Scene (Then-you)
- Commentary/reflection
- Historical Context
- The Now-you
- Transition



THE RHYTHM: SCENE AND TRANSITION

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- (1) Find a scene.
- (2) Take the emotional temperature at the start and then at the finish

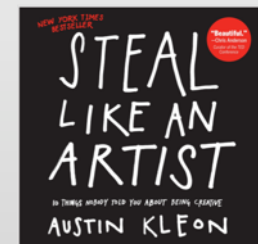
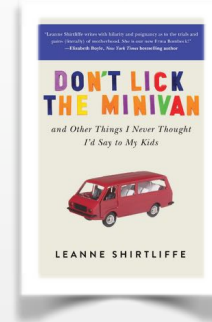
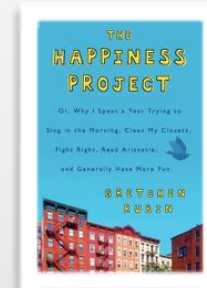
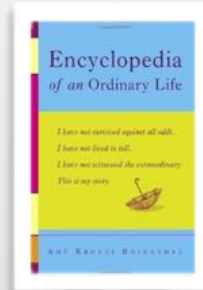
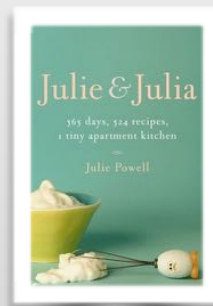


FRAMEWORK:

A PREMISE FOR ORGANIZING

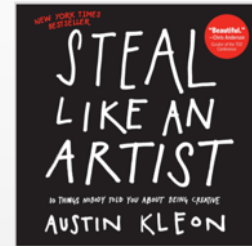
SAMPLE FRAMEWORKS:

- Things I Never Thought I'd Say
- Months of the Year
- Encyclopedia
- Recipes



FRAMEWORK:

A PREMISE FOR ORGANIZING



SEARCH FOR SAMPLE FRAMEWORKS

Note: not all memoirs have frameworks

WHAT IF NOTHING MAJOR HAPPENED TO YOU?

A
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C
S



GREGORY

*"Dear Mom and Dad: Thanks for the happy
childhood. You've destroyed any chance
I had of becoming a writer."*

Alex Gregory in *The New Yorker*

WHAT IF NOTHING MAJOR HAPPENED TO YOU?:

FROM "ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AN ORDINARY LIFE"

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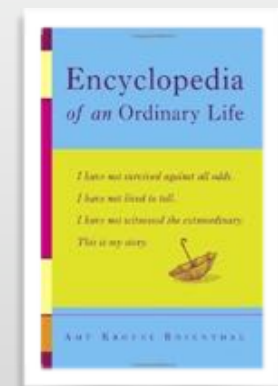
I was not abused, abandoned, or locked up as a child. My parents were not alcoholics, nor were they ever divorced or died. We did not live in poverty, or in misery, or in an exotic country. I am not a misunderstood genius, a former child celebrity, or the child of a celebrity. I am not a drug addict, sex addict, food addict, or recovered anything. If I indeed had a past life, I have no recollection of who I was.

I have not survived against all odds.

I have not lived to tell

I have not witnessed the extraordinary.

This is my story.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

A
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MarionRoach.com

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS FROM THE WORLD OF MUSIC:

A
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C
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Glen Hansard
talking to Shad on
CBC Radio's q ...
on putting
together an album
THE CATALYST



STRUCTURING YOUR MEMOIR

QUESTIONS
(AND POSSIBLY
ANSWERS)

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