

Key Elements of a Memoir

The Desire Line

What do you (as the narrator/protagonist) want in the story you're telling? The struggle to achieve this desire drives your memoir. You should be able to state the desire line in ONE sentence:

- I wanted to forgive my father after he abandoned us.
- I wanted to be a model though I weighed 160 pounds.
- I was always sad and couldn't explain it; I wanted to find happiness.
- I wanted to learn not to value others' opinions above my own.
- I wanted to find a way to handle my anxiety.

A few key points:

- The desire line can change by the end of the memoir. For example, a teen author might begin by chronicling the methodical engineering of his own destruction, but end by deciding he wants to live.
- The desire line must be one that makes the story about you.
- Make your desire line as specific as you can. Avoid vague desires like, "I wanted to be loved," or, "I wanted to belong"—they're too general simply because everybody wants those things.

From *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms."

What is his desire line? _____

From *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert: "I have a history of making decisions very quickly about men. I have always fallen in love fast and without measuring risks. I have a tendency not only to see the best in everyone, but to assume that everyone is emotionally capable of reaching his highest potential. I have fallen in love more times than I care to count with the highest potential of a man, rather than with the man himself, and I have hung on to the relationship for a long time (sometimes far too long) waiting for the man to ascend to his own greatness. Many times in romance I have been a victim of my own optimism."

What is her desire line? _____

Emotional Beats

A memoir is an emotional journey. The events in the story are there not because they happened, but to show the shifts in emotion the narrator (you) goes through, event by event, over the course of the book. These shifts are called "beats." A beat is an event keyed to an emotion. Here's an example from *Night* by Elie Wiesel: "I was putting one foot in front of the other, like a machine. I was dragging this emaciated body that was still such a weight. If only I could have shed it! Though I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn't help thinking that there were two of us: my body and I. And I hated that body." What purpose does this emotional beat serve?

The Initiating Incident

Some beats will be major turning points, others more minor. The most important event/beat comes near the beginning. This is the day the trouble started. You were perfectly content as you were, saw no reason to change, then the trouble came along and wham! Everything you knew about yourself was thrown out of balance. Before this event, you might have what is called the status quo scene—the one that shows you in the midst of your ordinary life before the trouble starts.

The Ending Incident

Picking the end point is crucial. Life goes on and on, but memoirs mustn't. **The desire line defines the ending:** When the narrator gets what he wants, or doesn't, or stops wanting it, or whatever, the story has reached the end of its arc. We see him changed by all that has come before. This is also where the memoirist will share the epiphany / realization / AHA moment, and what was learned or not... by the aforementioned events.