

Finally, after settling upon the MLA format for the source entries I made final adjustments to the introductory information that precedes each source. In addition to including basic statements characterizing each source, I decided to provide students with some information concerning each author, thus generating additional context.

What's the Truth About Memoir?

Synthesis Essay

Reading Time: 15 minutes

Writing Time: 40 minutes

Directions: The following prompt is based on the accompanying seven sources.

This question requires you to integrate a variety of sources into a coherent, well-written essay. *Refer to the sources to support your position; avoid mere paraphrase or summary. Your argument should be central; the sources should support this argument.*

Remember to attribute both direct and indirect citations.

Introduction: Memoir remains a popular genre and form of nonfiction. Some memoirists, however, have been accused of misrepresenting certain events of their lives to suit their goals, be they aesthetic or commercial. To what extent, if at all, should a memoirist, in Russell Baker's words, be able to "invent the truth"? How absolute a label is "nonfiction"? What constitutes the standard for "truth" in a text that is presented to its potential audience as a memoir?

Assignment: Read the following sources (including any introductory information) carefully. **Then, in an essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources for support, take a position that defends, challenges, or qualifies the claim that a memoirist's commitment to the truth is of absolute importance in memoir writing.**

Refer to the sources by their titles (Source A, Source B, etc.) or by the descriptions in the parentheses.

Source A (Zinsser)

Source B (Frey)

Source C (Roberts)

Source D (Amends)

Source E (Kertes)

Source F (Hampl)

Source G (Gutkind)

Source A

Zinsser, William. *Writing About Your Life*. New York: Avalon Publishing Group Incorporated, Marlowe and Company, 2005.

The following is an excerpt from a book that provides guidance to writers of memoir. Its author is a noted writer and teacher of writing.

When nonfiction is raised to an art, it's usually because the writer imposed on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an *idea*—that hadn't been attached to them before.

I think of Tom Wolfe's book *The Right Stuff*, an account of the astronauts who pioneered America's space program. Wolfe's reporting throughout is solid; he hasn't embellished the facts. The value he adds is to attribute the astronaut's success to certain traits of character that he analyzes and defines as "the right stuff." That raises the book to an art, lifts it above other books about the space program, and gives us an intellectual mechanism for pondering what it takes to be an explorer and to leave the known world behind—a mystery as old as the Phoenicians. Beyond all that, Wolfe's postulation is enjoyable. It's fun to tag along on his ride.

Source B

Frey, James. "A Note to the Reader." Statement dated January 2006 and inserted into copies of *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.

In January 2006, "The Smoking Gun" Web site documented what it called numerous instances of misrepresentation by James Frey in his bestselling memoir A Million Little Pieces. The following statement is an excerpt from an insert included with copies of James Frey's book soon after widespread public comment developed over his alleged use of invented details in his memoir. His book offers a personal account of his rehabilitation from drug and alcohol abuse.

I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of from a strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. This memoir is a combination of facts about my life and certain embellishments. It is a subjective truth, altered by the mind of a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. Ultimately, it's a story, and one that I could not have written without having lived the life I lived.

I never expected the book to become as successful as it has, to sell anywhere close to the number of copies it has sold. The experience has been shocking for me, incredibly humbling, and at times terrifying. Throughout this process, I have met thousands of readers, and heard from many thousands more, who were deeply affected by the book, and whose lives were changed by it. I am deeply sorry to any readers who I have disappointed and I hope these revelations will not alter their faith in the book's central message—that drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome, and there is always a path to redemption if you fight to find one. Thirteen years after I left treatment, I'm still on the path, and I hope, ultimately, I'll get there.

Source C

Roberts, Rev. Dr. Mark D. "Oprah, James Frey, and the Question of Truth" [markdroberts.com](http://www.markdroberts.com). 30 January 2006. <<http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/oprahfrey.htm>>.

The following is excerpted from an online article at the author's Web site. Rev. Dr. Mark D. Roberts is a pastor, author, speaker and blogger. Since 1991 he has been the senior pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Irvine, Calif. He has had several nonfiction books published by WaterBrook Press which, like A Million Little Pieces publisher Anchor Books, is an affiliate of Random House, a major publisher.

[My] experience as a non-fiction writer working with a Random House company was almost completely different from that of James Frey when it comes to the matter of truthfulness. His publisher was willing to accept his account at face value, even when he claimed to have experienced things that were truly incredible and seemed to beg for additional evidence. But there was no fact checking, no corroboration. Just blind trust.

When WaterBrook Press edited my first manuscript with them, it almost seemed to me as if I were guilty of falsehood until being proven innocent. For every single quotation in the book I was asked to submit, not only the precise bibliographical reference, but also a photocopy of the original or an Internet link. When I protested that I didn't have some of this information, I was encouraged to go to the library and get it, which I did. WaterBrook, I was told, wanted to make sure that every jot and tittle was correct, without exception. . . .

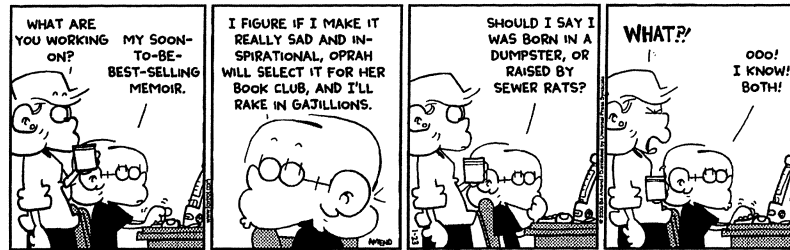
Why, I wonder, would one subsidiary of Random House have such a high commitment to truthfulness, while another does not? I'm tempted to say that this can be explained, in part, by the Christian values of the WaterBrook staff. They do not think that truth is merely a matter of personal perception. Rather, they tend to think in more objective terms. . . .

Yet it's not only Christian publishers that have high regard for the truth. Last year I was mentioned briefly in a *New Yorker* article on Hugh Hewitt, my friend and fellow blogger. I recall, I was included in one sentence of an article of several thousand words. Before that *New Yorker* story ran, I received a call from a magazine staff person. He was checking facts. He and I spent at least five minutes on the phone together. He asked about many things that never appeared in the article, concerning me and concerning Hugh. I mentioned that he was thorough. His answer was something like, "At the *New Yorker* we are committed to getting everything right." I was impressed.

Source D

Amend, Bill. "Foxtrot." Comic strip. *Portland Press Herald* 23 Jan. 2006: B6.

Foxtrot is a syndicated comic strip that appears in daily and Sunday newspapers in North America.



Source E

Kertes, Joseph. "The Truth About Lying." *The Walrus*, June 2006: 39–40.

The following is excerpted from an essay. Joseph Kertes is an author and the dean of the School of Creative and Performing Arts at Humber College in Toronto. The Walrus is a monthly Canadian journal.

As its name implies, memoir depends for its accuracy on memory. Tobias Wolff, author of the grim memoir *This Boy's Life*, writes, "Memory has its own story to tell. Memoirists are not writing proper history but rather what they remember of it, or, more accurately, what they can't forget."

So if James Frey did not tell an absolute truth but rather told his version of drug addiction and recovery, of hell and redemption, if he made up some details or embellished the facts, it was in the service of a higher truth about death and resurrection. It was his truth and therefore it was genuine. Otherwise, millions would not have believed him. After all, even after Frey was exposed, his book remained on the bestseller lists for months.

He may have been lying but he was not faking. There is a difference, and it is the salient difference. There is no trickery or fakery in the book, just the experience of a man who has endured much and lived to tell the tale—or his take on it. Before I picked up the book, I watched my daughter and wife—both discriminating readers—stay up late into the night to get through it. The book is compelling precisely because Frey knew what was required to fill out the narrative. Even the life of a drug addict must have slow bits, and Frey was smart enough to leave those bits out. Is that a form of deception?

If so, Frey is not the first memoirist to massage the facts to sculpt his narrative, and the company he keeps might surprise some purists. Henry David Thoreau, for instance, pretended in his great non-fiction work *Walden* that he slept under the stars and cherished the universe as it was created. He didn't. He slept in a house in Concord, often at his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson's place. But he needed *Walden's* non-fiction narrator to masquerade as a woodsman. Being at one with nature allowed the narrator to transcend the self more successfully than being a sleeper in a plush bed in town.

Source F

Hampl, Patricia. *I Could Tell You Stories*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

The following is excerpted from a book. Patricia Hampl is Regents' Professor of English at the University of Minnesota. I Could Tell You Stories is her exploration of the genre of memoir.

Memoir must be written because each of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of the tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in place and in history. And the downside of any created thing as well: We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our points of view. We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning. You tell me your story, I'll tell you mine.

If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us. That is the scary political fact. "The struggle of man against power," Milan Kundera's hero in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* says "is the struggle of memory against forgetting." He refers to willful political forgetting, the habit of nations and those in power to deny the truth of memory in order to disarm moral and ethical power.

It is an efficient way of controlling masses of people. It doesn't even require much bloodshed, as long as people are entirely willing to give over their personal memories. Whole histories can be rewritten. The books which now seek to deny the existence of the Nazi death camps now fill a room.

What is remembered is what becomes reality. If we "forget" Auschwitz, if we "forget" My Lai, what then do we remember? And what is the purpose of our remembering? If we think of memory naively, as a simple story, logged like a documentary in the archive of the mind, we miss its beauty but also its function.

Source G

Gutkind, Lee, ed. "The Creative Nonfiction Police?" Introduction. *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. xix-xxxiii.

The following is excerpted from the editor's introduction to a collection of nonfiction pieces. Lee Gutkind is writing program professor at the University of Pittsburgh and a prominent promoter of "creative nonfiction," as founder of the journal Creative Nonfiction.

The ethical boundaries of the narrative are not . . . a new dilemma or debate. Henry David Thoreau lived for two years on Walden Pond while documenting only one year. Which part of the two years did he choose, and how often, in his painstaking process of revision, did he combine the two or three days—or even four weeks—into one? This technique that Thoreau evidently employed, by the way, is called "compression"—meaning that multiple incidents or situations are combined or compressed in order to flesh out the narrative—allowing a writer to build a more compelling, fully executed three-dimensional story.

Student Samples

Sample A does the best job of highlighting her own argument. Her argumentation is particularly cogent. She raises her position with questions at the end of her first paragraph then punctuates her view at the end of her essay, after seasoning her argument with apt references to the sources.

Sample B is workmanlike but subtle. He uses the sources in order to find his way through the question toward his argument, which does not really emerge until the last two paragraphs of his response.

Sample C's author knows what she thinks, and musters support for her views throughout her response. Her essay lurches a bit, and her language choices are not always ideal, but she certainly conveys her thinking. Her strongest moments, however, come at the end with an illustration drawn from a film's message.

SAMPLE A

How much embellishment can a memoir contain and still represent the genre of memoir? At what point does a memoir become a work of fiction? Some writers argue that anything but the truth and the whole truth is a lie. But in all honesty, few readers could care about the author's breakfast choices; dull recollections of insignificant past events are not much more enticing. Besides, it is the character of what one remembers of an event that directs him towards one path instead of another and alters who he becomes. Isn't conveying the essence of the truth the purpose of most memoirs? Shouldn't an author illustrate how he or she has arrived in a place and use those engaging illustrations to convey a message, advice, or warning?

Most writers agree that there is some point where a memoir with excessive exaggeration or embellishment becomes a fictional story, perhaps even one that could effectively convey the intended message. For example, in one panel of Bill Amend's comic *Foxtrot*, a character in the process of writing a "memoir" asks which story line would be most helpful in "raking in gazillions": being "born in a dumpster, or raised by sewer rats?" when, obviously, neither optional memory is close to the truth. When large events and ideas such as this are entirely fabricated, the book crosses the line into the fiction category (Source D). The debate, however, is over how many and what sort of exaggerated or omitted details would constitute such a switch.

James Frey, author of the bestselling memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, was heavily criticized for his use of invented details. In a statement, he expresses the hope that "these revelations will not alter [the reader's] faith in the book's central message" (Source B). One could argue that some details need not be entirely accurate as long as the basic story line is based upon truth and any embellishments aid in conveying the memoir's message, in this case encouraging the idea that "drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome" (Frey). In addition, as Joseph Kertes comments about Frey, "even the life of a drug addict must have slow bits, and Frey was smart enough to leave those out" (Source E). What reader cares about every mundane detail of life? Such a memoir may turn off readers entirely out of sheer dullness, and no message, even an important one, can reach anyone if it is not published or read. Even Henry David Thoreau knew this; according to Lee Gutkind, professor at the University of Pittsburgh, in *Walden*, Thoreau only wrote of one year of his two-year stay at Walden Pond, leaving out mundane details and combining the events of multiple days into one, a technique called "compression" (Source G).

Memoirs are not supposed to be history books but, like history books, they need to adhere to standards of truth even as they interpret what events or occurrences are meaningful, significant, or even just entertaining. In memoir, the author writes what he remembers to be important, regardless of whether or not his recollections are entirely accurate. Memoirs are

supposed to be a purposeful, engaging *version* of one's life as thoughtfully *recalled*, not just a compilation or invented, exaggerated rendition of events. After all, "what is remembered becomes reality" (Hampl). For this reason, the memories should be "true enough" so that the author's message conveys truths that are significant.

SAMPLE B

Among the different genres of writing, the memoir is the one in which the ideal of truth is least clear. The memoir sits somewhere between texts like historical documents and laboratory reports, in which the whole, objective truth is expected, and the various fictions, which are held to a much less rigorous standard. There is much disagreement about how accurate the facts of a memoirist must be, and how much he or she is "allowed" to bend the truth. All agree that to consider a text a memoir, there must be a palpable degree of "absolute" truth—the controversy is over how much.

The root of memoir is memory, which suggests the degree of truth that should be expected. We all have memories which are vague, ones which are clear, ones which are in one of the categories but seem as if they should be in the other. Sometimes memories change as we look back on them, sometimes we see that they were just wrong. This allows a degree of flexibility with the truth, but it must be remembered that it *is* still the truth. It may have different views of emphasis from another's truth, but truth it remains.

Obviously, a memoir does not adhere to the exact historical truth—that is the realm of autobiography. What makes a memoir special is its ability to mold the truth which springs from its subjective viewpoint. Looking back, memoirists often attach meaning or emphasis to things which didn't have them before—this is what makes memoir more than a history (Zinsser). Events which, at the time they took place, are not thought of as "prominent" can grow more important in the revised memory. The writer "[imposes] on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an idea—that hadn't been attached to them before." (Zinsser). This is not deception—this is analysis and evaluation.

Similarly, bringing dull memories from a life together is not lying or even deception. Combining memories is called "compression" and has been a staple of memoir for years—it allows what may or may not have been an interesting experience to be worth reading (Gutkind). Such a tactic allows us to draw some value from the work, perhaps something we could not have discovered had it not been used.

What you may not do, in a properly conceived memoir, is make up facts to suit your purpose. Thoreau and Frey are memoirists who, in trying to transfer their message, left the realm of memoir by fabricating the facts (Kertes). False memories that are simply remembered incorrectly are one thing, but "retrospective" memories that never existed are another.

When writers become so distracted by their intent that they fail to preserve the truth in their work, then the work ceases to be a memoir. These works deserve a more accurate label: historical fiction.

SAMPLE C

William Zinsser says in Source A "When nonfiction is raised to an art, it's usually because the writer imposed on the facts an organizing shape or notion—an *idea*—that hadn't been

attached to them before.” In other words, if a story is to have meaning and significance it must have an underlying theme. This theme is absent in biographies and history books because of the need to adhere to the strict truth, which results in merely laying out the cold, hard facts and leaving the theme to self-interpretation or even nonexistent. However, in a memoir (which is generally known as “creative nonfiction”), an underlying theme is a necessity, and therefore, the truth may or may not be stretched to fit this theme.

Source D shows what is clearly fictional writing. There is a difference between embellishing the truth and blatant lying. It is highly improbable that the character writing the memoir was actually born in a dumpster or raised by sewer rats. This is not a memoir. What James Frey did in his book *A Million Little Pieces* was nowhere near as drastic as what the boy in *Foxtrot* is trying to do. As Kertes writes about Frey in Source E, “He may have been lying but he was not faking.”

Memoirs like James Frey’s deserve credibility because they “transform experience into meaning,” as is said in Source F. Memoirists write “in the service of a higher truth” (Source E) in order to convey meaning to their life experiences when they embellish the truth. Sometimes, it may even be necessary. For example, in Tobias Wolff’s memoir *This Boy’s Life*, I am certain that not every word spoken in dialogue actually happened. However, it makes the story more believable and interesting, to keep the reader tuned in. After all, isn’t it critical to keep the reader interested when writing a story? It’s not selfishness, it’s good writing skills.

However, if the reader is constantly thinking, “There’s no way this happened,” then the writer has gone too far. The writer might as well take up inspirational fiction.

All in all, the most important element of a memoir is not to stick to black-and-white, 100% fact, but to convey a message. The complete truth of a memoir is merely a technicality.

In closing, I want to mention the story related in the movie *Big Fish*. The main character, whose life is recounted through flashbacks, uses real events in his life but dresses them up into wild tales that are barely believable. His son resents these “lies” but after his father’s death he views them and realizes that parts of his father’s stories are from fact. The son’s eventual insight into the “truth” of his father’s “lies” gives the whole story a mystical and inspirational tone. And isn’t the effect of a story what stays with the audience longest?