

| Community Memoir Essay |

“Devise, wit; write, pen; for I am for whole volumes in folio.” -Love’s Labours Lost



Unfortunately for us all, William Shakespeare never sat down to write the story of his life in the form of a memoir. We shall not make the same mistake. In essence, a memoir is a non-fictional collection of memories written by an author who is aiming to recount stories from their own life. The memoir has quickly become one of the most popular literary genres of the 21st century: Michelle Obama’s *Becoming*, for instance, has sold over 14 million copies worldwide, while Prince Harry’s *Spare* is widely considered a disappointment for selling a mere 3.2 million copies. This assignment will give you the opportunity to tell your own story, albeit to a significantly smaller audience. If the ending of the Broadway phenomenon *Hamilton* has ever prompted you to wonder “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”, the answer, in this case, is *you* will tell your story.

For this assignment you will write a 4-5 page (double spaced) Creative Non-Fiction Memoir about your *personal experience* of a **significant event** which occurred within a community you consider yourself to be a member of. As you might expect, “community” can be an extremely capacious category. Amongst many others, the Oxford English Dictionary lists the following definitions for “community” along with a few examples:

- A commonwealth; a nation or state. Now *rare*. (1398-present)
 - The United States of America, Iowa, Iowa City, Goosetown
- Originally: the adherents of a religion considered in their entirety. Later also more generally: a group of people distinguished by shared circumstances of nationality, race, religion, sexuality, etc.; such a group living within a larger society from which it is distinct. (1713-present)
 - Religious Communities
 - Ethnic Communities
 - Identity-Based Communities (LGBTQ+)
- A group of people who share the same interests, pursuits, or occupation, esp. when distinct from those of the society in which they live (1757-present)
 - Occupation-based (Veterans, Bakers, etc.)
 - Interest-based (Car Enthusiasts, Swifties, other fandoms)
 - Pursuit-based (Activists, College Majors)

- A body of people who live in the same place, usually sharing a common cultural or ethnic identity. Hence: a place where a particular body of people lives. (1426-present)
 - Cities, Cultural Neighborhoods within cities, etc.
- An online facility, such as an electronic bulletin board, forum, or chat room, where users can share information or discuss topics of mutual interest. (1988-Present)
 - Gamers, Twitch, Youtube, etc.

Although memoir is similar to the personal essay, there are a few differences. Memoir tends to **focus more on life-changing or striking events**, and has a heavier hand than the personal essay. If the personal essay explores a topic free from need for interpretation, **the memoir interprets, analyzes and seeks a deeper meaning beneath the surface experience of particular events**. The memoir asks the following questions (which you should strive to answer in your essay):

- Why was this event of particular significance?
- What did the event mean to you and to other members of this community?
- How has this event changed you?

Your Memoir must:

- Be about you and be the TRUTH (Although, TRUTH can be a bit flexible)
- Be 4-5 pages in length, typed, double-spaced, size 12 Times New Roman font, 1" margins all around
- Have a creative, catchy, original title
- Have an exciting beginning that draws the reader in. Start in an interesting place and hook your reader in the first sentence. You can use action, a vivid description, or dialogue, for instance.
- Be written in first person ("I")
- A Memory of a significant event. This memory must have affected you, your life, or your personality. The memory may also have changed the way you viewed something or someone. Overall, this memory must have *significant* meaning in your life.
- Explain your connections to a community, or communities, in details and be told in logical order
- Use vivid, detailed description full of imagery
- Include *some* dialogue
- Include a short reflection paragraph that reflects on the memory and explains to the reader why this is significant. By the end of the story, the message, or "SO WHAT?" should be clear: the reader should know why you wrote this and what they are supposed to learn about you from it.
- 4-5 Pages, Double-Spaced, in 12point Times New Roman or Garamond font. Essays in other fonts will not be accepted. Essays written in the Papyrus font will be flung into, or at least *at*, the nearest garbage can while I shout "Kobe!" at the top of my lungs. Not really, I'm just making sure you're actually reading all of this.
- **Usage of Generative AI, Large Language Models, and other forms of Artificial Intelligence will result in failing the assignment.**

| Rubric |

Category	"A"	"B"	"C"	"D"
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Lead	Lead grabs attention through action, dialogue, or thoughts	Lead introduces story but doesn't grab attention	Lead does not introduce story or grab attention	A lead is not included
So What?	Definite conclusion that explains the story's purpose	The conclusion finishes the story, but doesn't leave reader with an emotion	The conclusion does not bring the story to an end	A conclusion is not included
Beginning, Middle, & End	The story is well organized with a definite beginning, middle and end	The story proceeds logically but is missing one or more aspects (beginning, middle, or end)	The story doesn't have a definite beginning middle and end	The story is poorly organized and difficult to follow
Written in First Person	There is a main character for the reader to follow and connect with	There is a main character but the reader feels little connection to them	Difficult to identify the main character	There is not a main character or the use of first-person voice
Main Idea	The story has a central focus. Details and information deal with main theme	The story has a general focus but contains unnecessary details or information	The story contains large amounts of unnecessary information	No main focus or theme
Balance of dialogue, action, & description	The story is a good balance of dialogue, action, and description of details and thoughts	The story is missing dialogue, action or sufficient description of details and thoughts	The story is not balanced and is missing more than one element	The story does not use dialogue, action and description
Community	The community aspect is vibrant and well-defined. The reader understands the significance of this community.	The Community aspect is present, but not particularly well-defined.	The Community aspect is mentioned, but not fleshed out.	No mention of a community.
Writing	Writing presents no obstacles to understanding; high degree of skill and complexity	Contains only minor errors that do not detract from the essay; writing is skillful	Contains some errors that do not detract from overall essay/argument; writing is competent	Contains major errors or numerous minor ones that detract from the essay/argument; illegible;

| Student Example |

Regrowing Myself, Rooting in Community

I don't remember much of what happened in the car. I don't even remember how it started, or what sent me into such a state. I don't remember what happened before or after, but

parts of it, whatever you want to call it, are as clear as the sky that day. I remember how it felt in my body: my frantic gasping breath, my vocal cords cracking, the hard void in my chest, my temple slamming against the passenger side window. I can see the dashboard, the parking lot my boyfriend pulled into, the bench at the bus stop where I sat, trying in vain to stop. This wasn't the first time something like that happened, but it was the worst, and the last.

It happened during my second semester at the University of Iowa. I transferred there from Iowa State, where I spent one very short semester -- the one where everyone left for Spring Break and never came back. I figured that if I was going to be quarantined at home, I might as well go to the U of I, only a fifteen-minute drive away. Not that it really mattered where I went to school, all of my classes were online anyway. I always tell everyone I transferred from the University of Denver because of the pandemic, to simplify things. If I'm honest, I just couldn't bear the thought of going back to DU. I was desperately lonely, disappointed, depressed, and I wasn't coping well with that.

Ever since I moved to Iowa City in middle school, I'd plot my escape back home, away from all of the corn fields and Jesus freaks. I felt like I could never catch my breath. Iowa air is so heavy, sticky, probably full of industrial farm chemicals. I'd have panic attacks, like the fast pumping of smoke into a beehive. I longed for fresh mountain air, dry and light, and my old life within it. When I finally got back to the place where I spent most of my life, it didn't fulfill the unrealistic imaginings of my naive teenage self. Instead, new wounds were created while old ones tore open. I didn't tenderly clean them out and wrap them in sterile gauze, nor did I have anyone to stitch them up for me. Instead, I ignored them and they festered. Sometimes I'd catch a hazy glimpse of them, ugly and raw, through clouds of smoke. They stayed untreated for so long, even after I moved back to my new so-called "home."

My life had been upended so many times, and I've progressively felt worse after each move. I was prescribed medication for my "treatment-resistant depression and anxiety" in high school, but I was already taking the highest recommended dose and previous attempts to change medications only exacerbated my symptoms. The pills helped a lot at first, but after so long, I felt like I was in a worse place than before. I was so desperate to not feel the way I was feeling that I was ready to take drastic measures. If I was already feeling so horrible while I was taking my meds, I might as well stop. My doctor helped me plan to wean off of the medication. I was still depressed, anxious, fatigued, and not sleeping well, but that was nothing new. I thought it might be going alright until I started screaming and crying and slamming my head into the car window. I wanted it to stop, for everything to stop.

I decided I needed to take some time off of school, to clean out the years' worth of crusted puss and grime, to put my brain back together. I found someone to help me, a therapist named Kristen. She told me I was using drugs as a form of controlled dissociation, to separate myself from the way I was feeling. She gave me a new diagnosis and suggested a treatment plan that uses EMDR. I'd sit in her office, a buzzer in either hand, exhuming a lifetime of traumatic memories one by one. It was difficult, exhausting work, but for the first time in my life, I grieved. I really felt it all, and it hurt. My heart broke all over again and then it would start to heal. I knew I had to go through it to come out the other side. I stopped craving the drugs I used to cope.

Much of my time between therapy sessions was spent in the woods near Iowa City, which felt like another, less clinical kind of therapy. My boyfriend took me to look for morels soon after my episode in the car. An Iowa City native, he'd been foraging with his dad since he was little. He felt at home in the woods, and he helped me feel at home there, too. There weren't many

morels that season, which opened our eyes to all of the other mushrooms and plants that were out there. I was getting to know Iowa City and the other-than-human beings that live here in a new, intimate way. I was eating the land, becoming one with it. It was the first time I'd felt at home anywhere in a long time.

Most of my friends in Iowa City had moved away by the time I moved back. Going to school online, what with the whole pandemic and all, my social skills were rusty, to say the least. I needed a new job so I applied at a new plant-themed bar, the Green House, that was opening up near downtown. The owner, Emily, a caring, hilarious mom in her forties. She was a bartender in Iowa City in her twenties and wanted to open a welcoming space for friends to gather. Emily hired many wonderful people who helped foster a community of camaraderie and cooperation. I loved being at the Green House, getting to learn new skills, and meeting new people, even if I was particularly awkward at first. Having been fairly isolated for a few years, I was nervous and timid with no bartending experience. Learning how to start and hold conversations with strangers was an unexpected challenge. The job gave me a tremendous opportunity for personal growth and helped me rebuild my confidence after what happened in the car. Once I got the hang of it, I was acquainted with many individuals who comprise the pockets of communities within Iowa City and I started to build one of my own. I took my newfound confidence and social skills home with me and practiced with my neighbors, who I found were quite friendly and community-minded. We started hanging out at the fire pit in our courtyard, sharing cups of sugar, and caring for one other. I felt more at home than ever because of the community we were building.

While bartending one day, I recognized one of the guests as Fred, the professor of the gardening class I'd taken during my last semester at Iowa. It was the only class I passed that semester, a testament to Fred's enthusiasm and hands-on teaching techniques. He was having a

meeting with his colleagues from Backyard Abundance, a local nonprofit that he founded. He told me about some volunteer opportunities: watering their community gardens and food forests and assisting in their nature classes. Since I had been foraging and loved his gardening class, I was happy to lend a hand. I was impressed by how much food one could grow in such a small space and inspired by their mission. I volunteered in many of their classes, absorbing their teachings and by the end of the summer, I had my own garden and an internship offer.

I took over the unused patch of dirt in my neighborhood. My neighbors would visit me while I worked and I would show them where to find thyme, basil, parsley, and chives if they ever found themselves in need come supper. I loved how gardening allowed me to care for others. I created an ecological community and tended it. It gave me food in return. We cared for each other, and I shared my garden's gifts with the people in my life. It was a labor of love, but a labor nonetheless. I was complaining about my garden to one of the Green House regulars, "The hose is so far away, it's such a pain to drag around in this heat. My carrots and herbs are doing well, but my tomatoes and squash are dying! Did you know that black walnut trees exude a chemical that kills certain crops? I sure didn't. Oh, and the bindweed! Every day I have to scour the garden for new shoots so I can weed them out before they get the chance to strangle my crops."

He graciously listened to my long list of woes and asked me, "Well, do you have any ideas on how you would improve your garden?"

I had actually thought about it a lot, "Raised beds would be a great way to get the plants away from the bindweed and the black walnut trees. I could even build a few separate ones so other neighbors could use them, too. Then we could all have our own space. I could also put in a rain barrel under the downspout. That would make it way easier to water..."

“Would you like some help with that? I can give you a grant.” As it turns out, I was speaking to the founder of Resilient Sustainable Futures for Iowa City, a local nonprofit that gives grants to projects that strengthen neighborhoods and communities. I couldn’t believe it. It seemed like everything since the incident in the car had led me to this project. I asked my neighbors if they would be interested in a new garden, and my proposition was met with overwhelming support. Even my landlords decided to pitch in, giving us a patio set and some extra cash.

Over the next year, I consulted with Fred, a seasoned sustainable landscape designer, while I TAed in his gardening class. He made suggestions and helped me go over each of the many iterations of my design. I couldn’t have done it without his guidance. The team at RSFIC helped me with all the heavy lifting, bringing soil and compost to the space, which was all donated by another Green House regular who works at a garden center. She also donated all the seeds you could ever want, while another regular gave us her composter.

This spring, I hosted a garden party. I invited my neighbors, coworkers, friends, and the teams at RSFIC and Backyard Abundance to help us build and plant in the garden. I couldn’t believe it had all come together. There were so many times when I doubted myself, shaken by the incident in the car. I thought there was no way *I* could pull off such an ambitious project. Each time, I was met with support and encouragement. Many hands made light work and, after nine months of planning, the garden was built in only a few hours.

I’m so grateful to everyone in my community who came together to help create a space for us to gather and nourish each other. I could not have built this garden alone. I’m also grateful for that incident in the car. It pushed me to take time off from school to heal and grow. Without that opportunity, I never would have been able to pursue passions like gardening, meet new

people at the Green House, or participate in community-minded organizations like Backyard Abundance. It didn't happen all at once. It was many moments, big and small. It happened with sustained dedication and community care.