

**Hello and Welcome,**

I'm pleased to share with you this lesson in creative nonfiction writing, which focuses on the challenge of writing memoir or personal essay based on the narrator's memory—when your recollections may be incomplete or sketchy.

I developed the following advice after having dealt with the particular challenges of memory-based-writing for most of my writing life.

I hope that it is helpful to you.

If so, I'd love [to hear from you!](#)

Sincerely,

**Lisa Romeo**

Author of *Starting with Goodbye: A Daughter's Memoir of Love after Loss*  
(to be published May 1, 2018, by University of Nevada Press)

You can pre-order *Starting with Goodbye* now; visit [my website's pre-order page](#) for direct links to your favorite bookseller, whether that's the online giants or independent bookshops.

# Writing from Memory (Even When You Can't Remember): Advice, Techniques, and Tools

by Lisa Romeo

I'm going to tell you a story. Stay with me. I do have a point. Actually, several.

I'm 50-something years old. Though occasionally, when I'm making up a tray for a quiet solo lunch, I'm 8 again, ordering waffles, pancakes and bacon from room service at the Americana Hotel in Bal Harbour, Florida. Sometimes in my laundry room while waiting for clothes to finish in the dryer, I putter around straightening the hangers on the nearby rack, and I pause at the three wooden ones, imprinted in a fading blue, with the word: *Americana*. I finger the A, stretched into a logo artwork of a globe, and I'm 15 again, unpacking 10 days' worth of dresses for dinners at the Fontainebleau, the Doral, and Eden Roc hotels. There I am, practically twirling in the room-size closet of our house-sized suite. I can feel the warm ocean breezes drifting in through the open balcony doors.

At least once a year on a trip to a nearby mall, I purposely park nearest the door to Bloomingdale's (where I can't really afford to shop) and I enter at the doors closest to the shoe department. Once inside, I inhale deeply. In this place only, with one sniff, I am immediately transported to the sprawling lobby of the Americana, the site of childish running about and silly pranks, pubescent crushes, and later, secret midnight liaisons with boys I'd met at the pool that afternoon. I take a seat in Bloomie's shoe department, pretend to be checking email messages or sending texts, and...remember: the Americana's bright, flower-patterned carpeting, me and my mom gliding from elevator to front desk to revolving front door to dramatic outside portico.

I remember my "Uncle Charlie," the hotel manager, behind the front desk, or occasionally coming over to the plump couch—where I'd be sitting with whatever new friend I'd made, and he'd swing an arm around me, ask if I was having a good time, pinch my knee and reach in his pocket for a card we could give to the waitress at the poolside bar the next day for a free fruit punch and any sandwich we wanted.

I am 50-something years old. Except for when I make a reservation for me, my husband and two sons for what is now called a suite at a generic chain hotel and which I know will be merely an oversized room with a microwave—and while I'm on hold I recall suites at the Americana with two spacious bedrooms opening off a living room where six couple friends of my parents, and their assorted kids and me, could all fit and sit. And when my husband and I and our kids go to one of those hotels—not for a 10 day annual vacation, but more likely for a visit to a prospective college or to be near relatives for a wedding—and we have a meal in the hotel restaurant, when the bill arrives and my husband reaches for his wallet, I say out loud, "Just sign it to the room." I say this not because Frank doesn't have enough cash, but because this is what my father said to me, hundreds of times in the coffee shop, the gourmet restaurant, the steak house and the poolside bar at the Americana, and I want to remember my father, in his late 40s, his face unlined, relaxed, enjoying spending his polyester fortune.

My best friend from childhood, Laurie—who made perhaps 8 of the 15 trips my family spent at the Americana, from the time I was six until I started college—still lives less than a mile from my house. Over coffee we swap stories of our kids, husbands, money and worry, and often, of our Americana vacations. Once, not long ago, we dug out some old photos—and fell away laughing and spilling real tears, of glee and nostalgia and remembered teenage angst. There we are, awkward preteens in unflattering stars-and-striped swimsuits, our frizzed hair held back by truly awful but once-trendy bandanas made of sheer chiffon and what looked like fluttering petals. Once, instead of putting the photo away with the others, I kept that one on my desk for months afterward.

About 10 years ago, when my sons were small, my mother unexpectedly sent them a regulation tabletop wooden shuffleboard game. As we slid it from the plain box, the sight of the triangular scoring grid with its paired numbers, catapulted me to afternoons in the hot Florida sun, pushing shuffleboard discs with 10-foot long hollow aluminum sticks, everyone trying to beat my mother, who'd mastered the game. Her legs were slim then, muscled, her arms strong, she could walk quickly from one end of the long court to the other. I taught my kids the game, strategy, how to ruthlessly tap your opponent's disk from the scoring frame. A few years later, at a cousin's country club party, my kids discovered a timeworn shuffleboard court, a couple of chipped disks and two rusty dinged sticks and proclaimed, "It's a Noni kind of shuffleboard court." Sometimes I visit that now-forgotten tabletop game, propped in a corner of our basement, run my hand along the wood, and think about Florida – and more.

One summer a few years ago, when my mother was in a fairly elegant rehabilitation hospital (as much as that word can be applied to a rehab facility) and wasn't feeling up to the dining room one night, and we were waiting for the orderly to bring her dinner tray, she wondered if she ought to tip him. Before I answered, I took in the oxygen tank, wheelchair, the blankets that never get her warm enough and said, "Just sign it to the room," and we laughed, then cried.

Last summer, in addition to my frugal purchase of a quart-size no-name sun block, I also purposely bought a small bottle of Coppertone, for the simple and complex reason that I longed to pour it in my hand and inhale. It smells like poolside at the Americana, which means it smells like my first swimming lesson, like my mother teaching me how to play gin rummy on poolside lounge chairs, it smells like childhood and adventure and sun and smooth skin, like childhood in the 1960s and teenage rebellion in the 1970s, like memory.

Once, in my late 20s, after not being there for 13 years, I went back to the Americana, by then transformed into the Sheraton Americana – and felt nauseous as soon as I got past the glass front doors. Everything was changed, gone, different. Tears sprang immediately, tears for dead Uncle Charlie, the ripped up flowered carpeting, the disappeared plump couches, my father in a dinner jacket, my mother tanned and bejeweled, me.

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I lied before.

I said I was going to tell you a story and I haven't. Not really. All I've done really is tell you a bunch of stuff that lives inside my head in the bin marked "Americana," and some of the other bins connected to that one, marked *Childhood Travels*, *Best Friend*, *Parents*, *Youth*, *Parents When They Were Younger*.

What I have done above is not tell a story. I haven't written an essay or memoir piece (not even a rough draft of one). What I have above is a collection of images, thoughts, ideas, anecdotes, situations, events, and descriptions. A bunch of incomplete memories, some more accessible than others, a few so distant, so frail, I wonder if I'm really remembering them accurately at all.

Some of what I've sketched out above (first) occurred spontaneously: encountering hangers in the laundry room, pulling the pink striped room service napkin from the back of my crammed dining room drawer, telling my mother to sign for her dinner tray—while others were slightly more planned: Laurie and I hunting for Americana photos, buying the sun block, the ill-advised trip back to the hotel. Others were a combination of both.

About six years ago, without planning to, I walked from a frigid New Jersey afternoon into Bloomingdale's because that's where I found a parking space in the mall parking lot, and stopped in my tracks a few steps inside the doors. I felt lightheaded, a little bit frightened – but didn't know why. Then, suddenly, I knew – it was because I felt I was back at the Americana...but why? I sat, and realized: Bloomingdale's *smelled like* the Americana.\* Now, I go there on purpose. I do not ever want to find out what they use to scent the air there, or even if I'm imagining it. I only want to keep on knowing that being there once in a while does something for my soul, which is why I've figured out that if I enter near the shoe department, I can sit and linger. (\* *Scientific studies have proven that smell is our number one memory trigger. Music is second.*)

I've been accumulating Americana memories, and recording my reactions to them, for a while now. Some of the writing that has resulted from this memory mining has found places in various essays I've written and published over the years, in small ways in my memoir, *Starting with Goodbye: A Daughter's Memoir of Love after Loss*. But I have not yet written a complete piece about my Americana experience itself. I might one day. I might not. I think of it as an expedition, not a planned route to a predetermined destination. It feeds me, it feeds part of my writing.

Most importantly, however, this activity has helped me develop an entire toolbox for when I need to go on a memory plunge that is much more purposeful – for example, when I am working to complete a piece which requires engaging with memories that I find more frustrating to access. Ones which I THINK I remember clearly, but I wonder...What parts of those memories are actually real? What have I filled in with real but conflated recollections? Where have I filled in instead with what seems likely, with what I have since read about or heard others discuss or seen in photographs?

Then there are the memories which I simply can't seem to get to. I know, for example, that when I was about five or six years old, I had a small bird as a pet for a short time, but all I can remember are three things I *think* I know for sure: That the bird was a gift from Uncle Emil. That on the day it died, my parents debated whether to bury it or put it in the trash. And that I stood for a long time shivering in the garage, after it had been wrapped in newspaper and plastic and placed in the garbage barrel.

Why, I keep asking myself, can't I remember anything else—the bird's name, what it looked like, where the cage was in our house, if it made any sounds. I used to talk to that darned bird, watch it. So why can't I remember more? It's been a frustrating experience trying to remember, and I nearly gave up because I wasn't really planning to write about the bird anyway.

Except.

In a long memoir piece, I was working on about how I came to be a horse owner as a teenager, I wanted to explore the other pets I'd cycled through, and frankly didn't much care about: goldfish, a turtle, a frog, and that danged bird. I was fiddling with a theme about how animals in cages and tanks could never satisfy me, and how my parents would only ever allow animals in a cage or tank. Then there was the irony that even a horse which I rode wildly across huge fences and galloped through wide fields, and allowed to graze while I lay in the grass nearby, also lived in a barred stall most of the day – a kind of cage. I felt I needed to go on a quest to find out something more about me and the caged bird, to engage with that inaccessible and incomplete memory.

The question was, how?

For starters I could ask those who might have first-hand information about it.

But even before I get to that, I did what I have come to call Surrounding Memory Musing. Nothing magical here – all I mean is that I think AROUND the memory I'm trying to unearth and see if, by remembering other related things, maybe other events that occurred around the same time I had the bird. That way, I can get closer to the memory.

I ask myself: Who and what other things WHICH I CAN REMEMBER WELL have an attachment or connection to the memory I'm trying to find?

For the bird story, first, I made a list –

- Uncle Emil -birds in general - my parents' feelings about pets in the house - what else I really longed for as a pet at that age - my much-older sister who likely would have been the one to help me with the bird - what I knew about the consequences for making messes in my childhood home.

This is a good start....as I spin through some of these, I find a lot that is probably meaningless, but I also start to discover small pieces of memory which eventually may help me to dislodge chunks of the story.

For example:

- I remember that my mother was often both dismayed by, and then again also proud of, her brother Emil. In her fatherless, impoverished childhood tenement flat, he kept the family fed and protected (he was a boxer, then a soda shop owner, and sold souvenirs at parades). But in her upper-middle class, newly affluent suburban life, he often embarrassed her. He still lived in a gritty city (Paterson), had an uneducated vocabulary and would often arrive with a boxful of leftover parade souvenirs she regarded as junk, but which made me popular in school when I brought them in and gave them out. *It's entirely possible, I think, that she regarded the bird as an equally unwelcome gift.*
- Next, I think about how I'd begged for a dog and/or a pony and was immediately dismissed: these ideas were such folly! I was instead steered to goldfish, which I accepted but never liked.
- My parents were fastidious about cleanliness. It's hardly likely they would have been happy to have a messy birdcage around.

- My sister – even today in her 60’s – is leery of birds. Could she – as a teenager at the time, with a lot of responsibility for her little sister – have helped clean that birdcage?

Next, I think about how else I could get at this memory. I already have a sense that there are no old photos of me with a bird or birdcage – at least none that I recall. But I make a note to go through old photos next time I visit my mother; but that may not be for many months.

Next, I think of other ways to go about this memory dig.

On any nonfiction writer's list should be the option of Interviewing Others. I could ask my mother and sister about the bird. My brother was away at military school when I was that age, but who knows, maybe he remembers it a little. Perhaps my best friend, who lived next door and who I still see, might remember something. (Uncle Emil, his wife, and my father were all gone, but I wonder if Emil's sons, who I'm still in touch with, maybe ever had a bird or would remember anything....)

But this tactic comes with a huge caveat. Or several, really.

Let's digress for a moment and look at some of the problems that may be associated with interviewing others in order to help uncover stubborn memories:

- **Everyone will have a different recollection of the incident** you are asking about. Forget about objective accuracy, truth or anything like that. What you're asking someone to do is dig into their OWN memory. Are you willing to accept whatever pops out? Often, their memory will be FAR different than yours. Not wrong, but filtered through a different set of lenses. Decide if you can simply gather their story quietly and without comment. Can you record what they have to tell you, and resist the temptation to "correct" them? To defend your own story?
- **You may find out something you might not want to know.** On the face of it, I figure there's probably little chance, in asking about the bird, that I will unearth something truly tragic or hurtful...but maybe not. I'm making this next part up, but believe me, I've heard variations of this many times from other writers, and have lived through a few of my own unexpected and unwanted revelations:
  - o What if I ask my mother about the bird and she tells me it died because I forgot to feed it? I'll feel guilty but then I'll also wonder why no one stepped in to help me (and the poor bird! I was so young!). Do I want to know why/if my family would let a bird die because a five year old was forgetful? What if I ask my sister, who is normally forthright and generous with her thoughts, and she clams up, refuses to talk about the bird? What might THAT mean?
- **The person you ask may decide you have no right to write about the subject**, particularly if they are part of the story. Of course, you DO have that right (it's YOUR story), but do you want to set into motion a difficult situation? Anyone you interview will almost certainly at first say, "Oh why do you want to know that?" Are you willing to discuss what you are writing? And why? Is it anyone else's concern, really?
- **What you may find out could drastically alter your piece of writing.** That could be good – it may open up great new opportunities to expand the piece, deepen it, make it more meaningful. Or, it may blow your entire original idea out of the water.

Having said all of the above, I'm actually NOT discouraging you from gathering information from other people whose memories may be essential to your own understanding of a past event which you can't remember as clearly as you'd like. I've done it myself many times, usually quite informally over a meal or coffee – sometimes without revealing WHY I'm asking the questions, if I can manage to make it an organic part of an on-going conversation. I'm simply saying that in doing so, be prepared.

Now, back to my bird story and what I did next.

I decide to begin with my sister, because she has the broadest understanding that as a writer, I go places others may find uncomfortable, and she respects my creative process. Also, she's open-hearted and up front about our family's flaws, past and present. I decide to skip asking my mother, who is often highly defensive and lately, as she's aged and her entire original family has died, I notice she now glosses over everyone's flaws; anyway, she would never admit, not in any way, that she harbored any ill will towards any family member, ever. I may or may not ask my brother; doing so means it will get to my mother. I also decide to ask my best friend.

Next, I move on to what I call the **I Don't Remember Draft**.

This is an exercise really, in the development of the piece. I sit down and write out everything I DO NOT remember about this topic, and what I hope to learn. This document isn't really meant to be part of the eventual piece, HOWEVER very often, parts of it do make their way in there for two reasons: A. It's interesting. What we don't remember makes good reading (more on this later); and B. in the process of writing about what I don't/can't remember – guess what, sometimes I DO remember. That is, the process of crafting sentences about what's missing does something to my brain, which seems to open up and offer up tidbits of actual memory.

For example:

*I don't remember what that bird looked like, if he was big or small, brightly colored or dull. I don't remember if he make any sounds. I don't remember if I was a good bird owner, that I stopped by the cage and talked to him (or was it her?) often enough. I don't remember taking a photo of me and that bird. I don't remember if it liked being in the cage or if it seemed to want to fly free? I don't remember if I found him dead or someone else did?*

Then – I put this list away....and a few days later, I take out this **I Don't Remember** exercise....and I suddenly remember two things.

First, it had to have been a pretty small bird because when his body was wrapped in newspaper, it fit into a typical medium size Baggie. I can see it now, with one of those red twisty ties holding it closed. And I remember something else: once (perhaps around the time of owning the bird?), there was a bird flying wildly around our living room; I was watching from the kitchen doorway, and my sister was crying, and my mother was swatting at it with a broom. I don't know what happened next, but I begin to wonder – could this have been my pet? Had I accidentally let it loose by not closing the cage?

Now, granted, I don't yet have a lot more than I started with, but I have something. Is it enough to work with? Maybe. I still intend to ask my sister and best friend for more. But at least I've started a process which has kicked my memory into action.

Here's what Sue William Silverman says in her book, *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*: "(the act of) Writing, in fact, will bring you closer to the truth. I frequently retrieve previously forgotten details once I immerse myself in the senses of the scene, once I develop those shadowy photographs into detailed imagery. I ask myself: How did it smell that spring evening when my high school boyfriend broke up with me? Of lilacs? No, damp lilacs. Yes, now I remember."

Next, I give it a rest. Go work on something else. I put the bird memory conundrum aside. Forget about the bird story for a while. Let it bang around my brain unattended, without trying to remember anything else, and see what happens. Simmer. Marinate.

Why?

Because we are writers ALL.THE. TIME. Which means that once we begin to think about what we are writing, what's missing, what memory we are tracking down – our mind files that away and, even when we are away from the keyboard, even when we make a decision to forget about it for a while, we don't; somewhere in the back corner of our brains, we are still working on that part of the writing puzzle. Once I started the bird inquiry, over the next few days or weeks (or months) I'm certain I will have sudden flashes of bird memories which appear to be unbidden, to come out of nowhere. **But it's not so mysterious. My writer's brain is working on the problem, even when I'm not writing, EVEN WHEN I'm writing something else.**

Remember this. Trust this process. It has never let me down. The key to understanding and ALLOWING this process to do its work, is to embrace and practice the art of letting things rest. Putting your drafts aside. Working on something else for a while.

Meanwhile...

### **Sometimes our memories need a trigger...**

A memory trigger is a wonderful thing for a nonfiction writer.

Sometimes a memory trigger comes our way unbidden, such as the first time I encountered the memory trigger of the smell as I walked into Bloomingdale's – what a gift. I would have NEVER thought to seek out the smell of the Americana lobby. I didn't even know there WAS a unique smell to the Americana until that day in Bloomingdale's.

But sometimes, we go need to **go in search of** memory triggers.

That happens when we engage with photos and other physical objects, when we go down roads we haven't explored before, when we read, touch, feel, listen, hear, smell things PURPOSELY which we hope might help us make contact with that squirmy memory.

Recently I decided it may help to research the history of Bal Harbour, Florida, which I hoped would yield up some Americana lore – and up on my computer screen popped the hotel's old logo, black-and-white poolside photos and ... an account of a major hurricane which once struck, badly damaging the hotel. I had gone in search of a memory trigger, and boy did I find one. I was thrilled to find this website, which triggered memories of being there once when a minor hurricane blew through – and I began writing about seeing heavy wooden poolside chairs being picked up and deposited into the swimming pool.

At the end of this piece, you'll find a link to a blog post in which I offer a list of memory triggers. I'm sure there are other ones. Be curious. See what triggers you can find and which ones find you. Go on a memory trigger hunt on purpose. This means you are likely going to have to get out of your writing chair, office, house, town, and/or comfort zone. Do it.

I had a writing student once who was frustrated about not having more complete memories of her father's frequent business trips and how they affected her family. We talked about memory triggers, and this is what happened next:

Turns out he traveled by train most of the time, yet this writer had not been on or near a train for decades. First, she scoured the internet and found some old train schedules from the city she lived in as a child. Next, she found out about, and visited, a small museum about 40 miles away on the site of an abandoned train station. Finally, she made her way to a busy metropolitan train station – an 80-mile trip from her house, which she made into a day trip – and simply wandered around there for an hour, then sat and watched the train-traveling world go by, watched trains go by. A friend in her book club lent her a memoir written by a 1940s train conductor. Meanwhile, she'd told her brothers about her interest, and little by little, they sent her photos of the family bidding Dad hello and goodbye at train stations. One brother found Dad's old leather suitcase in his attic – and the writer was happy to bury her nose inside it on her next visit.

Did she then remember everything she'd wanted to? No. That wasn't the goal. She DID however remember much more than when she first began her quest. She was, by then, swimming in the waters of her work, living inside it, so to speak. And that's where you want to be.

**A big part of using memory triggers in your work as a creative nonfiction writer is to be open to the possibility of what they can do for you.** This means realizing that not ALL of your work happens at the keyboard. It also means you must be even more observant than you probably already are. Most writers are keenly observant. Still, you need to be more so.

Writing about something that happened while you were in high school? Listen to the music you used to listen to. Pull out that yearbook. Watch a documentary about the time period or something significant that happened then.

Writing about your beloved grandma, who spent most of her time in the kitchen? Prepare some of the food she used to cook. Can't cook to save your life? Find some of those specialties at a bakery, diner, restaurant, specialty food shop. Ask around—does anyone have a recipe written in her hand? What about some of her kitchen tools?

Writing about an activity/hobby/sport you once participated in? Might you find a stray piece of equipment or clothing in your attic or basement? Got a trophy, ribbon, or certificate around? Might YouTube yield up old footage of folks engaging in that activity at the right time period? Jump in the car and go to...a shop that sells that activity's equipment, a nearby competition, a museum or hall of fame.

And be mindful that memory triggers are all around you.

The best advice I have for this is to slow down in your everyday life. Yeah, I know it sounds like good advice most of us can't follow – we're crazed with obligations and have to get things done. But think about it. If the world is always whizzing by, how do you expect to observe it in a way that allows you to think, allows you to process what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and how it may be connected to the memories in your head? How can the world, as it

slides by you, help you on your memory hunt if you are too busy or your head is always down, so that you don't even notice it?

So, consider: lose the iPod ear buds, put your cell phone away and stop texting and checking email. Sometimes, even close that book you are reading on the bus or train or in the doctor's waiting room. Just stop everything sometimes, and look around. Watch. Eavesdrop. Listen. Go closer and look at the painting you always walk right by. Pretend to nap and eavesdrop on the conversation to your right. Put the newspaper away while dining alone and watch others eat, look at body language, listen to the background music.

See what happens. Let yourself find out if what you see and hear and smell brings memories your way.

The point is that if you don't let the world in, you never discover what might then spill out of your memory.

Be sure to have a notebook handy, of course.

Am I suggesting you go through life like this all the time? Of course not. But once in a while, try it. See what happens.

### **The "Right" Memories**

Memory isn't right or wrong. It just is.

And if you are talking in strictly objective terms, in terms of what's provable, what's accurate, what's \*true\*, well then all memory is inherently "wrong". Because the millisecond after something occurs, it is already a memory – and memory exists within the confines of a fallible human brain. We can only experience something from our own perspective; our mind is not a still camera, not a film camera, not an audio recorder, and once the experience of the moment is over, we have a memory informed by all the other memories we already have, by our hopes and worries and attitudes and prejudices.

As soon as you begin to recount something – whether it happened five minutes or five years ago – you're doing so from memory and memory is ALWAYS different from the actual, provable truth of what happened. All creative nonfiction is about what's remembered – and what's forgotten, irretrievable. That's what makes the genre interesting, what makes memoir and personal essay fascinating – to see what the writer has done (what YOU could do) on the page with what is recalled, and what is left out, either because it is lost to memory or because the piece works better without including every blessed detail you do remember.

So you might think, well then, we are all doomed, all creative nonfiction is doomed to be “inaccurate”.

You'd be right about that. And also wrong.

Readers DO understand that in personal essay, memoir, travel narratives, and most other forms of creative nonfiction (except usually, humor), that the writer is doing his/her best to relay events as accurately as the writer can, given that the writer is human. This means you as the writer make

the very best effort you can to present your recollections with as much accuracy as you are able to deliver.

You write what you can recall, and trust the reader with it.

And, you don't make stuff up.

You don't write that you won an award if you were only nominated for it. Can you write that you wish you'd won the award? Sure. Can you write an imagined account of what you hoped life would be like had you actually won the award? Yes, so long as it's clear you are imagining on the page.

You also don't use your fallible memory as an excuse to write in an ambiguous fashion that might be misconstrued by the reader as fact. For example, someone I know had a horrendous childhood at the hands of her mother, but she doesn't want to upset her brothers who revere Mom's memory and who remember things differently. She can be ambiguous in her writing to the extent that whether or not her mother's treatment of her could really be called abusive is left up to the reader. But she can't, for example, be ambiguous in a way that would let the reader conclude it was really her grandmother or her father who was the abusive one. (The writer of course always has the option – some might say the duty, but that's a matter of writerly opinion – to write it exactly as she remembers it, indicting her mother, and her brothers be damned. That all depends I suppose on whether or not she cares if they ever speak to her again.)

Sometimes, the best decision is to let the incomplete memory become part of the narrative: to level with the reader about what you can't remember.

Some excellent CNF is reliant on faulty memory. How a writer works with incomplete memories -- in full view of the reader – can be an incredibly powerful craft decision. A writer who can elegantly sort out on the page the difficulty of not knowing something for sure, will likely win the respect of readers, who are all too aware that memory "plays tricks on us." Letting the reader know on the page that this may or may not be a full account of your experience allows the reader to engage in the mysteries of memory retrieval *alongside the narrator*.

The trick you must never play on a reader (hello, James Frey) is to write that which you KNOW did not happen, which your memory is sure did not occur, and present it as authentic. I think this is obvious, and to repeat what I said above, I believe the nonfiction writer's credo must be: Don't make stuff up.

But then again, what happens when you know some of a memory, but not all of it, and you find that in a piece of work, you still need to write about that event? A few guidelines:

Don't flesh out an incomplete memory in a way which you KNOW is not accurate or is LIKELY not to be accurate. Here's what I mean. You are writing a scene or passage or dialogue section and are clear on the important stuff, but not so clear on the lesser important details. You can flesh it out but only based on what you do know seems likely and logical to have been so, and only in areas that don't impact on the larger issue at hand.

For example, if you are writing a scene that you know took place in your childhood bedroom, and *the larger issue here* is some information your brother let slip during your conversation. But you can't remember who was sitting where or wearing what, or if it was day or night; that's okay, you can fill in the scene with what makes sense about these details – because the larger issue

here is what you and your brother talked about. So if you write that you were sitting on your respective twin beds, wearing your PJs and it was night time – *and in fact, you had hundreds of talks with your brother while sitting on your beds in your PJs at night* -- then you've done no harm here. Your fleshing out of the scene is based entirely on what is most likely to have been so AND these details don't have an impact on the conversation you had, *which is the larger issue at hand.*

But what if you start to give your brother lines of dialogue that you KNOW he did not say, but which you wish he'd said and/or which would really sound great in this scene? Or you give yourself lines or a reaction you wish you had said/had? Ack, NO! You can't do that.

Let's say you can't remember how you reacted when he told you he had tried smoking pot. Can you write that you jumped up and screamed, when in fact you were never the sort of kid who'd do that? No, you can't. Can you write, "I don't remember what I did next..." Of course you can. But you could also write, for example, "I probably just sat there, dumbstruck. That was my way, when I heard something I didn't want to hear." You could also write, "I wish I had jumped up and screamed..." You may even feel okay writing, "I sat there, quiet, dumbstruck," even though you can't verify that this is precisely what you did. Why? Because it's based on your knowledge, gathered over years of knowing yourself and how you typically reacted as a kid. If 99% of the time, you reacted to big news by sitting quietly dumbstruck.

Frankly, I think it's usually more interesting to go with *"I probably..."* or *"I can't remember what I did next...."* but that may just be me. I almost ALWAYS think it's more interesting to bring the reader into the narrator's head as she/he struggles with memory and with the person we wish we'd once been and how that squares with who we actually remember ourselves being.

As Sue Silverman says in *Fearless Confessions*, *"The only thing readers won't forgive is an out-and-out lie. Nor should they."*

When you can't remember the exact details of something that IS pertinent to the larger issue at hand, I believe that's an even more critical time to put your memory lapses on the page.

Here's Joan Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a memoir of widowhood in the immediate aftermath of her husband's death, describing what she does and does not remember about the events preceding and during his collapse. Also, note how she lets others' dialogue point up her memory lapses. (Before he died, they had been at dinner, discussing various things:)

*"I have no idea which subject we were on, the Scotch or World War One, at the instant he stopped talking. I only remember looking up..."*

Later, when paramedics have arrived, she writes what she overhears:

*"He's still fibbing," I remember the one on the telephone saying.*

*"V-fibbing," John's cardiologist said the next morning when he called from Nantucket. "They would have said 'V-fibbing.' V for ventricular."*

*Maybe they said "V-fibbing" and maybe they did not...*

*I have no memory of sirens. I have no memory of traffic. When we arrived at the emergency entrance to the hospital, the gurney was already disappearing in to the building. A man was waiting in the driveway. Everyone else in sight was wearing scrubs. He was not. "Is this the*

*wife?" he said to the driver, then turned to me. "I'm your social worker," he said, and I guess that is when I must have known.*

To go back to Sue Silverman's previous advice, one good way to work through difficult memories, is to write your way through them, which is what Didion says she did when writing her memoir – she began with all the questions she had about what she could not remember. Sometimes, by doing so, you create prose that not only addresses the memory hole, but weaves itself right into the fabric of the piece.

In whatever combination of ways you choose to work with your incomplete and stubborn memories – and chances are you already know a few methods that I haven't even touched on here – the one thing to remember is that memory is elastic, porous and susceptible to manipulation. Something that which seems completely beyond retrieval today may begin to bubble up and poke through the surface in a day, week, month, depending on what you do in the interim to help shake it loose – and depending on what occurs by happenstance along the way which may inadvertently cause it to dislodge.

Nudging those memories often depends on a combination of hitting them with a sledgehammer, tapping them with a tiny chisel, and simply allowing in the potential memory triggers all around us. The good news of course is that you CAN do something about your memories. Even today.

On the next two pages I've offered an outline of how you can go on a memory dig. Try it!

Resources:

Memory Triggers posts at Lisa's blog:

<http://lisaromeo.blogspot.com/2010/02/slow-down-see-memoir-with-memory.html>

<http://lisaromeo.blogspot.com/2010/02/memoir-memory-triggers-go-get-yourself.html>

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## **A nonfiction writer on the trail of the incomplete, inaccessible, uncooperative, or elusive memory.**

**Begin with** your strongest recollection of any aspect of the memory AND anything else you can recall relating to the event, time period, situation, characters, etc., no matter how minor.

- If you want to remember more details about an event that occurred a particular week at your vacation house in 1990, start with the strongest elements that you DO recall, for example: *Cousin Joe punched Dad. It was pouring rain. I was watching from upstairs through the railing, but no one in the room at the time knew that. Then, continue down the list with everything else that comes to mind, even if it's small: *Joe kept laughing; Mom was out shopping. Earlier that day, the dog pooped on the porch rug. I was annoyed about the rain.**

**Continue with what you recall of the setting / time period.** Continuing with the above example, paying particular attention to the sensory aspects. You may write: *The TV was on in the other room, probably MTV. Sound echoed in that house, with its high ceilings. I was 12, so Joe must have been around 22. We were there, with my Aunt Evelyn's family, and some other relatives, because gas was expensive that summer and no one wanted to drive far. My favorite cousin there was Kate, who had a great singing voice. Everyone thought Joe was secretly sniffing something because he rubbed his nose all the time.*

**Create a step-list for the piece in general.** Yes, you want to get at this particular memory, but take the larger view, which will put you in action on many fronts. Make a list of all the things you want to / will have to do, in order to write this piece well. This could include steps directly tied to retrieving that memory (for example, draw a map of the layout of the house, so you can picture where everyone was standing at the time), as well as other tasks, such as recreating the feel of that summer (for example, looking up what songs were popular then, the price of gas, the correct spelling of all your relative's names). This will keep you from fixating on the elusive memory, and help you immerse yourself in the piece overall, all of which could jog more memory free, too.

**Write the "I Don't Remember" draft.** Write, without stopping or even lifting your pen from the page (or fingers from the keyboard), for at least 15 minutes; don't stop to fix anything, just write. Begin every sentence with "I don't remember...." See what happens.

**Write the "I Remember" draft.**

Do the same as above, but begin each sentence with "I do remember..."

**Put the lists and drafts away** for a while. For as long as you can stand it.

**Create an object / action inventory of memory triggers.** Without looking at the above materials, make lists of the different objects or actions which might help you remember more, as well as the actions you could take to nudge those memories. For example, again using the above scenario: *I could find photos from that summer, find the recipes my mother used then, ask my friend to dig up the letters I wrote her that summer. I could take a drive down to the vacation house, listen to music from that year, "interview" my Dad about the incident.*

**Interact with the memory triggers.** Take action on any/all of the above. Take notes, of course. Pay particular attention to the feelings that these forays into the past bring up for you.

**Talk it up.** Let people who were there know you are wondering about that summer. You can do this directly if that feels safe, or indirectly, simply by starting conversations that you hope will circle around to the time period/event.

Along the way, **be open to unsought but helpful memory triggers.** If you are working with this memory over the course of a few weeks or months, keep your senses open to any other memory triggers that may come along, unbidden, which could catapult you to remembering more. Maybe you see someone who looks like Cousin Joe used to look back then, or you read an article about the town where the vacation house is located, or you are served a meal at a friend's house which your mom cooked a lot that summer. Take note of anything that comes up for you as a result of these.

**Integrate everything you learned** during your inquiry, into a new draft.

**If need be...**

**...write the piece without all the memory you wish you had.** Go ahead. Trust the reader, by bringing the reader into your inquiry/dilemma. For example, you might write, *"The real reason Joe slugged my father is buried so deep in my memory, it may as well be lying beneath the sand of Long Beach Island where, only hours before, we had all been laughing and eating gritty sandwiches."*

...or, write in your own speculative version of the memory, but being clear that this is your imagination at work. For example: *"Dad must have confronted Joe about the empty cans of spray paint in the garbage barrels out back, or at least that's what I imagine happened. Or maybe Dad said something stupid again, as he often did when he'd had too many beers."*

Both of these devices are more interesting than simply omitting or writing around the missing information. Readers understand that nonfiction writers can't remember everything; respect the reader by not pretending that you do.

**Let it rest, again.** For as long as you can stand it. Remember, your \*writer's brain\* is always at work. Even when you are not officially working on the piece, your mind will be marinating the topic. You may remember things at odd moments, when you least expect it. Trust your writer's brain to deliver goodies at unexpected intervals...and seize them!