Introduction

Look at Our Pasts Through a Writer’s Eyes

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, teachers will:

- Launch the memoir unit of study.
- Establish themselves as memoir writing mentors by sharing a story about an important period or related events in their lives.
- Model how writers find memoir-worthy content in their own lives.
- Compare memoirs with personal narratives.

Students will:

- Use photographs and objects to make connections to their important life periods or related experiences.
- Share stories about an important period or related events with a partner and discuss the process with the whole class.

Preparation

Materials Needed

- Photographs and/or objects that are associated with important periods or related events
- Chart paper and markers
- Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

Gather photographs and/or other objects associated with an important period in your life to model how you make connections to your personal stories. During the practice portion of this lesson, students will need at least one photograph or object with which to make their own connections.

1. Focus

Introduce Memoir Writing

Display a photograph or object that you associate with an important period in your life or that you connect with several related events in your past. Use the sample think-aloud below as a model of how to talk to students about the stories associated with the photograph or object. You may wish to share more than one example with students.

Sample think-aloud. Say: This is my college yearbook. Whenever I see it, I think about my freshman year in college. It was a very important period of my life because it was the first time I was on my own. The photos in my yearbook remind me of several events that happened during that year. I can recall how I felt and who I spent time with. There wasn’t one particular event that stands out as important, though. Rather, the series of related events during that year feels important because the whole experience helped me grow.

Say: If I were to write about my first year at college and what made that period of my life so important, I would be writing a memoir. A memoir tells about a short period in the life of the author. A memoir is similar to a personal narrative, in that they both tell stories about the author’s life, but they are not the same. A personal narrative tells about one incident, such as a trip to New York City. A memoir tells about related events that occurred over a short time in the author’s life. For the next several weeks, we are going to read, write, and share memoirs with each other. We will tell about a short period of time or related events in our lives, and we will express our feelings about those events.

Write the T-chart below on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Narrative</th>
<th>Memoir</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus is on one particular incident in the author’s life</td>
<td>Focus is on a short period of time or several related events in the author’s life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Genre Comparison Chart

Introduce the Purpose and Audience for Memoirs

Say: Authors often write memoirs because they want to share what was an important time in their lives. The memoirs I read often tell about a period in the author’s life in which he or she helped change the world in some way. I find it fascinating to learn what those authors did and said and how they felt as they made the world a different place. If I were to write a memoir about my first year at college, it wouldn’t tell about how I changed the world. Rather, it would be...
about how the world changed me. I could share with readers that at times life was difficult for me, and how I struggled through those times and matured. I suspect, too, that I would learn something about myself in writing that memoir.

2. Rehearse

Practice Telling Memoirs Orally

Invite students to work with a partner. Both students should share with their partner a photograph, object, or drawing of an important period in their lives, such as a week at summer camp or a particular year in school. The partner listening to the memoir should be prepared to retell it to the class. Students should explain how the photograph or object helped them remember details to tell their partner. If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

Share Memoir Stories with the Class

Invite volunteers to retell the stories their partners shared with them. Ask them to tell how their partners used their photograph or object as a memory aid. Use one or more of the following questions to engage students in a discussion.

Storyteller
• How did you feel as you told the memoir story?
• Why did you choose to tell about that part of your life?
• Did telling the story help you understand something about yourself? What?

Listener
• How did you feel as you listened to your partner tell the story?
• What else would you like to hear about from that time in your partner’s life?

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: Today we learned that memoirs tell about related events or short, but important, periods in our lives. Photographs, photo albums, yearbooks, or even letters you’ve saved can remind you of the times in your life that would make a good memoir. In the next several weeks, we will look at more photographs and objects to help us focus on those periods worth writing about.

Ask students to write a paragraph about a period in their life that was important to them.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to read aloud their paragraphs. Discuss the many ways (reflected in students’ writing) in which a period of time or series of events can be meaningful to a writer.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning
Meet with beginning ELs one on one while other students work with partners for the “Practice Telling Memoirs Orally” exercise. Encourage them to use pantomime and gestures to explain the basic information of the stories associated with their photographs or objects, such as how old they were, how they felt (happy, sad, scared), and who was with them during that time in their lives.

Intermediate
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner practice. Write simple sentence frames on chart paper and model how students can use them to talk about their photograph or object. For example:

This _______ reminds me of ________.
This photo shows ________.
During this time, ________.

Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during partner practice.

All Levels
If you have students whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates to help them understand the lesson focus: memoirs/las memorias; important/importante.