Look at Our Pasts Through a Writer’s Eyes

1. Focus

Introduce Memoir Writing

Display a photograph or object that represents 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 events associated with the photograph or object. You may wish to share more than one example with students.

Sample think-aloud. Say: This is a bandana I wore almost every day during one memorable summer. Whenever I see this, I remember the various events of that summer. I volunteered for an organization that was helping to save the animals harmed during a major oil spill. I cleaned animals. I went out on boats. I can recall how I felt while I was doing these things and what was going on around me. It was a major turning point in my life that I will never forget.

Say: If I were to write about my summer saving animals and what made that period of my life so important, I would be writing a memoir. A memoir tells about an important period of time or a series of related events in the life of the writer. If I were to write about just one incident that happened my summer working to save animals—for example, the day I was unable to save a seal—I would be writing a personal narrative rather than a memoir. The two genres share many features, but they are not exactly the same. Over the next few weeks, we will read, write, and share memoirs to tell about a short period of time or related events in our lives.

Write the T-chart below on chart paper or use 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: One purpose for writing a memoir is to share the story of an important period of your life with people who can learn from your experiences. For example, I would want to share my memoir about the summer I mentioned with readers who want to hear a personal and direct experience of disasters affecting people, animals, and the environment. Another reason for writing a memoir is to reflect on ways important events shaped our thoughts and beliefs.

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, teachers will:

- Launch the memoir unit of study.
- Explain the difference between personal narrative and memoir by sharing examples from their own lives.
- Establish themselves as memoir-writing mentors.
- Model how writers find memoir-worthy content in their own lives.

Students will:

- Use photographs and objects to make connections to memories and experiences to include in a memoir.
- Share memoir-like stories 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

During the introductory portion of this lesson, use one or more photographs 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.
2. Rehearse

Practice Telling Memoir Stories Orally

Invite students to work with partners. Students should share with their partner a photograph or object they associate with an important period in their lives. The partner listening to the memoir story 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 about the exercise.

Storyteller
• What was it like to share your memoir story? How did you feel as you told it?
• Why is that period in your life important?
• What audience do you imagine would be most interested in your story?

Listener
• How did you feel as you listened to your partner tell the story?
• What else are you interested in hearing about your partner’s life?

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: Today we learned that memoirs tell about important periods or sets of events in our lives. Photographs, clothing, books, and other objects can remind you of the periods in your life that were important to you. In the next several weeks, we will look at more photographs and objects to help us focus on those periods and generate the details you need to include in your memoirs.

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. Encourage them to use pantomime and gestures to explain some of the details of their memoir stories, such as what they were doing, how big or small they were at the time, how they felt during their experiences, and what they saw happening around them.

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 ______ makes me think of ______.
This picture shows ______.
During this time, ______.
This was an important time because ______.

Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner practice.

All Levels
If you have students whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates: important/importante; memoirs/las memorias; period/el periodo.