

# "Memory Writing"

## *A Powerful Method for Teaching Paragraphing and Compositions—A Step-by-Step Approach*

Students will welcome the idea that there is a non-onerous, concrete method that will help them get thoughts onto paper and then aid them in organizing those thoughts. Teachers—even more so—welcome such a technique. Herein, you will be led, step by step, how to make students *understand* paragraphing, and from that, a whole composition.

There is a section for the simplist of this idea (for primary grades) to more mature use (grades 4 or 5 through high school). More can be written about style, word choice, voice, audience and other eventual necessities of writing, but without basic organizational skills, herein taught, what good are such accessories?

### **A Comparison**

Memory writing is similar to diary and letter writing in that it can be personal, but there's a greater elapse of time—and, perhaps, it's easier. It is similar to autobiography except that only one incident in one's life is written about.

### **What the Student Learns**

In "memory writing" students tap their memories and learn how to select and shape this material into compositions. They can use this memory-recalling process for later self-direction.

They will learn to work in small interacting-collaborating groups; deal with their egocentric, unelaborated writing; and pick up skill in sentence mechanics, grammar and spelling.

They can be led to *sense* the need for paragraph divisions.

### **Why the Student Learns**

The appeal of "memory writing" seems to be the personal content to which significant feelings are attached.

Nevertheless, this is not diary writing. Therefore, the students should be made aware of two kinds of writing: private and public. Diary writing is private (which, of course, can be made public later), memory writing (as a class activity) is public. But because it *is* personal disclosure, the students are urged not to write anything they would never want to reveal about themselves.

Another appeal (though maybe not at first if the students have never done this before) is the triad collaboration and editing as one is composing. This interaction is both socially and academically stimulating.

Finally, make the students aware beforehand—or sometime during the process—that they will be sharing their finalized products in a class booklet. This adds appeal to the task.

### **How the Student Learns: The Process**

Lead the whole class together at first. Demonstrate memory writing by recalling your pleasant (or unpleasant) memories on the overhead projector or chalkboard as outlined below. After you have started or finished each step, stop and let the students do likewise.

#### **Step 1** (Use this as a column-like title)

Search your memory for those childhood experiences/incidences of which you are fond (or otherwise): ones that will disclose something about you of which your students are unaware. For the students it may be an incident that happened on a particular day; such as: first day in school, first bike, first fight, best trip, taking a music lesson, best trip or old girl/boyfriend.

If you feel better prepared by writing your memories down beforehand, then just copy them from your paper. Regardless, list them as brief notes for the students to see. Once you have written three or four they will get the idea. Ask them to join you. Let everyone spend 10 minutes racking their brains. No talking.

#### **Step 2** (And column two)

Choose one of your experiences listed during step 1 and place it in column two—one that you think would interest other people. (You can have this prepared beforehand, too.) Under this incident or memory list as many one-word or short-note details as you can that are connected with the memory. In other words, jot down everything you can remember about the incident, including your thoughts and feelings at the time. Allow 15 minutes of class time for the students to do likewise.

#### **Step 3** (Initial student sharing)

Students get into threesomes of their choice (or your appointment) and share their expanded memory (Step 2) by slowly (kids rattle things off much too fast) reading their memory title and the details. The other two members of the group rely upon their natural curiosity and ask any questions that strike them about the topic or what they think should be brought out by the writer. The composer can consider these possible elaborations. They can also state which of the details interest them most—helping the composer successfully prepare for his/her audience.

#### **Step 4** (Writing those drafts)

Now comes the narrative composing. (Brace yourself for the groans and don't tell them this is only the *beginning* of the end.) Again, demonstrate (you may have prepared beforehand) how you're going to take those details listed in Step 2 and incorporate them into your story. For example, you may have numbered them chronologically or according to importance or interest. You may also have crossed some out for whatever reason: not closely enough related to the incident, too personal, or judged not interesting enough.

**Step 5** (May take place next day)

After completion of writing their memory as a rough draft, the students have to prepare them not for you but for two other peers (their triad) to read and praise and criticize (helpfully).

These students will make written marginal suggestions or ask for clarification and deal with grammar and mechanics (such as that). Everybody in the group gets the same treatment.

**Step 6** (Final draft)

The final draft must be accepted by the threesome. It will go into the class booklet without additional teacher modification (well,...if it's *really* unclear or you plan to share the booklet with other classes....).

**Notes**

Students keep their Step 1 memories for future memory writing. (Best to have a class file so the papers don't get lost.) Don't overdo this type of writing or procedure, but do play it for what it is worth.

The groans will start to disappear as the students start to enjoy and see the worth of collaborating with, sharing with, and learning from each other.

(But let's be realistic here, too. If managing your class is difficult and student interaction tends to create bedlam, then skip the sharing part; it is not sacrosanct. Your students will still learn a great deal from this approach minus the social-interaction element.)

**How I Did It**

<u>Step 1</u>	<u>*Step 2</u>
Going barefoot*	Springtime/May 1st
Building log cabins	Sensitive feet-callused
Picking berries & wild grapes	Hot road
Our swimming hole	Cool grass
Playing driving with sticks	Ages 5-13/14
Sister & washing	Sundays
Spoiled brother	Mud
Working on the farm	Visiting

First girlfriend	Nails, glass
Picking in tomato field	Leading the mule
One-room schoolhouse	Bike riding
First-grade teacher	Washing feet
	Reason for stopping
	Dreading new school year
	Saved money—poor

### Step 6

#### “Going Barefoot”

*When I was between the ages of 5 and 13 I loved to go barefoot. One of the reasons my brothers, sisters and I went without shoes after school and in the summer was because we were poor and could save our shoes some wear. But we would have wanted to go barefoot even if we were rich.*

*We just couldn't wait until the first day of May because that was when our foster mother let us first take off our shoes. We'd beg her before, especially if the weather was warm, but she'd not budge. I never knew why.*

*On the first few days our feet were very sensitive. The dirt road was very hot to our feet and the smallest stone would bring an ouch and a jump. But after a couple weeks we could even run races on the road because the bottoms of our feet had a tough callus on them. The best place to walk was in the grass of the lawn. And it was fun to go to the creek and walk in the bed while the mud oozed up between our toes. It was so cool and refreshing!*

*Once, I stepped on a rusty nail and had to get a tetanus shot so I wouldn't get lockjaw. But in those days we did not have to fear broken glass because we lived in the country and children didn't break bottles like they did much later; they could take empties back to the store and get some money for them. We kids used to collect bottles to make a little spending money.*

*Sundays I hated, not because I had to go to church, but because after going barefoot all week (which made my feet a little bigger) shoes squeezed-up and hurt my feet something terrible (as country folk put it). This is one reason, too, I dreaded going back to school in September because I would have to wear shoes all day. My feet would be burning with an awful pain at the end of each school day for a week or so. But eventually my feet got used to being imprisoned again.*

*I remember that we had a very large garden and used a mule (an animal that is a cross between a horse and a donkey) to help plow (dig up) the ground. It was usually my job to hold and lead the mule by his bridle (which was around his head and face) so he wouldn't step on the plants we were growing or bite off (eat) too many of them. Once in a while I would forget I was barefoot and walk too close to the mule's hoof (foot) and he would step right on my foot. Wow! Did that hurt. And the dumb mule didn't even know—and couldn't feel—he was on my foot. I'd push and shove at this heavy animal, but he'd move off very slowly—just considered my foot a clod of dirt, I guess. Then I'd have to sit*

*down to rub and rub my sore foot. (Sometimes I'd put on some big old shoes for this job.)*

*I think everybody, even grownups, should go barefoot just to see how good it feels—even if it does hurt once in a while.*

I purposely underlined the words or phrases I used in Step 2, above, because I wanted you to notice that I decided that every item from the list just didn't fit, so I didn't use them all. But as I was writing I started remembering more, and I wrote it down.

### **Adaptations**

For the early grades, a *Book about Me* dictated to an older child or aide for the student to illustrate is a good starting point. Pages can be, for example, "My Family," "My Toys," "When I Was a Baby".

For older students the taking of pictures of people, places and things that are an important part of their life—parents, friends, house or bedroom, favorite possessions—and presenting them in an organized way with commentary can be a simple beginning or later version of "memory writing." (If doing this, rubber cement the pictures to poster board and run through a continuous laminator found in teacher stores [least expensive method] or at larger photocopying/printing stores. Then tape the posters in the hallway for all to admire.)

### **Some "Memory Book" Titles**

<i>Down Memory Lane with 310</i>	<i>Our Secret Crimes</i>
<i>Trips into the Past</i>	<i>Events from the Past</i>
<i>History of a Friendship (or Enemyship)</i>	<i>The story of our lives</i>
<i>I Absolutely, Positively Will Not</i>	<i>Yesteryear</i>
<i>Tell You About...(Secrets of 310)</i>	<i>Yakety-Yak: What 310 Has to Say</i>
<i>All about Me: Autobiographies</i>	<i>Revelations: Secret &amp; Otherwise</i>
<i>Now You Know: Revelations of 310</i>	<i>Stop Laughing! (Our Embarrassing</i>
<i>To Know Me is to Love Me</i>	<i>Moments</i>
<i>Say that Again? (Interviews with 310)</i>	<i>Inside (Me) Edition</i>
<i>Say that Again? (Interviews with 310)</i>	<i>This-'n'-That</i>

### **A Bonus? Rubric to Judge Compositional Writing**

The educational Powers That Be are currently on a binge following the portfolio-rubric fad, so I offer the following clear, and hopefully acceptable, rubric (criteria for judging a piece of prose) that is easy for you and will get the above mentioned off your back.

**Student meets some, all, or exceeds expectations for the current grade (or present skills taught) in the following areas:**

1. Shows clarity of sentences and whole piece.
2. Meets objective of type of writing assigned: narrative, descriptive, persuasive, etc.
3. Sticks to the point (no extraneous ideas).
4. Reflects knowledge of mechanics: paragraphs (when to), punctuation, word agreement, spelling, capitalization, neatness.
5. Demonstrates depth: topic appropriately developed/elaborated/explored as grade level of student might allow.
6. Related to numbers 1 and 3: exhibits organizational skills (logical order of ideas) in paragraphs and whole piece.
7. Optional: displays evident style—energy/emotions, humor, etc.