

4-1-2013

Going Public: Writing and Revising the Memoir

Autumn N. Keiss

Olivet Nazarene University, ankeiss@olivet.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/honr_proj



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Keiss, Autumn N., "Going Public: Writing and Revising the Memoir" (2013). *Honors Program Projects*. 39.
https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/honr_proj/39

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Digital Commons @ Olivet. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Program Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Olivet. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@olivet.edu.

GOING PUBLIC: WRITING AND REVISING MEMOIR

By

Autumn N Keiss

Honors Scholarship Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

Olivet Nazarene University

For partial fulfillment of the requirements for

GRADUATION WITH UNIVERSITY HONORS

March, 2013

BACHELORS OF ARTS

in

Psychology

Lisa D. McGrady Lisa D. McGrady 3/15/13
Scholarship Project Advisor (printed) Signature Date

CHARLES W. CARRIGAN Charles W. Carrigan 4/26/13
Honors Council Chair (printed) Signature Date

Rebecca Belcher-Renkin Rebecca Belcher-Renkin 4/24/13
Honors Council Member (printed) Signature Date

Autumn N Keiss, 2013, copyright

To Aimee Fish, a supportive and caring friend.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Dr. Lisa McGrady for serving as my mentor, for working with me through the writing and revising process, and for helping me conduct my survey. Thank you Beth Thrall and Dana Peterson for helping me complete a final proof before sending my work to alumni. Thank you to all of the people who inspired my writing and helped me throughout the process, and thank you to the honors department at Olivet for providing me with the funds necessary to complete my research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
Recalling Memories.....	2
Beginning the Writing Process.....	4
Writing about Emotional Topics.....	5
Effective Writing Techniques.....	7
Advice for the Memoirist.....	8
Review of Memoirs.....	9
Methods for Writing and Revision.....	10
Writing Process.....	10
Criteria.....	11
Chronology.....	11
Description.....	12
Sight.....	13
Sound.....	14
Smell.....	14

Taste.....	14
Touch.....	15
Metaphor.....	15
Narrator.....	16
Theme.....	18
Length.....	22
Overall Appeal.....	23
Survey.....	29
Feedback from Readers.....	32
Final Revision of Memoir.....	36
The Beginning.....	41
Middle School.....	43
Freshman Year – First Semester.....	44
Freshman Year – Second Semester.....	51
Summer.....	56
Sophomore Year – First Semester.....	61
Sophomore Year – Second Semester.....	68
Beginning of Summer.....	77
A Pause.....	78
Summer Between Sophomore and Junior Year.....	79
Junior Year – First Semester.....	83

Junior Year – Second Semester.....	87
Summer.....	89
A Second Pause.....	90
Moving On.....	91
References.....	93
Reflection.....	94
References.....	95

ABSTRACT

The following paper discussed the research and revising process of writing memoir. It began with a literature review that discussed literature about writing, literature about writing memoirs and published memoirs. The literature reviews concluded there are six criteria necessary to make a memoir effective. The six criteria are: length, chronological order, narration, description, theme and overall appeal. The paper then explored the application of criteria to a personal memoir about an abusive relationship, before discussing a survey sent to Olivet alumni that asked objective questions about each criterion. The survey responses are used to help complete a final draft of the memoir, *Everything I Want You to Know: Learning We Are Not Alone*, which explored the idea that no one is ever truly alone while presenting the story in alternating pieces of current reflection and scenes from the past.

Keywords: memoir, writing process, writing methods, effective writing

INTRODUCTION

My honors research for Olivet Nazarene University focused on writing and revising memoir. I began my project by researching memoir writing and memoirs, then wrote several drafts of a memoir, created a survey to estimate the effectiveness of my writing and finally revised my memoir into a finished project.

Memoir is becoming a popular form of literature, and many authors are beginning to explore the genre. However, it may also be one of the most emotionally difficult kinds of work to write due to its roots in nonfiction, its complexity and the difficulty of exploring sensitive topics. In order to write a memoir, it's first important to understand the basic concepts of general writing, of memoir writing and of retrieving memory.

While this project was completed to meet the requirements of the university's honors program, it was also created to dispel many of the myths about people who have experienced trauma. It was written to remind people that the recovery process can be slow (and that is okay), that they may feel alone (and that is okay), and that people are complex (and that is okay). It was written to reach out to those who are hurting, those who will hurt and those with family members or friends who are hurt, in order to provide hope and companionship for the recovery process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recalling Memories

Zinsser (1987, 2004), Polking (1995), Larson (2007) and Murdock (2003) all stressed the malleability of memories and reminded readers that memoir is creative nonfiction. It is not possible for the memoirist to create an exact account of his or her experiences. However, this should not discourage the memoirist, for memoir is about expressing the emotional and physical journey of the writer, not presenting a historical work. Roorbach (1998) also believed that memoirists should not focus on recording an exact account of events and that “expression, not information is the first goal of a memoir” (p. 11).

In order to create a memoir, the memoirist must learn to evaluate his or her experiences. According to Smith (personal communication, 20 February 2012), a memory researcher and professor at Olivet Nazarene University, it is not possible to separate true memories from false memories—those created by the mind to fill the gaps left by an inability to perfectly recall the original event. He suggested a memoirist carry a notebook with him or her in order to record memories as they are recalled, for recalled memories may quickly be forgotten again. Lamott (1994) agreed with Smith and warned the memoirist that he or she will not remember something long enough to write it down later.

Smith (personal communication, 20 February 2012) went on to warn against trying to force remembering, which may cause the creation of false memories. Instead, he suggested using items and locations to spark memories. Hunter (2010) made a

similar suggestion and asked the memoirist to create a chest of items that may help him or her remember the past. Polking (1995) also believed in the importance of capturing memories and suggested the memoirist reference old letters and keep track of his or her dreams in order to remember more about the event his or her work is focused on, while Evans (1984) told the memoirist to keep a notebook close and to use a tape recorder to record memories and ideas. Though I did not record memories in a notebook or by using a tape recorder, I did use items to help recall memories and was careful not to force any remembrances.

Beginning the Writing Process

Other authors offered advice to the memoirist who struggles not with recalling memories but with recording those memories. Bickham (1992) told the memoirist to persevere in his or her work, never making excuses or putting off working and not to wait for inspiration but to instead begin writing immediately. In order to aid recall and to prevent the memoirist from giving up on his or her project, Kita (2009) believed the memoirist should set a word goal for each day of writing, and Lamott (1994) went a step further by setting a specific word goal of 300 words per day. She recognized the frustration of writers block and suggested the memoirist write letters when he or she becomes stuck. She pushed the memoirist with writer's block to accept his or her frustration and to write about anything, even something unrelated to his or her project and then take a break. Lamott also suggested the writer try to write at the same time every day and focus on short, paragraph-length portions of the project. Murray (1983) also offered advice for combating writer's block, telling the memoirist to "stop thinking

about writing, write early in the process, set small deadlines, don't write the lead first, write a letter, use a ritual, dictate, take a break, read copy [and] don't look at what [has] already [been] written" (p. 143-145), stressing that writing begins and ends with discipline. While working on my own memoir, I wrote every day, regardless of my schedule or mood. I also set up small deadlines for myself, writing scene by scene instead of focusing on the entire project.

While the literature tended to agree on how to structure the writing process, there was surprising disagreement about the value of outlining a project before beginning the drafting process. Roorbach (1998) believed outlining limits the author while Polking (1995) suggested the memoirist outline, and few of the other authors stressed outlining—or not outlining—at all. However, the literature did agree that the memoirist must be prepared to rewrite and redraft. Zinsser (2004) suggested the memoirist begin the writing process by writing any vivid memory each day for several months, and Murray (1983) suggested free writing. Unlike Zinsser and Murray, Duncan (1982) did not provide specific guidelines but believed very few writers do not need to rewrite their work. Murray (1983) also stressed the need to draft many different introductions and conclusions. Lamott (1994) also had ideas about drafting and believed all good writers begin each work with a very bad first draft and that writers should not edit themselves while working on the first draft. She compared writing a first draft to “watching a Polaroid develop, [the viewer isn't] supposed to know what it looks like until it's done” (p. 39). I chose not to outline my memoir and prevented myself from editing as I wrote my first draft. Before I even began work on the memoir, I wrote a brief

descriptive scene for a month, though those scenes were not always memories and they were rarely related to the topic of my memoir.

Writing about Emotional Topics

Once the writing process has begun, the memoirist may struggle with the emotional weight of the topic he or she is choosing to explore. He or she may also become too focused on his or her story and forget the readers. Zinsser (1987) addressed both of these problems by reminding the memoirist that the reason for writing “a memoir is...the same reason [a person] would write any book: to fashion a text” (p. 26). Zinsser (1987) believed the memoirist needs to be willing to edit his or her life out of a duty to readers and should include information that makes him or her uncomfortable and situations he or she wishes to forget. In another text, Zinsser (2004) expanded on this idea by telling the memoirist that “the only pertinent question about a memoir” is whether it “is a good or bad book” (p. 173). Unlike Zinsser, Berman (2010) emphasized that many writers, including Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway and Sylvia Plath wrote as a way to escape depression and anxiety. However, Jacob (1955) agreed with Zinsser and told the memoirist not to use memoir as a form of therapy, but to treat it like he or she would treat any other literary endeavor. Larson (2007) also urged the memoirist to distance himself or herself from the cathartic aspects of memoir by detaching “now from then” (p. 42-43). However, pain and healing are still important aspects of memoir writing, and Murdock (2003) warned that memoir writing includes pain, but the writing

can also be an act of healing. Roorbach (1998) believed the pain involved in writing memoir is necessary for a memoir to be successful and told the memoirist that “the places in [the] writing where [the memoirist flinches] are the places [that he or she needs] to explore” (p. 78). The topic of my memoir is very personal and painful, and it was often difficult to write. However, I did my best to think of the reader instead of myself. When I came across memories that were difficult to write about I added extra description and length to the scenes.

Effective Writing Techniques

The literature not only discussed the general writing process and exploring difficult topics. It also discussed specific, effective writing techniques. Jacob (1955) told the memoirist to embrace fictional plot devices while always asking himself or herself how his or her experience can be made relatable to readers. Martin (2012) also emphasized the use of fictional writing techniques, and Polking (1995) discussed the specific technique of transferring emotion to readers and the importance of the question: “Who is this book for?” Larson (2007) told the memoirist that his or her memoir must have at least some chronology in order to guide the reader through the story, yet memoir does not dictate how it should be written, and many different forms can be used. Roorbach (1998) also told the memoirist that there are no formulas for creative nonfiction, though a memoir should be short (Zinsser, 2004). Murray (1983) also provided practical advice about order, suggesting the memoirist organize his or her work so transitions are not necessary and the piece flows naturally.

There are other goals memoirs should achieve. Murdock (2003) believed memoir must be intimate and universal, and should connect to readers through the use of sensory experiences. Memoir needs to contain a strong theme.

Instead of focusing on theme, Zinsser (2004) stressed the importance of specific details. Roorbach (1998) specifically emphasized description through the use metaphors which “tend to develop on their own” (p. 136). Bickham (1992) warned the memoirist away from using too much description and told him or her to begin the piece with action instead of description. Bickham also told the writer to avoid lecturing readers and to provide description in small pieces instead of large paragraphs.

Lamott (1994) focused on the importance of the narrator of a memoir. She believed the most important aspect of a story is a likable narrator and that the memoirist should feel compassion for all of his or her characters, especially for the villain.

I tried to take all of the previously mentioned advice into consideration and focused on chronological order, theme, length, description, narrator and overall appeal in my writing. Each of these six criteria will be explored further in the following sections.

Advice for the Memoirist

Other advice specific to the memoirist included Jacob’s (1955) warning that the memoirist should only reveal what he or she can live with revealing. Jacob also suggested the memoirist avoid sharing his or her work until it has been published, in order to avoid pressure from family and friends to change the truth contained in the

final product. Larson (2007) also asked the memoirist to be cautious when sharing his or her work. Larson also told the memoirist not to over play the act of finding himself or herself and to avoid whining, yet it is still important for the memoir to reveal how the writing process affected its author. Murdock (2003) agreed with Larson and believed that memoir should show the writer coming to awareness. According to Murdock (2003) self-reflection is essential when writing a memoir. In my own writing I tried to find the balance between complaining and being honest, and I only shared my work with those I knew I could trust.

Review of Memoirs

To understand memoir, it is also important to read memoirs. In his memoir, Alбом (1997) created a short book by balancing his use of detail with personal information. Angelou's (1969) work read like a novel instead of nonfiction. Written by a woman reflecting on her childhood, Angelou's memoir blended the views of the child with the views of the adult remembering the past. Burroughs's (2002) memoir also read like a novel. It introduced humor into his dark past, making some of the least bearable scenes in his book easier to read. Gilbert (2007) also filled her memoir with humor. She wrote in the present tense, addressed the reader, and divided her work into small segments making the piece light and easy to read in many short periods. Unlike the other works discussed, Miller's (2003) memoir lacks a plot. Instead it is a loosely connected series of scenes from his life that created a cohesive, fluid memoir that discussed a wide variety of topics and ideas. Miller (2009) used a similar style in another memoir, yet the more recent work has a set plot that Miller used to branch out and

explore abstract ideas. Oates's (2011) 400 page memoir is not disjointed like Miller's, yet she did break her large book into pieces by inserting e-mails and hand-written letters into her work to supplement the larger text. I considered all of these works while writing but mainly borrowed from Miller (2003), whose work I most enjoyed, specifically the loose flow.

METHODS FOR WRITING AND REVISION

Ten drafts of *Everything I Want You to Know: Learning we are not Alone* were written, including the final product. The writing and drafting process was very long and complex, and required the use of all the sources and information referenced in the literature review of this paper. However, in order to help focus the project and improve the memoir, this paper condensed the research to six important aspects of a finished work. With this in mind, access to the eighth draft and an accompanying survey was sent to Olivet alumni with backgrounds in the Department of Modern Languages in order to measure readers' reactions to six criteria. The six criteria – chronology, description, narrator, theme, length, and overall appeal – were chosen based on previous research and on feedback from an Olivet professor.

Writing Process

The writing process began with short paragraphs and scenes written during my research process. Once the research was complete, I began my first draft in earnest, rushing through the process due to the emotional burden of the work. Because of the emotional distress writing caused me, my first draft was very sloppy. My goal was to get the information out of my head and onto the paper. Once that was accomplished, the material became much easier to work with, and I was able to distance myself from the emotional aspects of the piece. I revised my introduction and my conclusion several times before beginning a second draft. The second draft's main purpose was to make my memoir more descriptive while the third draft focused on the narrator. Theme

became very important in my fourth and fifth drafts and my final drafts focused mainly on length and on fine tuning overall appeal and the other important criteria.

Criteria

Chronology. Chronology is an important part of a memoir. Without logical order readers become lost, confused and frustrated. Larson (2007) told writers that their stories must have some chronology, and Murray (1983) provided suggestions that are more concrete by telling writers to organize information so that transitions are not necessary and to seek a natural order of events. Few other authors provided any kind of advice regarding chronology, perhaps because, as Roorbach (1998) pointed out, “there are no formulas for creative nonfiction” (p. 161). If the writer is not limited by a single structure, he or she is also not limited by a specific formula for chronology.

However, that does not reduce the importance of flow to memoir, which is one reason chronology is a criteria. I also chose to focus on order because I struggled to create flow and organization in the first drafts of my memoir.

My memories from the time the events in my memoir took place are jumbled and jarring. They are connected to extreme emotions that make it difficult to view that portion of my life as a clear, systematic story. Before I even began writing, I was sure that I would be unable to tell my story in the traditional, event A followed by event B, form. Instead, I decided to pursue a format loosely based on Miller’s (2003) work. Instead of relying on the passing of time to guide the flow of his book, Miller used theme to connect very short portions of text. I decided it would be much easier for me to organize my turbulent emotions into short vignettes instead of one long piece.

However unlike Miller's, my story still needed some chronological order. The feedback I received from McGrady (personal communication, 2012), a member of the English department at Olivet Nazarene University and my honors mentor, suggested that my memoir was difficult to follow and sacrificed flow. To fix this problem, I reworked many transitions, added transitional phrases, cut small portions of my reflections and eventually added the chapter headings "The Beginning," "Middle School," "Freshman Year—First Semester," "Freshman Year—Second Semester," etc... to help guide the reader through my two-and-a-half year relationship.

I also used verb tense and fonts to help guide my reader. All descriptive, action scenes were written in present tense and formatted in italics while reflective portions between each scene were written in past tense and were not italicized. This distinction between scene types helped the memoir flow like a novel, even though it was written in a unique format.

Description. Description is an incredibly important part of memoir that many authors stressed. Murdock (2003) emphasized the use of metaphors, which when used by a memoirist "[allow] deeper knowledge of self" (p. 59). Murdock also stressed the need to include sensory experiences in writing. Roorbach (1998) agreed with Murdock. He believed metaphor is important and asked the writer to "show, don't tell" (p. 36), while Kita (2009) agreed with Murdock's idea of incorporating all of the senses into writing. Zinsser (2004) also stressed that specific details are incredibly important, and this converging of information left me desperate to add description to my work. Bickham (1992), however, provided balance to other sources by reminding me that if I

devoted too much text to description, the action, or plot, of my work would suffer. Therefore, it becomes very important to find the right balance between detail and action. In previous works I have struggled to find that balance, erring on the side of too little description instead of too much. My first draft of the memoir contained actions scenes, but they held little description. In following drafts I began to focus on sensory detail.

Sight. One of the first scenes I added description too included appeals to sight.

The original passage read:

REDACTED

The same passage, rewritten to include description read:

REDACTED

Sound. Though the bulk of the scenes in the memoir lent themselves to sight imagery, I also tried to include references to the other senses, such as hearing, with short phrases like, **REDACTED** (Keiss, 2012b, p. 21) and **REDACTED** (Keiss, 2012b, p. 48).

Smell. Some descriptive scenes also incorporated smell. For example, a bathroom is described as **REDACTED** (Keiss, 2012b, p. 29).

Taste. Several scenes discussed taste. For example, one scene reflected on my boyfriend's and my dad's reactions to a bad homemade birthday cake:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 20)

In another scene I fantasized about eating one of my favorite candies:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 23)

Touch. I also tried to include a sense of touch in my descriptions to help the reader empathize with the experiences of my character. In one section of the memoir I mentioned a cold breeze touching my skin:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 34)

Metaphor. Much of the research stressed the importance of metaphor, so I was careful to include metaphors, similes and other comparisons throughout the work. Many of the metaphors contained animal imagery, including,

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 4)

Other comparisons not listed here also include animal imagery and the idea of the hunter and the hunted. This consistent comparison allowed me to explore the almost instinctual, wild nature of my situation. There were times during the years the events in my memoir took place that I felt like an animal being hunted. I and my boyfriend often seemed untamable, and in my eyes we lost many of our human qualities.

After the third draft, the memoir began to receive positive feedback concerning my description (McGrady, personal communication, 2012). However, description was still included as a final criterion because of the stress so many authors placed on it.

Narrator. In memoir, the author and the narrator are the same, and it becomes very important for the author to avoid allowing himself or herself to whine about his or her experiences (Larson, 2007). It is also very important that the memoirist does not “over play the act of finding [himself or herself]” (Larson, 2007, p. 131). Because the narrator is central to the story of a memoir Murdock (2003) believed the writer must “make the reader care for [the writer] and the people in [his or her] life” (148). Lamott (1994) agreed with Murdock and stressed that the most important aspect of any story is a likeable narrator. Because the readers’ ability to connect with the writer and feel empathy for him or her is heavily stressed by several authors, I included the likability of the narrator in my survey.

The first drafts were very story focused, following my story through a difficult time in my life. Geddie (personal communication, April 16, 2012), journalist and author, suggested I add balance to my work by sharing other aspects of my life, stories that would help the readers learn about and relate to me. I took his advice by adding several scenes to my memoir that showed me interacting outside of the context of my abusive relationship, such as the following:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 24 - 25)

Such passages were included to help the readers to connect and empathize with the narrator.

Theme. Another very important aspect of memoir is the inclusion of a universal theme, which according to Zinsser (2004) can “come in unlikely garb” (p. 202). A memoir’s theme does not have to echo an idea commonly found in literature, but it is important that a memoir have a universal idea (Zinsser, 1987). Jacob (1955) told the writer to ask him or herself “How do [my] experiences relate to readers?” (p. 195), an important question that may not be easy to answer. The memoir must hold meaning not only to the writer but also to the reader and “the reader must be able to relate to [a memoir] and find it meaningful” (Duncan, 1982, p. 12). I included questions about theme in my survey, which is discussed later in this paper, because unless my work can relate to readers very few people outside of my social circle will have any interest in my memoir. It would have no literary value. This is also an area that I struggled with in my writing, receiving continuous feedback from McGrady (personal communication, 2012) that my work was not yet universal. I made several changes to my work in attempts to make my memoir universal, and while I included several subthemes, exploring the questions “Why do women stay in abusive relationships?” and “Who is really to blame in horrible situations?” the main idea I wanted to convey to my readers—and the idea I was struggling to convey—was that no matter their struggle, they were not alone. My largest effort involved weaving other, smaller stories throughout my memoir, ending

each descriptive scene with a short snapshot of another story. My introduction was transformed.

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012a, p. 1)

I removed the rambling, relatively self-centered introduction and created an introduction to several thematic stories as seen below.

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 4 - 5)

This change in my introduction allowed the work to connect with readers immediately. The introduction changed from a self-centered monologue to an engaging series of stories that allowed the story to draw readers into the work.

Like the introduction, the conclusion also changed, shifting from a personal poem written to my former boyfriend to a conclusion that connected with the introduction:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 59)

When I continued to receive feedback that my story was not yet universal, I shifted my attention to the short, bold statements that I wrote following every dramatic scene. Originally these statements were personal and disjointed such as

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012a, p. 4).

In the first drafts, these statements had no true purpose and only existed because I wanted them to exist. Because of their lack of purpose, McGrady (personal communication, 2012) regularly asked about the need for the statements and constantly requested changes to them. I decided to marry the problem of the bold statements to the problem of theme, and in my eighth draft I used the statements to connect the universal ideas held in my introduction and conclusion. The two statements listed above changed to,

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 10).

Length. I focused on the length of my memoir because the short word counts of my drafts made me uncomfortable. However Zinsser (2004) told the writer to “think small, keep it short” (p. 6). My memoir is short because of the careful selection of

information, which, Murray (1983) would approve. He wrote, “brevity results from selection, not compression” (p. 7). Despite my careful selection of information and considerable attempts to flesh out scenes as fully as possible, my memoir was 19,949 words after the eighth draft. According to Masterson (2011) my memoir was shorter than the average novella, which is 20,000 – 50,000 words, and therefore might be difficult to publish. The short length of my work made me uncomfortable and motivated me to add length to my list of criteria. However, there was little I could do to purposefully make my work longer without making it clunky. I included every scene I thought was important and removed everything I thought was not, focusing on what Zinsser (2004) believed is the most important question: “Is [the memoir] a good or bad book?” (p. 173), instead of asking if the memoir was long enough. I chose to allow readers to answer that question through my survey.

Overall Appeal. The last criterion was the broadest and most important. Readers must enjoy the story they are reading. Zinsser (2004) believed that “the only pertinent question about a memoir [is] is it a good or bad book?” (p. 173). All other criteria serve to support this final one. According to Zinsser (1987) the only reason to write a memoir is “for the reason you would write any book: to fashion a text” (p. 26). He told the writer to “be raw” (p. 111). Different authors offered different advice about making a book as appealing to possible readers. Evans (1984) believed an author should begin a book with a journalistic, feature lead and stressed that “the ending is as important as the beginning” (p. 41). Bickham (1992) also stressed the beginning of a book and tells writers to begin with action instead of description. Murdock (2003) believed a “memoir

must be intimate with its audience” (p. 20) to be successful while Lamott (1994) wrote that “dialogue makes or breaks a piece” (p. 64). I took all of these factors into account while writing.

I followed Bickham’s (1992) and Zissner’s (1987) advice and wrote a raw, active introduction. While my original introduction began with exposition, it slowly evolved into the following action sequence:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 4)

There were other areas of my drafts that I allowed to be raw and intimate, despite original trepidation. In an effort to be as honest with my readers as possible, I decided to include a new piece of information in my memoir that was not present in the first few drafts. Telling the reader that my abusive boyfriend had obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) was surprisingly difficult, because it was information I had rarely discussed before. In an effort to be “intimate with my readers” (Murdock, 2003, p. 20) I wrote the following paragraphs:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 58)

I also focused on improving the overall appeal of my memoir by focusing on dialogue as Lamott (1994) suggested. I included passages of dialogue to help propel the story and reveal the nature of my characters:

REDACTED

(Keiss, 2012b, p. 15)

By emphasizing the raw and intimate nature of my work while also including passage of useful dialogue, I hoped to make my memoir as effective and appealing as possible.

Survey

The Department of Modern Languages provided me with a list of alumni names and email addresses. The list contained 81 email addresses, and an email briefly explaining my project and containing a link to a surveymonkey.com survey was sent to each address. The survey itself contained another link to an online PDF document containing my memoir. Participants were asked to read the memoir and answer 30 questions built on a Likert scale with 5 questions pertaining to each criteria as well as a single short answer question. Participants were also offered the chance to provide their email addresses in order to enter a drawing for one of two 25 dollar Amazon gift cards.

Participants were asked to rate the following 30 questions on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:

- 1) The memoir provided lots of description.
- 2) I like the narrator.
- 3) The individual scenes were the most descriptive portions of the memoir.
- 4) Overall the memoir was effective.
- 5) I would buy this memoir.
- 6) The memoir did not drag.
- 7) The scenes describing other aspects of the narrator's life helped humanize her.
- 8) I empathized with the narrator.
- 9) The memoir was not too descriptive.
- 10) I was able to picture the characters in the memoir.
- 11) I would read the memoir again.
- 12) I understood what was happening in the story.
- 13) I felt satisfied with the length of the memoir.
- 14) I was able to connect with the story in the memoir.
- 15) The occasional chapter descriptions aided the flow of the memoir.
- 16) I liked the flow of the story.
- 17) It was easy for me to visualize the events occurring in the memoir.
- 18) The bold statements throughout the memoir aided the development of the theme.

- 19) I believe many people could relate to the memoir.
- 20) The memoir was a good length for the story.
- 21) Parts of the memoir connected with my own life.
- 22) The narrator was easy to connect to.
- 23) I would recommend the memoir to a friend.
- 24) The memoir did not provide too much information.
- 25) I was never lost.
- 26) The memoir provided me with enough information to understand the story.
- 27) The memoir explored universal themes.
- 28) The order of events made sense.
- 29) I enjoyed the memoir.
- 30) I was rooting for the narrator.

The survey's short answer question asked participants "What recommendations do you have for the author?" The questions were connected to the criteria in the following way: questions 1, 3, 9, 10, 17 applied to description; questions 6, 13, 20, 24 applied to length; questions 4, 5, 11, 26, 29 to overall appeal; questions 12, 15, 16, 23, 25, 28 to chronological order; questions 14, 18, 19, 21, 27 to theme and questions 2, 7, 8, 22, 30 to the likability of the narrator. The last question provided the participants with an opportunity to give feedback on any aspect of the memoir they believed was important that my criteria may not have account for.

FEEDBACK FROM READERS

Surveys were sent via email to 81 Olivet alumni who graduated with degrees from the Department of Modern Language. Surveys were sent outside of the university in order to protect my identity, the identity of those in my memoir and the objectiveness of responses, since many Olivet students know who I am.

Of the 81 emails, 23 were returned due to delivery failure. Of the 58 emails that were successfully sent, four of the recipients viewed my survey and two recipients completed the survey. Each of the two respondents received an electronically delivered 25 dollar Amazon gift card. Low response rates may have been due to the wording of the email—which warned readers of the memoir’s graphic content—and the length of the memoir the participants were asked to read.

While two sets of responses did not provide enough data to complete any kind of statistical analysis, the feedback I received from the survey was still very helpful because of the nature of the survey. Instead of treating respondents’ feedback as data, I instead viewed it as subjective opinions. I believed the guided thoughts of two readers who were not personally invested in me and who were guaranteed to remain anonymous could provide helpful feedback for me as an author shaping a final draft of work, especially when the feedback was combined with comments provided by McGrady and other individuals.

Though they are not of statistical importance, it may be interesting to note that average scores for my six criteria found using the data collected from surveys measured on a 5 point scale were: description, 3.7; length, 3.2; overall appeal, 2.4; order, 3.1;

theme, 3.6; narrator, 3.7. The scores tended to cluster around 3 because one reviewer was overwhelmingly positive while the other was very negative. Together these numbers suggested that my eighth draft satisfied all my criteria except for the criteria of overall appeal. However, when the averages were readjusted by the removal of the two overall appeal questions that addressed the reader's personal taste the average score increased to 3.16. This adjustment can be justified when the responses to the short answer question and to other objective questions are examined. Though respondents said they would not reread or buy the book, they did say they would recommend the memoir to a friend. The low overall appeal score may be the result of the demographics of those surveyed. Perhaps my work is better suited for young adults instead of a broader audience. This possibility is supported by the short answer question which one participant responded to by writing that "this memoir [highlighted] some universal topics that many young adults could connect with and relate to" (personal communication, Feb 10, 2013), which simultaneously suggested the appropriate demographic for my work while excluding the respondent from that demographic.

While the averages of the collected scores suggested that my memoir successfully met my six criteria, the scores for individual questions suggested ways to improve my memoir and also revealed effective techniques already included in the memoir. Scores suggested that the extra scenes I added in order to humanize the narrator were effective and that my chapter headings made the sequence of events easier to follow. The responses also suggested that the bold statements following each scene were ineffective. Because of this result and the relatively negative feedback the

statements had received from McGrady, I eliminated the bold statements from my final revision.

The responses to the short answer question allowed me to make changes that may increase the effectiveness of my memoir's length and the overall appeal of my work. Both respondents felt that the ending of the memoir was too abrupt, so I lengthened my conclusion to cover a longer span of time and provide insight into the recovery process.

One of the respondents also commented that "it didn't seem believable that the narrator during all that time in which these experiences took place...couldn't get further help" (personal communication, Feb 10, 2013). To help make the story more "believable" I added a section to the middle of my work that reads as follows:

REDACTED

Other, similar changes related to the conclusion of my memoir were made after I received subjective feedback from members of the university's honors council.

FINAL REVISION OF MEMOIR

The final version of my memoir begins on the next page and is formatted in the way I would present it to a potential agent or publishing house.

What I Want You To Know:
Learning We Are Not Alone

*For all of the men who tried to show me I was beautiful,
And for Aimee Fish, the girl that succeeded.*

*“I don't want the world to see me
Cause I don't think that they'd understand
When everything's made to be broken
I just want you to know who I am”*

-Goo Goo Doll

Names in this manuscript have been changed to protect the identities of the innocent.

REDACTED

References

XII.

Jahme, C. (2010). Why do so many women put up with domestic violence? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2010/may/24/women-domestic-violence>

XXXVIII: A Second Pause

Footnote 1

Renshaw, Keith D.; Steketee, Gail; Rodrigues, Camila S.; Caska, Catherine M., & Beck, J. Gayle (Eds). (2010). *Interpersonal processes in the anxiety disorders: Implications for understanding psychopathology and treatment*. (pp. 153 – 177). doi: 10.1037/12084-006

Footnote 2

Craighead, W. E., Miklowitz D. J., & Craighead L. W. (2008). *Psychopathology: History, diagnosis, and empirical foundations*. Retrieved from http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=xZYeZbqBt2cC&oi=fnd&pg=PA78&dq=general+anxiety+disorder&ots=li7FRDJVQJ&sig=9QRyORwDg362i-qaUsKt_IBXU6M#v=onepage&q=general%20anxiety%20disorder&f=false

REFLECTION

Writing *Everything I Want You to Know: Learning We Are Not Alone* was one of the most difficult experiences I have ever encountered. While working on the first several drafts I often felt time reversing as I relived the abusive relationship. The process was very painful and very personal, which made me especially sensitive when I gave my work to other people for them to review.

However I found that the more people who reviewed my work and the more feedback I received, the easier it was to share the memoir and the less emotional effect the writing had on me. Negative criticism was especially helpful because constructive suggestions allowed me to take a step back from my work and view it as an artist critically examining a painting instead of as a vulnerable individual reliving a darker time in his or her life.

The project not only helped me to experience and eventually let go of my past, it also shaped me into a writer. My memoir was the first writing project, other than research papers, that I extensively researched and thought about before beginning. It was the first project that I revised multiple times before deciding it was finished and the first project of more than 2,000 words that I was able to complete. I learned the discipline a writer needs in order to practice the craft and became more and more confident in my abilities as the memoir slowly took on its final shape.

REFERENCES

- Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie: An old man, a young man, and life's greatest lesson*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Angelou, M. (1969). *I know why the caged bird sings*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Berman, J. (2010, September). The talking cure and the writing cure. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, 17(3), 255-257. doi: 10.1353/ppp.2010.0006
- Bickham, J. M. (1992). *The 38 most common fiction writing mistakes (and how to avoid them)*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest.
- Burroughs, A. (2002). *Running with scissors: A memoir*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Duncan, L. (1982). *How to sell your personal experiences*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest.
- Evans, F. (1984). *Changing memories into memoirs*. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble.
- Hunter, A. G. (2010). *Write your memoir: The soul work of telling your story*. UK: Forres.
- Gilbert, E. (2007). *Eat pray love*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Jacob, D. (1955). *Will write for food: The complete guide to writing cookbooks, restaurant reviews, articles, memoir, fiction, and more....* New York, NY: Mallow.
- Keiss, A. (2012a). *Untitled draft*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Keiss, A. (2012b). *Everything I want you to know: Learning we are not alone (survey draft)*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kita, J. (2009, January). How to write your memoir. *Reader's Digest*. Retrieved from <http://www.rd.com/advice/great-tips-on-how-to-write-your-memoir/>
- Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York, NY: Anchor.

- Larson, T. (2007). *The memoir and the memoirist: Reading & writing personal narrative*. Athens, OH: Swallow.
- Martin, L. (2012, Fall). Selling out in the writing of memoir. *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative*, 14(1), 121-127. doi: 10.1353/rvt.2012.0028
- Masterson, L. (2011). How long should your story be? Retrieved from <http://www.fictionfactor.com/articles/wordcount.html>
- Miller, D. (2009). *A million miles in a thousand years*. Nashville, TN: Nelson.
- Miller, D. (2003). *Blue like jazz*. Nashville, TN: Nelson.
- Murdock, M. (2003). *Unreliable truth: On memoir and memory*. New York, NY: Seal.
- Murray, D. (1983). *Writing for your readers: A handbook of practical advice on how to write with vigor, clarity, and grace*. Chester, CT: Globe.
- Oates, J. C. (2011). *A widow's story: A memoir*. New York, NY: Ontario Review.
- Polking, K. (1995). *Writing family histories and memoirs*. Cincinnati, OH: Betterway.
- Roorbach, B. (1998). *Writing life stories: How to make memories into memoirs, ideas into essays and life into literature*. Cincinnati, OH: 1998.
- Zinsser, W. (2004). *Writing about your life*. New York, NY: Marlowe.
- Zinsser, W. (Ed.). (1987). *Inventing the truth: The art and craft of memoir*. Boston, MA: Houghton.