

Suggestions for Academic Instructors, Workshop Facilitators, and Writing Partners

We have an opportunity to revision education as a communal enterprise from the foundations up—in our images of reality, in our modes of knowing, in our ways of teaching and learning.... Such a re-visioning would result in a deeply ethical education, an education that would help students develop the capacity for connectedness that is at the heart of an ethical life. In such an education, intellect and spirit would be one, teachers and learners and subjects would be in vital community with one another, and a world in need of healing would be well served.

—PARKER J. PALMER
Educational reformer and writer

MEMOIRS OF THE SOUL is a textbook, a workshop resource, and a guide for partners writing together. Its chapters originated in handouts I prepared for the workshops I lead, so they have been thoroughly tested. While ideas for people who are writing together are scattered throughout the book, this chapter offers more detailed suggestions for academic and other group settings.

THE MEMOIR: A LITERARY GENRE

If you follow the chapters as they are sequenced in this book, the first ones will delineate characters and place and reveal the main character's goals and problems. These chapters are followed by rising action and complications that lead to one or more crises. Dramatic tension mounts until it reaches a climax when we see what the outcome will be; after that, a resolution, or *dénouement*, reveals how the main character comes to terms with all that has happened. Thus, in a loose, general way the chapters of this book will help shape the writers' memoirs according to classical literary form (see figure 13 for more details).

At the back of the book you will find lists of suggested writers' guides, memoirs and autobiographies, anthologies, and books of particular interest to instructors and workshop leaders. You and the writers in your group can extend these lists.

ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION

Ask students to write reviews of the published memoirs and autobiographies they read and to make copies of their reviews for all members of the class. Everyone will thus have a guide from which to choose books. Collections of reviews from past classes can comprise a small library for use by current students.

Consider requiring your students to keep diologic journals of their readings. To keep a diologic journal, the reader folds a page of lined paper vertically. To the left of the fold, the reader copies any phrase or sentence from the book that elicits his reaction, whether of agreement, disagreement, surprise, or any other emotion. To the right of the fold, the reader writes to the author or to one of the characters in the book. The reader may argue, advise, congratulate, or engage in any other form of dialogue. The vertically folded paper is used for a bookmark so the reader can conveniently add to it while reading the book. If the reader rages or philosophizes in response to the author, the journal can grow to numerous pages in length. The keeping of a diologic journal engages the reader and is useful later when writing a book review. Grade the journal according to the amount of understanding and involvement with the book it shows, not by whether the reader agrees or disagrees with the perspective of the author.

Particular Admonitions

You must not assess the content of your students' writing! Because their writing will be profoundly personal, you must evaluate it indirectly. Memoirs by their nature are candid. To elicit skillfully written, candid memoirs you must assess only:

- The students' adherence to the steps of the writing process
- Participation in response groups
- Mastery of writing skills

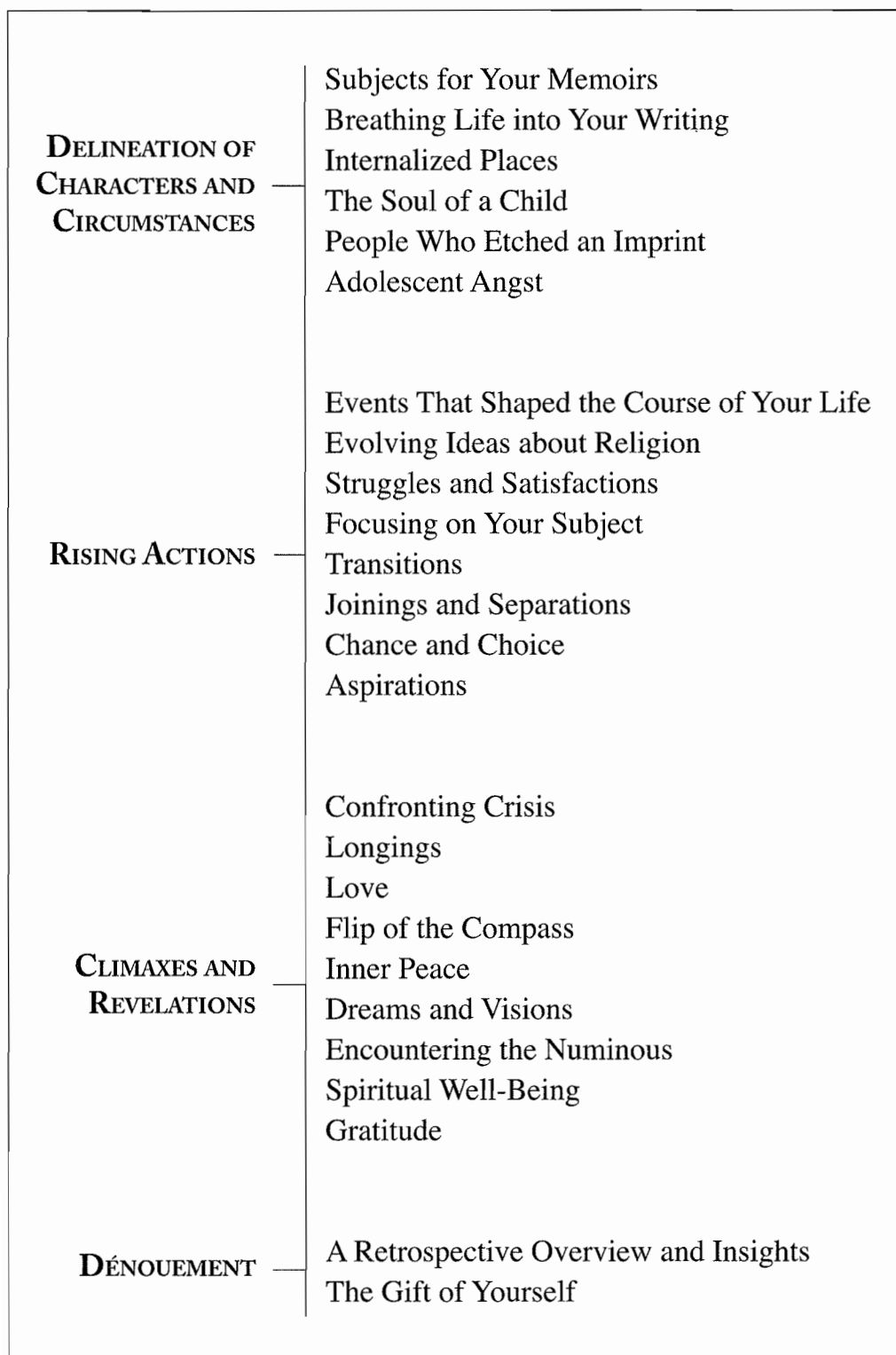


Figure 13

Several chapters in this book should be optional, if used at all, in credit courses. They are chapters 17, 19, 22, 23, and 24. Some workshop participants who have used this book found that they were not ready to confront the major crises in their lives. They said they might return to chapter 17 later, when they feel emotionally ready to look at traumas they are not yet able to face. Working with chapter 19 could be uncomfortably revealing and personal for some students, while chapters 22 and 23 open subjects students may feel strange disclosing in a credit course. Chapter 24 requires experience and perspective younger students may not yet have. All of these chapters are valuable for individuals who write their spiritual memoirs but may be inappropriate, and certainly should be optional, in graded classes.

Require all students to take part in response groups for the assigned chapters, but allow students to indicate which final drafts they want to submit for grades. Not every topic will work equally well for every writer, and not every final draft has to be graded.

Imperative Advice

Memoirs of the Soul is a prescriptive book only in terms of method. It should never be used for doctrinaire purposes. Because it invites disclosure, a well-meaning teacher could do great damage if she were to try to “correct” the feelings and thoughts of the writer. Teachers as well as students must follow the guidelines for listeners. A sensitive teacher might pose a question that would guide the writer toward self-examination, but any judgmental response would violate the trust and the integrity of the writer.

Assessment for Academic Credit

Grades can be based on:

- Completion of a designated percentage of writing assignments
- Incorporation of the steps of the writing process
- Unfailing participation in response groups
- Conformity of final drafts to the conventions of standard English and the elements of style taught by the instructor
- Thoughtful dialogic reading journals
- Analytical book reviews

If you ask students to use these six criteria to grade themselves, they will reflect on their effort as well as their achievement. Most students grade themselves more severely than we would grade them, and you will have the pleasure of raising some of their grades.

The basis for grades should be printed in the course description and syllabus. In addition, make it clear that you will not judge the content of your students’ memoirs and will guard the confidentiality of every student’s writing.

For further information about teaching memoir-writing at university and secondary levels, please read my article about how to evoke and sensitively assess writing that probes values and seeks ultimate meanings, "A Reflection on Classroom Teaching." It is posted on www.memoirworkshops.com under "Academic Considerations."

INSIGHTS FOR ALL INSTRUCTORS AND WORKSHOP FACILITATORS

Since the writing of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, the confession has been a component of memoirs. Whenever we reflect on our inner lives, we confront the acts we have suffered and the deeds we have committed. Confession is inevitable. You must create a safe environment so participants can explore their deepest regrets as well as their great joys. Do not reveal that you are shocked. Though you will be confronted with surprising confidences, you must remain accepting and empathic.

Sometimes writers will bring narratives for you alone to read. Those writers aren't ready to share what they have written with response groups, and their writing may reveal suffering that will distress you. When the next class or workshop meets, find time to speak quietly and privately to such a writer. Thank her for placing trust in you and commend her for being able to write about the problem. Then, if appropriate, ask the writer if she has found a good counselor. Most writers will say that they have, but if someone has not found a helpful counselor, be prepared to suggest resources. Have ready appropriate telephone numbers for mental health services, rape crisis counselors, or other suitable hotlines. Do not attempt to counsel the writer yourself unless you are a professionally trained, licensed, and insured counselor.

To write about what we have suffered, both as victims and inflictors, is cleansing and healing. Writing expels the experience from deep within oneself and allows one to dissociate from it and examine it. Through such writing we are sometimes able to forgive, to find forgiveness, and to regain self-respect. You are honored with trust when a student makes you part of this process.

Always write rough drafts along with students and participants. To expect them to disclose their inner lives while withholding your own personal life does not create a participatory atmosphere. You may choose not to reveal yourself as fully as you would if you were writing among peers; nevertheless, you should participate in both the writing and responding in order to promote comfort and enthusiasm in the students. The response groups provide an opportunity to build collegiality.

When you take part in response groups, do not assume the role of facilitator. Participants, even younger students, should be the ones to decide who will read first and when to move on to the next reader. By following the guidelines for listening and responding, students and participants are perfectly able to manage the response groups themselves, and they gain control of the process by doing so.

Prior to opening certain chapters, alert participants to make special preparations:

- Chapter 12—Bring a snapshot picturing a person, place, or object important to the writer.
- Chapter 18—Bring something that is meaningful to the writer such as a prayer, poem, work of art, selection of music, handmade item, passage from literature, saved letter, or cherished gift.
- Chapter 24—Bring pencils or pens in at least five different colors for drawing lines.
- Chapter 26—Reread everything that's been written.

Credit Classes at the Secondary Level

Some chapters of this book are not appropriate for use with secondary students because they tend to be less compassionate as peer editors than adults. Because adolescents are not yet sure of and comfortable with their own identities, they are more likely to discuss classmates' disclosures. Immature students are likely to tell their friends what was revealed.

Even so, you can use *Memoirs of the Soul* as a high school textbook. Begin the course by first discussing the steps of the writing process and then the problem of confidentiality. Reassure students that you will not call their parents or talk about the students' writings in the teachers' lounge. Similarly, obtain an agreement of confidentiality from the class. If the students themselves discuss the potential for harm from peer gossip and then design their own confidentiality code, they are more likely to observe it. Encourage them to create a formal pledge of confidentiality that every class member would sign.

Another issue that could arise is the requirement placed on teachers to report indications of child abuse or intention to do harm. Therefore, explain to your students at the beginning of the course that you are required to inform counselors of abuse or dangerous situations. Writing is a powerful tool for healing, and most students benefit from writing about painful parts of their lives, but they should be aware that a counselor might have to be alerted.

Teamwork enables common people to attain uncommon results.

—BASED ON AN OBSERVATION BY ANDREW CARNEGIE
Business magnate and philanthropist

WORKSHOPS

Writers' organizations, lifelong learners, members of religious congregations, support groups, and people who seek to examine and understand their lives have found this book easy to use. Simply follow the boxed instructions.

Each chapter fits a two-hour session. To maintain group cohesion and momentum, plan to meet every week. Participants in full-time, intensive summer workshops can meet daily and complete a chapter a day. The chapters that follow chapter 3 initiate two writings, so if participants meet mornings and afternoons they will have time to take the warm-up writing through all the steps of the writing process during the morning and do the same with the second topic in the afternoon.

To organize a workshop, you'll first need to find a location. The pastoral care department of a hospital sponsored the class I conducted in preparation for this book and arranged for two different workshops to meet in hospital conference rooms on Saturday mornings and Sunday afternoons. In some communities, public utility companies allow local groups to use their meeting rooms, and a few banks make their conference rooms available on Saturdays. Bookstores frequently agree to remain open on certain evenings for literary groups. You may be able to use a room belonging to a religious organization, senior center, lifelong learning school, writers' group, or even the place where you work. People who don't drive or don't own cars will appreciate a location near public transportation.

Attract people to your workshop by sending announcements to newspapers, literary organizations, and publications for retired people. You may also wish to include newsletters written for religious groups and the organizations to which you belong, as well as the in-house letter of the business providing your meeting place. Be aware that newsletter editors often need to receive stories a month before publication time. Enclose page-size posters for bulletin boards along with your newsletter announcements. You may also be permitted to staple posters on bulletin boards in recreation centers, bookstores, shops, libraries, and places of worship.

Limit enrollment to twenty people. If more people wish to enroll, make a waiting list or schedule an additional section. Participants usually prefer to commit to only eight sessions at a time, with assurances that they may re-enroll for continuing sessions.

Plan to hold special, celebratory sessions after every eight chapters are completed, beginning with chapter 3. On these occasions invite participants to read selections from their writing to the group at large. Ahead of time announce that readings will be limited to a certain number of minutes so no one will monopolize the event, and ask a participant to time the readings. Continue to enforce the guidelines for good listening. Some writers may prefer to listen only, but the majority will want to read. Such events are a highlight of the workshop.

Critical to a successful workshop is the creation of a safe atmosphere. The workshop facilitator must ensure that listeners refrain from judging the behavior, lifestyles, and feelings expressed by the writers, and that members of the workshop guard the confidentiality of every writer. Discuss the guidelines for good listening the first time you meet, and remind participants of them at the next several sessions.

WRITING PARTNERS

A writing partner can be helpful in several ways. An ongoing, scheduled appointment with a partner will help sustain your writing momentum. If, before beginning to write, you talk to your partner about subjects you're considering, you'll automatically organize your ideas and find the right words. Once you've written a rough draft, your partner's responses will help you see its strengths and also recognize inadvertent omissions or ways it can be misconstrued. A good partnership energizes each writer and results in improved writing.

Use the guidelines throughout this book to respond to each other's drafts. These guidelines are designed to elicit constructive suggestions, protect your confidentiality, and shield you from personal criticism.

To find a writing partner:

- Let your friends and acquaintances know you're looking for a fellow writer.
- When you're among associates, announce that you're looking for a writing partner.
- If your community has a literary guild or community center where writing is taught, call to ask how critiquing groups are formed.
- Consider posting a "want ad" in a building where religious services are held.

Family members are not always ideal writing partners. Relatives tend to "correct" one's memories, to be judgmental, and to be less tactful than people from outside. If a relative wants to write with you, however, and is willing to follow the listening guidelines, you're likely to form a close familial bond in addition to writing your spiritual memoirs.

Couples who write together will see facets of their partners they might otherwise never glimpse. The resulting insights can lead to deeper understanding, increased appreciation, and greater spiritual intimacy.

*Let us be united;
 Let us speak in harmony;
 Let our minds apprehend alike.
 Common be our prayer;
 Common be the end of our assembly;
 Common be our resolution;
 Common be our deliberations.
 Alike be our feelings;
 Unified be our hearts;
 Common be our intentions;
 Perfect be our unity.*

—THE RIG VEDA
 Ancient Hindu hymns of praise