

Memoir or Novel? How To Decide

It's common for writers to use their real-life experiences in their work. The writing of a novel and a memoir involve the same techniques, but the results and intentions differ.

What is a Memoir?

A memoir uses fictional techniques to draw readers into an honest account of a true story. It is written in the first person, from the author's point of view. And it differs from an autobiography or biography in that **the former tells about a life while the latter tell the story of a life or from a life**; a memoir has a narrower focus. The turning point of an author's life might make a great subject for a memoir.

Notable and popular memoirs include *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls or *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed.

Can a Memoir Be a Novel?

A novel is a work of written narrative fiction that may be based on or inspired by a true story but does not claim to be a true account.

Avoid having to apologize to readers (*and Oprah – like James Frey, author of A Million Little Pieces*) by ensuring that everything you write in your memoir genuinely happened.

So, you can see that memoirs and novels have similarities but are distinct forms. If you are not sure which you are writing, you need to make a decision. Choose sooner rather than later, because the kind of book you are writing will affect:

- a) how you approach it
- b) how readers perceive it
- c) how it's sold

How to Decide Between Writing a Memoir and a Novel

If you answer yes to the following questions, you should seriously consider writing your story as a novel rather than as a memoir.

1. It's not true

If your story is a work of fiction that does not accurately reflect true events as you experienced and perceive them, it's not a memoir.

2. You think it might upset people mentioned in the book (and you care)

You can either wait until everyone mentioned in the book as passed on and create your memoir, or you can write your story as a work of fiction. If you take the latter approach, ensure that the characters in your novel are reasonably different to the true personages.

3. You can't remember what happened

Telling the truth is a big part of writing a memoir. If you can't remember the truth, you might be better calling your work fiction.

4. The story is not about you or your perspective

While your subject might be an event or another person, a memoir also needs to be about you. If there are big gaps in your memory or if the story is not based on your memories, write a novel.

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