**Qualities and Conventions of Memoirs**

We love memoirs because they involve real people telling real stories. As we know, memoir uses many features of literature and consequently it is as much about HOW the writer communicates their story as it is about WHAT the story is.

Remember also that memoir involves the careful selection of detail and a great deal of reflection as the writer is processing their life experiences and commenting on them later on. This reflection then makes us reflect on our own life experiences and our own relationships.

Traffic Light Highlighting Directions: Highlight each term according to your knowledge of the term:

* Red – *I have never seen this term before and need to learn it*
* Yellow – *I have seen this term but need some practice using it*
* Green – *I have firm control of this term and can use it in my academic speaking and writing*

**Here are some key features and qualities of memoir:**

**Unique Voice:**  A good memoir will sound like the writer is talking to us and their unique voice will come out. Sometimes it’s in the form of slang or informal writing but often it comes through with emotions, whether it be anger, sadness, regret, celebration or humor. Look for areas where the voice of the writer comes through.

**Specific Details:** Readers want to see, hear, smell and feel the experiences that the writer is talking about. Trevor Noah’s unique details about his dog’s pink nose or the small peach tree on one side of his house and a driveway on the other help us see and feel what he felt. That is good storytelling.

**Emotions, Thoughts, Feelings:**  Memoirs share feelings if they do anything at all. Elie Wiesel’s famous memoir Night shows the intense fear of a young boy being put on a train bound for a concentration camp or the intense guilt he feels for not helping his father in his time of need. These emotions are what make us feel empathy and think about larger issues in the text.

**Descriptive Setting:** The time and place are both important in memoir. Writers are transporting readers to new places so they need to develop settings. Rich description of these places makes it unique and easy to picture.

**Vivid Relationships:** Our relationships with friends and family shape who we are. It is no wonder that memoirs often explore their relationships and reflect on that influence. Trevor’s relationship with his mother or Elie Wiesel’s relationship with his father are critical parts of their works.

**Clever Dialogue:** We like to read dialogue and see how people talk to one another. Incorporating speech into the memoir makes the memoir come to life and understand conflicts and key moments much more vividly.

**Snappy Sentences (Syntax):** Creative syntax and sentence structure makes great writing. Look for parallel structure or a short impactful sentence or listing. When Elie Wiesel repeats the phrase “Never shall I forget…” in many subsequent sentences, this syntax is powerful and memorable.

**Reflection and Honesty:**  Memoirs require deep reflection as the writer is after all looking back at an experience and reflecting on what they learned and how they changed. Look for moments of honesty and reflection and strive to include this in your writing.

**Figurative Language**: Writers of memoirs pull out all the stops and often use metaphors, smiles, personification, allusion and other figurative devices to tell their story. When Michael J. Fox writes about his first discovery that he had Parkinson’s disease, he describes his shaking hand to be “like a wind-up toy” or the sound of his tapping figures like “water torture.” This figurative language makes the experience and details more vivid.

**Powerful Verbs**: Verbs do the action and we love it when authors use powerful verbs. When Trevor Noah describes the women in prayer circle as “chanting” “murmuring” and “praying” we get a clear picture of what is happening. When he describes the police as “kicking” “dragging” “beating” and “arresting” Black South Africans for being romantically involved with a white person, we can feel the oppression and violence.

**Clear Context and Background:** Memoirs need to be clear about contextual factors. Trevor Noah spends some time in his memoir telling readers about apartheid in South Africa, the unjust laws and how they affected every aspect of life in South Africa. Sometimes the writer needs to offer some basic facts and details that help the reader find a basis to work with.

**Catchy Words:** Great writing uses language and vocabulary carefully. When Andre Agassi describes his “fire-belching” father, we feel the fear and trepidation he feels for his father. Look for unique language and turns of phrase that make ideas more vivid.

**A Creative Structure:** Stories aren’t always told in a linear fashion. Watch for how authors structure their writing. Sometimes the story starts in the middle and loops back. Sometimes the writer will insert a flashback.

**A Catchy Beginning:**  We love a good hook and memoirs need to grab the reader’s attention right away. When Jeannette Walls opens her memoir *The Glass Castle* with, “I was on fire,” we want to keep reading. Feeling the urgency and intensity of that line hooks the reader.

**Thought-Provoking Symbols:** Objects can be used symbolically in literature and in memoir this is no exception. The fire-breathing tennis ball machine that fires practice balls at young Andre Agassi is used as a symbol for his father’s intense anger and pressure on his young son.

**Vivid Imagery:** Imagery is language that appeals to the senses. The imagery used by memoir writers helps us see, feel, hear and taste and consequently makes the writing more vivid and more powerful for us to read.

**Internal Voice**: We love to hear the author’s internal voice as well. Sometimes the author will write this voice in italics. For example, “*I wonder how much this handout will help my students,* I thought to myself.” This kind of internal voice is a clever technique sometimes used in memoir.