

From: New Directions in Teaching

Memor  
A studio Workshop Approach 3

By. Dawn Latta

?

Dan Kirby

2007

## Explorations in Memoir Writing

---

The following eight chapters are the *how to do it* chapters. They are designed to help you enact the values of the studio into your teaching repertoire. They are written as a guide to step you through the process of teaching your students to write powerful Contemporary Memoirs. We will share the instructional framework we have created and offer examples of the kinds of reading and writing explorations in which our students engage. We hope these chapters will also encourage you to establish a studio-style classroom and to expand and deepen your practical knowledge of process pedagogy.

### Exploring the Territory of Memoir as Genre

Because we have found teaching memoir to be an excellent invitation to teach students about literary genre, we urge you to begin your work with memoir by reviewing the concept of genre with your students. Because of the way genre has too often been taught in schools, students have acquired some narrow understandings of how works of literature end up classified as a particular genre. "If it rhymes or has meter, it's poetry." "If it ain't true, it's fiction." "All short stories have five main features." As you read and write memoir with your students, you will have opportunities to debunk all of these conventional myths and to help them acquire the more sophisticated understanding that many works of literature cross the boundaries of several genres.

One of the key ways in which we initially explore memoir as a genre is to examine some of the observations that memoirists have published about the

genre. See Figure 3-1 for several quotes about memoir that we use as a handout to share and discuss with our students in order to prompt their thinking about the genre.

We like these excerpts for the insights they give us about writing and reading memoir. Based on these passages, we infer that memoir is *not* the same as autobiography. Memoirs validate our lives and those of others, but memoir does not attempt to capture all of the details of a life. A memoir is a selective collection of life stories, an attempt to create a “braided cord of humanity” (Baker 1982). Memoir can help writers discover sequence and importance in their lives. Writing memoir gives the writer an opportunity to find threads of meaning and untangle them to form a “clear line” (Welty 1983). Discussing these points with students will help them understand what memoirists do and think; it will also help your students understand what they will be trying to do and think throughout the entire Memoir Framework.

### Exploring the Memoir Framework

We believe in an approach to teaching memoir that is comprehensive, carefully planned, and fully orchestrated. That distinction, as you will see, is part of what separates our idea of a *framework* for writing from mere assignment-giving. Other key features of our framework follow:

1. The student writer is also a careful *reader* of memoir, reading both whole memoirs and a plethora of carefully selected excerpts from published memoirs. Each excerpt is selected in order to illustrate a specific technique that student writers will then discuss and attempt in their own writing.
2. The student writer attempts many short exploratory pieces, which we sometimes call *Spider Pieces* (see the following section). After a student has written twelve or more such short pieces, the writer culls them, looking for powerful language, potent expression and emotion, apt metaphor, and a premise that resonates with both the writer and her readers.
3. Finally, the student writer extensively revises three to five (sometimes more) of the short pieces to craft a final memoir piece.

Let’s examine how our framework plays out in actual practice.

### Overview of the Memoir Framework

Following the philosophical tenets discussed in Chapter 2, we read and discuss exemplars of each short piece that students will then explore in their own lives and writing.

### Observations on Memoir as Genre

**Directions:** As you read these excerpts from writers of memoir note how they define the genre. Jot any surprising phrases that describe memoir in the spaces provided.

1. "Memoir" is defined as some portion of life. Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense—childhood, for instance—or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn't possible in autobiography; memoir is a window into a life.

—William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth*

2. Ego is at the heart of all the reason why anybody writes a memoir, whether it's a book or a pamphlet or a letter to our children. Memoir is how we validate our lives.

—William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth*

3. The best memories, I think, forge their own forms. The writer of any work, and particularly any nonfiction work, must decide two crucial points: what to put in and what to leave out.

—Annie Dillard, in *Inventing the Truth*

4. These hopeless end-of-the-line visits with my mother made me wish I had not thrown off my own past so carelessly. We all come from the past, and children ought to know what it was that went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord of humanity stretching up

Figure 3-1. *Observations on Memoir as Genre*

from time long gone, and that it cannot be defined by the span of a single journey from diaper to shroud.

—Russell Baker, *Growing Up*

5. Writing . . . is one way of discovering sequence in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life. This has been the case with me. Connections slowly emerge. Like distant landmarks you are approaching, cause and effect begin to align themselves, draw closer together. Experiences too indefinite to outline in themselves to be recognized for themselves connect and are identified as a larger shape. And suddenly a light is thrown back, as when your train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come, is rising there still, proven through retrospect.

—Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*

6. It seems to me, writing of my parents now in my seventies that I see continuities in their lives that weren't visible to me when they were living. Even at the times that have left me my most vivid memories of them, there were connections between them that escaped me. Could it be that I can better see their lives—or any lives I know—today because I'm a writer? . . . Writing has developed in me an abiding respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists. The strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost. . . .

—Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*

May be copied for classroom use. © 2007 by Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby, from *New Directions in Teaching Memoir* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH).

Figure 3-1. Continued

Our explorations consist of paired readings and writings in memoir surrounded by thought, discussion, and experimentation. Our framework for memoir generally looks something like this:

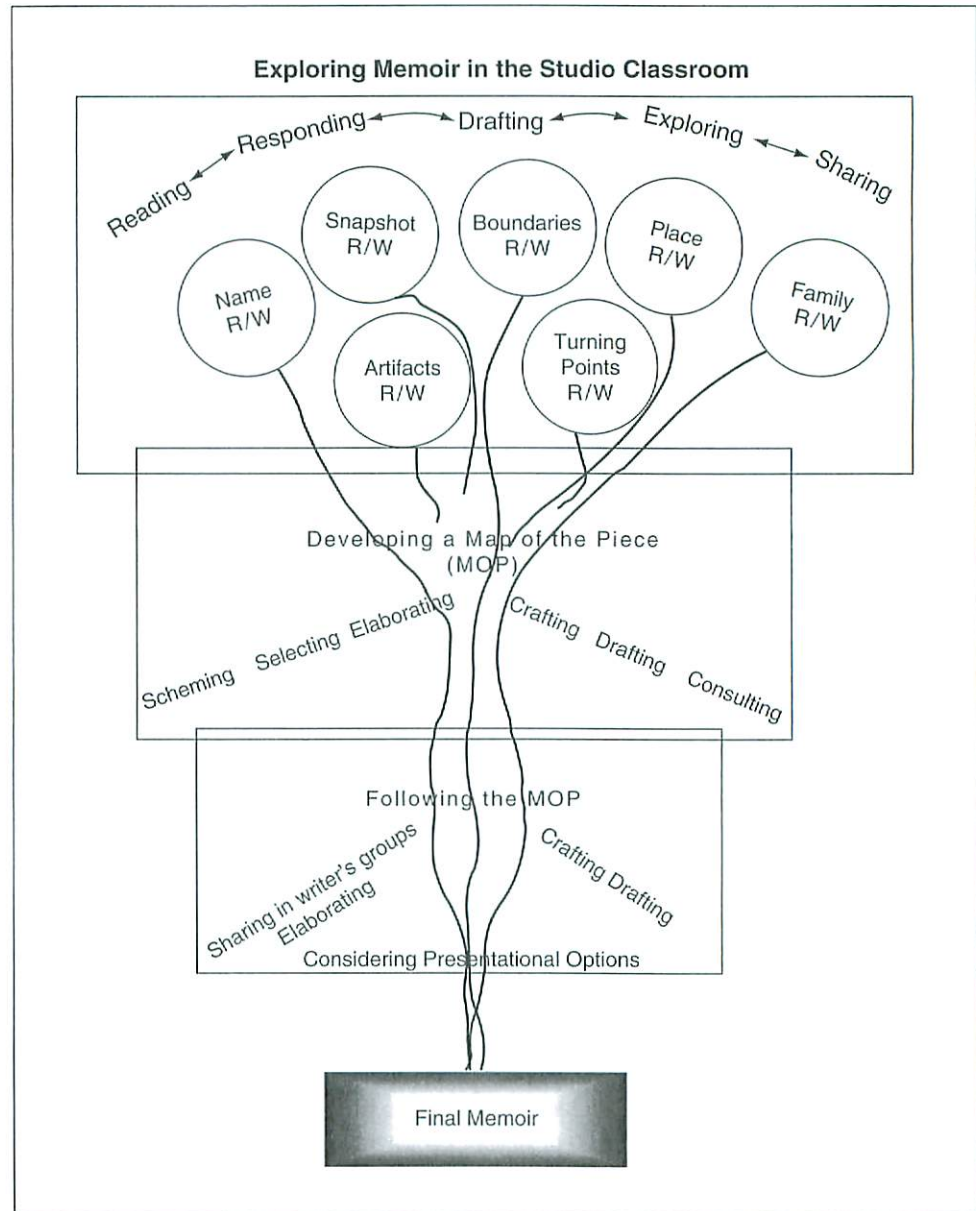


Figure 3-2. *Exploring Memoir in the Studio Classroom*

Once our students and we have accumulated some writings of our own, our written texts become part of the readings that we share and discuss alongside the published memoir excerpts. In this manner, we explore the territory of *reading like a writer* and of *writing like a reader*, both for ourselves and our emerging craft, and for those who are published in the genre. We discuss the principles for reading like a writer and writing like a reader at the end of this chapter.

The idea of pairing the readings and written pieces serves to create a wealth of layered and multifaceted memories in writing from which to draw for our final, woven-together memoir piece. Too often, inexperienced writers struggle precisely because they try to write from an impoverishment of ideas; they have nothing to write because they have neither read nor thought deeply about the subject on which they are to write. Our Memoir Framework goes a long way toward alleviating that deficit.

#### SPIDER PIECES (EXPLORATIONS)

In his poem “The Noiseless Patient Spider,”<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman writes of the process and tenacity that a spider uses to weave its web. The spider throws out filament after filament until, finally, a single thread attaches securely. This anchor filament forms the guiding thread—the anchor—around which the remainder of the web is woven. Extending this metaphor to writers, we encourage student writers to work like patient spiders, trying out lots of pieces of writing before they find the one that can anchor their memoir piece. We offer students many triggers to memory and to writing for their exploration. They try these *Spider Pieces*—these short, exploratory writings—to see which ones work, to delve into connections among their memories, and to find metaphors, key characters, and strong voices within their life stories that can enhance the telling and interpretation of those stories in the here and now. They are looking for their *hook* or *anchor piece* and all of the other pieces that will attach to it in order to form the final memoir piece.

The Spider Pieces are teacher-sponsored; that is, we don’t instruct students merely to “Write about what you remember.” Vague advice doesn’t do much to help writers. Rather, we carefully choose published memoir excerpts that illustrate a specific subject or technique that we want our students to explore in their own thinking and writing. We read and discuss the selected excerpts, and students write a Spider Piece using the excerpts to trigger their own remembered experiences. Such work is not quick, nor is it easy. It requires the tenacity and assuredness of eventual success inherent in the weaving work of the spider.

By writing exploratory pieces, students discover meanings within their tellings that they didn’t necessarily know existed. These short pieces are sometimes multifaceted, related, and guided by reading and discussing published exemplars from existing memoirs. Student writers are encouraged to follow emerging connections and tangents, weaving memory webs that eventually yield a storyline—the hook—to follow.

#### AN ENVIRONMENT FOR AUTHENTIC REVISION

As this process unfolds, it presents a powerful tool for authentic revision. Too often, student writers equate revision with a retype-it-and-fix-the-commas type of activity

rather than a true re-seeing (re-vision) of the piece. The processes for engaging in writing that we use within our framework encourages real revision for several reasons:

1. Not all of the short Spider Pieces that a student writes will appear in the final memoir. Some will be discarded as either too vague or as not fitting with the overall premise of the memoir.
2. The writer may find that she needs to write new pieces and new sections of existing pieces to weave into the final memoir paper.
3. The writer will need to work on transitioning, ordering, and organizing pieces that began as separate entities in order to have a coherent final piece of writing.
4. The writer will need to weave together the perspectives and tones of the original short Spider Pieces around the central *hook* or *anchor piece* to help unify the final memoir piece.

#### SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS OF THE MEMOIR FRAMEWORK

Approaching the teaching of writing, specifically of memoir, from within our Memoir Framework solves several of the dilemmas faced by teachers who want to motivate student writers.

- It is consistent and grounded in theory.
- It connects reading and writing in meaningful ways.
- It helps student writers to derive a wealth of knowledge from which to write.
- It provides multiple opportunities for practicing writing.
- It encourages and practically demands that students engage in authentic revision.

So, what are the texts that student memoirists read and write? Several examples with which we have had success are detailed in the next section.

#### Getting Started with the Memoir Framework: The Pieces

We have developed this set of exemplars, or Explorations, throughout the last decade or more by working with memoir. Nonetheless, this list is far from exhaustive. We add and delete from this list of memoir exemplars almost every time we teach the Memoir Framework to our students, pulling what seems to meet our particular students' needs and interests. We encourage you to do the same, finding readings that suit the ability level and interests of your students, exploring new techniques with which you want your student writers to experiment, and using exemplars from the most current memoirs available at the time that you teach.

Our students typically read and write these Explorations in pairs, though we have not necessarily found a professional published exemplar for each Exploration listed in Figure 3-3. That's at least one of the times when our writings and those of former and current students become the texts of our class. We find that having students read and write approximately eight to twelve of these paired Explorations provides them with a wealth of

memories and of studied writers' craft from which to weave together their final memoir paper. Depending on your time frame, interest level, and objectives for instruction, you may elect to engage your student writers in more or fewer of these Explorations. We suggest trying several combinations, however, to see what resonates most for you and your students.

### Overview of the Pieces

Figure 3-3 indicates several of the Explorations in which our students engage as they read and write memoir. Based on the motif for each Exploration, students read a memoir excerpt and write their own Spider Piece. We explain our teaching of several of these Explorations in detail in the next section. For others, we invite you to find excerpts from published memoirs and explore them with your students. We also invite you to add to our ideas by creating ideas of your own that are triggered by your readings in the genre and by your students' original ideas and memories. In no particular order, here are several Explorations with which we have had success:

Name Piece	Snapshot Piece	Firsts Piece	Boundaries or Map Piece	Artifacts Piece
Family Secrets Piece	Difficult Times Piece	Mysteries Piece	Home Piece	Family Perspectives Piece
Holidays and Celebrations Piece	Ethnicity or Culture Piece	Eating, Cooking, or Favorite (or Despised) Food Piece	Parent Piece	Pet Piece
Dialect, Dialogue, or Favorite Sayings Piece	Favorite Transportation Piece: Skateboards, Bikes, Cars, etc.	Conscious Artist Piece	Family Trip Piece: Car Behavior, Airport Behavior, Packing Routines	Personal Portrait Piece
On the Day I Was Born Piece	Sibling Piece	Teachers or School Worries and Woes (or Joys and Triumphs) Piece	Grandparent Piece	Hiding Places and Hidden Treasures Piece
Place or Spiritual Home Piece	Family Lore Piece	Epiphany or Turning Point Piece	I'm This Way Because. . . Piece: Inherited Behaviors and Tendencies	Futuristic Piece: What I'll Be Like in 10 Years (or 5, 15, 20, etc. years)
<p>May be copied for classroom use. © 2007 by Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby, from <i>New Directions in Teaching Memoir</i> (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH).</p>				

Figure 3-3. *The Memoir Pieces*



Remember, the paired readings and writings are important here, not the order of the pieces.

### *Using the Memoir Framework to Evoke Short Writings*

Let's walk through a sample Exploration to show you how we implement the Memoir Framework with short exploratory or Spider Pieces. As you read through this example, try to look at it not as an instant lesson plan but rather as a kind of model for you to use to develop your own age- and student-appropriate Explorations.

#### THE NAME PIECE

We often begin our memoir Explorations with the Name Piece. It is an unabashed favorite of ours and of our students. All kids have names and usually they have some stories or memories associated with their names. In the early stages of talking about their names, if some students don't know much at all about their names or why they have a particular name, encourage them to talk to parents and grandparents about their names. Such conversations among the generations are an added bonus of this Exploration. Many published pieces on names exist in memoirs and in fiction. We invite you to look for examples to add to our suggestions.

Because this Exploration has been consistently successful for us and our students, we illustrate it in some detail here. Once we present the general principles of reading, discussing, writing, and thinking that are associated with this Exploration, we think that you will be able to apply them readily to the additional Explorations in this chapter.

**Readings** We begin by initiating class discussion about names: the importance of names, how names connect us to our families, and how names can be culturally or ethnically based. Then, we introduce students to excerpts from several professional memoirs and novels, discussing the similarity in writing technique in both fiction and nonfiction for this motif of names (see Figure 3-4 on page 38).

For each excerpt, students are to notice how writers do what they do in this genre. Our discussions are not literary critiques per se, but rather writerly discussions based on what our writers' eyes see about the author's techniques in the excerpts. Students might notice information such as what the author tells us about names in the piece, how the names are important, whether the names are liked or disliked by those who hold them, the voice employed by each narrator—child's voice, adult-looking-back-in-time voice, third-person omniscient detached voice—vocabulary, and other relevant writer's craft features of the piece. Because we have deliberately chosen pieces here in order to appeal to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the students in our classes, we urge readers also to notice the cultural connections in these particular pieces.

We cannot emphasize enough that locating excerpts that are suitable for your students from sources that are suitable for your school's constituents is paramount for success when using excerpts in the classroom. Although the excerpts we have chosen, we think, are generally rated G, or sometimes PG, the books from which they are

taken are sometimes rated R—or more. We offer these exemplars only as guides, not as the only excerpts that will work for each pair of readings and writings.

Also, for each excerpt included in this book, we give only a small sampling of the more complete excerpt that we use with our students. We encourage you to obtain each of the memoirs and novels that we discuss in these sections and to use excerpts of a length and content that is appropriate for your students. Of course, do observe all relevant copyright laws, as we do.

**Writings** Once students have read several published excerpts like the ones in Figure 3-4 and discussed the key features of each, comparing the excerpts to each other and to their own life experiences, it is time for students to begin writing about their own names. First, we ask students to complete a Name Chart on which they write their names—full names, nicknames, whatever names they want to include—across a sheet of paper. Then, under each individual name, they jot what they know about that specific name.

As a guide, we write our names and jottings on the board or on the LCD display-equipped computer at the same time that students are writing their jot lists. Or, sometimes we give students the handout shown in Figure 3-5 to model for them what we want them to accomplish. Remember, students may not know much about their names at first, so these jottings may have to be filled in further once students have talked to their parents and grandparents.

Both of us have written many name charts over the years while working in front of our students. Here is a sample chart from Dan.

Daniel	Ralston	Kirby
From the Bible?	Richard Ralston (grandfather) RRK initials on his sample cases Dry goods salesman in west Texas	Formerly O'Kearby Irish
"Dare to be a . . ."	Ashamed of that name as a kid	Who? Where?
Brave in the lion's den	Kids called me "shredded" and "Purina" and "hot"	"Kirb"

We encourage you to create your own name chart and to share it with your students. Doing so is a fabulous icebreaker and a way for you and your students to get to know each other better.

Once students have written and discussed their Name Charts with partners or writing groups and completed the family research that they may need to conduct in order to add more detailed information to their Name Chart, they draft a first attempt at a name piece.

The idea here is to write a first draft—a Spider Piece, an Exploration—based on their names. This Spider Piece is not a finished product at this point, but it may reveal the potential for further work at some future date.

### Name Piece Excerpts

**Excerpt #1: From *My Name* in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street***

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong. . . .

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza.

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

**Excerpt #2: From *This Boy's Life* by Tobias Wolff**

I didn't come to Utah to be the same boy I'd been before. I had my own dreams of transformation, Western dreams, dreams of freedom and dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency. The first thing I wanted to do was change my name. A girl named Toby had joined my class before I left Florida, and this had caused both of us scalding humiliation.

I wanted to call myself Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent in my idea of him. The odds were good that I'd never have to share a classroom with a girl named Jack. And I liked the sound. Jack. Jack Wolff. My mother didn't like it at all, neither the idea of changing my name nor the name itself. I did not drop the subject. She finally agreed. . . .

My father got wind of this and called from Connecticut to demand that I stick to the name he had given me. It was, he said, an old family name. This turned out to be untrue. . . .

My mother was pleased by my father's show of irritation and stuck up for me. A new name began to seem like a good idea to her. After all, he was in Connecticut and we were in Utah. . . . We were barely making it, and making it in spite of him. My shedding the name he'd given me would put him in mind of that fact.

**Excerpt #3: From *The Names: A Memoir* by Scott Momaday**

*My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tsoai-talee; therefore I am.*

*The storyteller Pohd-lohk gave me the name Tsoai-talee. He believed that a man's life proceeds from his name, in the way that a river proceeds from its source. . . .*

Figure 3-4. Name Piece Excerpts

You know, everything had to begin, and this is how it was: the Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log. They were many more than now, but not all of them got out. There was a woman whose body was swollen up with child, and she got stuck in the log. After that, no one could get through, and that is why the Kiowas are a small tribe in number. They looked all around and saw the world. It made them glad to see so many things. They called themselves *Kwuda*, "coming out."

—Kiowa folktale

. . . . The names at first are those of animals and of birds, of objects that have one definition in the eye, another in the hand, of forms and features on the rim of the world, or of sounds that carry on the bright wind and in the void. They are old and original in the mind, like the beat of rain on the river, and intrinsic in the native tongue, failing even as those who bear them turn once in the memory, go on, and are gone forever: Pohd-lohk ["Old Wolf" in Kiowa], Keahdinekeah ["Throwing It Down" in Kiowa, the name of the author's great-grandmother], Aho [meaning unknown; the name of the author's grandmother].

**Excerpt #4: From *The Namesake: A Novel* by Jhumpa Lahiri**

As for a name, they have decided to let Ashima's grandmother, who is past eighty now [and living in India], who has named each of her other six great-grandchildren in the world, do the honors. When her grandmother learned of Ashima's pregnancy, she was particularly thrilled at the prospect of naming the family's first *sahib*. And so Ashima and Ashoke have agreed to put off the decision of what to name the baby until a letter comes, ignoring the forms from the hospital about filing for a birth certificate. Ashima's grandmother has mailed the letter herself, walking with her cane to the post office, her first trip out of the house in a decade. The letter contains one name for a girl, one for a boy. Ashima's grandmother has revealed them to no one.

Though the letter was sent a month ago, in July, it has yet to arrive. Ashima and Ashoke are not terribly concerned. After all, they both know, an infant doesn't really need a name. . . . Names can wait. In India parents take their time. . . .

Besides, there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, by family. . . .

Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places. . . . Good names represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Ashima means "she who is limitless, without borders." Ashoke, the name of an emperor, means "he who transcends grief." Pet names have no such aspirations.

May be copied for classroom use. © 2007 by Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby, from *New Directions in Teaching Memoir* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH).

Figure 3-4. Continued

### Memoir Exploration #1: The Name Piece

**Directions:** Now that you have read several pieces by writers about their names, see if there are some memories floating in your head about your own name. On a sheet of paper, print your full name, leaving plenty of space for jottings. Each part of your name will head a separate column. Think about these questions as you stare at your name. Then, when you are ready, jot information that you can recall about each specific name. Be prepared to share your Name Chart with members of your Writer's Group.

**Key Questions:**

- Who named you? Why? What is the significance of your name, if any? Does your name have a special meaning?
- What are some of the names that you almost had? What are some of the names that you've always wanted to be called?
- How does your name connect you to other members of your family?
- What troubles or opportunities has your name afforded you?
- What are some altered versions of your name? What are some of your pet names or nicknames?

First name	Middle	Last	Variations

May be copied for classroom use. © 2007 by Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby, from *New Directions in Teaching Memoir* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH).

Figure 3-5. *The Name Chart*

The following is a Spider Piece—an Exploration—written by Dan and based on his Name Chart as shown in Figure 3–5.

Daniel Ralston Kirby—Danny—then Dan when I insisted in the seventh grade. Kirby to my school friends or Kirbs as in, “Hey Kirbs, let’s go down to Bargers Drive-in for lunch.” Dan, Daniel—Biblical, I’m sure. Daniel in the Old Testament in the lions’ den and unafraid. Refused to tell the king what he wanted to hear. Funny, I’ve never really connected that Bible story to my name before. My parents never told me much about my name. I don’t remember them telling me to “Dare to be a Daniel” or “We named you Danny because. . . .” Now, my middle name, the one that has since become an initial, was always an embarrassment. Junior high was the worst, eighth grade. “Ralston” . . . “Purina” . . . “Dog Chow.” I tried to hide it from my friends. My grandfather’s name was Richard Ralston Kirby. I remember seeing the initials “RRK” embossed on his sample cases and his briefcase as he packed his car on Monday mornings. He was a traveling salesman—a dry goods salesman who traveled the back roads of west Texas in the 1920s and 1930s. He died of leukemia at the age of fifty. I was maybe ten years old. Maybe if he had lived and I had been his grandson longer, the one who helped him pack his cases into the old black Buick, I would have been proud of my middle name, but mostly I hide that name with an R.

—Dan Kirby

Dan feels that this name motif has potential for him, so he tries a second exploratory piece on the same subject. Sometimes an idea will resonate for a student, so that she wants to try the technique of *looping*, of taking a key idea from one piece of writing and then writing a second piece based on the idea from the first piece. Dan does that here, as you’ll see. He’s still working on details and on sorting out his feelings about his name; he tries a new opening and addressing the reader directly this time. His grandfather is still clearly an important figure in this exploration and in his family connections to name.

I have always tried to hide my middle name. Sometimes behind the initial “R” or sometimes by leaving it blank on all those forms. Sometimes I have lied, writing “Robert” or “Richard.” I’ve tried to hide my middle name because my friends loved to torture me about it. We moved a lot when I was a kid. I was a semi-permanent new kid in school. At each new school, I begged my mother to hide my name, to leave it off of the school forms. But someone always gave me away. Ralston, that’s the name I’ve hidden, yes, Ralston like the cereal. See? You think it’s funny, too. You would tease me, too. My friends called me “Shredded” for short in the second grade. And “Hot.” I think I had a short career as “Hot Ralston” and “Purina.” And yes, I was always Purina. So I hid my name.

For some reason my parents never explained the significance of the name. If I had known it was my grandfather’s middle name and his mother’s maiden name, I might have borne the humiliation with some sense of family purpose or pride. But it was at my grandfather’s death that I learned the significance of Ralston. I read it on the In Memoriam leaflet, “Richard Ralston Kirby.” Born 1898. Died 1952. I was ten or

eleven at the time. I sat there in the church staring at the leaflet—Richard Ralston—and I felt ashamed for hiding my middle name.

—Dan Kirby

Once a student has tried one or two explorations based on his names—or on any Exploration we discuss here—the student needs to decide if the piece has potential. Maybe it's such a strong piece that he can use it to build other short pieces around it. Maybe it could be the *anchor piece* for the whole memoir. Or, if the piece isn't going all that well—perhaps because the student doesn't have enough strong memories to make the piece powerful—the piece needs to be filed in the student's Writer's Notebook for possible future consideration and as an example of the work in which the student is engaging.

***Student Examples of the Name Piece*** If you are successful at creating a studio-style atmosphere in your classroom, students will follow or not follow the professional excerpts you have read with them. They will also enjoy the models you write in front of them sharing your own life experience, but they may do this Name Piece their own way. That's a good thing. Remember, we're trying to encourage students to render their life experiences as honestly as possible, choosing the forms and formats that are most comfortable for that rendering. Two teacher friends in Denver have been especially successful at creating classroom environments that engage and excite their student writers. Betsey and Charles Coleman have shared the following name pieces, which their students wrote after exploring the excerpts shown earlier.

Cassandra's piece has a bit of the feel of Sandra Cisneros with surprising and even coded images. In the second paragraph, Cass borrows a bit from Dan's piece relating how others used and misused her name. She does a good job of tracking the history of her names and embedding that history in personal experience: "just a glance at the baby name book."

#### The Only Me<sup>2</sup>

I am a long, hissing snake as my name rolls off my tongue and out of my mouth, uncurling. The snake is venomous, but doesn't strike because it dances fluidly, mesmerized by a wooden flute. Sitting in a circle on the carpet, other children were "hope", "wished for child", or "Christmas baby", but I was "the Greek temptress of men." (Although later I would learn that my name was really the Greek prophet who no one believed and who was raped during the Trojan War. I wondered if that was what the book actually said.) Those same children with plain, garter snake names would call me "her" because I was too long to remember.

I was "Cass" to my softball coaches because it was easier to call while I was running for the ball. People have always tried to be cute and friendly by calling me "Cassie" as they bent over and talked to me in baby voices, but "Cassie" is a stupid, line-dancing, short jean-skirt wearing Texan, and that wasn't me. I was long, elegant, smart, three syllables. So I always said, "No, it's Cassandra." Even then, it was mispronounced as "Cassaaahyndra" with a scrunched-up, dripping, red nose, long A in the middle.

My middle name was a beautiful tribal girl tracking a deer in some exotically exciting rain forest. I didn't learn how to spell it until second grade when the standardized test asked me for my full name and I didn't know how to spell it. My middle name, like my first, wasn't my great-great-grandmother's name, the name of the person who saved my mother from drowning, or anything of that nature. It was just a chance glance at the baby name book. That was the same place where my parents found the name for my possible male self. Spencer. Frankly, I can't say I'm disappointed that I came out a girl.

The last part of me is German, which is why we bought a German Weimaraner dog and named it "Otto." My last name is short and rude. It is hard, a stone tossed into the flowing water that is me, plopping in and creating ripples, making me close my eyes and flinch as it splashes.

I am unique. I don't have to share me with anyone else. When people talk about me, they know it's me, not, "Now, which Sarah do you mean?" I looked it up on the computer, and I am the only me in the entire world. The only "Cassandra Adair Stroud."

—Cassandra Stroud

Lauren Young-Smith, ever the poet, writes a name piece full of crisp images and wonderfully fresh verbs. Like Cass and Cisneros, she *reveals* by sharing biographical data and *conceals* by using graphic and coded images. Her piece is both photographic and impressionistic.

#### To Grow a Name<sup>2</sup>

My name means equal opportunities. My name is broken beer bottles in a field of poppies. My name is vanilla, never French vanilla but vanilla extract, brown in a stained vial like liquid childhood. The dictionary says I am evolved from the Greek *laurel* plant, as if I had bloomed from in between curling freckled foliage and fluttered into existence on a sweet olive breeze. My name is a note-to-self scribbled onto a crumple post-it note, slipped into the back pocket of my jeans, forgotten until someone else points it out. I am somewhere in between where my mother begins and my father ended, hanging from the wires that string both their names together. I hack off the evidence of my origins and leave two stately initials clinging to each other. My name is yellow apples and bitter dark chocolate. It means pennies in the street and tastelessness. It means nothing until it is teetering off of someone else's tongue; it slides out between clumsy syllables. It is a hush, it is kneeling.

In downtown Denver in December, you can hear my name crystallizing at the edges of the dirty windows of Suburbans. It was given to me almost as if by flippancy, a "why not?" sort of gamble. It tells no stories, channels no shadows of great alabaster princesses. Like it crawled out of a Baby Name Book, attempting weakly to be seen and brandished. My parents were no renegades.

It isn't mine to flaunt or lock away, neither does it define me nearly as well as every other identification I've made for myself. It bounces from lip to lip through the currents of people in hallways, familiar in taste, low in meaning. If I could, I would break it into pieces and slip them into empty palms, curl the fingers of the lonely over it. Those who don't have enough of themselves inside them. I would plant my name in



the warm April soil and watch it spread its fingers out over park benches and ponds, a name bereft of fruit and strangely motionless in the wind. I would watch the seasons swallow and vomit my name back up, with each turn of the pinwheel sun. I will never be the only Lauren. But to be the only me is enough as my name quietly climbs the graying walls of my house, as the earth whispers it, I will know that it's mine.

—Lauren Young-Smith

Courtney's piece is a fresh-faced explication of her names. She reveals some of her personality and then launches into family connections to her names. Like many teen writers, she uses informal, even conversational, dialect. Notice that the piece is untitled and is collected in her *Writer's Notebook* only as "the name piece." We encourage students to delay naming pieces until they are sure what they are really about and how they might be used in their memoir.

### The Name Piece<sup>2</sup>

My name is an anomaly. Many are associated with important people and places—things that mean something to everyone. I am not a "little," "the fourth," or "the six hundred and twentieth." Simply Courtney Nicole Engle. The one and only.

Courtney: *french* (not hardly): from the court, for whatever that's worth. It's a name for dancers, luckily. Poise. Grace. Dedication. Strength. Endurance. Creativity. Flexibility. Passion. My name is not unique, by any means; there are three in the high school alone. I, personally, would have chosen Katania or Alissa.

Nicole: *french* (again?): victory. At fifteen you can hardly expect me to have ended world hunger, or expelled the infidels, or cured cancer, but I try. I've always known that if Nicole were my first name I would go by Nikk. Something less girly—stronger. Nicole and Courtney both imply that I cannot throw a ball. I can. That I do not lift weights. I do. That I am simply about manicures, boys, and shoes. Okay, the shoes part is true, but everyone has a weakness. Someone with bright pink nails and a spray tan wouldn't be caught dead slide tackling people to get a round piece of plastic. I would.

I have no siblings to compare my name to, but I have parents and grandparents. My mother: Bernice Vee Engle. Yes, "Vee." She does indeed have a letter phonetically spelled for a middle name, as does my uncle: Donald Dee Fossett. My dad: Bruce James Engle. Pretty typical and average. Not like my dad at all (let's just say he was a rebel, though *he* never admits it). My grandmother: Viola Belle Davis. Again, mediocre. My grandfather: Emery Evert Fossett. My papa: Joseph Osmar Engle. Oddly enough, his initials are J.O.E.: Joe—his nickname. My nana: (this is where it gets tricky) Laura Joyce Pokock. She, however, went by Betty Ann for her entire life. No one called her Laura Joyce, not even her parents. Overall, names in my family are pretty normal; nothing exotic; nothing gets twisted around and comes out like peanut butter.

I have only one common nickname: Court. Big surprise there. My best friend calls me Courtie, and golf mates call me Sparkey. Yes, Sparkey. It's a long story. We have a motto in my house which will summarize the end of this paper: "I don't care what you call me, as long as you're sure to call me for dinner."

—Courtney Engle

### *Explorations in Memoir Writing*

What we like about all of these student pieces is the uniquely personal voice in each. We encourage students to develop and tune that voice as they write additional exploratory pieces. Don't be discouraged if the first name pieces you get from students are perfunctory, routine, or uninteresting. This is the beginning of the journey toward memoir and many student writers don't find a really powerful memory, metaphor, or anchor piece until they have written several pieces. Remind them that the spider persists in throwing out filaments, and many of them fail to make a connection. If your class becomes really rowdy during writing time, remind them that the spider is also "noiseless and patient."

The Name Piece should launch memoir study with enthusiastic student participation. Use that momentum to keep them writing new pieces each week. In the following chapter, we will offer two more detailed examples of our approach to teaching memoir that have worked well for us. As you read these examples and think about your own classroom, return to Chapter 2 to examine the Studio Values we offered. We find that we need to remind ourselves often of what we are trying to do with our instruction and to remind ourselves of what student behaviors we really value in our classroom.

### Notes

1. Walt Whitman's poem, "The Noiseless Patient Spider," is often anthologized. It can be found in numerous collections of Whitman's work and in many literature anthologies.
2. The student authors featured in this chapter were all students at Colorado Academy with Betsey Coleman as their English teacher. We print all students' papers as they were written, without correction.

### Works Cited

- BAKER, RUSSELL. 1982. *Growing Up*. New York: Plume Books.
- CISNEROS, SANDRA. 1989. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books.
- DILLARD, ANNIE. 1998. "To Fashion a Text." In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, edited by William Zinsser, 141-61. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- MOMADAY, N. SCOTT. 1976. *The Names*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- WELTY, EUDORA. 1983. *One Writer's Beginnings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- WOLFF, TOBIAS. 1989. *This Boy's Life*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- ZINSSER, WILLIAM, ED. 1998. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.