

## English 12

Mr. Monsen

Writing a Memoir

**Directions:** Complete steps 1-9 in order in your notebook.

**Step 1:** Brainstorm ideas by answering the questions below:

- 1) What is your earliest memory?
- 2) What is the most important thing that has ever happened to you?
- 3) What is the worst thing that ever happened to you?
- 4) What is something you will never forget?
- 5) What is the moment where you were 100% happy?
- 6) What was a time when you felt brokenhearted?
- 7) What memory shows something important about your family or your friends?
- 8) What was a time when you've laughed harder than you've ever laughed before?
- 9) Who is the one person who has motivated you to do something that changed your life?
- 10) What one object can you show others that would tell them exactly who you are? What does it tell?

Copy the four topics below into your notebook. Then list some possible objects, events, people, or places that helped to shape you as a person.

**Objects**

**Events**

**People**

**Places**

Now select one from your list above and complete the following:

**Describe it in detail:**

**Tell us how it influenced you:**

**Step 2:** Copy the definition of a memoir below into your notebook.

A **memoir** (from French: meaning memory or reminiscence) is a collection of memories that an individual writes about; they can be public or private. These events took place in the subject's life and are understood to be factual.

**Step 3:** Read the sample memoir "Michelle on Tape" below and answer the questions that go with it.

### **Michelle on Tape**

By Anita Vacation

As I pulled into my parents' driveway, I realized how loud the radio was. I turned it down, peeled my legs off the blue vinyl seat, and lugged my pile of laundry up to the front door. The doorknob wouldn't turn and I still hadn't gotten around to making myself a duplicate key.

I rang the bell and waited. Nothing.

Leaving my basket of dirty clothes on the steps, I tramped through the bushes in front of the living room window. Pep was across the room sitting in his usual chair and reading the paper. He was a familiar sight in his plaid flannel shirt, striped clip-on bow tie, and tweed cabby hat.

I knocked on the window. He turned around, startled, and focused his eyes on me. I smiled and waved at him, but he just stared at me. I gestured toward the front door. His face had that hollow look, but something made him get up and let me in.

"Hi, Pep." I kissed him on the cheek. He made way for me and my laundry.

"Hello, how are you?"

I headed for the washing machine. Pep trailed closely behind.

"Kevin and Clare aren't home, but they should be here soon. Do you want to wait for them?"

"Yah, I'll be here." I began separating whites from darks.

"Do you want anything to eat? There's meat and bread in the ice box and some cookies in there."

"No thanks."

"I don't know where Kevin and Clare are. They took Katie out somewhere. Do you know Katie?"

I paused. Here we go. This was going to be one of those conversations. I should just say, "Why, yes, I know Katie." But perhaps if I venture a bit further, something might jog his memory and we wouldn't have to go through the whole routine. Dad says that Pep has a tape recorder in his brain, and bits and pieces keep getting erased.

I decided to give it a shot. "Pep, Katie is my sister."

It didn't work. Pep responded as though I hadn't said a word. "Yah. Well, they went down to . . ." He doubled his chin and scratched his chest with both hands.

"You know, down . . ."

"To the Donnellys?"

"Yah, that's it. What did you say?"

I repeated, "Donnellys'," loud and clear. It was usually best to speak with as few words as possible. The name Donnelly had a vague significance in Pep's mind, but he had no idea that the Donnellys were my mother's sister and her family.

"Yes, that's right, they went to the Donnellys'. How did you know? What did you say your name was?"

"Michelle."

He smiled politely. "Oh, are you a friend of Clare's?"

"Pep! I'm her daughter."

"Yah, well, I just want to tell Kevin and Clare who was here in case you leave before they get back."

"I'm home for the weekend. I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay," he said, with an offended tone that left me feeling guilty. He turned around and headed for his chair. He truly did not know who I was. He had let a perfect stranger into our house to wash clothes.

When I was a child, Pep would spend hours with me, patiently teaching me all fifty states and their capitals. When I had those down, we moved on to state flowers, birds, and slogans. He would read me his poetry and tell me never-ending bedtime stories about giants and fairies and magical castles. We would sit in front of the Christmas tree and try to guess which ornament the other was thinking of. On this day, though, I had more important things on my mind. Whites. Darks. Delicates.

Pep returned a few minutes later with a pen and his notebook.

"Here, write down your name so I can tell Kevin and Clare you were here." The prospect scared me. I was hoping he would realize who I was after a while and forget that he had forgotten me. But this was putting everything on the line. What if he saw my name and still couldn't recognize me? As he eagerly offered me the pen and paper, I couldn't say no. I wrote M-i-c-h-e-l-l-e in his notebook and gave it back to him.

He looked at it for a few seconds and then wrinkled his eyebrows and bit his lip. He looked at me with a hint of disbelief.

"Michelle."

He said it with the expression of a disappointed but amused parent. The name seemed to hang in space. I imagined what would come next. He might say, "You're not Michelle" or "Who in the world is Michelle?"

But he said, "All this time you were Michelle?"

"Yes." That giant lump shot into my throat and tears crept into my eyes.

"Well, thank God for you."

I smiled. He patted me on the shoulder and walked away, shaking his head and chuckling. I was relieved. I did still exist in

his mind, on his tape. But I was only a part-time visitor now, and I couldn't help wondering how long it would be before I was permanently erased.

**Word Count:** 864

### **“Michelle on Tape” Questions**

1. What was this memoir about?
2. What was the theme of this memoir?
3. In your opinion, what was good about this memoir?
4. In your opinion, what was not good about this memoir?
5. Locate and write down one example where the narrator “thinks out loud” to reveal how she feels.

**Step 4:** Copy the “Characteristics of a Memoir” below into your notebook:

Characteristics of a Memoir
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- Focuses on a person, place, or event (reoccurring or singular) which had a particular significance in the writer’s life
- Has a particular focus, an element (big idea) which receives the most emphasis
- Re-creates for the reader incidents shared with the person, in that place, or during that event
- Revels the writer’s knowledge of and feeling about the person, place, or event
- Includes the author’s feelings and thoughts
- Has reflection scattered throughout
- Makes the person, place, or event come alive for the reader

**Step 5:** Copy the “Memoir Outline” below into your notebook:

### **Memoir Outline**

- I. Create an Effective Lead
- II. Use Many Paragraphs to Describe Event (In Story Format)
  - a. Use Dialogue
  - b. Imagery
  - c. Show, Don’t Tell
  - d. Reflective Narrator
- III. Describe Impact Without Directly Saying It
- IV. End in a Memorable Way

**Step 6:** Read the three lessons listed below for the skills “Dialogue, Reflective Narrator, and Show, Don’t Tell” and then copy the definitions/rules of each into your notebook:

### **Five Simple Rules for DIALOGUE**

**Dialogue should do one, if not all, of the following:**

1. Reveal characters’ relationships to one another.
2. Move the story forward.
3. Increase the tension.
4. Start a new paragraph for each new speaker.
5. Use speaker tags to reveal who is speaking (i.e. He said, Stephanie exclaimed as she left the room).

\*\*\*Sometimes speaker tags can be left out altogether to increase the pace of the conversation.

## Reflective Narrator

A **reflective narrator** is one who stops and thinks about things as they are happening in the story, or about things that have happened. This narrator lets the reader in on more than just the events by sharing inner thoughts that other characters in the story may not be aware of. Writers often use the reflective narrator to let us know what they consider moral or immoral, right or wrong.

**Here is a sample:** "Here, write down your name so I can tell Kevin and Clare you were here." The prospect scared me. I was hoping he would realize who I was after a while and forget that he had forgotten me. But this was putting everything on the line. What if he saw my name and still couldn't recognize me? As he eagerly offered me the pen and paper, I couldn't say no. I wrote M-i-c-h-e-l-l-e in his notebook and gave it back to him.

## Show, Don't Tell

When you **Show, Don't Tell**, you create an image for the reader with words, instead of just telling the reader what is happening. Use senses – sight, sound, smell, taste, touch – to do this. Instead of saying "It was cold", say "Mary shivered as she touched the ice-covered window". That gives an image of it being cold and makes the reader think more and become engaged in the story.

**Excerpt One:** (this excerpt doesn't really show, but instead tells)

The morning I was to receive my package, I went downstairs and watched television. I thought about how excited I was as I ate breakfast. I wondered what my best friend had bought for me in South America and decided that I would call her as soon as I received the package. I was really looking forward to her return to the United States. I thought about all the things we would do together once she returned. All of a sudden, the doorbell rang, and I went to the door. I opened the door and looked outside.

**Excerpt Two:** (this excerpt shows better by using imagery)

The morning I was to receive my package, I bounded down the stairs and flipped on the kitchen television. After I grabbed a bagel and settled down in my favorite chair, my mind began to race. "What did she send me?" I wondered aloud. I pictured the possible contents of the package: a bag of aromatic South American coffee beans, colorful pottery crafted by villagers, or perhaps a brilliant, hand-woven tapestry. I grabbed my cell phone off the counter so that I could call Sarah the instant I received the package. When I glanced over at a picture of us at our favorite restaurant, I smiled. I couldn't wait to visit Moe's Eatery with her again when she returned to the United States. The doorbell chimed, and I sat straight up in my chair. It was here! I shoved my chair away from the table and raced to the door, nearly tripping over my dog. I flung open the door and stuck my head outside. "Where do I sign?" I nearly shouted.

**Step 7:** Write your own memoir in your notebook. Try incorporating the three skills you just learned, plus any of the ones below you may already know.

## Other Memoir Skills

Effective Lead

Sensory Imagery

Using Fragments for Effect

Effective Title

**Step 8:** Type up the final copy of your memoir to look like the sample you read earlier.

**Step 9:** Include the memoir in your 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter Portfolio and complete that portfolio.