**Top 8 Things All Memoir Writers Need To Pay Attention To**

**1. Scope**  
Knowing the scope of your story means knowing where it starts and where it ends. You don’t have to have a perfect sense of what comes in between, as long as you know where you want to end up. Most memoirists bite off more than they can chew for a single memoir, and have to end up paring back and creating a tighter container around their story. You want to create these bookends around what you’re writing as early as possible.

**2. Sequencing of Scenes**  
Sequencing is the order in which you piece your story together. Your scenes may well be the most important piece of how your story unfolds, and they plays out within the container of your memoir’s scope. Many first-time memoirists try to be ambitious in their sequencing by telling a story out of linear order (beginning, middle, end). While this is okay, it’s also important to understand that a linear story is a satisfying one, and you can tell a linear tale and still pop out of the current time line using memory and flashback. Don’t make it harder on yourself just because you think a linear storyline is too easy. I assure you, it’s not.

**3. Tense**  
Pick a tense and stick with it. You can experiment a bit. For instance, dream sequences or flashbacks might be written in present tense in a memoir that’s otherwise written entirely in the past tense. But just as is the case with sequencing, too much tense jumping, if you don’t have a firm command of tense, has a more negative effect than positive. Changing up your tense too often pops readers out of the storyline and can create confusion.

**4. Dialogue**  
Although I’m a fan of well-written narrative prose, a memoir without dialogue is not a complete memoir. A general rule of thumb is that any given chapter be 20%-40% dialogue. It moves the story along. It allows you to showcase other characters without getting into their heads (which you’re not supposed to do), gives ample opportunity for body language cues, and relies on the skill set of “showing” rather than “telling”—all of which give dimension to your characters and your memoir.

**5. Word Repetition**  
Sometimes it’s difficult to see our own word repetition, but every writer is guilty of having certain pet words and phrases. Don’t worry too much about catching these things early on in your writing process, but be aware that you will want readers or an editor to read your work down the road. Jot down any repetition you notice, and keep a running list of words or turns of phrase.

**6. Sentence Structure**  
Just like with word repetition, sentence structure can be a killer. You have to vary it up. I have worked with authors who seemed to rely on a certain kind of sentence structure, as if they’d been taught that that was what made for good writing. But the reader needs short and long sentences; sentences with and without adjectives that describe nouns; sentences with different kinds of patterns.

**7. Transitions**  
Transitions are the spaces between scenes. They are usually time indicators that hold the reader as you transition them from one space to a next. Transitions are all about anchoring your reader in your story so they don’t lose track of where you are.

**8. Reflection**  
Finally, reflections are those places where you pause to ponder, to connect, to consider the ways in which your story is universal, and human, and relevant to your reader. Without reflection, your memoir may be a great story; with it, it can become transformative. It’s a window into your soul. It’s the place where you make a heart connection with your reader by writing about truisms, the human condition, and the ways in which your experience reflects something bigger about all people everywhere. This can feel like a hard thing to do, but once you get into the habit of it, it’s really not. You don’t want to overkill your reflective scenes, but there need to be some. [Annie Lamott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Lamott) is a master of reflection, and every good memoir has them. Just start paying attention. Where does something that someone wrote totally eviscerate you? That’s probably a skillful reflection.