Writing a Life
Teaching Memoir
to Sharpen Insight,
Shape Meaning—
and Triumph Over Tests

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Revising a Text, Revising a Life

Five Sledgehammers and Nineteen Nails for Making a Memoir Even Better

My advice to memoir writers is to embark on a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text.
—Annie Dillard, “To Fashion a Text,” Inventing the Truth

Finally, after all the remembering, collecting, layering, and planning, your students have begun writing drafts of their memoirs. Of course, they would like to be finished now. Who can blame them? They’ve been working hard! But it’s not over, for now we begin my favorite part of the writing process: revision. During writing workshop, whenever my students profess to be done or complain that they don’t like what they’ve written on the page, I say, “You don’t like what you wrote? No problem—you can revise it! Get back to writing!”

Revision is hope. We live our “one, wild and precious life,” as Mary Oliver calls it, only once, but we get to reconsider it dozens of times along the way. We can change our clothes, hair, interests, friends, and mates, if necessary. We can change careers and neighborhoods. We can change our minds and beliefs. We can even change identities, especially as we write about ourselves in a memoir.

Revision is like the layers of soil in Italian vineyards, like the layers of ancient civilizations beneath modern cities, like the layers of DNA in the oldest variety of grape, grafted by vintners over centuries into new varieties of grape, always in pursuit of the finest wine.

Revision is a second, third, fourth, even a twentieth chance.
We can revise our life. We can revise our teaching. We can revise the way we operate in the world. Think about revision in the largest sense, of imagining things as if they could be otherwise, as Maxine Greene says.

Revision is forgiveness.

When you revise memoir, you become the author of your life. How dare you change the sequence, the names, the dialogue, the true facts of your life? Well, you do dare because you are revising to make your life mean what you want it to mean. You enlarge the story; you enlarge your life. You layer your memoir like thick layers of paint on a canvas. In Italy, we saw a painting, and a special X-ray machine revealed that underneath the picture of a fully clothed standing man, there was a seated, naked woman. Don’t you wonder who or what made the painter revise that work?

As you write and remember and add layer upon layer to the stories of your life, you begin to realize this frustrating truth: that your life, anyone’s life, is so thick and complicated that it can never be fully revealed. Revision helps us shape, regroup, and make sense of all those complexities. Ted Kooser (2005), the U.S. poet laureate appointed in 2004, says that he revises heavily, sometimes up to thirty or forty times for a single poem (16). Kooser, who also won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2005, says that he wants to revise from complexity toward simplicity and order. You can begin to chip away at the chaos of experience by sharpening some of the tools of revision. I wish I could devise an original metaphor for revision strategies, but seeing them as tools just fits so perfectly.

Two of my favorite books about revision—The Revision Toolbox, by Georgia Heard (2002), and The Poetry Home Repair Manual, by Ted Kooser (2005)—talk about the tools of revision, so I know I’m in good company when I use this image. A draft is like a field waiting for a plow to turn the rich soil over. A draft is like a lump of clay that requires the sculptor’s tools—the sawtooth carvers and ribbon cutters—to chip, scrape, and cut it to get to the essential work of art. The draft is a building that needs the builder’s tools—hammer, saw, nails, trowel—to raise the roof. All craftspeople use tools to make things, and the memoir writer is no different.

I offer the following five ways of reseeing the memoir draft as the big pickaxes and sledgehammers of revision. In my classroom, I present these demolition moves early in the writing process and come back to them repeatedly in minilessons and writing conferences. Revision, as practiced writers understand, does not happen as an afterthought to writing, but rather in the midst of thinking about, adding on to, and composing drafts of a piece of writing. Smaller, finer tools will be needed for the detail work that can be
applied when there is a substantial working draft, and I name those in the second portion of this chapter.

Five Revision Sledgehammers

1. Revise by answering this question: Where am I in this story? What is happening inside of me? What does this story say about who I am as a person?

In a student memoir draft, we might get a full rendition of an event, but the author might forget to clue us in to how he was thinking and feeling during it. This problem occurs often, so I display these questions on a chart for students to use while revising:

Where are you in this story?

What is happening inside you?

What did you learn from this event?

What changed as a result of this event? (For the youngest children, you might word this question a bit differently: What do you want people to know about you in this story?)

These are perhaps difficult, sophisticated questions for anyone to answer, but they are the soul of memoir. (Telling a good story may be the heart.) Memoir, at least as I define it in this book, is memory plus reflection. As the memoirist looks back over her draft, she might find that she has written the outline of what happened.

First, we drove for about a zillion miles to get to my grandma’s house. Then when we got there, we were already too late for dinner and I was starving. My Granma brought me a special tray with little kid-sized dishes full of my favorite foods: whole wheat crackers with peanut butter and sliced bananas, a little bowl of cream of chicken soup, and a little slice of her vanilla cake with chocolate frosting.

This is a wonderful little moment in this writer’s memory of her grandmother. Teachers would be delighted with the descriptive details of “kid-sized dishes” and the
foods. But to revise it toward memoir, the writer might ask, “What am I trying to say here?” or “What does this memory reveal about me, or about my relationship with Granma?” Perhaps she remembers the little tray with her favorite foods made her feel special, seen and known in the midst of a houseful of grandchildren. Perhaps this kind of demonstration of her grandmother’s love stood in marked contrast to how she felt treated in school.

In Italy, Randy and I stayed for one glorious week at an ecotourist farmhouse in Tuscany. In the mornings, I would sit on our little terrace with my caffè latte, watching the owners water, pick fruit, sweep the walks. I wrote in my notebook:

This morning everything feels so fresh and new. Every breeze brings a sweet jasmine smell and bird songs I’ve never heard. I try to paint this view with my watercolors—I can’t. I don’t know how to mix colors to get all these shades of green. The leaves of trees sparkle in the sun. The white gravel roads glow. Nothing detracts from the earth: all the buildings grow out of the ground in tans and terra cotta colors. Even the pool mimics the sky today.

I looked over this paragraph in my notebook, and I was not happy with it. It may have been fine as a casual observation of the surroundings, but I knew my noticings were unoriginal, and I also knew I was avoiding what was really going through my mind that morning. Fortunately, I knew it was just something I jotted in my notebook and that I could revise it. Patricia Hampl says, “Writing a first draft is a little like meeting someone for the first time. I come away with a wary acquaintanceship, but the real friendship (if any) is down the road. Intimacy with a piece of writing, as with a person, comes from paying attention to the revelations it is capable of giving, not by imposing my own notions and agenda, no matter how well-intentioned they might be” (1999, 28).

So I asked myself about this little notebook entry: What do the details of what I’m describing reveal to me? Not much, yet. I needed to turn the writing over and over like tilling a field before planting the grapevines. So I pushed my hoe in deeper, turned up a new layer of ancient dirt. I wrote more honestly, always a sure way to improve one’s writing through revision. As this was merely a notebook entry, I knew that since I couldn’t remember the full Dante quote (now in quotation marks) that suddenly came to me, I could just put “Dante” and look it up when I got back home:

Coming to this gorgeous place in my 45th year, like Dante, I am “midway on my life’s journey, I have found myself in dark woods, the right road lost. To tell about
those woods is hard—so tangled and rough." I watch that young German woman sunbathe nude for hours by the pool. She loves her body. No self-consciousness whatsoever. Her body is like a flower stem. I watch also the older American woman outfitted to fight off age—sun hat, zinc oxide like a white mask over her entire face, giant black sunglasses—exercising in the water first thing every morning. Her body is the full, round flower, and she covers it with a towel the second she rises from the water.

Why do we worship the young green stem and not the full flower?

OK, I liked this better, but if I wanted to make this a memoir piece, I could go back to possibly the deepest layer of myself, to reveal the embarrassing truth: that much of the time in Italy, when I wasn’t studying Renaissance art and architecture, or painting landscapes, or talking to locals about the voting system in Italy (all noble pursuits), I was gripped with jealousy, watching all the young, beautiful Italian girls in their short, short skirts and leather jackets, their impossibly high heels, zipping around on their Vespa motorbikes, just beginning the night’s adventures as I was heading home to sleep. I felt envious of the young Americans studying art in Florence for a year. Why hadn’t I tried something like that? I was mourning a life I feel slipping away, and then I beat myself up for being so incredibly shallow and unsatisfied. But I knew that beneath jealousy and nostalgia there had to be some true compost, some live organisms, some heat, so I kept digging, and I found three more truths: (1) I am afraid of getting old—afraid that I will miss something I was meant to have or to experience, something life-changing. Beneath that is (2) a lifelong struggle to feel happy and satisfied with the gifts I have been given of a full and happy life. And I face that struggle because (3) I have not forgiven the adults responsible for me, and not thanked them either, for giving me life. There. After a great deal of reflection, I was able to reach some level of truth. As I revise, I now have the option of weaving those revelations into my original observation or just letting them inform which details I choose to put in and which to leave out. This exercise reminds me of the second big way to revise.

2. Revise by telling the truth

Not the truth as in who was sitting around the table when you threw up your Thanksgiving dinner that time. Not as in the exact words you said to your brother when he took your bike and wrecked it. Not the names of each and every ride you took at the amusement park. But the truth about what you were feeling at the time. Or the truth about how
you feel now, reflecting on something that happened then. The power of memoir resides in what might be called an emotional truth. This is critical because the images and feelings that linger inside us might not coincide with what others claim to be the truth. When William Zinsser’s mother read his memoir chapter about his lonely boyhood on Long Island, New York, she wept because his memory of his childhood was “less golden” than her memory of his childhood (1987, 12).

In The Seven Sins of Memory, Daniel L. Schacter (2002) assures us that we all recall the past through our current biases and beliefs. It is impossible for humans to give a clear, concise, accurate account of what happened in the past. For memoir writers, that should come as a relief. We can use noncommittal phrases like “I think it was . . .” or “It seems as if . . .” or “I don’t remember exactly, but . . .” In fact, such phrases help earn the trust of your reader, who doesn’t remember her past very clearly either and will be sympathetic to your foggy memory.

Memoir writing is probably the most risky kind of writing for postulating truth. Fiction and poetry, of course, are exempt from telling the truth, except that the events, situations, and feelings of the characters have to make sense within the world of the text and within some kind of world order that people can accept. Characters can’t suddenly have an about-face, a change of heart, unless there has been provocation enough to make it happen. Unless it is a science fiction novel, green, slimy creatures can’t come to dinner. Unless it is a fantasy novel, children probably can’t fly through the air on sticks.

Some kinds of expository writing, such as journalism, academic writing, and feature articles in magazines, posit truths that must be backed up with evidence: facts, statistics, verifiable quotes and references to other texts, names, dates, numbers. But memoir hangs out there like a loose kite. You think you can still see it up there, tiny against the clouds, but you can’t pull it back, you can’t tie it down, you can’t follow it, it’s moving too fast. Memoir is suspect and subject to scrutiny and to multiple points of view. Have you had the experience of sitting around the table, recounting some old family story, when your brother said, “That’s not how it happened!”? Or perhaps your mother said, “I don’t remember that. You must be mistaken!” Sometimes it seems as if we grew up in entirely different households.

Truth, in memoir, is ultimately between the writer and the writer’s conscience. The memoirist tries to be honest, tries to turn a memory over and over, tills the soil to find where the central theme is, tries to reflect on the event in a way that reveals something
that seems a bit risky, a little on the edge. You almost blush from saying these words, yet you decide to go ahead and say them. Writing memoir should feel almost as if you were diving from the highest platform into the deepest pool of water. Or as if you were watching a video of yourself teaching your class. You know that feeling—“Oh that can’t be me!” But it is you.

Why do I have to make myself feel like that? you might ask. Why do I have to be that honest? And especially, why would I ask my children to feel that way? Because the unspoken contract between the memoirist and the reader demands honesty. People who enjoy reading memoir read it presuming that the author is telling the truth. They want to know how this person, this particular writer, sees the world and makes sense of his life. What he learned from experiences that might be like the reader’s own. Finding out that a memoirist was telling barefaced lies causes a breach of trust, and it chisels away at the writer-reader relationship for future memoir writers. If it happened too often, one could imagine memoirists becoming people who, like politicians, are largely distrusted and ignored by their audience.

The memoirist has the responsibility to develop her “I” in the memoir. The “I” cannot be too full of itself or too positively in the right and in the know about things. Unlike politicians, memoirists should not be making grandiose promises or holding themselves up as the best and the brightest. The memoirist should concede to not knowing a lot of things, to not remembering exactly, to being right about some things and very wrong about others, to making mistakes, and especially, to having twenty-twenty hindsight. Often, the most interesting parts of a memoir lie in the reflection, the process of looking at the past through the lens of the present. “Now that I think about it . . .”; “If I had only been able to . . .”; “I used to think . . . but now I think . . .”

On the other hand, you can try the third large revision strategy.

3. **Revise by telling “lies”**

Embrace your aging memory! Daniel Schacter assures us that there is next to nothing we can do about the common memory problems we all, young and old, face. We are absentminded; we misplace our wallets and keys; we think about too many things at once. We block certain things, like someone’s name, and then we all experience that “tip of the tongue” feeling. We mistake words or faces that look similar. Our memories are
open to suggestion. We see the past through our current biases and beliefs. Bad memories persist and good memories fade with time. Rather than bemoan these memory problems, we can revise to compensate for what we can’t remember.

Move events around in time. Make something the climax of your story that in reality played only a small part. Change names to protect the innocent (and the guilty). Don’t fuss and fret over details of what the place looked like, which exact intersection your car broke down in, or what color of shirt your father had on that day. Make up details that will create the world that seems most true to your experience.

*It was a stormy night—so black after flashes of lightning that I thought someone had thrown a wool sack over my head to blind me.*

No.

*It was a close, muggy night, and the mosquitoes kept me awake with their high-pitched whining around my ears.*

No, actually . . .

*It was the kind of night when you never want to go to bed because the air feels so sweet on your skin.*

It’s useful in the draft to try to get to the truth, to the heart of the matter, and then make up details that help your memoir be a better piece of literature, a more finely crafted story, a more moving narrative. Of course all writers can get carried away with descriptive detail or with facts and events that drift away from the core of the story, so they need to know that they must also use sledgehammer 4.

4. **Revise by leaving things out**

Russell Baker said that while the biographer’s problem is that he never knows enough, the autobiographer’s problem is that he knows too much: “He knows the whole iceberg, not just the tip” (1987, 49). Just because you have the floor, so to speak, in your memoir, it doesn’t allow you to blather on about this and that, to “hang on the reader’s arm, like a drunk” (1987b, 68), as Annie Dillard so deftly puts it. A writer who sounds drunk had best learn the power of silence. Poets know the power of silence and use it often in
the white spaces of their poems. The subjects not mentioned, the occurrences left out, the feelings alluded to but not dissected to bits—in the hands of a skilled writer, this reticence becomes aesthetically pleasing, a quality of good writing.

The best advice we can give any writer is to learn how to cut things out of his text, and most writers cut ruthlessly. The memoirist might have a particularly hard time letting go of actual parts of his life, but the craftwork, according to Dillard, is “to fashion a text,” to figure out “what to put in and what to leave out” (1987b, 55). Figuring that out is difficult, especially for young or first-time memoirists. Teachers of writing hear the same complaint year upon year from their students: “But that’s what really happened!” The details of exactly what happened are not the point, however. The point, in fashioning a text, is to tell a great story that makes the reader care to read it.

Deciding what to cut, deciding what to leave out, deciding what to reveal and what to conceal becomes an art, and it takes years of practice. Do not expect children to know how to do it without a great deal of support from you and time to practice it again and again.

5. Revise by telling another side of the story

In Italy, we saw possibly thousands of frescoes, paintings, and sculptures depicting the same Bible stories and the same lives of the saints and monks, the bishops and popes. Each work of art was more breathtaking than the last, but they all shared the same theme: the unquestioned and unquestioning religious piety of medieval Europe.

But there were other stories as well. At the Museum of Torture in Siena, you can look at instruments, paintings, even handwritten journal entries documenting the details of certain men of the church who tortured anyone who did not bend to their beliefs. The tools of torture are some of the most brilliant objects I’ve ever seen, and the most hideous. A sign at the entrance of the museum reads: “No one under 14, or the sensitive.” I should have heeded that warning.

For Christians, this is a very hard story to think about, and yet if it doesn’t get told, we are letting masses of people die without graves.

My student William was having trouble writing about his family because he was so angry at his father for ignoring or making fun of his children and for eventually leaving home. He told me he didn’t want to write anything about his childhood at all because “none of it was good.” When I asked William if he could think about why his father
might have acted toward him as he did, William decided to revise his memoir by including another side of the story, one about his father’s childhood. William’s father had been adopted by a white couple who had stripped him of his Dominican culture and language. They wanted his father to “dress white, talk white, and act white.” “I think that’s why he criticizes the way I talk sometimes,” William wrote. “He says I’m talking like a ‘Spic.’ I guess he didn’t really have anyone to teach him how to love someone for who they are and talk nice to them.”

Revision may not have led William to forgive his father, not yet. But it helped him imagine his father’s side of the story, and that may be the first step toward forgiveness. I think that forgiveness can come from imagining what were the social, political, and psychological conditions of the people responsible for us that would allow them to ignore or even encourage things to happen the way they did. Once you look critically at the social conditions surrounding your life, you angle your memoir out of yourself toward the world.

The Finer Tools of Revision

Once students have selected a topic or theme for their memoir, collected more information and layered the story with interpretive lenses, and attempted some of the large tools of revision, we can approach a list of serious nuts-and-bolts strategies for revising the memoir draft.

For at least one week prior to taking drafts through final edits for spelling, grammar, and punctuation, I ask my class to help me generate a chart of things to do to change their drafts. If students have been writing for several months, or have been in writing process classrooms before mine and tried writing several different genres, I encourage them to begin our “Memoir Revision” chart with activities that worked well for them in the past. I also add strategies that I know work particularly well for the memoir genre. I type and copy this list for each student to paste into the writer’s notebook, and during the week or more of revising, I require students to tackle at least two items from our list of revision strategies during class or for homework.

Usually, they do this revision work in their writer’s notebooks, which are like workbenches. These activities should feel liberating, eye-opening, as fun as letting loose a
giant bundle of helium-filled balloons into the sky. Some of the work they do in their notebooks over the next week or two will find its home in the final memoir draft, but some of it will not. The value is in the exploration and finding out that writers fiddle and muck about and play with language a lot until they find the exact right words for what they want to say, which has the effect of hitting a nail smack-dab on its head.

**Draw a section**

Draw part of the memoir. Talk about what you drew with a partner. Are there things in the drawing that can be added to your draft? What were you thinking about as you drew this picture?

After you talk for five minutes with your partner, go write down in your notebook what you talked about so you won’t forget it. Then, look over your draft to see where these new pieces of information will best fit.

**Act out a section**

Get together with a partner or small group and act out a part of your memoir. First, give your partner(s) the portion of your memoir that you want to see performed. It should be a section that has some dialogue and action, or else there’s nothing to act out! Ask someone to play you and others to play any other characters. See if they can come close to what you had in mind when you wrote the piece. If not, revise your writing to make it come closer to what you had in mind. Your partners may have some great ideas for how to improve this scene!

**Make various outlines for a section**

Once you have written a draft of a memoir, try making at least two different outlines of the major sections. In your outlines, rearrange the parts. Move the chunk you currently have at the end up to the beginning. Move what is currently in the middle to the end, and so on. Think about how reorganizing the sections would change the draft, and be open to finding a new and better way to organize the major parts of your draft.
Cut up big sections and rearrange

Make sure you have a copy of your draft before you do this. Cut the draft at the large sections. Rearrange the parts so that what used to be in the middle is now at the beginning, and so on. Think about how reorganizing the section changes the draft; you may need to write a new opening paragraph or a new ending to match your new arrangement.

Study published lead paragraphs

Look at the first paragraph of five published memoirs. Read them out loud to yourself. Notice how the author invited you, the reader, into his or her story. What did the author do to catch your eye? Is this something you can try in your beginning? Here are five beginnings to study:

I remember the first time I got really bad news. (Mary Pope Osborne, “All-Ball”)

I grew up riding a rocket. If legendary rocket man Wernher von Braun could have harnessed the power of my meteoric temper, we’d have beaten the Russians into space by a good six months. (Chris Crutcher, King of the Mild Frontier)

When I was your age, I was flying. I wasn’t flying all the time, of course, and I didn’t fly by myself, but there I was, nonetheless, on Saturday afternoons in the 1950’s, several thousand feet in the air over the state of Connecticut, which is where I grew up. (Reeve Lindbergh, “Flying”)

“Guess what?” That’s all my nine-year-old sister Lizzie had to say to get me excited.
“What?”
“You’ll never guess,” Lizzie said. And I wouldn’t. Lizzie was too smart for me. (Katherine Patterson, “Why I Never Ran Away from Home”)

My sister, brother, and I didn’t have a dog, but we sure could have used one around dinnertime. Our dog would never have had to beg for table scraps, for we promised sincerely in our mealtime prayers always to feed Rover the main course. It wouldn’t have been so much for love of dog, but for survival. (Rita Williams-Garcia, “Food from the Outside”)
Write five leads

Write at least five different beginnings to your memoir; then choose which one you like best. See how your memoir would change with each of those possible beginnings.

Study published final paragraphs

Look at the last few paragraphs of five published memoirs. Read them out loud to yourself. Notice how the author “leaves the page.” What did the author do to make the story sound finished (without saying “the end”)?

[My father] was persuading and coaxing and willing the plane to do what he wanted; he was leaning that airplane, like a bobsled, right down to where it could safely land. He could feel its every movement, just as if it were part of his own body. My father wasn’t flying the airplane, he was being the airplane. That’s how he did it. That’s how he had always done it. Now I knew. (Reeve Lindbergh, “Flying”)

The rest of that night I slept sweetly, peacefully, for the first time in I couldn’t remember how long. I slept deeper than the voice of Howard Bruce’s father, a sleep that might have come all the way from Heaven. (Karen Hesse, “Waiting for Midnight”)

Swimming now in the clear-water lakes of Wisconsin, where I live, I sometimes imagine my mother riding the waves of the sea, cresting over the top and falling gently without ever hitting bottom, laughing her easy musical laugh. She could be right next to me: we are separated only by glimmering water. (Kyoko Mori, “Learning to Swim”)

It is from that moment that I stop crying. Although I don’t know it then, sitting in that chair in our living room, I have passed over a line—the invisible line between childhood and whatever it is that comes next. Not adulthood, not that quickly, but the beginning of the long, long walk into another world. (Norma Fox Mazer, “In the Blink of an Eye”)

“We’ll leave her,” Grampa said. We turned to get into the car. When I looked back over my shoulder, she was gone. Only ripples on the water, widening circles
rolling on toward other shores like generations following each other, like my grandmother’s flowers still growing in a hundred gardens in Greenfield, like the turtles still seeking out that sandbank, like this story that is no longer just my own but belongs now to your memory, too. (Joseph Bruchac, “The Snapping Turtle”)

**Write five endings**

Write at least five different endings and choose which one you like best. Notice that if you change your current ending, you will probably need to change other parts of the draft, even the beginning, to fit the new ending.

**Tell someone your memoir**

Call someone and tell him or her what you are writing about in your memoir. Have the person take notes, or tape-record you, so that you can add some of the new and different things you say to your friend into your draft.

**Describe the internal you and the external you**

Choose two or three meaningful events or memories from your draft. Rewrite them to include what was happening to the external you and then again to include what was happening to the internal you.

**Write more about one sentence**

Find a part of your memoir where you write only a sentence or two about something important. In your writer’s notebook, write that sentence up at the top of a blank page. Then squeeze and squeeze your memory to write two pages all about that sentence. Pretend the sentence is the door you open into a museum. Go exploring to find out what is in that museum.

**Turn a difficult part into a list or poem**

For a part that feels overwhelming because there is just *too much* to say, or it is painful to say it, try just writing about it in a simple list, using only a word or phrase on each line of the list. Or try writing this section as a small poem.
Write a section in third person

Think (without looking at the actual draft) of a paragraph or a scene from your memoir that is written in first person. Write that small section over again in your writer’s notebook, using the third person.

Now compare the two versions, and notice what is different. See if there is anything in the tone, the word choice, the details you recalled in the third-person version that you can add into your draft.

Study five favorite published titles

Find five titles from published memoirs that you admire and try writing a few like those. Are they funny (and long), like Chris Crutcher’s *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography*? Or is the main title one strong word, like *Soldier*, by June Jordan? Are they poetic, like *The Air Down Here: True Tales from a South Bronx Boyhood*, by Gil C. Alicea?

Write five different titles

In your writer’s notebook, write at least five different possibilities for the title of your memoir. A good title makes a reader want to read your piece. So you won’t just make it a boring old title like “All About Me” or “My Life Story.” Instead, you might want to use a phrase that sounds like poetry: “Pink Mountains and Pearly Moons.” You might want a title that gives a tiny bit of information about you, but in a mysterious-sounding way that will be explained inside the memoir: “Girl at the End.” (The end of what? At the end of a line? At the end of her patience? At the end of time?)

Writers often find a meaningful word or phrase inside their piece that will make a good title. Look inside your memoir to see if there is a great word or phrase for your title. Perhaps you write about a pattern in your life that would make a good title: “Always Right” or “Laughing at All the Wrong Times.” Perhaps you found a theme that can now become a title: “Family First, Video Games Second” or “Alone but Never Lonely.”

Find five things to name with proper nouns

Look back over your draft and find five things you can give a proper-noun name to: not just *cookies*, but *Nutter Butters*; not *my street*, but *the corner of Colorado and Mossman Place*; not *an old lady*, but *Mrs. Muriel Olafsen*. 
Read your memoir out loud

Read your memoir draft out loud to as many people as you can. As you read, listen for places that your voice might stumble over. Maybe some words need to get rearranged in the sentence, or perhaps there are too many words in that spot. Be ready with your colored pen to change words, add things, or delete things right there, as you are reading.

You can also ask someone else to read your memoir out loud to you. Again, listen as if you have never heard it before, and you are ready to be critical of it. Make notes on a piece of paper about things you want to be sure to change when you get the draft back.

Type your draft

If possible, type your draft or ask someone to type it for you. Seeing your words “in print” can help you find places where the writing feels weak.

Put the draft away for a while

Finally, put your draft away for a few days. There is nothing better than the passage of time to help a writer look at his or her work with new eyes and revise some weak parts.

Revision’s tools are power tools. For the memoirist, the ability to change even the few words of a title can result in a new way of thinking about and telling a life story. Revision allows the memoirist to stand back, stand apart from the work she created to see it again, to see it anew, and to make it even better than it was before. How many things in life do we get another chance to make better?
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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