**What Is the Difference Between a Memoir & Personal Narrative?**

by Kate Prudchenko, Demand Media



Like memoir, a photograph evokes a memory of a particular time and place.

Both memoirs and personal narratives are stories of a real person’s experiences, but they are not entirely alike. A narrative is a story that contains elements of narration like setting, characters, and plot. A personal narrative, however, relays the person’s direct experience of a particular event, or set of events, including his thoughts and feelings. A memoir goes beyond a personal narrative; it contains both direct experiences and reflections on other people’s experiences of a particular time.

**Personal Narrative**

A personal narrative is typically written in first-person about something in the narrator’s life. It centers on a certain event and relays the narrator’s thoughts, feelings and experiences. A personal narrative may contain information about what the narrator read, encountered, or heard and his reactions to these encounters. Because a personal narrative is a narrative, it contains all the elements of a narrative, including setting, characterization, speech and plot. Furthermore, it is typically limited to the discussion of one particular event or incident.

**Memoir**

A memoir is an account of a real person’s life. The narrator is a character in a story who reflects on the events of his life and, usually, draws certain conclusions. A memoir is typically focused on certain incidents in a person’s life, and those incidents make up the individual stories that contribute to the overall work. Unlike an autobiography, which recounts particular historical dates and facts about a person’s life, a memoir is a depiction of how that individual remembers his own life. The dates and facts in a memoir may not be entirely accurate (though they often are), and they are less important than the memories and the reflections.

**Personal Narrative vs. Memoir**

One important distinction between a personal narrative and a memoir is that a personal narrative often covers a single event while a memoir covers multiple events with a single theme. A personal narrative relays a story in the narrator’s life that consists of his experience, thoughts, feelings and reflections, and a memoir contains information that goes beyond that, including information that is outside the narrator’s immediate knowledge and experience. As a result, while a personal narrative is also a memoir, a memoir is not necessarily a personal narrative.

**Examples**

A personal narrative about the September 11 attacks might consist of an individual’s direct experience of escaping from the towers down a staircase, the smell of the smoke, and the confusion and the helplessness that he felt on that day. That person’s memoir about the same exact event might also include his indirect experiences: stories of other people’s experiences who lived through the tragedy and the impact that their stories had on his own recollection of that time and place.

**References**

* [Appalachian State University: Reading/Writing Workshop Memoir; Dr. Beth Frye](http://www.lesn.appstate.edu/fryeem/RE5130/Memoir_Fall09.pdf)
* [The American Scholar: How to Write a Memoir; William Zinsser](http://theamericanscholar.org/how-to-write-a-memoir/#.UW7OUbXvswE)
* [Iredell-Statesville Schools: Narrative Writing Tutorial](http://www.iss.k12.nc.us/writing)
* [Canyon Crest Academy: Tips for Writing a Personal Narrative; K. Burke](http://teachers.sduhsd.k12.ca.us/kburke/tips_for_writing_a_personal_narr.htm)

**Resources**

* [The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative; Thomas Larson](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1151811.The_Memoir_and_the_Memoirist)

**About the Author**

Kate Prudchenko has been a writer and editor for five years, publishing peer-reviewed articles, essays, and book chapters in a variety of publications including Immersive Environments: Future Trends in Education and Contemporary Literary Review India. She has a BA and MS in Mathematics, MA in English/Writing, and is completing a PhD in Education.

**Photo Credits**

* Burke/Triolo Productions/Brand X Pictures/Getty Images