

## **This is an example of an ineffective memoir**

### **The First Time I Ever Told a Lie to My Mother**

It was 1956. I was five years old, and it was the fall of my kindergarten year in Mrs. Brown's class. I'd never lied to my mother before, but on this day I told a big lie! Here's the story of what happened on that day.

It all started when we were at naptime. Earlier that day we played with clay in art and a really good piece of clay was lying on the floor. I don't know why, but I picked it up and started rolling it around on my skirt. It made a big mess on my skirt!

When I got home, my mother asked me what was on my skirt. I didn't want to get in trouble, so I told her a boy named Glenn had put clay all over my skirt. She didn't believe me, because my brother's name was Glenn, but she didn't punish me! I never could figure that out! She just sent me outside to play. I'll never forget that day.  
The end.

## Why is it ineffective?

- The title is boring: *it's a label, not an inviting combination of words.*
- The beginning is weak: *it's an introductory paragraph of facts, not a lead that brings readers into the action.*
- There's no personality: *none of the writer's thoughts, feelings, and observations.*
- It's too short: the pace is too fast to draw readers in, involve them, and help them make a movie in their minds.

## This is an example of an effective memoir

### Two Lies

"What is that on your dress?"

I looked up into my mother's gray eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the pink stuff all over the dress I spent forty-five minutes ironing," she sputtered. I looked down and took a deep breath. Could I do it? Could I tell her the lie?

That morning at naptime, curled up on my kindergarten mat, I had spied a prize on the classroom floor: an exquisite lump of pink clay. I remembered how much fun it had been to stretch, pound, and eat clay at art time. Now I considered how much fun it would be to flatten out that lump. But on what?

I looked around. There was my mat - too sticky. There was the floor - too dirty. And ooooo - there was my dress. I spread the skirt of the dress on the mat, smoothed the material, and started kneading the clay.

By the time the boy who was the nap fairy came along to tap me with the nap wand and tell me I could get up, the skirt of my yellow dress had turned pink. I was wearing the lump of clay. As I rolled up my mat, the realization of what I had just done began to dawn. My mother was going to be upset with me. No, my mother was going to be mad at me. No, my mother was going to **kill** me.

I grew up in a house where the refrigerator was full of damp, rolled up clothes lying in wait in plastic bags for my angry mother to shake out and use for target practice with her iron. The dresses I wore to school - back then it was a federal statute or something that girls had to wear dresses to school - were smocked, sashed, and splashed with ribbons and lace. I think they must have been a mother's nightmare. Once my mother had ironed one of those suckers, I wore it until it was soiled; then she opened the refrigerator, and Glenn, Bonnie, and I ran and hid in our bedrooms until the fit of ironing had passed.

On the way home from kindergarten, I stared at my reflection in the window of the bus, ignored my friends and the laughter and singing around me, and worried. What would my mother say? Worse, what would she *do*? My mother was a spanker and screamer; I could feel the spanks and hear the screams.

Suddenly I sat up. Of course - why hadn't it occurred to me before? When my mother asked about the clay on my dress, I would *lie*. Yeah, lie. I'd heard about lying; people did it all the time. I'd just make up a story. What a relief. For the rest of the ride home I invented and polished the lie.

When the bus pulled up at the end of our driveway, I jumped down the steps, skipped up to our porch, burst through the back door, and yelled, "Mommy, I'm home!" when she saw the dress, which she did immediately, and asked about it, which came next, I took a deep breath, and I lied.

"See, at naptime, this boy who was on the mat next to me found a ball of clay and he picked it up and rolled it all over my dress."

"What?" my mother asked.

"At naptime, this boy who was on the mat next to me found a ball of clay and he picked it up and he rolled it all over my dress."

"Uh-huh. I think I'd better call Mrs. Brown and have a little talk with her about this boy - or maybe I'll call his mother and have a little talk with her. What's his name?"

I began to lose confidence. A name? A name hadn't been part of the plan. Frantically I cast around for a boy's name. A boy. A boy. Did I know any boys? I blurted out the only name I could think of.

"Glenn. It was Glenn." Glenn *was* a boy's name. Unfortunately, it was also my brother's name. I could tell by the look on her face that the coincidence was proving too much for my mother. She pinched her lips together and gripped my shoulders. I cringed and felt the tears begin. Her hands rested on my shoulders. I could feel her looking at me, but I was afraid to meet her gaze. I stared at our shoes. A silence of a few seconds stretched for an eternity.

Suddenly she released me. "Change your clothes and go outside and play," she sighed.

What?

"Go on - put on your play clothes."

I stumbled into the bedroom, stepped out of the dress, and pulled on a t-shirt and pants. In half a minute I was standing in our fenced-in backyard, alone and as confused as I had ever been in my whole life. Where were the screaming and spanking? It's not that I missed them. I missed the certainty of crime and punishment, of the way things were supposed to happen at my house. Why was my mother not acting like my mother?

She didn't mention the dress when my father came home from work or at dinner or the next day - or ever. In fact, I never saw the yellow dress again. It was a mystery I couldn't solve - until the day my daughter came home from kindergarten and lied to me for the first time, a small, dumb lie that I saw right through.

Anne cried. Then we talked about why she had lied to me. "Because I was afraid of what you'd do if I told the truth," she sobbed.

My heart sank. Anne was afraid of me - me, her mother, who loved her more than anything. We talked, until she understood I wasn't angry and her tears had dried. Then she went off to play, and I began to chop the vegetables for dinner. Standing over the cutting board in the late afternoon light, I remembered my first lie and its mysterious resolution.

And I understood power. Parents have so much of it. We're the monarchs of our children's worlds. I want my child to respect my power- to let me show her how to be honest, kind, civil, and safe - but I don't want her to fear it, to fear me.

Maybe the angry queen of my childhood didn't always enjoy her power, either. Maybe on a fall day forty-five years ago she looked through her daughter's tears and in that first lie felt the fear of Mom. Maybe her heart sank, too.

## Qualities of a Memoir That Works

- The title invites and fits: *it came last; it was chosen from among possibilities that the writer brainstormed.*
- The lead brings readers right into the action of the story.
- Background information that a reader needs is woven in – *the who-what-when-where-why context is embedded in the narrative.*
- There's lots of I: *lots of thoughts, feelings, and observations of the memoirist*
- The pace is slowed down: *readers can make a movie in their minds*
- A reader can see, hear, and feel the experience *because the writer provides concrete, sensory details and descriptions of people in action*
- The small details show what matters to the people in the memoir
- There is dialogue; the writer uses it to show what people are like and how they're feeling
- The language is interesting: *verbs like sputter, knead, spy, curl, polish, pinch, and grip that a reader can see, feel, and hear.*
- The ending is purposeful: *it leaves a reader thinking*
- There's a So what?: *a meaning or significance that was discovered by the memoirist during the act of writing the memoir*
- There's a setting: *a time and place*
- The action flashes back and forward in time and creates questions in the reader's mind about what will happen next
- *The memoirist invented details that fit with the spirit, intention, and truth of the story.*