

PART I

# WRITING A NARRATIVE

1.

# A MEMOIRIST TEACHES NARRATIVE

Sarah Beth Childers

---

## What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn to create concrete images and develop yourself into a character in a true, narrative account of an event that happened in your past. You'll learn to meticulously construct your piece so that every line and image, from the first word, builds toward an effective ending. You'll also learn to use your life experience to comment on your life and the world, revealing the ways you have changed as a person between when that event occurred and today.

## Key Terms

- Perspective
- Persona
- Voice of innocence and voice of experience
- Turn
- Scene

## Choosing a Story to Tell

The word *memoir* comes from the French *mémoire*, meaning “memory,” or, more specifically, a person’s memory of their own experiences. Perhaps you’ve heard of memoirs as long, narrative books that famous, older people write about their lives, but anyone, of any age, can write a memoir. The memoir’s length can be thousands of pages, focusing on many memories connected by a theme (like the writer’s experience with their dad over twenty years), or it can be a short essay focusing on one clear memory.

For this class, you’ll be writing a narrative essay (not a book!), so it’s easiest to pick one memory for your focus point. While the subject of a memoir can be anything at all, memories that work well for memoir have a few common characteristics:

1. The remembered event happened long enough ago that the writer has gained new **perspective** on the event, or a more mature way of viewing the situation in light of other experiences and personal growth.
2. The remembered event inspires complex emotions in the writer to this day. Perhaps those emotions include a mix of pride and sadness, or a mix of anger and joy. The work of memoir involves puzzling out why a memory is important, and how the writer feels about that memory.

3. The memory includes at least one clear, concrete image that the writer can develop into a **scene**, a particular moment on the page that takes place in a specific space.

In the memoir essay “Chop Suey,” Ira Sukrungruang<sup>1</sup> tells a story of a visit to a bowling alley with his mother that happened when he was a child, long before he crafted the essay. In the memoir essay “Dogged,” Barrie Jean Borich<sup>2</sup> describes a dog she saw running across the highway when she was a young woman, twenty-five years before she wrote the piece. But there’s no set amount of time that needs to have passed, as long as you’ve been able to gain **perspective** on that memory. Perspective, in a memoir, means the ability to see the memory with more complexity than you could see it at the time, and the ability to put the memory in context of the world around you and other events in your life. The memory also needs to have taken place long enough ago for you to take advantage of your brain’s natural memory sifting process. When something happened last week, it’s often difficult to decide which parts of the story are worth telling, leading to long, dull passages like packing a suitcase for a trip. Years after the event occurs, you’ll have forgotten the inconsequential details, and you’ll be more able to focus on what, for you, was worth remembering.

While great memoir pieces can be about enormous, life-changing events, like a career-ending injury or the death of a family member, they don’t have to be. Sukrungruang’s trip to the bowling alley and Borich’s running dog are small life moments with big implications. What’s important is that you choose something that you can interrogate, dig into. Something that allows you to ask yourself why your brain has stored that memory, how you felt about the event then vs. how you feel about it now, and what that memory can tell you about who you are today.

## Splitting Yourself in Two

When a writer crafts a memoir of any length, it’s impossible for them to put their whole self on the page, with every detail that makes them the human being who currently lives in the world. Instead, much like a fiction writer, the memoirist creates a character who experiences and tells the story, choosing the elements of the self that most relate to the situation at hand. In her book *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, Vivian Gornick calls that character-self the **persona**.<sup>3</sup>

In “Chop Suey,” Sukrungruang’s persona, or character-self, includes the following: he’s the ten-year-old son of a woman who immigrated from Thailand; he loves his mother but disagrees with her about American culture, people, and life; he has some experience with bowling but no real skill; and he and his mother are the only people of color in a bowling alley full of white men. Notice that while the writer chooses what information to give the audience about their persona, they must also decide what to leave out. We don’t learn, for example, anything about Sukrungruang’s father, or about other relatives who might be important in his life. We don’t learn anything about the house/apartment/trailer/etc. where he lives, or what he ate for breakfast that morning, or the car or train ride or walk to the bowling alley. We don’t learn about his religious beliefs. We don’t learn how he’s doing in school. What’s important is his relationship with his mother in that bowling alley on that day.

Of course, the little boy in the bowling alley isn’t the same as the adult, experienced person (or *persona*) who is narrating the piece. The adult narrator of the piece is proud of his mother, and he’s well aware of her skill at bowling. Sukrungruang begins the essay, “My mother was a champion bowler in Thailand.” The very next sentence shows the contrast between that adult narrator and the little boy in the bowling alley. Sukrungruang writes, “This is not what I knew of her.”

In her craft essay, “Innocence and Experience: Voice in Creative Nonfiction,” Sue William Silverman talks about these two different character-selves that show up in every memoir.<sup>4</sup> Taking inspiration from the English Romantic poet William Blake, who

1. You can find “Chop Suey” by Ira Sukrungruang online in the fall 2005 issue of *Brevity*, <https://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/chop-suey/>. The writer’s last name is pronounced “SUKERUNG-RUNG.”

2. You can find “Dogged” by Barrie Jean Borich online in the January 2011 issue of *Sweet*, <http://www.sweetlit.com/3.2/proseBorich.php>. The writer’s last name is pronounced “BORE-itch.”

3. Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002.

4. Sue William Silverman, “Innocence & Experience: Voice in Creative Nonfiction.” *Brevity*, 2005. <https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/innocence-experience/>

wrote a book of poetry called *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, she uses the term “**voice of innocence**” to describe the younger, past persona who experiences the events as they happen, without time for real reflection, and the “**voice of experience**” to describe the more mature writer-persona who puts the events into perspective, analyzing them on the page. That adult voice that begins Sukrungruang’s piece—“My mother was a champion bowler in Thailand”—is clearly the voice of experience, and the little boy in a sentence much later in the essay—“I put my head on her shoulder”—is clearly the voice of innocence. But, as Silverman notes, these two voices often intersect and overlap. For example, Sukrungruang describes the moment he learned more of his mother’s history, writing, “I listened, amazed that my mother could bowl a 200, that she was good at something beyond what mothers were supposed to be good at, like cooking and punishing and sewing. I clapped. I said she should stop being a mother and become a bowler.” Crafting that childlike thought and phrasing, “stop being a mother and become a bowler,” Sukrungruang wields the voice of innocence. However, readers can also sense some gentle self-mockery from the voice of experience throughout that passage—the experienced adult writer chuckling at his clapping child-self. In a memoir, innocence and experience balance each other out and sing together.

While Ira Sukrungruang begins his piece with the voice of experience, Barrie Jean Borich takes the opposite approach in “Dogged.” She begins with the voice of innocence, narrating the memory as she experienced it as a much younger woman. She writes, “The dog on the Calumet Expressway was no discernible breed, a good runner the size of a Doberman or greyhound, sleek and short-haired, dark with russet markings. No collar. The dog ran toward my car as I wound around the exit ramp toward the old East Side, where I was headed to pick up Little Grandma.”

Then, with the beginning of the second paragraph, Borich’s voice of innocence takes a step back, and the voice of experience steps in. The voice becomes more thoughtful, less precise, reflecting the fuzziness of memory. “This was near to twenty-five years ago,” Borich’s more experienced voice reminisces. She gives readers the details they need to understand the young persona who experienced that memory, explaining that she’d moved away from Chicago to Minneapolis, and she “was probably home for a short visit.” We learn that Little Grandma, who doesn’t drive, is Borich’s maternal grandmother, and Borich gives Little Grandma rides on her visits home.

In “Chop Suey,” Sukrungruang gives readers very little character info about the voice of experience that narrates the piece, focusing on developing his persona as a little boy. Borich, however, provides equal, or even more, life detail about her voice of experience/current persona, telling readers facts about her current life as well as describing relevant experiences, which presumably happened after the running dog, that helped shape who she is today. Beginning in paragraph four, Borich tells readers she currently owns dogs and pampers them, giving them Christmas presents and letting them sleep in her bed. She reveals she’s married to a woman named Linnea, and she tells a dog-related story of a time she and Linnea faced discrimination and hate because they were lesbians.

Reading “Chop Suey,” you’ll witness a life-changing moment that brought the worldview of the little boy, or the voice of innocence, closer to the adult voice of experience that narrates the piece. “Dogged” functions much differently. The dog on the highway didn’t change Borich’s life—she was just never able to forget it. The narrative power of “Dogged” comes from the new perspective the voice of experience brings to the memory, and from the contrast between the way Borich experienced that running dog as a young woman and the way she views that memory today.

## Structure and Scene

Memoirs of any length build to a **turn** that comes right at or very close to the memoir’s end and continues to the final word of the piece. At the turn, the memoir plunges into deeper emotional and/or intellectual territory. The voice of experience comments on the situation. The piece’s meaning becomes clear. The reader gets the distinct feeling, *We’re getting serious now*. Often, though not always, the turn reads like the climax in a fictional short story or novel, with a zoomed-in, slow-motion focus on an important, complicated **scene**. In a scene, a specific moment unfolds in a concrete space.

In “Chop Suey,” the turn begins when Sukrungruang’s mother changes her bowling shoes, and a “man with dark hair and

a mustache” begins walking toward her. The turn lasts all the way to the final line, when Sukrungruang’s mother says, “You’re welcome,” and Sukrungruang’s outlook on his mother and life changes forever.

Sukrungruang’s turn is so effective because he has built the entire piece to set up for that final moment. He’s set up the space physically with the “rumble” of pins on the wood floor and the “haze” of cigarette smoke. And he’s set up for the turn on an emotional and intellectual level. The first paragraph reveals Sukrungruang’s underestimation of his mother as a ten-year-old, and his childhood lack of understanding of why her view of American culture might differ so much from his own. In the third paragraph, he describes his mother through the voice of innocence, showing her as a middle-aged, matronly, potentially boring woman with heavy makeup “to cover the acne she got at 50” and a smelly handkerchief she puts over her nose, complaining about the “haze of smoke.” But in that same paragraph, Sukrungruang uses the voice of experience to set up the space’s danger: “My mother was the only woman in the place. We were the only non-white patrons.”

Sukrungruang also sets up the turn with a short scene, narrated mostly through the voice of innocence. Ten-year-old Sukrungruang tries to show off his bowling skills, fails miserably, and then his mother shocks him after picking up a bowling ball. Like any great scene, this one has clear, physical, grounded detail. His mother chooses a “ball from the rack, one splattered with colors.” Sukrungruang shows his mother’s body in action, writing, “When she was ready, she lined herself up to the pins, the ball at eye level. In five concise steps, she brought the ball back, dipped her knees and released it smoothly, as if her hand was an extension of the floor.”

This scene is crucial for two reasons: Sukrungruang’s mother’s sensational bowling performance begins to change her son’s view of her, and her performance apparently challenges the racist, loafing smokers, one of whom soon approaches her to attempt to assert his dominance with racist actions and remarks.

Then comes the turn, which in this case, functions much like a climax in a work of fiction. The ending stands out from the rest of the essay because of how closely Sukrungruang zooms in, showing every moment. The turn takes up a full third of this short essay’s length. Earlier in the piece, Sukrungruang summed up the dialogue, leaving out the quotation marks, including the line, “I said she should stop being a mother and become a bowler.” In the turn, all the dialogue has quotation marks, and, along with the dialogue, Sukrungruang shows the man’s changing facial expressions and body language along with Sukrungruang’s mother’s reactions. His mother holds tightly to her son and purse, while the man “toast(s) his beer to his friends, laughing smoke from his lips.”

Like the scene where Sukrungruang’s mother bowls, the turn takes place in a very specific, grounded space, right behind Sukrungruang and his mother’s lane, and a “few lanes over” from where the man’s friends stand. Readers can smell the cigarette smoke. They can see all of the characters’ bodies moving in this specific space: the approaching man clutching his cigarette and beer, the man’s friends “huddled and whispering.” Readers see Sukrungruang’s mother standing up after changing her shoes, and Sukrungruang himself leaning against her leg. And readers can feel Sukrungruang’s relief and admiration for his mother, and his brand-new understanding of this complicated country and world, as she protects her son and stops the man’s laughter with her measured response and the look in her eyes.

In “Dogged,” just like in “Chop Suey,” the turn comes close to the end of the piece and extends to the piece’s final word, “running.” While Sukrungruang’s turn hinges on a climax-like scene, Borich’s turn hinges on a revelation through the voice of experience of why she thinks she remembers this dog so clearly, and how she sees the dog differently as a much older writer than she did on the day it ran across the highway. In the next-to-last paragraph, Borich comments on the fact that she has been using she/her/hers pronouns for this dog during the entire essay, though she wasn’t close enough to determine the sex of the dog. She says she “assign[s] [her] memory of the dog a female gender” because she thinks of that dog and sees herself and her female relatives, who lived on through difficult circumstances that were due, in large part, to the fact that they were women. In the turn, readers understand Borich’s difference in perspective that has come twenty-five years later. When she witnessed the dog, Borich felt only sad and worried. Now, she remembers that dog and sees the “breathless, beleaguered female strain to keep on living.”

Also like in “Chop Suey,” the writer has constructed every line of the essay to build to the turn. However, the piece works differently because there’s not a whole lot to this memory—it’s just a collarless dog running on a busy highway. The dog on the highway provides a clear, concrete scene, as the dog “sp[eed]s toward the rumble of rusted sedans and semi trucks, into the far

southside industrial speedway.” But unlike “Chop Suey,” there is no story to spread out over several pages. In fact, Borich gives readers most of the memory of the running dog in the first paragraph.

In the subsequent paragraphs, Borich builds toward the turn by providing context through her voice of experience. She defends her past self to her current self, and to readers, explaining that because she was on her way to pick up Little Grandma, she couldn’t put that dog in her car. Borich tells readers about her current dogs, who wear hats and receive Christmas presents, letting readers know how much it hurt her to leave that dog behind.

She also shares a very short additional scene, illustrating the time that Borich and her spouse Linnea took care of two lost Golden Retriever puppies. She writes:

Some rough-looking young men, either neighborhood gangsters or pretending to be, showed up at our door. This was the year we saw neighbor boys with guns stuffed into their pants, the spring city papers started calling the street one block over from us Crack Avenue. The boys leaned up into our faces, calling us the worst words they could think of to let us know they could see we were lesbians, then accused us of stealing their dogs. We handed the puppies over. A few weeks later we adopted a dog of our own.

The boys at the door, leaning into Borich’s and Linnea’s faces, give the scene its clear image of action in a concrete space. This scene fits wonderfully into the essay because it includes dogs, and it builds directly to the ending, setting up the essay’s theme. In this scene, two women face danger because of who they are, and they determinedly live on by getting another dog together.

It’s important to note that while Borich spends much of her essay in the voice of experience, developing her current persona and providing context for the piece’s central memory, she also keeps returning to the running dog in between the background info and commentary, keeping readers grounded in that scene throughout the essay. She adds more detail to the running dog scene in paragraph three, telling readers it was raining and discussing the area’s terrible pollution at that time, calling it a “yellowish, smoke-stained drive to Little Grandma’s.” In paragraph five, she tells readers the dog was “running...headlong into traffic.” In paragraph six, Borich focuses on the dog’s eyes.

This brings us to the final paragraph of Borich’s piece. Great memoir endings often have two things in common:

1. Commentary from the voice of experience.
2. A final line that leaves readers with a powerful image.

At the end of “Chop Suey,” Sukrungruang uses the voice of experience to narrate his thoughts about his mother during her encounter with the racist man. He writes, “In that instant, I saw in her face the same resolve she had when she spanked, the same resolve when she scolded. In that instant, I thought my mother was going to hit the man.” Note that in his commentary, Sukrungruang doesn’t sum up the point of the essay (which is already clear) or tell readers what to think—he just reveals what *he* was thinking in that moment. After his commentary, Sukrungruang ends the essay with the image of his mother’s smile, “too bright, too large,” as she says, “You’re welcome.”

In the final paragraph of “Dogged,” Borich builds from the voice of experience’s commentary in the previous paragraph, where she just analyzed her female gendering of the dog. Now, she uses the voice of experience to zoom out in the running dog scene, showing readers the highway’s proximity to the pollution-choked places where her female family members have led difficult lives. Then, like Sukrungruang, Borich leaves readers with an image: the running dog, which, seen through through her current perspective—this new lens of determination—seems almost hopeful. In Borich’s memory, the dog still runs on that highway, not hit or starving, forever alive.

## Discussion Questions

- In a narrative reading that your instructor assigns, where has the writer used the voice of innocence, where has the writer used the voice of experience, and where do those two voices mix together?
- In that same narrative reading, find a concrete scene. What physical details create that space on the page and show bodies in

action?

- Make a list of three moments that changed your life and three moments you see much differently than you saw them when they happened. Next to each item on your list, jot down some physical details you'd use to develop the scene that would be important if you developed that memory into an essay. Choose the idea that interests you most and start writing.
  - Take a narrative essay (a published piece or one written by a classmate or yourself) and identify the turn. Then, for each paragraph in the essay before the turn, write a note about the information we get that builds to that turn. For pieces written by a classmate or yourself, look for paragraphs that don't build well to the turn, and make notes or friendly suggestions for cutting or better tying in those parts to the piece's overall narrative and theme.
- 

## About the Author



Sarah Beth Childers

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

<https://english.okstate.edu/pages/217-sarah-beth-childers>

Sarah Beth Childers is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University, specializing in creative nonfiction, and the nonfiction editor of the *Cimarron Review*. She is the author of the memoir-in-essays *Shake Terribly the Earth: Stories from An Appalachian Family* (Ohio University Press, 2013), and her essays have appeared in *Brevity*, *Colorado Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Pank*, and elsewhere. Sarah Beth lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma, with her family, including a dog-chasing little girl.