

The Art and Craft of Memoir Writing

A good memoir requires two elements—one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intention. Memoir is the best search mechanism that writers are given. Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us. If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own.

The other element is carpentry. Good memoirs are a careful act of construction. We like to think that an interesting life will simply fall into place on the page. It won't. We like to think that Thoreau went home to Concord and just wrote up his notes. He didn't. He wrote seven drafts of *Walden* in eight years, piecing together by what Margaret Fuller [one of Thoreau's contemporaries] calls the mosaic method, a book that seems casual, even chatty.

—from p. 6 of *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*,
edited by William Zinsser (Mariner Books, 1998)

1. What does William Zinsser mean when he says that memoir is “how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were, and what values and heritage shaped us”?
 - If we are writing about someone else, how does writing a memoir reveal who *we* are?
2. What does William Zinsser imply about the power of the writer when he says, “Good memoirs are a careful act of construction”?
 - What are the elements of “construction” that the storyteller or memoir writer controls?
3. Why does Zinsser stress that although his work sounds “chatty,” Thoreau “wrote seven drafts of *Walden* in eight years”?