



Elements of Effective Arc

Build your story around this foolproof framework to keep your memoir afloat.

BY ADAIR LARA

When I began work on my memoir, *Hold Me Close, Let Me Go: A Mother, a Daughter, and an Adolescence Survived*, about my daughter's action-packed coming of age, I had never heard of arcs. I thought, *I lived this story. I'll just write it down the way it happened. Type, type, type.* It was as if I decided to build a house and just started nailing together boards without having ever even heard of blueprints. I put up some strange-looking houses that way, in the form of inert drafts filled with pointless scenes. I would have saved myself a lot of time if I had drawn an arc. But back then, I hadn't even heard of an arc. Now I know it's the emotional framework of a memoir.

Once you have your arc, you stop banging your head on all those overwhelming questions that come with writing from real life. Where should the story begin? Where should it end? What goes in, and what doesn't? You learn not to lose the thread of your story by cramming in *everything* that happened—the trip to Alaska, the love letters, the musty apartment you rented before you got the house. You no longer waste time writing and rewriting scenes you don't even need. When you have an arc, you already know what must be drama-



tized in scene and what can be dealt with more quickly in summary.

If all that sounds essential to your memoir-writing process, it's because it is. So let's take a look at exactly how to build your arc, starting with the key elements: the desire line, actions and obstacles, emotional beats, the initiating incident and, of course, an ending.

The Desire Line

The first step in drawing an arc is to answer this question: What did you (as the narrator/protagonist) *want* in the story you're telling? In her book on writing memoir, *Your Life as Story*, my friend Tristine Rainer calls this *the desire line*. The struggle to achieve the desire drives the book. (You might have heard fiction writers call it the *through line*.)

You should be able to state the desire line in a sentence:

I wanted to be a psychiatrist.

I wanted to stay in the police department.

I wanted to love my stepson.

I wanted to make a new life in Uganda after the death of my wife.

I wanted to be a model though I weighed 160 pounds.

Keep in mind that the desire line can change by the end of the memoir. For example, a teen author might

begin by chronicling the methodical engineering of his own destruction, but end by deciding he wants to survive. Even so, it's his original desire that drives his character to that unexpected conclusion.

Don't expect to come up with your desire line immediately: It's not that easy. At first, I thought the desire line for my book about my relationship with my teenager was, "I wanted to keep my daughter safe"—but then I realized that was more about *her* than it was about me. The desire line must be one that makes the story about *you*. In my case, I had to keep searching until I found the right desire line: "I wanted to be a good mother."

Make your desire line as specific as you can. Avoid vague desires like, "I wanted to be loved," or, "I wanted to belong"—they're too general simply because everybody wants those things. If you're stuck, a good way to come up with the specific desire line is to write a one-page fantasy in which you get your ideal ending in the story you're telling. That's the story of you getting what you wanted. Now: What was it?

Actions and Obstacles

Once you have the desire line, you can lay out the events of your book. What did you do to get what you wanted? What got in your way?

Begin planning your story arc by jotting down a list of actions and obstacles:

I wanted _____ (the desire line).
 To get it, I _____ (action).
 To get it, I then _____ (action).
 But _____ (obstacle) got in my way.
 So, I _____ (action).
 (And so on.)

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In your memoir, remember that you are the action hero. You try a lot of different things to solve your problem, with mixed results. You have setbacks, you make mistakes and you push on, until you either get what you wanted, or you don't, or you stop wanting it, or whatever. For this reason, the obstacles in your book are just as important as the actions. Obstacles are often external: other people (the nurse who got herself written into your mother's will), bad luck, natural disasters and so on. Even more interesting to the reader, however, are the internal obstacles: the ways in which you screwed up, got things wrong. (After all, we all do, right? If your story is one of ping-ponging from triumph to triumph, keep it to yourself, thanks!) Why did you ignore evidence that your husband was lying to you? Or that you were lying to yourself? (In *Hold Me Close* I start by preening myself on what a natural mother I am. This is why it's such a blow when my daughter's life falls apart.) Often the real drama of a memoir is in watching the narrator shed beliefs and behaviors that keep him from getting what he wants.

If you can't come up with a clear list of things you did to get what you wanted—and of obstacles standing in your way—that might be a sign that your book concept is too internal, too talky or too dependent on psychological insights (for instance, realizing that you're leading the life your dad did, or that you married a woman who's a lot like your mom). If that happens, revisit your desire line until a clearer, more action-driven story arc presents itself.

It could also be that you're having a hard time identifying actions and obstacles because you're writing a victim book, in which something bad happened to you, and all you could do is *react*, rather than act. Take it from me: You don't want to write a poor-me book. The best memoirs show how human beings change under pressure, not just the bad things that can happen to people. And that change means change in *you*. If you marry a doctor who turns out to be a crook, that's not change.

It's bad luck. If you marry a doctor who turns out to be a crook, and you knew all along something was wrong—those unexplained phone calls, a repossessed Porsche—then you have a story to tell. Your memoir should be about what you found out about yourself,

not about him, the night of his arrest.

Be brave. Sometimes there's a difference between what you want to say and what readers want to hear. Assuming you're writing with an end goal of pursuing publication, it's not a bad idea to recognize this discrepancy early, so you can plan the book differently, this time with the readers' needs in mind.

Emotional Beats

A memoir is an emotional journey. The events in the story are there not *because they happened*, but to show the shifts in emotion the narrator (you) goes through, event by event, over the course of the book. These shifts are called "beats."

A beat is an event keyed to an *emotion*.

Here's an event: "And then my mother told me she'd had an affair." But how does that event affect the story? Here's the beat: "It was the first time that she made herself vulnerable to me, and for the first time in months, I really looked at her."

Take a look at these beats (with the emotional keys italicized, and of course simplified) in my student Erika Johnson's memoir-in-progress, *Wicked Stepmother*:

(**BEAT**) Erika is *excited* to be marrying the man she loves. He has a 5-year-old, Max, *but that's no problem*: After all, the boy is with his mother half the time. (**BEAT**) On her wedding night, she waits downstairs in a negligee for her husband to finish putting Max to bed, only to find the

two of them fast asleep. *She realizes there is an intruder in her marriage.* (BEAT) She scolds herself for *resenting and disliking* the son. (BEAT) *She vows to be a good sport.* That very morning, as a first step, she transforms Max's bedroom into a page out of Pottery Barn Kids. (BEAT) *Being a good sport doesn't work.* (BEAT) *She avoids the boy* by first staying away from the house as much as possible, and then by taking a job in India. (BEAT) *She is lonely.* (BEAT) *She decides the answer is to quit her job and throw herself wholeheartedly into the role of step-mother.* (BEAT) *She is frustrated* when the boy's mother excludes her from school events. ... (And so on.)

Can you see how these beats link together to form the arc? These are the events—linked with emotion—that must be dramatized in scene in your memoir.

The Initiating Incident

Notice that some beats will be major turning points, others more minor. The most important event/beat comes near the beginning. This is the day the trouble started. You were perfectly content as you were, saw no reason to change, then the trouble came along and *wham!* Everything you knew about yourself was thrown out of balance.

For Johnson, in the previous example, the initiating incident was realizing she had underestimated the impact of the presence of a stepson in her marriage. For another workshop student of mine, it was the day she crossed her college campus on the way to class and stumbled for no reason. She'd had cerebral palsy since

she was 7, and she knew this sudden buckling of her knees might mean she was heading for a wheelchair. This stumble sets off the struggle of the book, with the desire line, "I wanted to be able to take care of myself with no help from anyone."

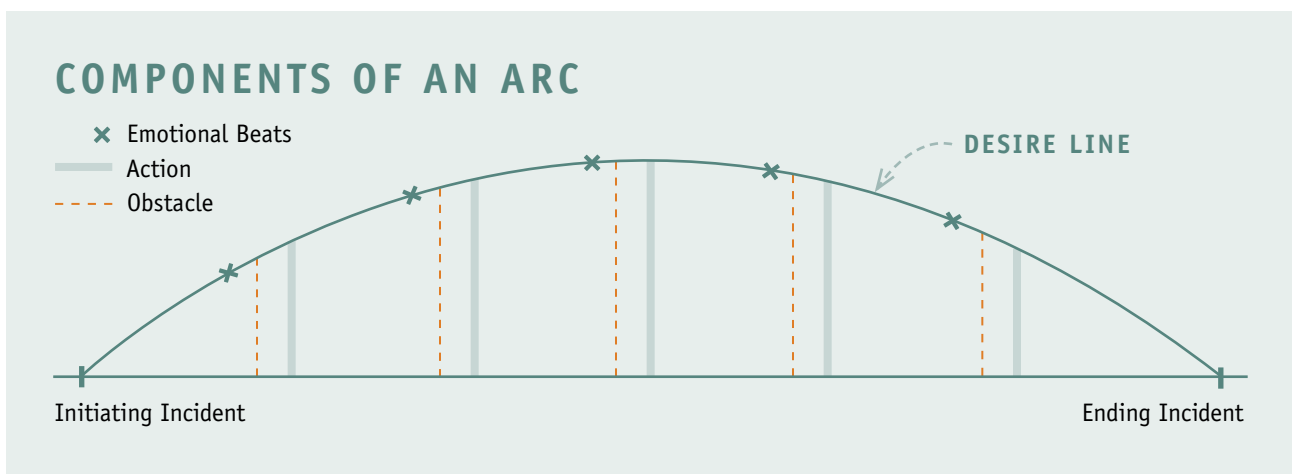
Your own initiating incident (called the "complication" in the short story) might be the day you discovered you were gay, or the day you quit law school or, nibbling toast one morning, read an e-mail that revealed your husband was having an affair.

Before the initiating incident, you might have what is called the *status quo scene*—the one that shows you in the midst of your ordinary life before the trouble starts. It might be you driving, oblivious to what is about to unfold, to the restaurant where your husband will disclose your mutual bankruptcy. It might show you at a house, closing a real estate deal just before the doctor's appointment that will change your life. Johnson's shows her complacently looking forward to sex with her husband even though her stepson is at home.

The Ending Incident

Picking the end point is crucial. Life goes on and on, but memoirs mustn't. Yes, you still have kids, but your story of being a single mother doesn't need to go up to the present.

The desire line defines the ending: When the narrator gets what he wants, or doesn't, or stops wanting it, or whatever, the story has reached the end of its arc. We see him changed by all that has come before. The cult member recognizes his group for what it really is. The



beat that resolves the desire line must be dramatized in scene, just as with the initiating incident and all other important beats: We get to watch the cult member pack his bags.

My writing partner, Janis Cooke Newman, wanted to become a mother (her desire line) and adopted a Russian boy. She ends her memoir, *The Russian Word for Snow*, with, “I looked back into his eyes, and at that moment I knew that I would forever put myself between him and all the dangers of the world—a vicious dog, a speeding car, a bullet from a gun. I had become a mother.”

Drawing Your Arc

When you’ve identified all the elements of your arc, it’s time to put them together in a sort of outline. I find it helps to put each event and its accompanying beat on an index card. One of Johnson’s cards, for example, might read:

EVENT: Christmas with the folks.

BEAT: I see them simply and naturally accept my stepson as one of the family. Why can’t I do that? What is wrong with me?

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Take some time to make your own cards for each element of your story. Then, get yourself a big glass of wine and a couple of undisturbed hours, and lay out all the cards on the floor or a table, in chronological order. As you gaze at your cards, you will see, I’m guessing, not a neatly laid-out story in which each event leads in a logical and satisfying way to the next. Instead, you will see real life. In real life, the day you realized your husband resented your illness was followed by something entirely unrelated, like that big deal you were about to close at work falling through.

This is where you save yourself hundreds of pages of writing and rewriting by simply arranging your cards so that they *do* tell a coherent story. Do you see events that need cutting? Once we get that your ex is a swine, there’s no need for the six scenes of additional evidence. Are all the flashbacks you’ve planned to include really necessary?

If you’re writing about a stroke, you don’t need events leading up to it: A stroke is a freak occurrence. If you’re writing about being a bad father, however, that memory of your own father passing you in a grocery store without recognizing you might be important.

Some cards will need moving around (we don’t necessarily need to know that you got your tubes tied when you were 18 until your fiancé announces he wants children). You might also find that some important emotional beats that would help the narrative flow are missing (you neglected to mention that you lost your son’s college tuition in a casino).

Take the time you need to structure your story before you write. Drawing your arc is not something you can knock out in the half-hour before dinner. It challenges you to survey the tangle of emotions, motives, repetitions and complexities of events you lived through with the cold, dispassionate eye of an editor. It asks you to know not what is important or meaningful to *you*, but what is important or meaningful to *the story*. It means regarding the painful events that actually happened to you—the doctor taping wires to your fingers to shock you into

being straight, picking out the urn for your own memorial—as material.

If you find the process of drawing a compelling and satisfying arc overwhelming, you may still be too close to your experience to get any writerly perspective on it. In

that case, you might find a writing group or coach especially helpful. Take solace in the fact that just knowing you need an arc puts you ahead of the game. A good arc is not sexy. You won’t be mobbed by readers at bookstores grateful for all the digressions you took out. But an arc will help get you *into* that bookstore. “Life is a hopelessly meager thing,” my father said. “What counts is what we dream into it, the words we find to describe it when we arrange jarring details to make a pleasing whole.” That’s just what your arc will give you: a pleasing whole. **WD**

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