

Non-Fiction and Graphic Novels

One of the most popular genres that uses sequential art in storytelling (i.e. graphic novels) is non-fiction writing, particularly **memoirs**, **autobiographies**, and **biographies**. But before we start looking at examples of these texts, let's explore the differences between these types of writing.

"A memoir is a special kind of autobiography, usually involving a public portion of the author's life as it relates to a person, historic event, or thing. The text is about the personal knowledge and/or experiences of the author.

In contrast, an autobiography covers the author's entire life to the present, and is expected to include details about his or her public and private life. A biography is someone's life story written by another person.

Examples of memoirs

Elie Wiesel's *Night* relates true stories of fellow concentration camp sufferers during the Holocaust of WWII based on the author's shared experiences with them. He limits our glimpses of his own ordeals, including them reluctantly as a vehicle to chronicle the others' suffering, perhaps due to survivor's guilt.

Irene Spencer's *Shattered Dreams: My Life as a Polygamists's Wife* is about polygamy from the author's personal experience of it. Now in a monogamous marriage, which was beyond the topic of this memoir, Spencer did not give us the details of her life outside of polygamy.

Memoir: Fact or fiction?

Obviously, a memoir should be true. The author should not alter the truth in telling his or her story. In fact, Elie Wiesel checked the text and made minor corrections in his book, *Night*, before it was published in the US to make it as truthful as possible.

Memories are faulty, so a little leeway is given to authors of memoirs, but they are expected to be honest and to check their facts for accuracy. Creating fiction and passing it off as nonfiction, as apparently was done by James Frey in his controversial *A Million Little Pieces*, is completely unacceptable.

Memoir writing techniques

A memoir is *written in first person from the author's point of view*.

It is *narrative nonfiction written in story form like fiction*. Dialogue can be included, but since few people can remember precisely every word spoken, the dialogue is not literally true; instead the author attempts to recreate it as accurately as possible. The memoir author should "think small" and make a series of "reducing decisions," says William Zinsser, author of the perennially popular book,

Each memoir has a particular theme or focus

A memoir *does not contain everything from this particular slice of the author's life*, but rather, *events are selected and examined for meaning* relative to the purpose of the book. *The author has questioned what happened and come to some kind of new understanding or lesson learned by it*. The author shows us how he or she was affected by this experience, how it has profoundly changed the way he sees the world. And by extension, reading the book will change the way the reader sees the world."

Copyright 2006-2007 by Barbara Doyen. All rights reserved.

(<http://www.barbaradoyen.com/writing-nonfiction/what-is-a-memoir-what-makes-a-memoir-different-from-an-autobiography-or-biography>)

Non-Fiction and Graphic Novels

1. What do you think is the value in reading:

Provide at least one answer for each of the questions below.

(i) biographies?

(ii) autobiographies?

(iii) memoirs?

2. How could the telling of a life event change if it is told by someone else? Write down something that has happened to you in recent memory that left an impression on you, recording the important details below:

Non-Fiction and Graphic Novels

3. Why do you think writers choose the graphic novel form as a way of writing a biography or autobiography, particularly the memoir type of autobiography? Think of two possible reasons.

1. _____

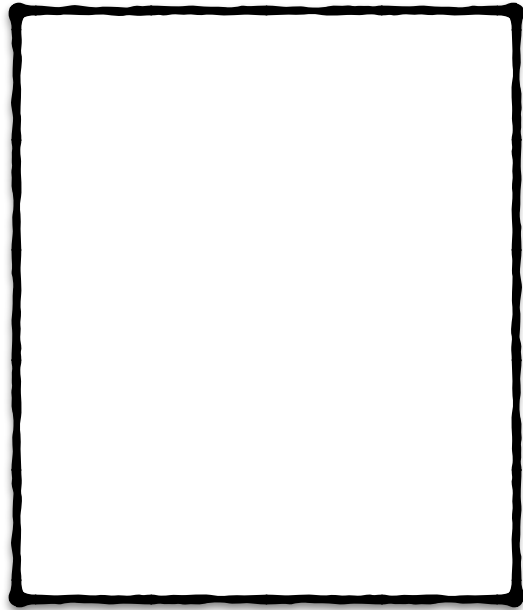
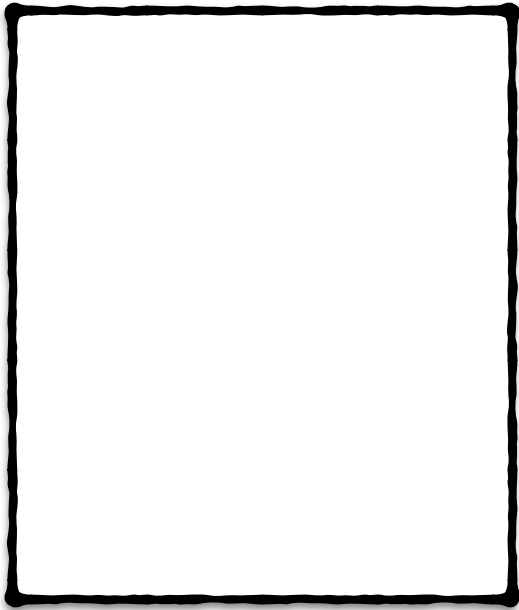
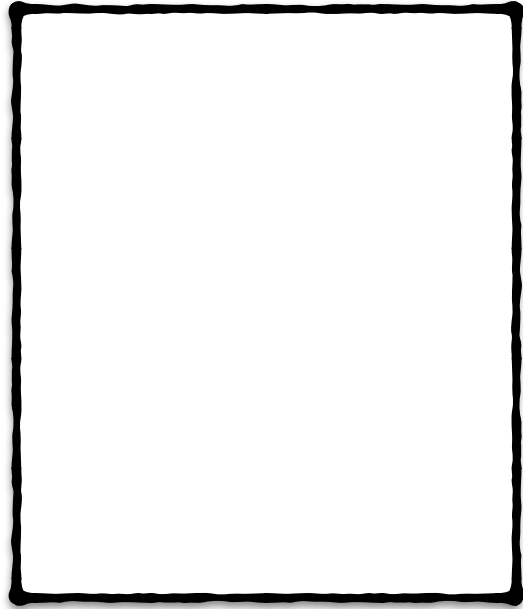
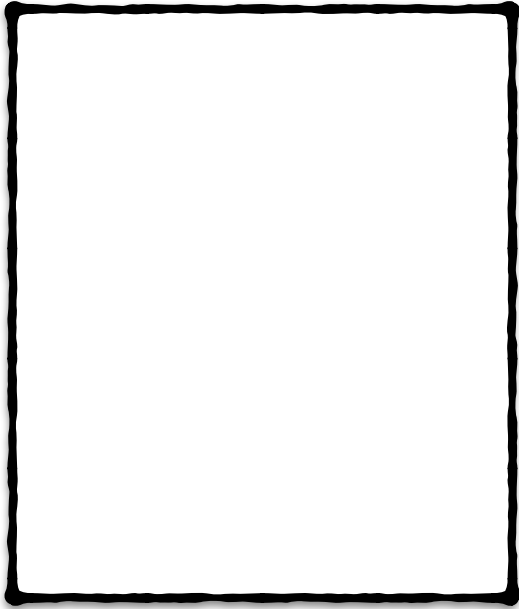
2. _____

4. “The author shows us how he or she was affected by this experience, how it has profoundly changed the way he sees the world. And by extension, reading the book will change the way the reader sees the world.” Do you think that traditional biographies/autobiographies have that kind of impact? Do you think a graphic novel can have the same impact on the reader as the traditional text? If so, how?

5. What kind of topics or themes would you expect graphic novel autobiographies or biographies to be about? Give two examples of possible topics or themes.

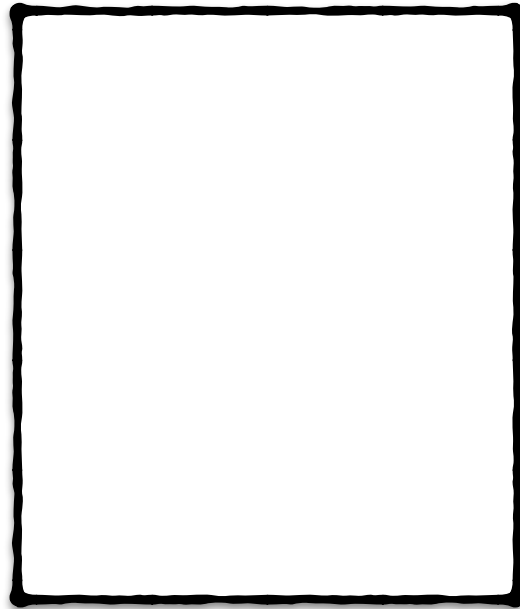
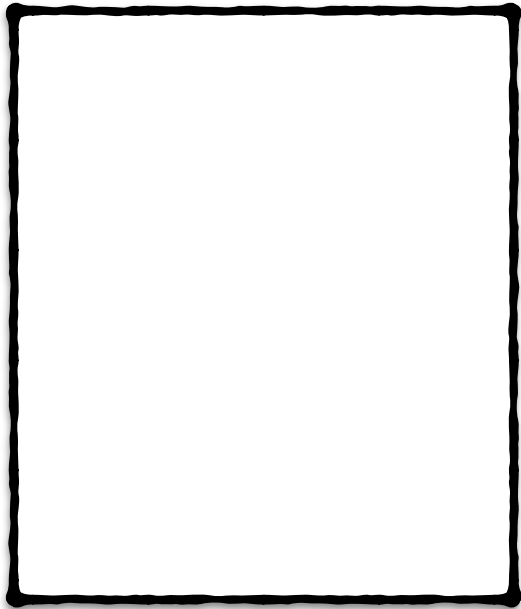
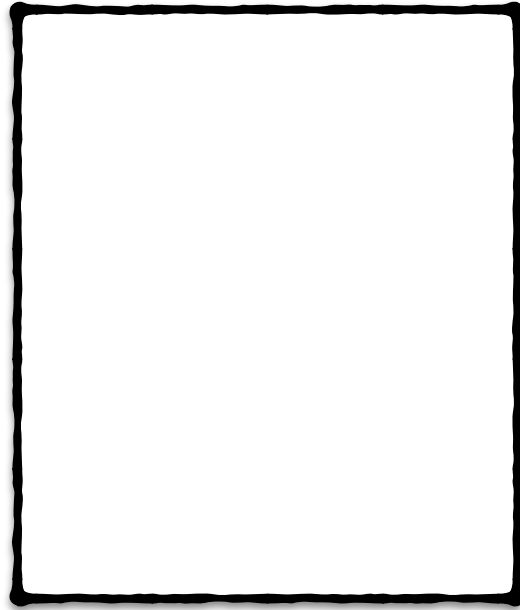
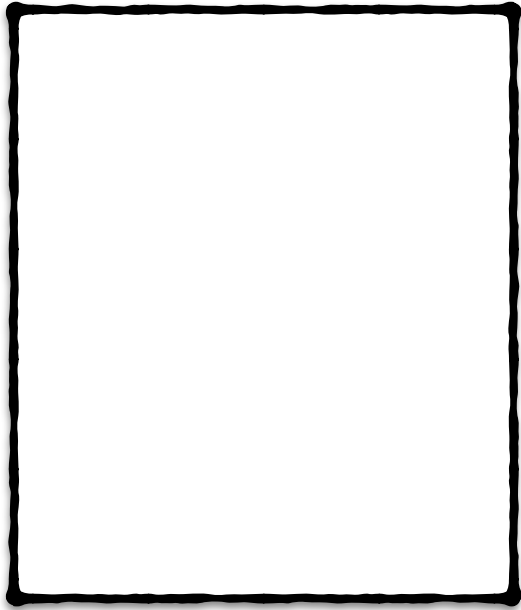
Non-Fiction and Graphic Novels

5. if you were to try to illustrate childhood, what would it look like? Use the four panels below to 'represent' childhood (doesn't have to be yours).



Non-Fiction and Graphic Novels

6. if you were to illustrate your life from birth to now in four panels, what would they look like?



Non-Fiction and Graphic Novels

7. If you were to write a memoir about your life, what would you write about?

8. What would be the most important things to get across to the reader for the story to be meaningful to others?