

READER REPORT

Sample Book Title

By Sample Author Name

Introduction

This reader report addresses the following aspects for the draft manuscript, *Sample*, of approximately 00,000 words and 00 chapters, as provided by the author via email on 00 Month 0000:

- book synopsis;
- narrative strength, author's voice, clarity, and purpose;
- plot and structure, balance, flow, and pace;
- characterization; author's voice, clarity and purpose;
- grammatical accuracy and consistency; and
- themes and messages.

The following recommendations are provided with the intention of helping the author prepare their book manuscript for publication and informing the author's writing in the future.

Book Synopsis

A book synopsis was not provided by the author, but the following suggested synopsis is an edited summary of the book's introduction:

For years, Author scribbled down their emotions, successes, and failures in journals, archiving memories lest she forget. When they looked back upon the ghosts of abuse in their childhood, they realized the life they expected to live was a fairytale. They had to learn how to live with their lifetime abuse and liberate themselves via self-reflection to understand and accept who they had become. To do this, they first had to unlock their closet and deal with the ghosts that lived there, one by one. Through this process, they realized the shackles in which their youth had kept them for years. Once they were able to revisit the lies they told themselves in their childhood, they realized that they were not nothing and ugly and that there were people who would want to strike up a relationship with them in adulthood.

HELPING WRITERS BECOME AUTHORS

Through their words expressing what their soul had suppressed, the author hopes the reader will come to examine their choices, relationships, and fears to rise above them, seek healing, and accept who they are.

Narrative Strength, Author's Voice, Clarity, and Purpose

The author tells a compelling story of abuse and their ability to rise above it through the perspective of MC, who tells their personal and reflective story of family connections, relationships, abuse, betrayal, coming of age, recovering self-esteem, transitions in life, motherhood, redemption, love, facing mortality, and the healing power of prayer in a series of short story-style chapters. The narrative pacing is slow at first until the author focuses specifically on the pattern of abuse MC suffered, gaining momentum somewhere around chapter 8 when MC meets SC and many tangents present in the first few chapters are abandoned. Once this happens, the narrative seems more focused, moves faster, and is more intriguing.

Title is a memoir, and as such, there are specific qualities manuscripts must possess to be classified as such:

What distinguishes a memoir from an autobiography is that, even though memoirs are non-fiction, they

should be more in the category of 'fiction' when it comes to the **style and flow** of the book. It's an entertaining read fashioned like a story...it just so happens to be true... A memoir is unique in the fact that it covers your life's events in a more **story-like structure** with an **overarching theme** or message written in...A memoir is a historical account written with personal knowledge and experience covering the lifetime of an individual, usually **with a greater purpose or message** within it... Essentially, you can teach others how to get through what you did or even how to learn from their own journeys just as you have yours.¹

Further,

A memoir...focuses on **one seminal event** [in this case, the abuse MC has suffered and how prayer helped her regain her power and self-esteem] that changes the course of that person's life. It's **heavily thematic**, meaning that there's usually one subject. Often this is the moral (i.e., the lesson learned)...**YOUR MEMOIR IS NOT ABOUT YOU**...Instead, your memoir is about the lesson you've learned and can share with others. People will get bored hearing about you. It's the book equivalent to being on a date with someone who drones on and on about himself...folks read your story to see human truths that they can use to make sense of their own lives. Which [event] has the great opportunity to tell a compelling story? What is the moral of the story you've chosen as your memoir? What was the lesson you learned from living this part of your life's story?...**FOLLOW THE RULES OF FICTION**...Start in the middle of the action, not from the beginning. Don't waste time detailing boring demographics like

¹ Pope, Bella Rose. 'How to Write a Memoir: The Complete Guide to Getting Started.' *Self-Publishing School*, 2 April 2020. <https://self-publishingschool.com/how-to-write-a-memoir/>. Accessed: 18 August 2020. (emphasis mine).

your age or gender—that will come as you continue the story. Employ the use of flashbacks... Show, don't tell. Use descriptive language to build the world within your memoir.²

The true theme of the memoir is revealed in chapter 5, and the author provides fewer sections detailing the minutia of daily life (such as courses taken during a particular semester in school or birthday parties early in life that play out without incident), which may seem like tangents. If these incidents have an impact on MC's self-esteem or the abuse she suffered later in life, they would be better suited as flashbacks when they are relevant so the reader can draw the connections between events.

The takeaway from the quotes above is that memoirs should read like fiction. As such, they should have a build toward the climax, start in the middle of the action (a device known as *in medias res*), and show, rather than tell. Showing creates a mental picture in the reader's mind by drawing on sensory input (what MC sees, hears, feels, touches, tastes, and smells). For example:

Tell: 'The pizza was delicious.'

Show: 'Mushrooms and pepperoni sausage formed thick layers on top of one another while the white mozzarella cheese bubbled over the bright red tomato sauce.'³

The author does this in some places: "Quote" (pg#), or "Quote" (pg#). Still, other places mark missed opportunities to show, for example, SC's "Quote" (pg#) (What did it sound like that made it distinctive?), "Quote" (pg#) (What did it actually feel like?). A balance between showing and telling is needed throughout.

Plot, Structure, Balance, Flow, and Pace

The structure of *Title* is in first-person-limited point of view (POV) prose.

Theme is often expressed in a thematic statement. For example,

Title by Author is about the effects of abuse and reveals that when a person is surrounded with support, love, and prayer, they can persevere to regain independence and power in life.

While this is only one interpretation, this is what will be used to discuss the plot and structure of the manuscript.

To examine plot, it might be helpful to see a point-by-point breakdown of the book's structure:

[Chapter summaries follow]

² 'How to Write a Memoir That People Care About.' *NY Book Editors*, 2020.

<https://nybookeditors.com/2016/03/how-to-write-a-memoir-that-people-care-about/>. Accessed: 18 August 2020. (emphasis mine).

³ 'Sample Lesson for Show Not Tell.' *New Paltz Central School District*, 2020.

<https://www.newpaltz.k12.ny.us/cms/lib/NY01000611/Centricity/Domain/1020/6-ShowNotTellLesson.pdf>. Accessed 18 August 2020.

A useful exercise might be to go through this breakdown (or make your own) and highlight only those points that support the thematic statement. For example, in chapter one, the fact that MC already has a lack of self-esteem even before the abuse is important to her mindset once the abuse begins. In chapter 2, MC's birthday present is important because it speaks to their self-esteem, but the weather at the time or unrelated news events might not help support the theme. The same goes for other events unless parallels can be drawn, which might be better reported as flashbacks around the time the relevant events occur in the narrative. Their first incident also supports the thematic statement, but [another incident] may not be unless it is to underscore their distrust in people as a result of their experiences, and this connection should be drawn in the narrative. When this is done, chapters should be revisited to omit events that do not support the thematic statement, and those that do should be fleshed out and clarified.

The introduction should also be revisited. Upon first read, it is unclear as to whether this book is a memoir or a fiction, as memoirs are written in first-person limited POV while the introduction is a mix of second-person and third-person limited POV.⁴ An introduction is more “appropriate for self-help books and...non-fiction[s to] introduce...the subject matter and explain...the author's qualifications, how [she] came to write the book...[and] why a person should read the book.”⁵ By contrast, a preface “appropriate for memoirs...[is] written by the author [and] tells how the book came to be written and why the author is qualified to write on the subject.”⁶ It is therefore suggested that the author change the introduction to a preface and modify its contents to be in first-person POV, discussing the origins of what drove them to write the book, the message they hope to impart, and what they hope the reader's takeaway will be.

Characterization, Author's Voice, Clarity, and Purpose

Title is MC's story of a lifetime of abuse, children, and healing after being reborn. As such, it is the story of a grown person approaching middle age, but the tone of the narrator's voice (i.e., MC's voice) sounds much younger. The author must remember that a “memoir frequently **presents a present self who sees these past events and the past self differently from the way the past self viewed them.** In such cases, it is in the gap between these two understandings, their contradictions and differing pictures, that the

⁴ For more on point of view, see Bunting, Joe. 'The Ultimate Point of View Guide.' *The Write Practice*, 2019. <https://thewritepractice.com/point-of-view-guide/>. Accessed: 18 August 2020.

⁵ Hoffman, Jessi Rita. 'Does Your Book Need an Introduction, Preface, or Foreword?' *Book Edits by Jessi*, 2020. <https://bookeditor-jessihoffman.com/book-need-introduction-preface-foreword/>. Accessed: 18 August 2020.

⁶ Hoffman

voice of the memoirist arises.”⁷ This means that many exclamations made by the author should be omitted, as the author is reporting and reflecting on a stressful time rather than currently experiencing the stress. In addition, much slang is used throughout (e.g., list of slang terms used in the manuscript, etc.) should be streamlined into proper English as this will help give the narrator's voice authority and maturity.

The thematic statement established earlier should be kept in mind with respect to clarity and purpose. It was also mentioned that it is not until about chapter 5 that the author finds their groove with the story. With minor digressions, this is the point at which the above thematic statement presents itself. In short, if something does not speak directly to this thematic statement, it either should be omitted or used at a later point as a flashback. If the event's connection to the thematic statement is not directly stated, but the author feels as if there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship some of these connections are not apparent.

Grammatical Accuracy and Consistency

Much work is needed to improve grammatical accuracy and consistency in this manuscript. The overall tone is quite informal, and the author writes as if she were speaking to a friend in casual conversation, but published manuscripts must have a much more formal structure and tone. Slang in a memoir (and all writing in general) is acceptable in dialogue but not in narration. As such, memoirs should be written in a sort of elevated casual tone, one that is halfway between daily conversation and formal tone. What this means is that though the narrative is informal, it still uses complete sentences and paragraphs and correct grammar and punctuation, but personal pronouns (I, me, my, etc.) and contractions ('I'm' instead of 'I am') are allowed.⁸ Further, the word 'and' is generally preferred to the ampersand (&), and 'etc.' should not be used at the end of a sentence (use 'and the like' or something similar instead). Recall that memoirs are different from autobiographies in that they read like works of fiction. Review some of the last few books you have read, especially those written in first-person limited point of view (as this is the same narrative POV as your memoir) to get a feel for how they are written.

⁷ Mura, David. 'Story & Narrative Voice in Memoir.' *Gulf Coast*, 27 April 2015. <http://gulfoastmag.org/online/blog/story-and-narrative-voice-in-memoir/>. Accessed 19 August 2020. Emphasis added.

⁸ For more on the difference between formal and informal tone, see 'Formal and Informal Writing Styles.' Skills You Need. <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/formal-or-informal.html>, 2020. Accessed 19 August 2020.

Regular paragraph breaks must be used whenever a new topic begins, the time or location has changed, or a new character begins to speak.⁹ This will help to break up the prose and increase readability.

Dialogue is used for several purposes: to advance plot, reveal character, create or increase conflict, break up passages of action or description, or elicit reader emotion.¹⁰ In other words, it should be used deliberately and with purpose. All dialogue should be reviewed to ensure (1) that it is used purposefully and (2) it is punctuated correctly. It is recommended the author read 'How to Punctuate Dialogue'¹¹ to learn how to punctuate dialogue correctly.

Apostrophes are regularly omitted in this manuscript, particularly to show possession or contractions, as well as to show slang (e.g., freakin instead of freakin'). It is recommended the author read 'Apostrophe Rules'¹² to learn how to use apostrophes correctly. Other punctuation, particularly exclamation points and ellipses (...) must be used with purpose. Where this is particularly problematic is when they are used at the end of chapter or poem titles. Overusing exclamation points affects the tone of the work as they are used to show emphasis, and section titles are rarely said excitedly. Ellipses are used to show when a thought or speech trails off, as in the person stops mid-sentence or thought. As titles should encapsulate the gist of the section that follows, they should not be incomplete, and therefore, an ellipses is not appropriate at the end of a chapter title.

Commas are frequently omitted in this manuscript. The placement of a comma can be extremely important when it comes to meaning. This oft-posted meme that first appeared in *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*:¹³

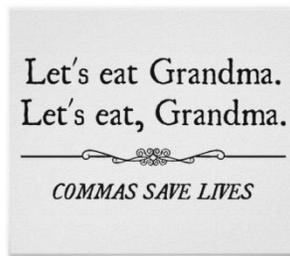
⁹ Cathcart, David. 'When to Start a New Paragraph in Fiction', 31 January 2015. *Book Editing Associates*. <https://www.book-editing.com>. Accessed 19 August 2020.

¹⁰ Hill, Beth. 'Dialogue—The Speech of Fiction.' *The Editor's Blog*, 17 February 2011. <https://theeditorsblog.net/2011/02/11/dialogue-the-speech-of-fiction/>. Accessed 19 August 2020.

¹¹ 'How to Punctuate Dialogue.' *WikiHow*, 6 September 2019. <https://www.wikihow.com/Punctuate-Dialogue>. Accessed 19 August 2020.

¹² 'Apostrophe Rules.' *Your Dictionary*, 2017. <https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/punctuation/apostrophe-rules.html>. Accessed 19 August 2020.

¹³ Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, 8 November 2013. London: Profile Books. Meme taken from Zazzle, https://www.zazzle.ca/lets_eat_grandma_commas_save_lives_poster-228790639368409132



demonstrates just how important commas can be. For a brief overview of how to use commas, see 'Comma Gain?'¹⁴ or 'Rules for Comma Usage'¹⁵ for a more in-depth explanation.

Emphasis in fiction (and usually non-fiction) is indicated with italics. Here is a note on using all capital letters to show emphasis:

using all-caps in a book, whether fiction or non-fiction, is tricky for the same reason it's discouraged in email: basically, you're shouting at the person reading it...even when a character in your novel is, in fact, shouting, you should hold back on the caps-lock. Your reader doesn't need to be overwhelmed by the dialogue; you can use dialogue tags to show what's going on instead.¹⁶

In modern typography, given the nature of word processing, italics are preferred for emphasis, and they are usually only used for a single word or short phrases, and rarely for entire sentences. Likewise, a single punctuation mark is always preferred to multiples (e.g., '?!?' or '???').

Note that numbers ten and under must be spelled out in full. Only numbers 11 and over may be written in numeric form.

Sentence fragments and run-on sentences are frequently used, which isn't necessarily bad if they are used purposefully rather than in error, but few fragments and run-ons are used (I suspect) purposefully and must be addressed to increase readability and flow of the manuscript. Review the rules of capitalization, especially at the beginning of paragraphs, sentences, and dialogue. Manuscript, chapter, and poem titles

¹⁴ Abram, Elise. 'Comma Gain?' *Elise Abram*, 20 October 2016. <http://eliseabram.com/comma-gain/>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

¹⁵ 'Rules for Comma Usage.' *Grammarly*, 2017. <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/comma/>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

¹⁶ Sullivan, Kate. 'NOW HEAR THIS!!! 3 Mistakes You're Making with Emphasis in Writing.' *TCK Publishing*, 2018. <https://www.tckpublishing.com/3-mistakes-when-writing-emphasis/>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

should follow common title capitalization rules.¹⁷ Also, knowing the difference between they're, there, and there is essential.

Consistency of tense is also an issue in places, particularly when to use past perfect tense:

The past perfect is used when two events happened in the past, with one past action having occurred even before the other past action. To form the past perfect, use *had* and the past participle of a verb in one part of the sentence. Often, the regular past tense is used in the other part of the sentence.¹⁸

Mixing or confusing tense can break the flow of a narrative, causing the reader to backtrack.

Themes and Messages

As indicated above, the over-arching theme of *Title* is about the effects of abuse and reveals that when a person is surrounded with support, love, and prayer, they can persevere to regain independence and power in life.

There are also a number of minor themes, as follows: family connections, relationships, abuse, betrayal, coming of age, recovering self-esteem, transitions in life, motherhood, redemption, love, facing mortality, and the healing power of prayer. Through MC's family connections, they learn about themselves as they react to relationships (both abusive and supportive) in what may be deemed a coming-of-age story. Through facing the mortality of themselves and their child, MC strives to be a good parent and recover their self-esteem after several abusive relationships as they transition through life, finally finding redemption and power in prayer.

These are all powerful themes, and all but coming of age might be at place in a memoir. Recall that the purpose of a memoir "focuses on one seminal event that changes the course of that person's life," whereas an autobiography "takes stock of the autobiographer's life from the moment of composition,"¹⁹ (i.e., from the event at which one feels her life began). Also previously mentioned, a memoir begins in medias res, not necessarily from the beginning. As the main story is MC's relationship with SC, the book might better begin with the day

¹⁷ 'Common Title Capitalisation Rules.' *Your Dictionary*, 2014. <https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/capitalisation/rules-for-capitalisation-in-titles.html>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

¹⁸ Yeager, Paul and Sherry Coven. 'Using Had: Past Perfect Tense.' *Everything Language and Grammar*, 12 March 2019. <https://languageandgrammar.com/2019/03/12/using-had-the-past-perfect-tense/>. Accessed 19 August 2020.

¹⁹ 'Autobiography.' *Wikipedia*, 2020. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiography>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

they met, bringing in all other stories of abuse when a trigger event happens in that timeline, rather than frame the entire manuscript as a coming-of-age story, “describ[ing] the changes that happen in a young person’s life as [she] mature[s] from childhood to young adulthood.”²⁰ Also, a statement of reflection made by MC as they look back on the events that led them to where they are in the story’s timeline might help add interest for the reader.

The nature of the title is revealed at the very end of the manuscript:

[Quote from manuscript illustrating the central theme.]

Analysis of effectiveness (or lack thereof) of book’s title with respect to plot.

Comparable Books, Target Market, and Genre

It is recommended that the author take some time to read other books in the memoir genre, particularly those detailing similar experiences to MC. While reading, the author is encouraged to “read like a writer,” making notes as to the author’s choices while storytelling, paying close attention to story structure, dialogue, character development, and narrative tone. Ask yourself questions with every sentence, such as ‘Why did the writer do that? What could she possibly hope to achieve that way? [What is t]his character...for? Why am I reading faster than I was a few pages ago? How did we get to the point where I’m interested in [the story]?’²¹ When you are done with your manuscript revision, re-read it, asking yourself the same questions at every step of the way. Begin by looking at who will be your competition while marketing. Select best-selling memoirs. Read them. Make notes. Re-read them. Consult reader reviews to see what the readers think. When you are done, review your notes. Revise your manuscript. Read it as if it were one of those best-selling memoirs and make more notes. Revise.

Summary

Title has immense potential to tell a powerful story in which others will find solace and encouragement, given that the editorial advice in this critique is considered. It is recommended that the author do a bit of homework to get a feel for the flavour of memoir narrative tone and structure, apply what they have learned to this manuscript, and then work closely with an editor to polish the book.

Suggested next steps:

- Read and critique a number of best-selling manuscripts, particularly those with similar themes to *Title*.
- Work on the structure of *Title* to begin in medias res, using events early in MC’s life (e.g., suggestion(s)) as flashbacks with added commentary to link events to present timeline.

²⁰ Ule, Michelle. ‘What is a Coming of Age Story?’ *Michelle Ule*, 2020.

<https://www.michelleule.com/2018/08/14/coming-of-age-story/>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

²¹ Roth, Gabriel. ‘How to Read Like a Writer.’ Center for Fiction, 2020. <https://centerforfiction.org/writing-tools/how-to-read-like-a-writer/>. Accessed 20 August 2020.

- Review reliable online sources (many of which are included in this report in the footnotes) to work on punctuation, paragraph breaks, capitalization, dialogue, etc., to improve readability and flow of the manuscript.
- Self-edit manuscript to ensure it has the same general tone as the bestsellers and that it flows logically from one event to the next.
- Have the manuscript to undergo substantial edit (including a review for grammar, spelling, paragraph structure, flow, word choice, voice, readability, continuity, point of view, etc.
- Revise the manuscript, taking the editor's suggestions into consideration.
- Send the manuscript to undergo final proofread.