

# Writing in the First Person

IT'S EASY TO BE YOURSELF, BUT IT'S DIFFICULT TO SHOW YOUR READERS WHO YOU ARE. **FRANK McCOURT**, A CONTEMPORARY MASTER OF THE FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE, REVEALS HIMSELF THROUGH EVERY WORD IN HIS MEMOIR. **LC** SHOWS YOU HOW HE DOES IT SO YOU CAN DO IT TOO.

## Who is Frank McCourt?

Frank McCourt was born in 1930 to Irish Catholic parents in Brooklyn, New York. The U.S. was in the Great Depression, and his father couldn't find work. When he was 4, the family moved back to his mother Angela's native Limerick in the south of Ireland. *Angela's Ashes* is a memoir of his impoverished childhood in Ireland.

Eventually, all the McCourt brothers moved to New York. Frank started out as a bellboy in the Biltmore Hotel, and got his education at the New York Public Library on 42nd Street. He spent 30 years teaching writing in New York public schools. When *Angela's Ashes* was published in 1996, it became an instant classic, remaining on *The New York Times* Best-seller List for 115 weeks. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 1997. He still lives in New York.



## How to write from models

>>Read the excerpt once through without reading the notes.

>>Read it a second time, with the notes.

>>Think about how you would write a similar passage.

>>Use the notes and writing prompts at the end to get started.

(excerpt from *Angela's Ashes*)

1. Here, McCourt lays the scene with a series of expository sentences in order to let the reader know what's going on. Once the context is in place, the action can unfold.

We don't laugh long, there is no more bread and we're hungry, the four of us. We can get no more credit at O'Connell's shop. We can't go near Grandma, either. She yells at us all the time because Dad is from the North and he never sends money home from England where he is working in a munitions factory. Grandma says we could starve to death for all he cares. That would teach Mam a lesson for marrying a man from the North with sallow skin, an odd manner and a look of the Presbyterian about him.

Still, I'll have to try Kathleen O'Connell once more. I'll tell her my mother is sick above in the bed, my brothers are starving and we'll all be dead for the want of bread.

I put on my shoes and run quickly through the streets of Limerick to keep myself warm against the February frost. You can look in people's windows and see how cozy it is in their kitchens with fires glowing or ranges black and hot everything bright in the electric light cups and saucers on the tables with plates of sliced bread pounds of butter jars of jam smells of fried eggs and rashers coming through the windows enough to make the water run in your mouth and families sitting there digging in all smiling the mother crisp and clean in her apron everyone washed and the Sacred Heart of Jesus looking down on them from the wall suffering and sad but still happy with all that food and light and good Catholics at their breakfast.

3. This run-on sentence is a breathless glimpse into the thoughts of a desperate, hungry boy. The lack of punctuation and the jumble of words related to food, warmth, and comfort give the reader a sense of the narrator's intense longing.

2. McCourt brings other characters' voices into the text without abandoning his own voice by using indirect dialogue, a device in which characters' speech is written without quotation marks. In this section, you can hear his grandmother's voice coming through to scold him.

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4. After the long sentence in the preceding paragraph, McCourt gives the reader a rest with one sentence that shifts into the voice of the older narrator looking back on his childhood.

I try to find music in my own head but all I can find is my mother moaning for lemonade.

Lemonade. There's a van pulling away from South's pub leaving crates of beer and lemonade outside and there isn't a soul on the street. In a second I have two bottles of lemonade up under my jersey and I saunter away trying to look innocent.

There's a bread van outside Kathleen O'Connell's shop. The back door is open on shelves of steaming newly baked bread. The van driver is inside the shop having tea and a bun with Kathleen and it's no trouble for me to help myself to a loaf of bread. It's wrong to steal from Kathleen with the way she's always good to us but if I go in and ask her for bread she'll be annoyed and tell me I'm ruining her morning cup of tea, which she'd like to have in peace ease and comfort thank you. It's easier to stick the bread up under my jersey with the lemonade and promise to tell everything in confession.

5. The word "lemonade" puts the reader back into the action of the story, and signals the moment when Frank spots the lemonade he's been looking for. When you read the word on the page, it's as though you see the bottle of lemonade with him.

6. This last paragraph combines several techniques to illustrate the narrator's thought process. McCourt uses exposition and indirect dialogue, and mixes the perspectives of the young boy with the older man to create a rich effect.

# Write Your Own First-Person Account

USE A MEMORY FROM YOUR OWN CHILDHOOD AS A STARTING POINT FOR THIS EXERCISE

**1** Re-read note #1. Don't forget that, even though you remember all the details, this scene is entirely new to your reader. Take the time to describe the physical scene and to give some context for your story.

**2** Review note #2. Who are the other people in your scene? Try to remember their voices—the things that they said and the way that they said them. Incorporate their speech into your essay using either direct or indirect dialogue.

**3** Note #3. Have you ever noticed how your thoughts run on and on without punctuation or even logic? Try to capture some of your own unique thought patterns in a sentence or two. You will likely discover connections to themes that go beyond the immediate scene.

**4** Note #4. Don't forget to pace your scenes. If you have been racing through a lot of dense material, try to give your reader a break by interspersing shorter sentences or paragraphs. If your writing tends to be slow and expository, try to include some action periodically to keep your reader's interest.

**5** Note #5. Although unconventional, one-word sentences are a great way to let your voice shine through, imply action, or portray thoughts. If your teacher doesn't mind the grammar, try using this device.

**6** Note #6. The best writing mixes multiple devices in the service of story. Don't be afraid to combine techniques in order to capture your own voice and experience.

**7** To finish your story, let memory be your guide . . .