

SAMPLE OUTLINE

***WILD* by Cheryl Strayed**

Cheryl Strayed's powerful memoir, *Wild*, explores her journey in reclaiming her life after the loss of her mother. It examines the experience of being orphaned as an adult woman and her lapses into extramarital affairs and heroin use. In a final bid to free herself, with virtually no hiking experience she sets out on a solo journey through the Pacific Crest Trail. It is a powerful, heartbreaking, and redemptive story of the lengths we will go to find ourselves.

What follows are my personal notes on how she structured her memoir, including some thoughts on process. These are simply my observations. The thing to remember with story structure is that it is not the events themselves, but rather the meaning we ascribe to the events, that provides the scenes with meaning.

As I'll be referring to page numbers, all my notes are based on the Random House Vintage Books paperback edition.

Establishing the World: (page 3)

"The trees were tall, but I was taller." Nice opening line. Notice how the first sentence infers that this is a story of transformation. It also ignites our curiosity. Something has happened. What is it? We need to find out. Also, was this the first line she wrote in her first draft? Doubtful, right? So, don't waste your time trying to write a great opening line. You will discover it as you write your first draft.

A common device in memoir is to begin with a crisis moment, an event that occurs much later in the narrative. It is often the end of Act Two (the dark night of the soul). It's a device to hook the reader, to cause them to wonder how on earth they will overcome this obstacle. The *Wild* prologue ends with Cheryl barefoot in the wilderness, miles from civilization. The final line is the solution to her problem, both real and metaphorical: "*Keep Walking.*"

Theme/Dilemma: (page 3-6)

Notice how we're experiencing Cheryl's dilemma from the very beginning. In order to find herself, she will hike the Pacific Crest Trail . . . which she might not survive. Forced to walk barefoot, she recounts for us how she got on the trail: traumatic childhood, mother has recently died (four years ago), stepfather has vanished, her family has become fractured, her marriage has crumbled after multiple affairs, and she's awash in despair and self-loathing. This is her final attempt to find herself. Notice how the dilemma is personal to her, but universal to the reader. *Will I survive the journey back to self?*

Inciting Incident (page 27)

Cheryl decides to trek the PCT. Her destination: The Bridge of the Gods. Now the reader knows what her goal is. She must get to the Bridge of the Gods, or she will be lost forever.

Notice how she didn't begin with this goal. First, she set up her situation, so we experienced why she had to go on this journey. Until we've experienced your protagonist's dilemma, there will be no context for the inciting incident.

Opposing Argument (page 75)

This is where Cheryl's dilemma becomes apparent. A man says, *"It's one thing to be a woman crazy enough to do what you're doing. Another thing to be a man letting his own wife go off and do this."*

She has lied to this man in order to protect herself. She is terrified of being assaulted. Will she survive this journey?

Notice how she has found a way to dramatize this question. It's not enough to tell us that the journey will be difficult. She has found an antagonistic force to experience the very real threat she is facing.

Decision/Reluctance (page 101)

Flashback: Cheryl ends her marriage. She says goodbye to the illusion of security. She is alone now, with no one to blame, and no one to hold onto. She makes a decision to start her life over again. She changes her last name. (Great metaphor!)

But notice the reluctance around this decision. While she is finally free and living authentically, she must now confront her demons.

Notice also, how the author jumps back and forth in time, using a flashback as a structural story point. Do you see how structure need

not be chronological? As readers, we want to experience your protagonist making a decision, and we want to experience reluctance around that decision. How you do that is entirely up to you.

ACT TWO

False Hope (page 135)

Notice how she is beginning to grow and adjust to this new environment. We're beginning to experience a sense that she just might be on her way to mastering this terrain.

"I had only just begun. I was three weeks into my hike, but everything in me felt altered. I lay in the water as long as I could without breathing, alone in a strange new land, while the actual world all around me hummed on."

There's a sense that she's going to be okay. In fact, there's a moment where it almost feels like the story could end. However, there are worthy antagonists lurking around the corner, inner demons that must be confronted. Notice the growth at this point, from the beginning of the story. This is perhaps the first time in the story that she has felt hopeful.

Midpoint/Temptation (page 174)

Wild is somewhat of a picaresque memoir, with Cheryl meeting various characters along the way, each of whom plays a role in her ultimate transformation.

She meets Brent, a sweet and handsome younger man on the trail.

"I didn't want to say goodbye to him the next morning."

"Make a wish. It's our last night in the Sierra Nevada."

There's no going back. *"Goodbye Ranger of Light,"* I said to the sky.

Notice in your memoir where there might be a point of no return. Cheryl literally comes out and tells the reader, *"There's no going back."* Notice how she is taking us directly into the experience that pushes us into the second half of the book.

Suffering (page 204-205)

Cheryl meets an astrologer, and tells us: *"She also said bizarrely specific things that were so accurate and particular, so simultaneously consoling and upsetting, that it was all I could do not to bawl in recognition and grief."*

"Your father was wounded. And you're wounded in the same place."

Notice how she is realizing that there is no escaping her past. She will always carry her wounds with her. She has lost her boots. Her feet are in agony. But more than that, they are merely an outward manifestation of the inner anguish she can never simply walk off. She is beginning to question why she ever set out on this journey to begin with. She is considering giving up.

"I put on my stupid sandals and began the long walk to Castle Crags."

Notice how the false hope she experienced early on in Act Two is being replaced by the grim fact that she can never outrun her grief. And that is what this memoir is about; the courage to grieve the past in order to build a new future. Cheryl is arriving at a truth. The dilemma is becoming apparent. No matter how far she walks, or what she does, she can never escape herself, or become a better version of herself. What began as journey to get somewhere else, has led her to the place where she must finally stop and go within.

“The sight of the churned, barren earth unsettled me. I felt sad and angry about it, but in a way that include the complicated truth of my own complicity. I used tables and chairs and toilet paper too, after all. . . . I wanted to have a family again.”

Surrender (page 222 – page 234)

As we approach the moment of surrender, Cheryl tells us, *“Sometimes it seemed that the Pacific Crest Trail was one long mountain I was ascending. That at my journey’s end at the Columbia River, I’d reach the trail’s summit, rather than its lowest point. This feeling of ascension wasn’t only metaphorical. It literally felt as if I were almost always, impossibly, going up.”*

On page 231, she has met a five-year-old boy and his grandmother. They have a conversation and it comes out that the boy has been abandoned by his father, and that his mother has died. And then, the boy offers to sing her a song. It’s Red River Valley.

“Thank you,” I said, half demolished by the time he finished. “That might be the best thing I’ve ever heard in my whole life.”

The appearance of this boy arrives at a critical point — his innocence and his unspeakable loss suddenly give context to Cheryl's own pain. It doesn't diminish her pain, but it gives her permission to feel it. It's almost as if she owes it to the child.

She reflects on the loss of her own father, on his inability to father her the way she needed to be fathered, and she allows herself to grieve.

"I laughed with the joy of it, and the next moment I was crying my first tears on the PCT. I cried and I cried and I cried. I wasn't crying because I was happy. I wasn't crying because I was sad. I wasn't crying because of my mother or my father or Paul. I was crying because I was full."

Reality (page 233 – page 234)

Act Three often begins with the appearance of a gift. It can be a physical gift, or simply the gift of insight. In *Wild*, a gift appears: she gets a new pair of boots. Notice how, by letting go of what she wants, which is some kind of existential salve to heal her broken spirit, a wider perspective appears, and she begins to see her situation in a new way.

She accepts the truth of her situation as opposed to the appearance of her situation. She can never outrun her pain. And ironically, her boots arrive. She must keep going, but her load is getting lighter. She's no longer demanding answers of the trail. She is simply allowing herself to be.

Notice as she reflects on her father's abandonment. "It occurred to me that I didn't have to be amazed anymore."

Notice this line at the end of the chapter. *“I was entering. I was leaving. California streamed behind me like a long silk veil. I didn’t feel like a big fat idiot. I didn’t feel like a hard-ass motherfucking Amazonian queen. I felt fierce and humble and gathered up inside, like I was safe in this world too.”*

But the story isn’t over here. The stakes continue to rise in Act Three. As a result of letting go of what she wants and accepting the reality of her situation, Cheryl takes action towards giving herself what she needs.

Action (page 265)

The action section is the bulk of your third act.

Notice that in giving herself what she needs, Cheryl begins to go to places she never allowed herself to go before. She commits heresy by raging at her beloved dead mother. She allows herself to feel the feelings she has never allowed herself to feel before. She is coming into her body. Reentry is messy and terrifying and liberating. She is accepting her mother and her stepfather and her brother and her ex-husband as human, neither greater nor less than her. She is accepting her perfectly imperfect self. She is no longer running from her pain.

Notice on page 269 how Cheryl reflects back to her mother’s dying days. It’s a conversation with her mother about what to do with her body when she’s dead. *“I want everything that can be donated to be donated,”* says her mother.

But Cheryl is relentless. *“What would you like to do with . . . what’s . . . left over. Do you want to be buried or cremated?”*

“Burn me,” she said finally. “Turn me to ash.”

Notice how we are nearing the end of the story, and the author is giving us a flashback. There are no rules. Your memoir need not be chronological, and while it’s important to limit exposition in your third act, I think this scene is an exception that proves the rule. This experience takes us to the heart of Cheryl’s grief, offering us a visceral image of her mother being burned to ashes.

Notice how this scene could theoretically have been placed in the beginning of the story. Her mother’s death precedes her journey on the PCT, but she saves this for Act Three. There’s an emotional wallop that happens here, a different meaning that is being expressed, a crucible of sorts that is happening as we approach the climax.

As we are galloping towards the climax, we experience a shift where the author is leaving her rational self behind and returning to some primordial self, returning to the earth as if she is attempting to reunite with her mother. There’s a shocking moment where she remembers taking the remains of her mother, the largest pieces, and *“I put her burnt bones in my mouth and swallowed them whole.”*

In the final few pages prior to the battle scene, Cheryl finds herself confronting predatory men. There is a savage sense of dread that everything in the story, every potential threat she has navigated up to this point has led us here. It is terrifying as she quietly negotiates her way to safety.

Battle Scene (page 299)

This is the climactic moment where all intellectual notions of a reunion are gone and Cheryl makes the difficult choice to let go of

her mother, her past, her old life. It is a purging, a crucible, and its power is not simply in the words that happen here, but in all that has preceded it. Everything in the story leads to this moment and the moment is unadorned, almost anticlimactic in its simplicity, and yet its power arrives with the weight of all that has preceded it. The difficult choice is simply to accept herself as she is.

“Very nice,” he said.

“What is,” I asked, turning to him, though I knew.

“Everything,” he said.

And it was true.

New Equilibrium (309-311)

“I had arrived. I’d done it. It seemed like such a small thing and such a tremendous thing at once, like a secret I’d always tell myself, though I didn’t know the meaning of it just yet. I stood there for several minutes, cars and trucks going past me, feeling like I’d cry, though I didn’t.”

Cheryl has arrived at her destination, and as T.S. Eliot said, *“the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place as if for the first time.”* Nothing much has changed for Cheryl. She is the same person. Outwardly, her circumstances are the same. She’s still single and broke. Her relationships to the people in her life are essentially unchanged, and yet, we know that she will never go back to the person she was before. Heroin, infidelities, and self-harm are now a thing of the past. She has grieved her losses, and she has reclaimed herself.

In the final pages she summarizes her life going forward, an epilogue of sorts, where we experience her years later, getting married in a spot not far from the Bridge of the Gods, her destination. She is married now, with children, and she has found a freedom that she never previously imagined as a result of coming to accept herself fully.