**BLUEPRINT FOR A MEMOIR:**

**HOW TO WRITE A MEMOIR FOR THE MARKETPLACE**

**by Jennie Nash**

The Impact Outline

**Excerpted from *Blueprint for a Nonfiction Book: Plan and Pitch Your Big Idea* by Jennie Nash**

Once you have mapped your arc of change, you can create an outline for your whole story. It may seem odd to make an outline of a story that comes directly from your own life; after all, you lived it, so why do you need to plot it out? Why can’t you just start to write?

Because the goal of a memoir (at least for the purposes of this book) is to write something that other people can engage with and find meaning in, and, even after doing all this work on the Blueprint, it’s far too easy to lose sight of your story, your point, or your reader when writing memoir. The Impact Outline gives you a way to curate the stories you tell while considering the experience of the reader at the same time. It’s a tool for measuring the impact of each individual story you select to tell the larger story of the transformation you experienced.

The Impact Outline guides you to connect the plot to the point in every event you share in the book, and to describe the impact those events have on the reader. This guarantees that every time you show us something happening to you in the story, you will also show us why it mattered to you, and why we (the reader) might care.

This tool can be used whether you are writing a chronological story, a fractured narrative, a prescriptive memoir, or memoir+. It’s a very flexible tool. If you like The Hero’s Journey, Save the Cat, Story Grid, or some other story structure, you can add those elements to your outline. If you want to use prescriptive elements in your memoir, you can use the third bullet point (the Impact bullet) to track those elements.

**The Impact Outline for Memoir**

The Impact Outline for Memoir has three bullet points for every major event in the book. Each bullet point has a specific function:

* SCENE: I experienced something—a choice, an opportunity, a trauma, or a passion/obsession. (This bullet point is about the writer. It is about what happened.)
* POINT: What I felt about what happened to me at the time; how I made meaning of it. (This bullet point is about the writer. It is proof that you are self-aware.)
* IMPACT: Why should the reader care? What impact does it have on them? How does the experience I am writing about connect to the larger point I am making in the story? (This bullet point is about the reader.)

The third bullet point is often missing in memoirs that don’t hold together. If you are just recounting things that happened to you, without attempting to make meaning of them for your reader, it will be hard for your reader to care about what happens next. There’s a chance that your story will come across as self-centered or narcissistic—a fate no memoir writer wants.

The third bullet point is where you can include memoir+ elements like research, interviews, statistics, and analysis because you will be using those elements to impact the reader—to teach or illuminate something, to educate, to explain.

The third bullet point is also the place where you can plan out a braided or spiral structure. You can use color coding or some other coding system (maybe assigning scenes an A, B, or C depending on their time frame or theme) to track where various concepts, times, or themes appear in the story.

Each set of three bullet points is connected to the next set of three bullet points by this clause:

And because of that experience…

The “because of that experience” clause helps both you and the reader see the connections between the events you are choosing to share. There may not have been a connection between the events that happened in your life, but it is your job when writing a memoir to make sure that the underlying meaning-making is there; otherwise, your memoir will read like a collection of random things that happened.

**The Rules**

There are rules for the Impact Outline and I am strict about following them. If you cheat, you will destroy the power of the exercise and rob yourself of the time you seek to save. The whole goal of this outline is to be concise and to force you to make choices about which stories to tell. Every scene must have a point and must be making an impact on the reader, and every scene must be connected by the “because of that experience” clause to the next scene as they all drive toward the transformation you want to show.

Here are the rules:

1. Use standard manuscript formatting: 1-inch margins, 12-point Times New Roman font, single line spacing, and one full line space between the bullet point pairings. Cheating means making the margins half an inch, making the font 9-point and/or choosing some teeny tiny, funky font, or single-spacing the entire thing.
2. Write no more than three pages for your first draft. You want to see the bare bones of your story to make sure it holds together. In order to do that, you have to keep it simple and, in order to do that, you have to keep it short. A three-page Impact Outline typically contains between 13 and 22 scene-point-impact pairings. This means you can only include the major scenes of the story. Cheating means writing anything more than three pages.
3. Each bullet point must have no more than three lines. Cheating means anything more than three lines per bullet point.
4. Each scene must connect to the next one through the meaning you have made of the experience, so that your story has narrative drive. Cheating means ignoring this rule and including random, “dramatic” things that happened in your life. You have to be able to emotionally link every action with the action that follows it, even if you are presenting those actions out of order. This is the whole point of this exercise, and the reason that the Impact Outline is different from other outlines that only trace the external plot.

**The Impact Outline**

* SCENE:
* POINT:
* IMPACT:

And because of that experience…

* SCENE:
* POINT:
* IMPACT: