

WRITING THE PERSONAL

Stories Close To The Heart

Every story reflects elements of the person who wrote the words. Some stories are, however, much more personal than others. The writer decides to venture into territory that is perilously close to events from her real life. Writing the personal is tricky for even the most seasoned writers. This article guides you through the dangers and the treasures of writing personal stories with techniques for surviving the turbulence along the way.

MURKY WATERS

Personal stories can be difficult to write for the simple fact that the writer is much closer to the material. It's easy to lose the line between the personal and the fictional. In reality, that line is always blurry. Every story, from the action-packed thriller to the raunchiest comedy contains elements of the writer's life, dreams, and history.

The waters get murky when a writer decides to create a story that draws substantially on some aspect of her life. Maybe it's a relationship with a relative or a town's reaction to an historical event or simply exploring the time period when she grew up. The closeness of the material makes it difficult to maintain perspective.

While the emotions are always going to be personal, a writer must be able to remember that the material being created is fictional. Unless you're writing an autobiography, this is a fictional story about a fictional character. When charting these murky waters, remembering that distinction is the first way-point on your map.

The distinction sounds incredibly obvious, but when you're in the thick of the story (probably somewhere in Act Two), you can easily lose your direction and suddenly start telling your story instead of the character's story. There are reasons that you chose not to write an

autobiographical tale. The fictional component gives you creative license, emotional breathing room, and keeps you from being sued.

Lawyers aren't the only sharks circling these waters. You are about to get terrifyingly close to your own personal demons. Writing a personal story flings open emotional latches that have been sealed for years. Some writers work best under these conditions and prefer to write stories that are close to the heart. For the rest of us, tackling material that strikes a little too close to home makes us flee in the opposite direction.

Writing personal stories can cause procrastination, writer's block, or your mother to stop talking to you. While all of those events (especially when combined) help you to get a lot of other things done, they make it hard to face the pages. The good news is that, like any difficult journey, the rewards at the end are that much greater. You will learn incredible things about yourself and the other people in your story. If you work hard, you may even find compassion for them. And, at the end of the day, you will have written a story you can be deeply proud of—for both the process and the result.

PREPARATION

The first step in this process is to embrace your voice. Even though some of the events or characters may come perilously close to reality, you get to tell your story. Everyone experiences and remembers events through their personal perspective. If you asked each member of your family to recall a version of the same incident, you would get a different story from every person. This is your story, so embrace your perspective.

The story is fictional, so explore the material in a way that is going to push you. Use a genre that lets

you get close to the emotions of the piece. That doesn't mean the only appropriate genre is drama. You can uncover as much anger and pain in a comedy as in a dramatic script. Comedy also gives a much-needed respite from heavy material for both the writer and the audience. Supernatural elements can open doors to emotional territory, such as death, that have always been locked for you. The genre deeply affects how you relate to the material—consider pushing yourself to get as close to the emotions as you can bear.

Writing is all about getting personal. When tackling stories that come closer than ever to home, jump in with both feet. Take the avenues that feel challenging. Learn to trust your instincts; they are deeply important to this process. That gut instinct will let you know if you are shying away from material because it's wrong for the story or because you're afraid to open the lock on that memory.

Be prepared to wander down paths that wind and twist and may not show you the outcome until you've landed there.

This process will push your craft like no other story you've written. The harder the work, the more honest the outcome will be. Your honesty will show through in the story and audiences will respond with delight. Open your heart and take that leap of faith.

STARTING THE JOURNEY

Writing a personal story pushes and changes your creative process. When you start, be prepared to give yourself space to grow. You may be used to writing ten pages a day every day, but this story may require more time for you to process the emotions. Five pages a day is fine. Or maybe the pages will pour out faster

than you expect. Flexibility is crucial to giving the emotions space to emerge.

Strike a balance between giving yourself creative space and establishing structure to move the writing forward. When the material is more intimidating, we tend to hold on to the stage of the creative process that is the most comfortable. Stay alert to your impulses so that you can check if they are productive or if you are avoiding the more painful work.

If you tend to brainstorm forever, push yourself to move into the outlining or the writing stage. Put words on paper and commit to the structure of the story. That commitment will push you closer to the emotions holding you back. Those emotions are the fuel for telling a gripping story. Don't be fooled by the feeling that you have to figure it all out before you put words on the page. Write it down, hash it out, move forward despite your internal resistance.

If you are a structure-junkie, give yourself the room to play with several story possibilities. Take extra time to brainstorm and journal. Resist moving quickly to the outline. Instead, let yourself feel the awkward and possibly painful emotions that are pushing you to get words on paper quickly. Give yourself a chance to embrace the characters and let their journey speak to you. Writing this story needs to be more about the emotions than getting the turning points just right.

STEERING THE CRAFT

Once your journey has begun, much of the process will be about strategizing through the tough times. The material may flow easily for weeks and then, suddenly, you hit quicksand. You find yourself procrastinating or refusing to write a scene or you shutdown emotion-

ally when you try to approach the material. You may even find yourself blocked at the starting gate, panicked about the entire journey.

There are as many techniques for lifting yourself from emotional quicksand as there are writers. Keep an open mind as we go through them. The idea that sounds the strangest to you may just be the one to push you through that creative wall.

Think about your writing environment. If you've never done this before, it is a valuable process. Personal material will challenge you like nothing you have ever experienced. Strategize on how to minimize the distractions. The less reasons to be distracted, the less likely you are to procrastinate. Your environment needs to keep you connected to the material and inspired to write.

For some writers, this is as simple as keeping their physical environment neat or turning off the phone when working. Other writers require complete solitude and arrange to go on a retreat where no one can distract or influence them. The closer the story is to your immediate family, the more emotional room you might need while writing. Think about how to define that room for yourself.

If you feel too close to the material, consider asking a trusted colleague to work on the script with you. The outside perspective could make all the difference in developing the project. This story deserves your very best, so be completely honest about what it will take to keep the words flowing.

When starting to write, take the time to distinguish between your personal story and the fictional story. This can be done in many ways. Put your personal story down on paper. Write out as much of your history and your feelings as required. Keep a journal or commit to spending a week to putting down everything that you remember and felt about the incident or person in question. Some writers prefer to use a different structure such as poetry or scrapbooks.

Writing your truth on paper serves two purposes: it opens up the emotions and it gives the past a voice. Once you've told that story, you can set it aside and work on the fictional tale. You can further distinguish fact from fiction by setting

the story in a different location, changing the character gender, or playing with the point-of-view. Use whatever opens up the most possibilities for you and for the story.

When you are ready to plunge in, dedicate quality time to developing the character histories and the backstory. The better you understand the fictional world, the clearer the distinction between your story and the protagonist's tale. Write detailed character profiles including a profile for the primary location. Take the time to develop your connection. Keep the notes that you make. They are always useful as reference material and may pull you out of trouble later.

Once you are in the depths of the writing process, there are many techniques to break through both small and large blocks. If you've become emotionally stuck and can't get past a scene, consider playing with the tone. Maybe you (and the characters) need a comic break from the heavier emotions. Experiment with how you approach the material. You'd be amazed how a single sarcastic or innocently humorous comment can release a scene from emotional shackles.

If you've hit a bigger obstacle and cannot write, there are many options. Go back to the basics and try writing stream of consciousness. Just grab a piece of paper and write. Don't edit; put down whatever comes to mind. Let the emotions flow onto the page without thinking of the consequences. No one needs to read the results—not even you. This is a tried and true technique to let out the hidden feelings and thoughts that are preventing you from moving forward.

Another technique is to call a trusted friend. You may just need to bend someone's ear. Be clear with the person about whether you want them to respond or just to listen. Be especially clear if you don't want advice. Sometimes all a writer needs is to hear the issues spoken out loud and a solution appears. If you do want advice, story editors are the best sounding boards. They understand the complete writing process from the emotional beginnings to the calculating polish. You still need to delineate what you want from the editor, especially if you're in a tenuous place with the story.

Finally, respect how much this story means to you. The process may take more out of you than it has in the past. Take regular breaks to keep your mind fresh. Don't risk exhausting yourself halfway through the project. Once a draft is written, consider setting it aside and coming back to it with renewed energy. Most important of all, consider keeping the project secret until you are ready to expose it to the world. Criticism and negative reactions, whether real or imagined, can derail a personal project before it even gets started. Cherish the time that the project is yours and yours alone.

LEGAL ISSUES

The best thing about writing a fictional story is that you're covered by the lengthy disclaimer at the end of the film credits. The closer your story's facts come to the truth, the more you'll want to consider discussing your project with a

lawyer. Especially if you have litigious relatives. Protect yourself by flexing those creative muscles and writing a fictional story with your true feelings at the core.

GREAT EXPEDITIONS

Writing a story with strong personal connections brings deep and lasting rewards. The process will push the boundaries of both your craft and your emotional comfort. Like anything in life, the bigger the risk, the greater the achievement. Many writers have told a small personal story only to arrive on an award podium because the material was so heartfelt and well-written.

Decide to write that so-called little story you keep pushing to the back of your mind. Your life and the world will change forever. ■

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