

MASTERING THE MEMOIR



Following God's Path to Getting Published

A Put It In Writing Workshop with Patricia Raybon

*"Write the vision, and make it plain."
Habakkuk 2:2*

Tell My Story, For His Glory Magazine Markets for Personal Essays

"The worker is worth his keep." Matthew 10:10

Newsweek (<i>My Turn</i> column)	\$1,000
Faith Today	\$100-\$500
Better Homes & Garden	\$100-\$400
Christian Home and School	\$175-\$250
FamilyFun (Disney)	\$1,300
Horse & Rider	\$150-\$1,000
Presbyterians Today	\$75-\$300
Guideposts Sweet 16	\$100-\$300
Family Circle	\$1,000-\$2,500
Ski Magazine	\$300-\$700
Upper Room	\$25 per meditation
New York Times Sunday Mag.	\$1,000+
Mountain House and Home	\$200-\$650 assigned articles
Outreach	\$375-\$500
Parenting	\$1,000-\$3,000
Nurseweek	\$200-\$800
Farm and Ranch Living	Up to \$300 (print/photo combo)
The Christian Century	\$100-\$300
AARP Magazine	Up to \$2,000

(For complete list of all markets for writers, see *Writers Market 2016*)



Finding My Writer's Voice

"I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb.
Before you were born I set you apart
and appointed you as my prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1:5

Who are you? Make a list of all the people you are.

Consider you age. Gender. Ethnicity. Hometown. What's first on your list? What's last? Consider also your job, generation, financial status, special talent or skill, political identity, religion, birthplace, native tongue, birth order, health condition, state, city or region of residence, hobbies, passions, special experiences. What about your loves, joys, fears and even "hates." Check the most significant.

What personal stories illuminate your key identities? Your writer's voice lives in the best of your personal, real-life stories. Seek to claim that voice.

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Writing Checklist for Memoirs & Personal Essays

- Announce the dilemma or issue in the opening. (Don't make reader wait.)
- Use a narrative thread. Tell a story, using anecdotes. Or tell "little stories" throughout to move your essay along. (Don't just philosophize.) And please don't ramble aimlessly.
- Write "close" - intimately, directly - as if you are writing to a close, respected friend.
- Use regular, everyday language. Use simple words. Avoid fancy, pretentious, complicated words and wording. But use proper grammar always.
- Watch your syntax. (That means the order of words in a sentence.) Stick with simple, declarative sentences. Avoid complicated, convoluted sentence constructions.
- Write tight. Avoid clutter. Cut extra words.
- Under-write. Use restraint. No exclamation points should find their way into your piece.
- Write with *strong nouns and verbs*.
- Use word pictures. Show don't tell.



- Make every word count. Every word should have a reason for being on your paper. If it's extra, ditch it.
- Use active voice.
- After a while, start to reflect. Weigh in on what your situation means.
- Reveal by showing the turning point - the moment or incident when things started to change. Show the change, again, by using one or two anecdotes.
- Resolve by showing how things ended up - ideally with new understanding and insight on your part.
- Avoid hitting the reader over the head with a message. If you've written it right, readers will "get it."
- Sustain the piece. Don't start out strong then resort to loopy, soft, dull writing. Keep the writing tight, direct and clean from top to bottom.
- Nail the ending. Don't allow the piece to fade into mush. To end it, use:
 - A tie-back ending, referencing your essay's opening.
 - Or assert a conclusion, declaring or final thought.
 - Or make a point. Readers like a final "closer."

Memoir Bullet List



- **Every good memoir starts with a problem.** (In *Angela's Ashes*, it's childhood poverty. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it's racism. In *My First White Friend*, it's unforgiveness. In *I Told the Mountain to Move*, it's unanswered prayer. In *The Glass Castle*, it's neglectful parents. In *Girl, Interrupted*, it's mental illness. In *The Color of Water*, it's interracial family life. In *The Long Awakening*, it's rediscovery.)
- **Every good memoir features a strong desire line—and it's evident from the beginning.** What are you trying to figure out? To resolve? To unravel? That desire should be clear early on in the book. Revealing it soon lets readers know what journey they're joining and whether they want to sign on for the ride.
- **Every good memoir is honest.** Truth, candor, honesty and self-reflection are the bread and butter of memoir. Without openness, memoirs just don't work.
- **Every good memoir is courageous.** But the writer doesn't have to start out that way. You can say *I am afraid. I'm not even qualified to write. But I'm going to try.* Readers can relate.
- **Every good memoir is focused.** Says memoirist Judith Barrington: "An autobiography is the story of a life. Memoir, on the other hand, is a story from a life."
- **Every good memoir is narrative**—featuring a natural beginning, middle and ending, all of which combined are very pleasing to readers' instinctual love for a whole story.

- **Every good memoir tells stories.** Life is the memoirist's material. Even when you hit a road bump—such as trying to write about something you haven't talked about—you can write about that irony. Says William Zinsser of life: "It's your material." Life is your story. Use it.
- **Every good memoir then reflects on these personal stories.** Good memoirs ponder over what happened, that is. They don't just tell what happened.
- **Every good memoir includes self-reflection.** In this way, the writer grows and develops during the course of the memoir—gainer deeper insight about herself and sharing that insight with the readers.
- **Every good memoir is fair.** The writer isn't keeping score against others. The writer is trying to figure out the answers to her own interesting and compelling problems, shortcomings, mistakes, choices. So while she may she may show others not being at their best, the good memoirist always turns the spotlight on herself. Now what about me?
- **Every good memoir uses sensory detail.** So her stories share how things look, felt, taste, sound—both in tactile ways and emotional ways.
- **Every good memoir teaches.** They show the writer digging into the problem as she seeks to understand it. Then it shows her reaction to what she is learning.
- **Every good memoir develops over time.** The writer explores the subject or problem—step by step, aspect by aspect—allowing the story to unfold in a satisfying, not-rushed way.
- **Every good memoir is itinerant,** meaning it is a journey—where you start the process of exploring the subject, not sure exactly where it is going to take you but being willing to start down the path and see where it leads.
- **Every good memoir is theological.** What does my story say about God? Or what I understand about God? Good memoirs tackle such questions, even if faith isn't the main focus of the memoir. Good memoirs don't start out knowing it all; they search for the answer—then share it. Now, that's a *good* memoir.

Things That Work

10 Craft Rules for Good Writing

"Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will succeed."
Proverbs 16:3

- 1. Use simple declarative sentences.**
They're the strongest sentence form. Period. Why?
They declare. Here's the order: Subject, verb, object.
- 2. Think small.**
Write in human terms, not cosmic terms.
Concrete details, not abstractions, carry the day.
- 3. Think big.**
Consider the larger meaning of your piece.
Show the trees. Slowly reveal the forest.
- 4. Tell the truth.**
Nothing is "bigger" in a story than the truth. If the coffee table is dusty or the head is bald - and it serves your story - tell it.
- 5. Write with nouns and verbs.**
Adverbs and adjectives are the weakest parts of speech.
- 6. Tell stories. Tell stories. Tell stories.**
Anecdotes are concrete. Concepts standing alone are abstract. They discourage reader engagement and reader enjoyment.
- 7. Practice good carpentry.**
Pound the nails in straight. That's Zinsser's advice.
Build one solid piece with all the basics intact. Then add decoration sparingly - if at all.
- 8. Maintain unity.**
Unity of pronoun. Unity of tense. Unity of mood. Unity of purpose. Digress and you're dead.
- 9. Keep things lean and spare.**
Verbosity and fat weigh down writing. Half our words in a first draft are dispensable. Trim them. In short, practice restraint.

10. **Fire your censors.**

Kick your "thought police" out of your writing space. Forget that someone you know may say "Tsk. Tsk." Get to the core of what you really want to say - then say it. You can always edit later. But first, get it on paper.

11. **Get 'em in the tent.** Write to the audience.

Pull in readers with a dilemma that appeals from the first sentence, and don't let go 'til the last. But first, get 'em in. That's award-winning author Rick Reilly's advice. Don't lumber into stories. Hit the go pedal and keep running hot until the piece ends. Remember, lukewarm sinks.

12. **Do the math.**

Did this say "10 Craft Rules for Good Writing"? Always check the numbers.

Bonus Tips:

13. **Never write a sentence you've seen before.**

He was fast as lightning?

No. Writer Rick Reilly says it this way:

He was fast as rent money.

Now how would *you* write such a sentence?

14. **Remember.** Somebody is dying for your story.

"Re-member" that person or that person's situation by knitting together the pieces of your solution in a story. If you have figured out something, write it.

15. **Live a great life.**

Alas, Hemingway said it best. "Writing is not a full-time occupation." Live deep, read lots, love well, greet strangers, laugh, sing, travel, play, get in hot water, figure a way out, help, think, pray, say thank you. When we do, stories find us.

Selected Reading List for Writers



- *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction* by William Zinsser.
- *Bird by Bird: Some Thoughts on Writing and Life* by Anne Lamott.
- *Writing for the Soul: Instruction and Advice from an Extraordinary Writing Life* by Jerry B. Jenkins
- *Stein on Writing* by Sol Stein
- *Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity* by Michael Card
- *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* by Judith Barrington
- *Immediate Fiction: A Complete Writing Course* by Jerry Cleaver
- *Making a Good Writer Great* by Linda Seger
- *Writing for Story: Craft Secrets of Dramatic Nonfiction* by Jon Franklin.
- *The Suspended Sentence: A (Grammar) Guide for Writers* by Roscoe C. Born
- *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* by William Zinsser
- "Writer's Market" (annual reference guide) by Writer's Digest Books.
- The Holy Bible (consider the One Year® NLT Study Bible. It's rich, thoughtful, instructive, and easy to read and follow.)

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