

TELLING TRUE STORIES

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A NONFICTION WRITERS' GUIDE
FROM THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



EDITED BY Mark Kramer and Wendy Call

most conventional news story. The most mundane tale, imparted by an inspired storyteller, captivates.

DeNeen L. Brown, a *Washington Post* writer, says, "An editor once said to me, 'Come on, you aren't writing a novel. Hit the button; send in the story.' Well, why not think of it as a novel?" This section of *Telling True Stories* explores everyday applications of novelistic structure: narrative stance, dialogue, strong beginnings, and satisfying endings.



What Narrative Writers Can Learn from Screenwriters

NORA EPHRON

A lot of college graduates approach me about becoming screenwriters. I tell them, "Do not become a screenwriter, become a journalist," because journalists go into worlds that are not their own. Kids who go to Hollywood write coming-of-age stories for their first scripts, about what happened to them when they were sixteen. Then they write the summer camp script. At the age of twenty-three they haven't produced anything, and that's the end of the career. By the time I became a screenwriter, I knew a few things, because I had worked as a journalist. When I wrote *Silkwood*, I knew what a union negotiation looked like because I had been in on several of them.

I have also learned things through screenwriting that would have been good to know when I worked as a journalist. As a young journalist I thought that stories were simply *what happened*. As a screenwriter I realized that we *create* stories by imposing narrative on the events that happen around us.

Structure is the key to narrative. These are the crucial questions any storyteller must answer: *Where does it begin? Where does the beginning start to end and the middle begin? Where does the middle start to end and the end begin?* In film school you learn these three questions as the classic three-act structure. This structure is practically a religion among filmmakers. Learning it is more instinctive among journalists.

I started working at the *New York Post* in 1963 when there were

seven daily newspapers in New York. No one would talk to reporters from the *Post*. We were the least among the papers, so we had to report much harder than anybody else. I often found myself writing long pieces about people who wouldn't give me five minutes on the phone. I had to talk to fifteen or twenty people who had known them since college or had made a movie with them or had run for office against them. Very early in my life as a reporter I learned to collect a lot of material.

The *Post* was an afternoon paper. Writing for an audience that had read a morning paper, I had to find what we called the "overnight angle" on the story. When we covered the same news events that the *Times* covered, we had to turn them into features; that meant developing a strong writing voice. I had been working as a journalist for nearly eight years before I could easily write in the voice that I turned out to have. The skills that I learned at the *Post* became enormously helpful when I moved into narrative journalism and then into screenwriting.

There is more justice in the print world than there is in the movie business. If you write something for print and it's any good, it will probably get printed somewhere. That's not true with movie scripts. People ask writers, "Do you have anything in your trunk?" I used to think, "Of course I have nothing in my trunk. I'm a writer. What I write gets published." But by the time I started writing screenplays, I had a *big* trunk.

When we began writing the screenplay for *Silkwood*, a lot had already been written about Karen Silkwood. There was a ton of daily journalism, narrative journalism, and even a couple of books. I didn't find any of it interesting, in part because Karen was a mixed bag, and all that writing didn't reflect that. Liberal journalists completely whitewashed her, while right-wing journalists turned her into a sort of devil. That made our movie very difficult to write.

All the regular questions that face writers also faced us. Where does the story begin, where is the middle, and where is the end? Each of those things is entirely up to the writer. They are the hardest decisions for any writer to make about any story, whether fiction or nonfiction. If you make the right decision about structure, many other things become absolutely clear. On some level, the rest is easy.

As we wrote *Silkwood*, we realized that we had to condense the period before Karen's death. We knew the movie would end with the automobile accident that killed her even though parts of her story continued long after her death. Since Meryl Streep was playing

Karen, we couldn't eliminate our lead character before the end of the movie. After we made that decision, it was clear that the movie had to begin before plutonium plant worker Karen became whistle-blower Karen Silkwood.

We had one other major problem, one that always faces screenwriters. What do you do in the middle of the movie? In the middle of any movie complications ensue and the whammies mount up. In the middle of *Silkwood*, Karen becomes a political human being. Well, that's boring to watch. How could we show this process without turning off the audience?

The answer was to make the movie very domestic, about three people in a house. Martin Scorsese says the dream movie scene is three people in a room. We had that: Karen, her roommate, and her boyfriend, Drew Stevens. These three people, all going in different directions, gave us a huge amount of material to play against the story that we wanted to tell: *A young woman becomes political*.

Because I started out as a journalist, I believe that if you just keep reporting, eventually you will come to know the structure that your story should have. A certain moment will come when you have figured out how to start, what to put in the middle, and what can wait until the end.

My move from print to film was gradual. Every nine months I took three months off from screenwriting and worked on a novel. After three years I had written my novel, *Heartburn*, and one of my scripts had been made into a film. *Silkwood* and *Heartburn* both came out in 1983. Twenty years later it is a lot easier to see *Silkwood* than it is to find a copy of *Heartburn*.

Too few journalists become screenwriters. I say to all the would-be screenwriters: *Become journalists*. And I'll say to working journalists: *Do not stay journalists. Become screenwriters*.

To Begin the Beginning

DENEEN L. BROWN

The hardest thing about the beginning is the blank screen. Writing is like scraping off a piece of yourself; people can see beneath your skin. I sit at my computer with a container of Slim-Fast bars on my

left, a box of Godiva chocolates on my right, and books surrounding me. Many of those books are short story collections. The screen stares and the cursor blinks nothingness, taunting me. It says, "Ready, set, go! What are you going to write this time?"

I sit down to write, but I want to rise above the story, as if I am going to tell the story to someone sitting in front of me. I summon a voice strong enough to say, *Sit down and listen to me*. The beginning is important, because you are establishing a relationship with the reader. You are asking to be invited in for a while. Tom Wolfe wrote in his introduction to *The New Journalism*, "Why should the reader be expected to just lie flat and let these people come tromping through as if his mind were a subway turnstile?"

Beginning to read a story should feel like embarking on a journey, starting toward a destination. The writer must decide what larger meaning the story represents and lead the reader to that. Is it about fear? Is it about shame? Pain? Love? Betrayal? Hate? Faith?

As I consider how to begin, I ask myself: What is the story about? What's the theme? What can I use to place a character quickly in a scene? How can I tempt the reader? How can I allow a reader to enter the subject's thoughts, share her feelings?

I wrote a story about a woman who went to an abortion clinic the very day that John Salvi attacked it, so she couldn't get her abortion. Later, she sued the state for the cost of raising her child. I spent a couple of days with her, and then went back to the newsroom and talked with my editor. He said, "What is this story about?" I said, "Well, it's about this woman who went to the clinic . . . and now she is suing the state." He repeated, "What is the story about?" And I repeated, "Well, it's about this woman . . ."

"No," he said. "It's about choice." I thought about that. In the end, every scene of my story focused on the central theme of choice.

Here are other questions to ask yourself as you begin: What would you write if you were not afraid of your editor? If you didn't care whether the story appeared on the front page of the newspaper or was published at all? If you were telling the story to your mother on a long-distance telephone call? If you had enough space to run with the full dialogue of your characters, letting in the truth of how people really speak? The full truth of what you saw?

Where would you begin if you were an omniscient narrator? As journalists, we must give ourselves permission to be reporters *and* writers. We must write our stories as natural storytellers would, letting the fingers fly across the keyboard, writing what the muse tells us to write.