

WRITERS DIGEST BOOKS

WRITING LIFE STORIES

HOW TO MAKE memories into MEMOIRS,
ideas into ESSAYS, and life into LITERATURE

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ideas into ESSAYS, and life into LITERATURE

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friend and family member and co-worker and on and on, placing the circles as near or far from *me* as is appropriate to their importance in your life. Where might you draw a larger circle to enclose those names that could be called the inner circle? Who's in there? Who's just on the line? And who's not in there?

Try different versions of this constellation: One for family. One for friends. One for co-workers. One for your childhood. One for now. One for the people who give you the most trouble. One for angels. The idea is simply to get thinking about who's important in your life and why, always looking for ideas, of course, and stories.



The first thing that makes a reader read a book is the characters. Say you're standing in a train station, or an airport, and you're leafing through books; what you're hoping for is a book where you'll like the characters, where the characters are interesting.

—John Gardner

EXERCISE NINE: *Characters as Traits*

7/17 From your constellation of characters, pick a friend. Type his or her name at the top of your screen, and make a list of traits. Include absolutely anything that comes to mind. What bugs you? What's endearing? What kind of humor? What kind of clothes? What's her favorite movie? What time does he hit the hay?

Next, do the same for a family member. Then an enemy. Then an employer. How well do you know each? What kinds of things do you know about one person in your life and not about the other? What traits would you leave out of a portrait? Which would you include? What traits would your subject like left out of a portrait? Which traits are needed for the story but uncomfortable for the person you portray? The idea is simply to start seeing the people in your life as characters, for as soon as you write about them in a narrative, that's what they will turn into.

EXERCISE TEN: *Relationships and Drama*

For each person you reduce (I use this word pointedly) to traits in the previous exercise, try a paragraph or two explaining the central drama between the two of you. Drama can be defined as conflict, conflict defined as tension, but remember that not all drama is negative, nor is all tension. The pages you produce for this exercise should not be a story or a description of an event but a discussion of your relationship. As you do two and three and four of these discussions, the idea of a central drama will take on more meaning for you. Note how reducing a friendship or romance to one central thing simplifies, clarifies. And note how drama arises from character.

Would the person you're writing about agree with your assessment? Why not? Can you write from his or her point of view for a draft? What changes? What can you use? Does a voice separate from your own emerge? If so, that's a voice the reader would like to hear.

CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH DIALOGUE

As a memoirist, you don't have omniscience at your disposal, can't read your brother's mind, can't but guess or intuit motives (unless you ask). Still, your reader must be made to forget your presence as the creator of his readerly impression of a character, must be made to forget the filter of your bias. Your reader comes to trust you only slowly and is quick to take the side of your mother, say, if your portrait feels too bitter, or quick to disbelieve you if your portraits are too sweet.

So a good place to start thinking about characters in nonfiction is with dialogue. In dialogue, your characters, your people, are speaking for themselves, and if your characters are speaking, the reader can look over your writerly shoulder, have the feeling he's seeing past you to the person herself.

Dialogue in nonfiction poses the same problems as in fiction—drama, verisimilitude, intensity, surprise, storytelling—with the added burden that (to whatever extent your ethics demand) it must really have been said, or be representative of the kind of talk that did occur. When I'm engaged in journalism (and when the talk isn't merely straight quotation, an easier case), any dialogue I use is verbatim, though at times I have condensed a conversation

or moved a sentence or edited for sense and grammar. That's as much as my journalistic ethics will allow.

John McPhee, a preeminent writer of literary journalism, says:

The nonfiction writer is communicating with the reader about real people in real places. So if those people talk, you say what those people said. You don't say what the writer decides they said. I get prickly if someone suggests there's dialogue in my pieces that I didn't get from the source. You don't make up dialogue.

I get prickly, too, when we're talking about journalism. But in memoir I give myself more leeway, and I think my reader does, too. Writing about events twenty or thirty years gone, I use dialogue more freely than in my journalistic pieces, letting my people talk as characters in the rough drafts to aid my memory, then carefully editing their talk to make it as close to that of my real friends, family, and other characters as I can, to make the speeches I can't quite remember not only plausible but probable, even occasionally giving the reader markers like: "My father said something like ..." And then proceeding to the talk.

Amazingly, though, much of what I report as dialogue I do remember well, some of it very well indeed. I can hear my father as clearly as I did the day he caught me puffing at a cigarette (stolen from him) in my bedroom forty years ago: "You'll be a lucky bird if you don't start smoking."

I don't remember my reply, but you can be sure it was a squirming promise (unkept, by the way—I started smoking, all right, and had to go through hell to quit twenty years later, twenty years ago). If I were to write about my former smoking career and my quitting, I'd probably reproduce that promise, knowing the kind of words I used for such things, and not feel badly or unethical about it. And, to reiterate, if I'm really going out on a memory limb, I'll say so: admit to making plausible dialogue, then carry on.

New writers of memoir will sometimes let problems of memory—especially in matters of dialogue—freeze them up. And if nothing gets written, what difference does a high ethical stance make? If your first goal is verifiable accuracy, you're better off as a scientist or historian or traditional journalist than as a memoirist. Successful memoir requires drama. Readers demand it. The form itself demands it. Drama—characters in action—must be the first excellence. Accuracy comes in a very close (and very important) second, but *second*. Always keeping in mind that lying is lying.

Check out the boxed disclaimer at the very front of Augusten Burroughs's winning memoir, *Dry*:

Author's note:

This memoir is based on my experiences over a ten-year period. Names have been changed, characters combined, and events compressed. Certain episodes are imaginative re-creation, and those episodes are not intended to portray actual events.

Burroughs is at the far end of a certain continuum, willing to mix a little fiction in with his nonfiction (fiction in the service of nonfiction?), but he lets us know up front, and, in the end, I don't think he loses our trust. We know that memory is faulty (especially in a story of alcohol addiction); we know that a writer's people need to be protected in various ways.

Like other defenses, the refusal to write anything but verifiably accurate dialogue (even in a memoir's rough drafts) gets in the way of discovery. Memory holds a lot more, even in matters of dialogue, than we may credit at first examination. You probably do remember what was said, so let yourself hear it. And if you don't quite remember, let yourself write anyway. Your rough draft and first drafts are yours alone. What matters is that your last drafts are as true as memory can make them and that your reader always knows where you stand. If you want to be trusted (not busted), let the reader in on your process and methods.

Or, having written pages and pages of plausible dialogue that helps you hear your people's voices, hear the conversations you've had in life, cut it all back to the two or three lines you're sure of, the ones all the extra writing made possible.

EXERCISE ELEVEN: *Your People, Talking*

Pick a character from your constellation, and write two pages or more of the two of you talking. You might use as a starting point a remembered conversation, but don't get too technical at this stage. Just let the two of you talk about one of your usual subjects.

Do four or five or more dialogues, different characters talking with you, a page or two each. See if that central drama I spoke of in the previous exercise starts to emerge in each one. If not, see if you can make it emerge. See if you can get your people talking about stuff that matters.

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Make at least one of your characters a good friend you could easily ask to read the dialogue you come up with, and show it to him or her. Does your friend feel well represented? Make sure, too, that one of your characters is someone you could never ask to read it.

Then, check your work against the following advice.

DIALOGUE TO AVOID

Wooden

"Doctor Smith has just called, Jonathan, and says the tumor is not malignant after all."

"Well, that is good news, Marilyn. I did not want to die so young."

"Yes, Jonathan, that is good news to me, as well."

"Marilyn, our life insurance agent, John Strauss of Wilton, called last night to say you have quintupled the policy upon my life. Is this true, Marilyn?"

These people sound too formal, inhuman. They are a couple, yet they use each other's names excessively. They speak without contractions.

Small Talk (and Lost Sequence)

"Doctor Smith called, and you're going to be okay!"

"That's good news!"

"Isn't it?"

"Quite good."

"I'm so pleased."

"Me, too."

"Darling."

"Darling."

"I'm going to live."

"Yes, you are."

"Ah."

"Ah."

"Oh, honey!"

"Relief!"

Real talk consists of a lot of filler and repetition. Your dialogue doesn't need to. All the relief here takes too much time, grows boring. And did you find the lost sequence? The speakers change places somewhere in the middle, not an uncommon problem in long stretches of unattributed back-and-forth.

Information Dumping

"Jonathan, Doctor Smith, who lives just down the street, phoned while you were at your office in the most expensive building in Dallas and said that the tumor in your gizzard has turned out to be benign."

"Darling, that is good news. Come here with your ample figure and long blonde hair and give me a hug!"

"Watch it, your black eyeglasses that you've worn since the skiing accident in Tahoe are gouging my prominent forehead."

Information dumping is a matter of the writer trying to give readers important information through dialogue. These characters are telling each other stuff they certainly ought to know (and therefore needn't *say*). Better to just communicate it in exposition or show it in scene. Let the characters speak for themselves.

Too Much Dialect

"I kin a' ha' na see a kenning tha' bless kinna wooffle nok."

"Aye, an' is trey, matey, an is trey!"

Okay, how people talk is important, but all that's needed to indicate accent is a suggestion here and there to give the flavor of it. Trust the reader to add the rest. In this case, our writer might have said, "He's Scottish and sounds it." An "aye" here and there and selected unusual vocabulary will do the rest.

Mimetic Comedy

"I uh-uh-uh-uh d-d-d-don't k-k-k-know, Ch-Ch-Ch-Charlie."

"Uh, you, uh, don't, uh, know?"

"N-n-n-n-no."

Again, the suggestion of a stammer is all the reader needs. She'll add the rest as part of her readerly dreaming.

Dumb Tag Lines

"I guess we can cancel that insurance policy now," he enthused.

"Perhaps it can wait till Monday," she encouraged.

"But we'll save eleven dollars if we do it now," he miserred.

"Who's we?" she queried.

"Why you, darling, and I!" he exclaimed.

"I'm more inclined to cancel you," she chortled.

I know your high school teacher told you to vary your tag lines. But there is nothing wrong with repeating *he said* and *she said* over and over. Every great writer does so. *He said* and *she said* provide fine rhythms, and when repeated, they fall into the background of readerly consciousness. Fancy, verby tag lines shake a reader out of his dream. Note that a question mark *means* "she queried," and that an exclamation point *means* "he exclaimed." "Chortled"? That's a marvelous word, coined by Lewis Carroll for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but how do you laugh and talk at the same time (if it's possible, show me, don't tell me ...)? "Enthused"? What's said ought to *sound* enthusiastic. "Miserred"? Please! I'm not saying never use anything but *he said*, *she said*, just use anything else sparingly and carefully.

Adverbial Insanity

"I'm going to live," he said gratingly.

"Where?" she said mysteriously.

"Why, I mean, I'll be alive!" he said meaningfully.

"What makes you think so?" she said menacingly.

"What's that in your hand?" he said realizingly.

"A hunting rifle," she said explainingly.

BANG, went the weapon loudly.

Your story ought to have provided enough context that only very rarely should you need to add an adverb to your tag line. As a matter of policy, try cutting all of them in your work. Which, if any, turn out to be really necessary?

EXERCISE TWELVE: *Read It Out Loud*

Gather all your dialogues from exercise eleven in this chapter and any dialogue you've written as part of other exercises, and one by one, try reading them out loud. One of the characters is supposed to be you—do you sound right saying what you've written? If you've got a patient friend, try reading together a dialogue meant to be between you two. in class

I always read all of my writing out loud at some stage of the drafting, often at many stages. My daughter thinks I'm nuts, lurking in the kitchen, ranting to myself in two or three voices: "Daddy! Who are you talking to?"

But anything I can't say right, a reader is not going to hear right in her head.

EXERCISE THIRTEEN: *Monologue*

I use a lot of long speeches by single characters, particularly in my journalistic work. Try re-creating five or ten minutes of someone giving a talk or someone passionately explaining an opera or someone giving you complicated directions. The trick is taking fast notes while you listen, writing them up immediately afterward, not putting it off. And do this one over and over.

Of course, a voice recorder will help, but the point of this exercise is training your memory. For the sake of the exercise, use your recorder only as an aid to check yourself: write first, then listen, superposing memory over record. What kinds of things do you tend to misremember?

EXERCISE FOURTEEN: *Real Talk*

Take that voice recorder to a gathering at which you know lively conversation will result: your poker night, a dinner party, reading club, family outing. You probably don't need to hide the machine; people tend to forget it's there very quickly, and you'll feel better operating in the open.

Next day, pick a lively section of the conversation, find it on the recorder, and go ahead and type it up, word for word. That is, *transcribe* it. Get it all correct, and add tag lines.

Chances are, you'll have a lot of pages before you're through, and chances are even the most scintillating conversation you remember won't flow smoothly, won't hold tension, won't work as dialogue.

The assignment is to make your transcript work as dialogue. What must be cut? How do you set off one character from another? How different are the voices? Can you get the funny way Aunt Esther coughs before each pronouncement? Can you get Charlie's lisp? And so forth. The idea is to think about how different actual conversation is from written dialogue, how much artifice is required to capture the truth of the mood and the timbre of lively talk.

LOOKING AT EXAMPLES

As with every other writing skill, when it comes to characters talking, it's a good idea to look at the work of fine writers.

So, let's look at some dialogue from a master, Philip Roth, this from *Patrimony*, a memoir of his father (and particularly of his father's death).

When finally my father seemed to remember Benjamin's presence, he looked up and said to him, "Well, Doctor, I've got a lot of people waiting for me on the other side," and with his head jutting out toward the bowl, he dropped his spoon into the Jell-O and resumed the attempt to eat something.

I walked out into the corridor with the doctor and his aide. "I don't see how he could survive two operations like that," I said.

"Your father is a strong man," the doctor replied.

"A strong eighty-six-year-old man. Maybe enough is enough."

"The tumor is at a critical point. You can expect him to have serious trouble within a year."

"With what?"

"Probably with swallowing," he said, and that, of course, evoked a horrible picture, but not much worse than envisioning him recovering not from one eight-hour operation on his head but now from two. The doctor said, "Anything can happen, really."

"We'll have to think it all through," I said.

We shook hands, but as he and his aide started away, he turned back to offer a gentle reminder. "Mr. Roth, once something happens, it may be too late to help him."

"Maybe it's too late already," I replied.

The drama here is clear. Between the doctor and Roth is the imminent death of Roth's father. No problem finding the dramatic center. I've plucked this bit of talk out of the middle of a scene in the middle of a chapter in the middle of a book, but note how much sense it makes; note the tension, the urgency. And note the parts that aren't talk. Roth's father says his poignant piece about people on the other side, and then there is silence. No one's talking. Everyone is silenced by the first line of speech. Roth fills this silence with his father trying to eat Jell-O. The silence lasts long enough for Roth and the doctor to get out into the corridor. Their talk fills in the facts, which we get as Roth gets them. His concern, his surprise, his worry become ours. "Probably with swallowing," the doctor says. Then there's another silence. Roth fills it now with his thoughts at the time. His worry about his father's swallowing has been made visceral and visible to us by the earlier image of the old man eating Jell-O.

More talk. Then a handshake, and one more silence in which we get the image of the doctor walking away only to turn and say the last devastating thing.

Roth's dialogue is never talk; it's always managed as a scene. How? For one thing, he doesn't forget the people who aren't talking. For another, he remembers that talkers aren't just mouths. He uses what's called *stage business*: characters doing things while they talk.

EXERCISE FIFTEEN: *Stage Business*

Again, get out one of your dialogues. Does it contain stage business? That is, are people doing things with their hands? Their faces? Are there silences? Are there moments when one character forgets to listen to the other? Are there background activities (traffic, music, wind)? Try adding the things that are missing. How much adds to the drama? At what point does too much start to take away?