

## My Favorite Expert Advice on Writing the Stories of Our Lives, Gleaned From My Favorite Books on the Subject

This outline is adapted from a handout I give to my life writing students. The points made here apply to writing in general as well as to writing our life stories in particular.

### I. Why should we write?

- A. Frank McCourt in *Writer's Digest*, Feb. 1999, p. 19: "But now I realize that everyone has a story. Nothing is significant until you make it significant. It's not what happens to you, but how you look at it."
- B. Frank P. Thomas, *How to Write the Story of Your Life*: "God created people because He loves stories." "Humans are happiest when we are creating." "There is a revival of activity today in search of our roots and family history."
- C. Strunk & White, *The Elements of Style*: Writing is a way to go about thinking.
- D. Rick DeMarinis, *The Art and Craft of the Short Story*: Storytelling is how we make sense of the world.
- E. Robin Hemley, *Turning Life Into Fiction*: Writing is a discovery process. Part of the fun is learning why you wrote what you wrote.
- F. *Writer's Digest*, Aug. 2000, pp. 20-21: You might find that the greatest rewards of writing evolve during the process of bringing your ideas to the page. As you reveal more of yourself on the page, you might notice patterns in the way you think, behave, and react to people and situations. This self-awareness can help you make better decisions, understand difficult situations, sort through feelings. It is a powerful way to find answers to some of your most difficult questions. And it can remind you that there are no easy answers—"this is the root of wisdom. Life becomes richer, observations and senses sharper."
- G. DeMarinis: Anyone will tell you his or her life story, given a little encouragement. It's the human thing to do.

### II. Why should we write well?

- A. DeMarinis: Poor writing can falsify experience.
- B. Various sources: Writing is rewriting. Craft moves from the back of the mind to the front during rewriting. Allow the first draft to be crude and ill formed.
- C. DeMarinis: Say everything that needs to be said in as few words as possible.
- D. Aristotle: "the proper and special name of a thing."
- E. Hemley: Words shape the way we view an event.
- F. DeMarinis: Be conscious of word selection. Develop an ear for language. The sounds in a sentence can produce three-dimensional images in the mind.

### III. Regarding truth, and the accuracy of our memories

- A. P.D. James, in *Reader's Digest*: "Memory is a device for forgetting as well as remembering. To that extent, every autobiography is a work of fiction, and every work of fiction is an autobiography."
- B. Robert Olmstead, *Elements of the Writing Craft*: Memoir is a narrative composed from personal experience. It depends on memory, which is somewhere between truth and how the writer sees the truth. Setting in a memoir is intensely personal and emotional.
- C. DeMarinis: Story is always biased. Hidden in the fiction is need, and need is always truthful. We need sympathy and approval, and want to be understood.
- D. *The Write Stuff* (a compilation): Memory is what people are made of. What's remembered is never the event. Memory is faulty.
- E. Hemley: What you have chosen to tell, and how, and what you have chosen not to tell reveal what kind of writer you are.
- F. Hemley: Memory plays tricks. Never let the truth get in the way of a good story. It's more important for an event to work than to be true.
- G. Tom Chiarella, *Writing Dialog*: Stating what literally happened is less important than interpretation of those events.
- H. Olmstead: What makes an experience important?
- I. Marcia Golub, *I'd Rather Be Writing*: Old memories are mysterious. A lot of what gives them narrative drive is trying to figure them out. Of everything that happened during childhood, why do we remember these things?
- J. Dwight V. Swain, *Creating Characters: How to Build Story People*: It's not the experience that creates the trauma, but the way the character reacts to it. (If you're writing your life story, that's you.)
- K. Hemley: What's most powerful is often what you most want to hide.
- L. Hemley: Dig deeper—"try to understand why a particular event stands out."
- M. Hemley: Distance from a place enables us to see it more clearly. What you remember is what's most important to you—the feeling it gave you. Description of a place should be anchored in the character's consciousness; it says as much about the character as about the place.
- N. Stephen Wilbers, *Keys to Great Writing*: "Given that all writing is to a degree fictitious—it can only represent reality—use the elements of artifice to your advantage."
- O. Pablo Picasso: "Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."

### IV. Getting started

- A. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*: Believe in the validity of your life!
- B. DeMarinis: The very act of writing sentences produces more sentences. This sometimes leads to inspiration.
- C. Hemley: ordering real life takes a lot of imagination and understanding.

D. Writer's Digest, Feb. 1999: Avoid chronology as an organizing principle. Instead, free-list key images.

E. Opening should be "crisp and economical" to grab the reader.

V. See my related article, "My Favorite Errors to Correct (Don't make these mistakes, and your writing will rise above most other writing)." Happy writing!

## About the Author

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