

Write Your Life Story

Orienting and Engaging Readers with the Factual and Emotional Truth

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Before diving into a discussion of the factual and emotional truth, I'd like to present a typical scenario that occurs at many family gatherings. Imagine this:

Aunt Susie and Uncle Jack are visiting their niece, Chrissy. Chrissy, her older sister Emma, her younger brother Jake and her parents are sitting around the dinner table after dessert. The conversation turns to those summers when Chrissy, Emma, and Jake stayed with Aunt Susie and Uncle Jack on their farm.

Chrissy and Jake are talking about good times on the farm riding Soxy the horse, swimming in the river, and playing monopoly on rainy days. Emma is silent. Chrissy turns to ask her what she remembers. She looks out the window, stammers a bit, then says, "I didn't really enjoy those summers." There is a collective "What?" and "Why?" and then "What do you mean?" from Chrissy, Jake, and her parents.

"Tell them," says Aunt Susie.

"Go on, Emma, finally get it off your chest," says Uncle Jack. *

Emma, with a flush of red rising from neck to forehead, takes a breath and turns to Chrissy, “I remember the horse and the swimming, all of it; but what I mostly remember, Emma, is how you fell off Soxy and almost broke your neck. You forced him into a gallop and he surprised you by jumping over the lower pasture fence. And I remember how Jake almost drowned because he wouldn’t listen to me when I said he was headed for where the bottom of the river drops off. It was way over his head. I spent every summer trying to keep the two of you from killing yourselves.”

“I never fell off Soxy,” said Emma. “I remember he jumped the fence, but I grabbed his mane and held on. Okay I was slipping off, but I was okay.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about this,” Mom asks.

“I did. I asked if I could go for half the summer and Jake and Chrissy could go for the other half. You and Dad said you’d think about it, but nothing ever changed. I... “

“I don’t remember you ever talking to us about any of that,” says Dad.

And so it goes, with Chrissy remembering Emma having good times with the pigs and Emma not remembering that at all. With Jake remembering an event one way and Chrissy remembering it quite differently. And with none

of the three children remembering the stories their parents said they had told them when they returned home from the farm.

So, when no one remembers the same events or remembers them quite differently, how do you write the stories of your life? Surely, others who were present during certain incidents or heard about them from relatives, are going to disagree with anything you write. How do you find the truth about the events in your life? The simple answer is that you can't. Memory is notoriously faulty, which is why people often disagree about what happened. But that doesn't mean you can't write your stories, nor does it mean that your stories won't be true. It simply means you need to consider the Factual and the Emotional truth when writing your stories.

The Factual Truth

The Factual Truth is truth based on facts that can be verified through shared memory, interviews, books, letters, diaries, journals, research, photographs, and other physical artifacts. It orients readers to who was involved in an experience, where the experience occurred, when the experience occurred, and what happened. Writing life stories that are honest and truthful involves sorting through facts that can be verified as indicated above.

Chrissy's family would probably agree on the following verifiable facts: Aunt Susie and Uncle Jack lived on a farm when Chrissy, Emma, and Jake were children; the farm was in Croom, Maryland; Chrissy, Emma, and Jake spent many summers on the farm; there were pigs and a horse named Soxy on the farm. Even if they disagree on some of these facts, they can do a bit of research by combing through photo albums and interviewing their aunt and uncle.

Lee Gutkind, author of *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, believes that when readers know that the writer is careful about the facts in writing creative nonfiction, they are more likely to accept the writer's story as one version of the truth.

While it is important to explore the Factual Truth of a story, don't become so involved in verifying information, you become overwhelmed by research and feel you can't even begin to write your story. If you don't remember where Aunt Susie and Uncle Jack lived, just write somewhere in Virginia or indicate you're not sure where the farm was, but then write whatever you do remember: the landscape, the house, the daily routines. Write what you know, acknowledge that others have different memories, and admit what you don't know.

The Emotional Truth

While the factual truth orients readers; the emotional truth engages them. It goes beyond story, which is a sequence of events detailing what happened, to plot—*how* and *why* events happened. To convey *how* and *why* events occurred, writers need to reflect on their thoughts and feelings during an event as well as their interpretation of the event. Because interpretations of events often change over time with more information; with more experiences in life, and with social, emotional, and psychological growth, writing the emotional truth sometimes involves writing about how thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of an experience changed over time.

But why does the emotional truth differ between people experiencing the same event? The emotional truth for Chrissy, Emma, and Jake differs because while all three spent summers on the same farm; their temperament, needs in a given moment, and life experiences predisposed them to focus on different facets of situations. And this led to very different interpretations of events. Additionally, their personal focus determined which events would be remembered and which events would be less important, and, therefore, forgotten. While all three remember the pigs, Chrissy remembers Emma enjoying the pigs because it was one of the few times her older sister wasn't being "bossy" telling her what to do and what not to do. Emma doesn't

remember the pigs because as the oldest of the three she was focused on keeping her younger siblings safe. That burden overwhelmed all other memories.

Lee Gutkind in his book, *You Can't Make this Stuff Up* indicates that:

Truth is personal—it is what we see, assume, and believe, filtered through our own lens and orientation. Although it may revolve around the same subject or issue, the truth as one person perceives it may not be the same truth another person sees...There are many truths to a story and many versions of the same story.

Gutkind stresses that even though writers are recounting their personal truth as they write a story, they shouldn't invent people who weren't there or didn't exist. He also stresses that writers shouldn't include events that never happened to embellish a story. To do these things is essentially to write fiction. And there are times when people decide to write fiction novels based on their life with major changes in events and details about people. This not only frees them from concerns about the accuracy of their story, but also protects them and the important people in their life from unintended consequences of truths that might be hurtful or potentially damaging to significant relationships.

When someone labels a piece of writing fiction, readers understand the events recounted didn't really happen. They know the writer wove the threads of their life experiences with the threads of research and the threads of imagined scenarios to create the people, places, and events in a story. But life stories are a form of creative nonfiction. Readers believe the people are real and that the events in the stories actually happened. The writer weaves the threads of life experiences and research into stories that are true.

But why are life stories considered to be *creative* nonfiction? The word "creative" has been chosen to emphasize that writers of this genre render their stories using the same elements of craft as fiction writers: dialogue, characterization, setting, scene, summary, etc. As a result, their stories read more like fiction than newspaper articles or scholarly reports.

Writing the Truth about Other People

Despite careful attention to the factual and emotional truth in a piece, there will be times when people involved in an event disagree about what happened or may be hurt by how you recount what they said or did in a situation. People are less likely to be hurt or angry when you present yourself and them as completely human with positive traits and negative flaws, strengths and weaknesses. Tell your story from your own point of view but

make allowance for the fact that there is more than one side to every story. Try to conceptualize the perspective of others as best you can.

This is best accomplished by approaching writing as a way to understand yourself and others. Writing in this way enables you to look back at your younger self with compassion and empathy. It also enables you to find compassion and empathy for the good, the not so good, and the downright hurtful actions of others.

In some situations, the actions of others are so extreme, it is impossible to find many positives. When the actions of others are harmful, try to present the story of how and why they did what they did. It doesn't excuse toxic behavior, but it does provide a context for what happened that enables you and the reader to find some understanding of a bad situation.

Next Steps

Read *How to Incorporate the Factual and the Emotional Truth in Your Themes and Stories* and *Incorporating the Factional and Emotional Truth: A Worksheet*, then, write your next theme or story. Below are a few quotes to contemplate before you write:

“My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way.” ~Ernest Hemingway

“I love writing. I love the swirl and swing of words as they tangle with human emotions.”

~James Michener

“The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart.”

—Maya Angelou