

## **Do's & Don'ts of Memoir Writing**

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**Purpose:** Tips for writing (and rewriting) a memorable story, based on the years of experience of this professional editor and journalist.

(Note: There are no “don’ts”; it’s your story. I only used it in the title to get your attention. But I do have a number of “avoids,” “rather thans,” and “not recommendeds.”)

- **Tell a story**—a memoir is not an autobiography, even though it is autobiographical. A memoir is a select collection of memories that support a central theme and focus. A good memoir reads like a novel (i.e., fiction).
  - Enlighten your readers. Ask yourself, what is the purpose of this memoir? What do I want the reader to take away from it?
  - Begin with an interesting, engaging event or incident.
  - Infuse humor as well as horror; self-deprecating; amusing anecdotes.
  - Avoid a rambling narrative that leaves the reader wondering, “Where is this going? What’s the point of this?” “Why should I care about this person?”
  - Avoid beginning with: I was born on . . . — unless it truly manifested itself as an unusual event or circumstance.
- **In the words of Mary Karr, “get carnal”**—delve deeply into emotions—not only your own, but of those people included in your story.
  - Avoid melodrama and purple prose.
- **Use a creative writing style**—“narrative nonfiction” or “creative nonfiction”—this style of writing applies the techniques of writing fiction to writing nonfiction.
  - **Create scenes**—use dialogue (as best you can remember it; these are *your* memories) and describe the actions, reactions, and responses of yourself and those with whom you are interacting. In creating dialogue, paraphrase as needed to get to the essence of what’s being said.
- **Narrative voice**—
  - Avoid “telling” and passive voice as much as possible—telling/passive voice distances the reader; disengages the reader; it’s the voice of history books, academia, and traditional journalism. Telling = I was very angry.
  - Show and reveal through active voice—engage the reader; draw the reader in. Showing/revealing = describing actions and reactions, and disclosing one’s internal thoughts: I wanted to kill him. Instead, I kicked him in the balls.
  - Avoid mixing present tense and past tense. Clarity, not confusion; consistency is critical. I recommend using past tense; you’re writing about the past. When referring to current situations or developments, present tense is acceptable; e.g., in your concluding remarks or epilogue.
- **Content:** Does your story have needless or irrelevant content? If there is no *story reason* for including it, cut it—“kill your darlings.” This will tighten it up and give it better flow.
  - Limit information to what’s relevant to the story’s focus and theme.
  - Include information that reveals character.
  - Include exposition that reveals important background information.

- **Structure:** How is your story organized—or not? After you complete (in the words of Ann Lamott) your “shitty first draft,” restructure it for clarity of story, character, and theme arcs. It does not have to be chronological, but it does need order, a discernable structure.
  - Write a logline or tagline—25 words or less describing your story/book.
  - Write a one-page synopsis (single spaced).
  - Outline the manuscript—chapter by chapter, scene by scene—*after* you have written it. Is this the structure you intended? Does it tell the story the way you envisioned it?
- **Narrative mode:** Do you switch modes midstream?
  - First person (I, me, myself, we, our) to second person (you, your, yourself)?
  - Clarity, not confusion. Consistency is critical.
- **Information dumps:**
  - Do you have “reader-feeder” in dialogue and exposition?
  - Do you have too much BS (back story), either in inappropriate places (bringing the story to a halt), or without context for the reader, who then skips it?
    - Avoid character backgrounds that read like an author’s notes to self. Cut the BS. Have characters reveal their backgrounds at appropriate places through what they say and do.
    - Avoid inserting background information before it has relevance to the reader.
- **Kill your darlings:** Do you fall in love with what you’ve written? If it doesn’t have a *story reason*, then kill it.
- **Patience > Time and Distance:** Do you give yourself time away from your work? Do you give yourself distance before rereading, revising, and rewriting? Take your time. Rushing it rarely ends well. Patience!
- **Feedback:** Do you get feedback on your writing? Many memoir writers fear asking family members or even friends for comments on what they’ve written. That fear may be justified. Try joining a read & critique group of like-minded writers, or work with a developmental editor.

**Formatting:** Do you despise Microsoft Word? So do I. But love it or hate it, it is the default word processor in the writing/publishing world; learn how to use its features, especially Styles and Track Changes. If you prefer Pages, Google docs, OpenOffice, or Scrivener, you will have compatibility issues when working with an editor who uses Word, even if you become technologically savvy.

**Working with an editor**—we all need editors.

- Listen to what the editor says, suggests, and recommends. It’s OK if you disagree, but at least take it under consideration and give it serious thought.
- Be organized.
- Accept constructive criticism; that’s what you’re paying for.
- Remember, you and the editor have the same goal: to make your book the best it can be.

**Ghostwriting:** hiring or being one

- Hiring a ghostwriter:
  - Some people find it challenging to talk/write about themselves, especially in a compelling manner that engages others. They are unsure of what aspects of their lives are interesting to others.
  - Involves extensive interviews and can take a year or more to complete the process.
  - Cost can range from \$25,000 to \$50,000; professional ghostwriters charge up to \$45,000 to \$50,000.

- Being a ghostwriter—requires:
  - Being personable and empathetic.
  - Top-notch writing skills.
  - Patience and forbearance.

### **Publishing**

- Traditional publishing deal—publisher buys the rights to your story; must have broad appeal; most deals are with celebrities or widely recognized individuals, or those who were involved in a sensational event or incident.
- Self-publishing—beware of so-called “publishers” promoting package deals, such as iUniverse, Lulu, et al.
  - Recommendation:
    1. Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP/Amazon)—print (paperback only) and Kindle ebook (KDP absorbed CreateSpace).
    2. Ingram/Spark—print (paperback and hardback) and generic ebook.

### **Finals words:**

- Clarity, not confusion.
- What's the story reason?
- Show, rather than tell.
- Kill your darlings.

### **Recommended Reading:**

- Resources for Writers webpage (<http://www.larryedwards.com/resources.html>)
  - [From the Editor's Eye: The 10 Most Common Errors Made by Writers](#)
  - [21 Rules for Improving Your Writing](#)
- *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Ann Lamott
- *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr
- *The Liars Club: A Memoir*, Mary Karr
- *The Glass Castle*, Jeanette Walls
- *This Boy's Life: A Memoir*, Tobias Wolff
- *Dare I Call It Murder? — A Memoir of Violent Loss*, Larry M. Edwards

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Larry Edwards is an award-winning investigative journalist, author, editor, and publisher. He is the author of *Dare I Call It Murder? — A Memoir of Violent Loss*, which took top honors at the San Diego Book Awards and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Books he has edited have also won regional and national awards, including the Benjamin Franklin Gold Award-winning *Murder Survivor's Handbook: Real-Life Stories, Tips & Resources*. Outside of writing, editing, and publishing, Edwards plays the fiddle in old-time music and bluegrass bands, and, being married to Janis Cadwallader—a serious birder—he has become an avid bird photographer.

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