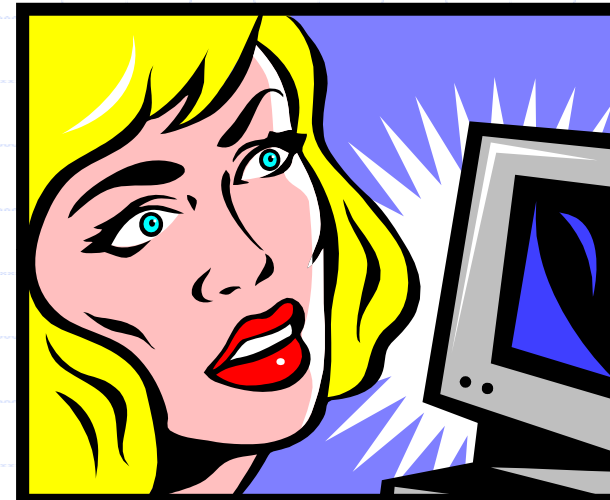


# How to Write a Memoir that Someone Other than Your Mom Will Want to Read



*Using Storytelling Principles to Strengthen  
Your Work and Broaden Your Audience*

Melanie Rigney

Writing Your Personal History Symposium

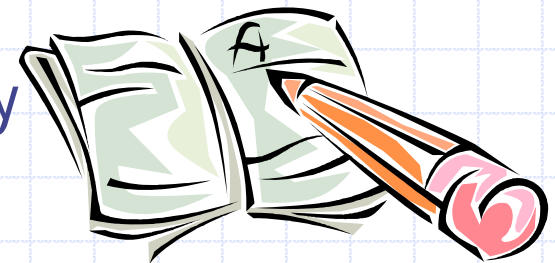
May 12, 2011

# What Are Your Goals?

- Why am I writing this?
- Who do I want to read this?
- What do I want the reader to feel/know that he or she didn't before picking up my memoir?
- What makes my experience special?

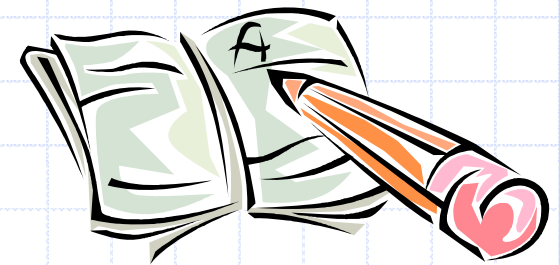
# Principles of Memoir Writing

- ◆ Memoir writing is the nonfiction form closest to novel writing
  - Memoirs must have a beginning, middle, and end.
  - They must tell a compelling story about a life-changing time if they are to be commercially successful.
  - Because their benefit is somewhat intangible, the experience or the writing must be earthshattering to be commercially successful.



# Start with the Action

- ◆ As with novel writing, you must begin with a problem; watch the tendency to give too much background. Let the story unfold from the point of crisis.
- ◆ Every scene must move the story along to its logical, satisfying conclusion. Watch the tendency to include everything that happened.
- ◆ Show, don't tell. Write in the moment.



# Memorable Opening Paragraphs

- ◆ “I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the stream coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.”
- ◆ “I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin.”
- ◆ “My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born.”

# Quick Tips to a Stronger Book

## ◆ The Basics

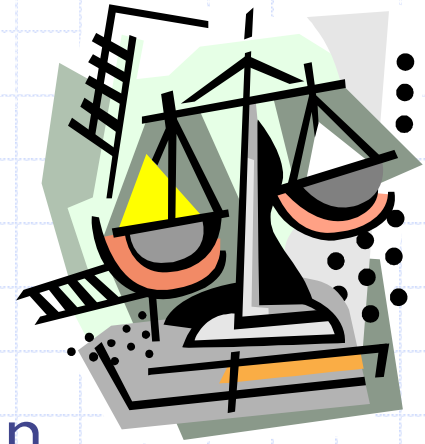
- There is no such thing as a publishable first draft
- That said, finish that first draft before you start editing in a serious way!
- Consider setting up a time line on paper or on your wall or in Excel to track your plot and characters.
- Look at other memoirs. How long are they? Do they include pictures? What do the interiors look like? If you're self-publishing, go look around the bookstore or on Amazon for cover treatments.
- Know your limits. Writing quality work is almost impossible to do more than an hour at a time.
- Remember the golden rule of storytelling: Something happens, somebody changes.

# Quick Tips to a Stronger Book

## ◆ Self-Editing

- Know the rules of grammar before you break them.
- Keep an eye on the length of your sentences, paragraphs and chapters. It's good to vary them somewhat, but that doesn't give you license for 200-word sentences, 10-sentence paragraphs and 80-page chapters.
- Is each scene/anecdote/sentence essential to move the story to its ultimate, satisfying ending?
- Does your dialogue sing? Is it consistent and distinctive?
- "Said" or "asked" is all the attribution you'll ever need.
- Do run spell-check. Just don't rely on it exclusively.
- Cross out all the adverbs, then think about adding them back. Judiciously.
- Where are you showing instead of telling?

# Truth in Memoir Writing



- ◆ Novelists have an advantage over memoirists: they don't have to worry as much about including real people in their stories.
- ◆ Libel/defamation hold people up to public ridicule. And generally, especially for public officials, if it's provably true—conviction, arrest record, and the like—you're safe.
- ◆ You cannot libel a dead person. But in some circumstances, their estates or survivors may sue you if your work opens them, not the dead person, up to ridicule.



# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- ◆ What if what you remember is hurtful to other people?
- ◆ When you write about private citizens, you are also open to the possibility of invasion of privacy suits, even if what you write is true.

# What Is Truth in Memoir?

- ◆ What if you're just writing it to let off steam?
- ◆ What if you turn it into fiction?
  - changing someone's name or not being a best-seller doesn't protect you from litigation.
  - You need to be sure the person is so different from real life as to not be recognizable to people who would know him or her.

# What Is YOUR Truth?

- ◆ An exercise from real life
- ◆ The takeaway: As Shakespeare wrote:

*This above all:*

*To thine own self be true,*

*For it must follow as dost the night the  
day,*

*That canst not then be false to any man.*

# Questions?

Thanks for coming!

Melanie Rigney

Editor@editorforyou.com