



Writing Your Memoir – Handout Dan Poynter

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NOW, SIT DOWN AND WRITE SOMETHING.

**Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency
San Francisco, CA**

3 Ways to Make Yourself Irresistible to Any Agent or Publisher

1. Understand how agents and publishers work.

A portrait of publishing in the throes of transformation:

- * The tightrope between culture and commerce
- * The competition books face
- * Publishing by the numbers
- * The 6 Sisters
- * 10 options for publishing your book
- * The quest for synergy
- * The more they pay, the more they push
- * The big 1% and the small 99%
- * The seven lunges at the brass ring of bestsellerdom
- * Publishing a hit-or-miss business
- * The publishing timeline from idea to bookshelves
- * The importance of timing
- * Avoiding risk
- * Major publishers' investment in a book and how they try to protect it
- * Superstores and returns
- * Why the form information takes is irrelevant
- * What publishers are buying
- * A subjective business
- * Anything is possible
- * Readers who want heart in their books

The role of an agent as a:

- * Mediator
- * Scout
- * Midwife
- * Matchmaker
- * Negotiator
- * Buffer and problem-solver
- * Advocate
- * Seller of subsidiary rights
- * Oasis of encouragement

An agent also:

- publisher
- * Absorbs rejections
 - * Frees you to write
 - * Has more clout with editors
 - * Gets you more money for subsidiary rights than you will receive if your publisher handles them
 - * Enables you to avoid haggling over money and rights with your editor
 - * Sells your book as professionally as you write it
 - * May be the only stable element in your career
 - * Is an oasis of encouragement

Three steps for getting an agent:

- * Write a salable proposal or manuscript.
- * Research the agents you want to contact.
- * Follow their guidelines when contacting them.

2. Develop your craft.

- * Read.
- * Learn to love words.
- * Understand what makes books work.
- * Get writing experience.
- * Come up with salable ideas.
- * Research the subject.
- * Outline your book.
- * Establish a work style.
- * Write.
- * Revise.
- * Share your work.
- * Do a final revision.
- * Submit your manuscript properly.

3. Make a commitment to your career.

- * Know yourself and your goals.
- * Be passionate about your books.
- * Embrace technology.
- * Reinvent yourself as what author Sam Horn calls an authorpreneur.
- * Mobilize your networks.
- * Do everything you can for your books.
- * Promote your books.
- * Love the process.
- * Make change an ally.
- * Keep growing.

* Don't let anything--especially fear, fame, or fortune--stop you.

Adapted from *How to Get a Literary Agent* by Michael Larsen.

10 Options for Getting Your Books Published

* You can collaborate with other writers in a co-op venture in which you share the production and marketing costs to create, for example, an anthology of your work.

* You can pay for all of the costs to publish your book to a vanity publisher, but vanity publishing has no credibility in the industry.

* You can use subsidy publishing, which means that you pay part of the publishing costs, an option with less credibility than a trade publisher.

* You can partner with a foundation that will support the writing and promotion of your book because it will further their cause.

* You can self-publish your book using one or more of the following options:

--photocopying your manuscript and selling it in a three-ring binder

--print-on demand (POD)

--using print-quantity-needed (PQN) for short runs

--using offset printing for longer runs

--publishing it for free online so it can be downloaded

* You can publish it in other media such as CDs and DVDs.

* You can sell it as a calendar or other forms of merchandise.

* You can sell the rights to:

--an on- or offline trade or consumer periodical that will serialize it

--a publisher for a flat fee, as a work for hire

--a small press, niche or specialty publisher, or a regional publisher

--a academic or university press

--a professional publisher that publishes books for a specific field

--a mid-sized house

--one of the imprints in one of the six New York conglomerates that dominate trade publishing

* You can work with a packager who provides publishers with a copy-edited manuscript, an upload ready for a printer or finished books.

* You can hire an agent.

11 Ways to Find the Agent (or Editor) You Need

* Referrals

The best way to get an agent's attention is if the first two words the agent sees or hears are the name of a client, editor, agent, author, or bookseller who suggested you contact the agent. The more important the person, the more eager the agent will be to hear from you.

* Your Networks

You need overlapping, professional, international networks online and off that will be as important to your career as writing and promoting your books: family and friends, speakers, writers, publishing people, professionals in your field, booksellers, fans, suppliers, champions, people around the country, and a promotion network

* Writer's Organizations. Members are part of your networks.

* The Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR),

www.publishersweekly.com/aar

* Directories

Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors, and Literary Agents 200X; 200X Guide to Literary Agents; 200X Guide to Literary Agents: A Writer's Guide by Adam Begley; *Literary Market Place (LMP); The Writer's Handbook.*

* The Web

Google literary agents. Visit authorlink.com, predatorsandeditors.com, publisherslunch.com, publishersweekly.reviewsnews.com, publishersmarketplace.com.

* Literary events: writing classes, readings, lectures, seminars, book signings, conferences and festivals

* Magazines: *Publishers Weekly*, *The Writer*, *Writer's Digest*, and *Poets & Writers*

* Publishers' catalogs and websites: libraries receive catalogs.

* Books: dedications and acknowledgments in competing and complementary books.

* Your Platform: Give talks, maintain a website, write a blog, do an ezine, post to related sites, do podcasts, get published online or off, publicize your work and yourself,

build your email list. When your continuing national visibility is great enough, agents and editors will find you.

Adapted from *How to Get a Literary Agent* by Michael Larsen.

The 6th San Francisco Writers Conference
February 13-15, 2009
InterContinental Mark Hopkins Hotel

Keynoters: Bestselling authors Richard North Patterson, Jane Smiley and Lolly Winston
Speed Dating with Agents: one-on-one pitches to a room full of agents

For more information and registration, please visit www.sfwriters.org .

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BLOCKBUSTER PLOTS for Writers

Martha Alderson, MA

I invite writers to experience the freedom of structure

www.blockbusterplots.com

<http://plotwhisperer.blogspot.com/>

NAMW Telesummit

October 23, 2008

Injecting Emotion into a Memoir Plot

The topic of emotional development in a memoir is challenging to most memoir writers, especially because you need to weave your own emotions into the story and develop yourself as a character.

The reason most people enjoy memoirs is because reading about other people's lives arouses our emotions. Character development is the way that writers bring characters alive on the page, and at the core of the characters are their emotional lives. Creating emotional material is challenging to all writers, but especially to memoirists because they are so close to the story being told. If the "I" character does not deliver emotion properly, the memoir will appear abstract and analytical.

Martha Alderson, an international plot consultant for writers, showed us in three easy steps how to develop emotion in memoir writing.

1. What is character emotional development and why is it important?
2. The three most powerful ways to create emotion in a memoir.
3. The art of writing emotion in scene.

SPECIAL NOTE: A Memoir Writers Plot eBook is in the works and has all the information Martha shared on the call as well as everything else you need to create a more compelling memoir through dramatic action, character emotional development and thematic significance. Pre-order at the reduced price of \$15 today:

http://www.blockbusterplots.com/plot_tools.html#ebooks.

Martha's Bio

Martha Alderson, author of *Blockbuster Plots* has created a unique line of plot tools for writers, including the upcoming *Plot for Memoirists eBook*. She teaches scene development and plot workshops privately and at conferences. For plot tips, visit: <http://www.blockbusterplots.com>

She takes readers and writers alike beyond the words and into the very heart of a story.

As the founder of Blockbuster Plots for Writers, she manages a popular blog: <http://plotwhisperer.blogspot.com>

Sheila Bender

NAMW Telesummit Oct. 23, 2008

In Memoir: Write From What is Unsolved; Come at Things Slant

www.writingitreal.com

The real topic of any piece of writing, the part that provides the emotional growth for both the writer and the reader, the part that holds everyone's attention and lingers with them after reading, is the part that portrays the author's search for an answer to some persistent question. It may be a question that is an obsession of the writer's such as, "How will I live now that my parents are divorced?" and it can occur for years after the precipitating event. The question might be, "If I don't feel like a good parent, can I be any good at all?" or "Why do elephants always make me laugh?" It might be "If the city I live in is so polluted and crowded and violent, how come I haven't given up on it?" or "Will I ever believe that I will grow old?" or "What is my calling?"

The poet Rilke addressed the need for questions in an author in his famous *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Here is a writing practice to help you learn how living the questions facilitates writing:

Fill a piece of paper with questions. Write any question that comes to you. Allow yourself to mix silly questions with esoteric ones, mundane questions with ethereal questions, questions that might have a simple answer with questions that undoubtedly have complex answers. This mix will free your unconscious to suggest questions that are important to your being.

What evidence do I have of life after death?
Which do I like better, granola or Rice Chex?
Will the rain wash away the smell of too many dogs using the yard?
What is the hardest thing for a woman to talk about?
What is the hardest thing for me to see about my life?
What is the hardest thing for me to see about myself?
What is the hardest thing for me to see about others?
How do I know these are the hardest for me to see?

Or try another way to get yourself to write questions by writing a dialog between two or more people in which no one is allowed to say anything that is not a question. Since you don't have to claim the questions as your own, but allow your characters to ask them, you may have an easier time coming up with unexpected ones. Let the people interact as if they were on stage or on a street corner or around a table conversing in this "question" way:

Harry: Are you coming to dinner with us?
 Pauline: Am I feeling okay about wearing mink?
 Harry: Why does fur make you comfortable?
 Pauline: Why do I eat when I am not hungry?
 Harry: Why do I always choose Hungarian food when I am feeling blue?
 Pauline: When does paprika look like bursts from a blood vessel?
 Harry: Will the act of chewing awaken my feeling of connection to something larger?
 Pauline: When are good friends the most important part of living?

Put your writing away for at least a few hours or overnight. When you pick it up again, peruse it for question that interests you. Draw a balloon on a piece of paper and print that question inside of it; draw a string on the balloon. Just like when you were a kid and you let helium-filled balloons go once you were inside your house knowing they would reach the ceiling and stay inside, imagine your question balloon floating aloft yet remaining in your eyesight. Let this question balloon keep you company like those magical balloons of our childhood.

Over a few days or weeks, write down the specifics of where you are and what is happening when you remember the question you "left hanging in the balloon." Describe where you are, what you see and what you feel, taste, touch and smell in the moment the question occurs to you, whether that is on city streets, a hiking trail, or by the stove where you are cooking oatmeal. Write about what you are thinking and doing when the question flashes in your mind to see, taste, touch, hear and smell the world in which your question lives.

You might be groping in the dark for a light switch when you think about one of them and you can write about that--the feel of the carpet beneath your feet, the sound of the switch going on, the way the furniture looks as soon as the bright light comes.

Collect many such moments on the page. And after you have collected them, set about writing a longer piece from the notes you have kept. You might entitle it, "A Question" and repeat the question like a refrain, followed by sketch after sketch of the moments your question attracted to you. As transitions from one sketch to another, you might rely on inserting dates and times or places as section titles.

The momentum built by the list of moments that come in answer to the same question will lead you, if you stay with the details, to new insight and to a satisfying ending to your piece of writing.

Rilke knew what he was talking about. Even if this feels clumsy and disjointed as a way of writing, force yourself to give it a try. Questions are where the breath and spirit are.

If you allow yourself to write without worrying, my bet is that you will create highly lyrical pieces with great power and beauty that cohere because of the refrain and the images. If you do this exercise, please send in the results and I'll get back to you with some more ideas for developing the essay.

Emily Dickinson's famous poem offers memoir writers good advice:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind

When you come at things slant, as a writer, you begin unearthing topics and bringing people in your past alive more easily than you think you can. Here are some writing prompts to help you get you started coming at your truths and experiences slant:

1. Whistling - Who taught me how? When? Where were we? Did I learn? What did I think of that person's whistling? What did I think of my own?
2. What meal do I remember eating alone? Where was I and why and how did I feel? What were the surroundings like? The meal?
3. What meal do I remember eating with others during a difficult time? Where were we and why and how did I feel? What were the surroundings like and what was in the meal?
4. What secrets am I holding for others? How much do they weight and how can I tell their weight? What would happen if I were to stop holding them? What would happen if I continue to hold them?
5. If I were to write out the secrets and circle one word from each of them, what sentence could I put together containing these words? What does that sentence make me think and feel? (You can write lyrically in response to this idea by repeating the sentence you create like a refrain throughout the writing.)

6. Choose a moment you remember clearly when someone said or did something that changed things for you. Start with a snippet of dialog, something from the moment that caused the change. Don't finish the statement or answer the question, but instead describe the surroundings you were in when you heard the dialog--what things or people were in the room, what the lighting was like, what other sounds you heard, what your mouth felt or tasted like. You can make a comment about what you were thinking or wondering about at the time. Then after you have written the scene, complete the snippet of dialog and show what the person speaking does--leave the room, slam a door, pull the blankets up, throw something, return to reading the paper, for instance.

The National Association of Memoir Writers

I am so pleased to offer these experts to you to help you write your memoir, learn about publishing and finding agents, and shaping and crafting your work. We at NAMW want you to feel successful in your writing life, and to be a resource for you. The audios will be available for anyone to have after the telesummit when they sign up. So tell your friends!

We have many free resources that can help you with your work—a newsletter with writing prompts and information, a free eBook when audios, weekly articles, and a writing resource list that we are building.

At NAMW, we also want to provide tools that will help you to write: CDs, Transcripts, membership teleseminars, and networking through becoming Member of the Month. Twice a year retreats to work with Linda personally, and online workshops and coaching. We are always creating new ideas, teleseminars, and workshops.

Please enjoy the following article and writing exercises to help you go beyond your doubts and worries about telling the truth and launching into your stories. It's important to trust your desire and passion urge to write your story. Listen to the whispers of your creative self, and make your memoir writing dreams come true.

Writing the Truth about Family (and yourself)

Linda Joy Myers, Ph.D.

www.namw.org

Truth in memoir writing.

What is it? Who defines it? How do you understand it?

Memoir writing, especially in this post-James Frey age, is about writing the truth as we know and experience it. When we choose to write memoir, we are diving into the rivers of memory to come up with our version of what happened.

But many memoir writers struggle with the issues of truth in its various forms—from writing the truth, telling the truth, to facing the truth. Let us investigate the memoirist's journeys through landscapes that may be fraught with stumbling blocks for the completion of our memoir—the issue of truth.

Did you grow up with these behavioral rules?

- Always tell the truth
- Be honest
- Don't tell lies

www.namw.org

- Honesty is the best policy
- You will be punished if you lie

Are these phrases familiar?

- Don't air the family laundry
- Family business stays behind closed doors
- Quit blabbing about your personal business
- Stop that navel gazing
- You have quite an imagination

How confusing! What rules are you supposed to follow? What will happen when you don't obey the family rules? And you want to write a memoir?

Many writers/creative people have discovered that they are the “truth-tellers-shit disturbers” in their families. They are the different ones, the loudmouths, the ones who challenge family rules and myths. They grow up to have voices of their own, ideas, and opinions. To a “very close” family—read enmeshed—one that is threatened by differences, separation, and boundaries, the dissenting voice *must* be brought into line with the rest of the family. Thinking differently and having one's own version of truth, appears dangerous in this kind of family.

There is a force in families that serves to keep everyone together. In these families, you must obey the rules—or else you will be turned out. This force is called “homeostasis.” If you break the rules, you are threatening. You must conform or become the scapegoat of the family. You may feel on the outside and not accepted or valued for who you are.

This is an excellent, though painful, training to being an artist and writer. The creative people throughout time have been the ones who came to see a different vision from the ordinary or the acceptable. However, this may mean enduring a painful exclusion from the kind of acceptance you might yearn for. You may find yourself the outsider in ways that are hard to bear.

How does feeling like an outsider affect writing your memoir?

Humans are social beings, and we need to company of others, even if we are writers and capable of spending long hours at our desks, dreaming, thinking, creating. The “outsider” position creates distance, yet gives us autonomy.

The other thing that happens in a family where the creative person is the outsider, is that the *inner critic* may take up where the family left off.

The inner critic gets in the way of our full, authentic expression. It follows the old rules and stops us from writing what we really think or has us pull back from the “real” truth. The critic keeps us connected with the familiar, negative voices that we are used to.

We need to trade in those old and negative voices with positive ones, and find an antidote to the negative programs of old. This may mean more autonomy from the family, and a new relationship with ourselves, which can be quite challenging.

Here are some antidotes to the negative inner critic:

- Repeat positive phrases about yourself in the mirror three times a day. Say such things as “I have my own thoughts and point of view. I have the right to say what I think. I am good enough the way I am.”
- Write down what the critic says, and counter each negative phrase with a positive one.
For example: Negative voice: “You are making all this up. It never happened.”
Positive antidote voice: “I am writing my truth as I remember it and see it as honestly as I can.”

Writing Invitations

1. Write about your negative inner voice—how did it come to you? Do you have memories of critical teachers, family members. Etc.
2. Make a list of the negative comments you hear in your head when you write or when you think about writing. Be specific.
3. Write about your positive voices—what do they say? Where did they come from e.g. teachers, family, friends?
4. Don’t share or show your work to family. Treat it like a tender plant, and be very nice to it. Protect it from negative criticism.
5. How does your best friend feel about your stories?
6. What criticism do you imagine hearing about your stories?

Truth or Lie Exercises

1. What is the most controversial subject in your family? Are you ready to write your own version of what you know to be true?
2. Write a story your family would call “false” a lie, not true.
3. Write a story your family would call true, but you think is false.
4. Write a scene that shows your family in a way that speaks of its philosophical truth about life, such as “we are very close,” “we are not religious.” “We are not prejudiced.” Etc.
5. What stories would your family tell about you that you feel did not happen?
6. Do you have stories in your mind, or memories where you doubt the veracity or the accuracy of the memory? Write about it.
7. What family secret do you feel you are obliged to keep?
8. How do you feel about secrets as a memoir writer?