

Telling Your Story

If we used a textbook in this class, it would probably be *Inventing the Truth, the Art and Craft of Memoir*, second edition, edited by William Zinsser, a successful writer and well known teacher of writing. The book is a collection of memoirs written by him and other well-known writers: Russell Baker, Annie Dillard, Alfred Kazin, Toni Morrison, Eileen Simpson, Ian Frazier, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Jill Ker Conway. Zinsser sees a difference in autobiography, "which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant" and memoir, which "assumes life and ignores most of it. The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense - childhood, for instance - or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn't possible in autobiography." Zinsser sees memoir as "a window into a life."

Zinsser says that the reason for his title "Inventing the Truth" is that each person sees any given event in a different light from anyone else. When he wrote about his grandmother, his mother objected that he had not seen his grandmother in the way she had seen her mother-in-law. Similarly, his sisters did not remember some of the incidents from his childhood as he remembered them. So, who's telling the truth? You can only write any particular incident as you recall experiencing it.

In this class, most of us write memoirs, not autobiographies. Of course, a large set of memoirs may well become a very revealing kind of biography!

I hope you will write every week. The more you write, the easier it becomes and the better it gets. If you like, each week I will *suggest* a possible topic for your writing for the next class. If you think about the topic for a while and see no way that it applies to your life, write about anything you please. One unexpected result when most of the class writes about the suggested topic is that we get a rich variety of experiences, with widely varying points of view. However, if you already have an agenda for writing about particular times of your life for your particular audience, by all means continue to write about those topics. They too give variety and spice to the class.

You'll find that writing is easier and better if you are constantly aware of the person or persons for whom you are writing. (Because you'll also usually be aware of members of the class as your immediate audience, you may want to add details which your primary audience might know. But if you don't explain for the class, don't worry; they'll ask if they don't understand. You'll find that members of the class are very supportive.)

Along with your audience, you'll generally have a goal in mind in telling your story. That goal can serve as a controlling idea to keep your story moderately well organized.

I suggest always starting out with a clear idea of who your audience is - is it your grown children, or maybe grandchildren whom you know well, or perhaps future generations whose need for explanatory details you can only imagine? As the years pass, our

successors lose more and more of the details of "how it was." That phenomenon alone should make the details of your memoir important.

Each week we share our writing with the class. What others read may well suggest things that you will want to write about. Most of us like to make notes as we listen. I hope that you'll enjoy bringing something to class to read each week, no matter how short.

As you gain experience in writing, you'll probably find, as most writers do, that you want to make changes, sometimes minor, sometimes major, in what you have written. Keep all drafts of your writing, and *don't* be hesitant about making changes. The greatest writers rewrite and polish what they have written. (If you're writing by hand, I suggest leaving wide left- and right-hand margins and maybe writing on every other line. That practice makes any revision much less tedious than copying the whole thing over.) It's always good to let what you've written rest for several days and then go back to adjust some of the words or phrases you wrote, or even to add some details you have recalled. On the other hand, don't be hesitant to read in class what you wrote just hours ago; there's a spontaneity in such reading that is very refreshing, and members of the class may have interesting suggestions for expanding, etc. Always strive for freshness but don't be afraid to change and add to what you've written after it's rested.

Reading what you've written to yourself (even aloud) is often helpful. I have a handout of a self-editing checklist that you may find convenient to use, both before you start writing and after you have finished your first draft.