

Three Rules to Write World-Changing Memoir

by Jeff Goins

Rule #1: It Must Be Interesting

The biggest mistake you can make in telling your story is to tell it all. To expose every detail and explain every aspect of what happened. To tell us every word everyone said.

The problem is our stories are rarely as interesting as we think. As my writing mentor Marion says, “Just because it happened doesn’t make it interesting.” Your memories always mean more to you than they do to other people.

So what do you do? Bend the truth? Change details? Lie? Of course not.

Instead, you must be deliberate. Cut every scene, every detail, every piece of dialogue that doesn’t drive the story forward and isn’t directly connected to your central theme.

Rule #2: It Must Be Thematic

All great writing is thematic. Behind every compelling story, every memorable movie, every interesting documentary is a theme. This is especially true with memoir.

What is a theme? It’s a universal idea we all grapple with, something anyone can understand. Good themes remind us of what is right and good and true in the world — or at least, what we would like to be.

A few examples of good themes are:

- Courage in the face of opposition
- The conflict between mercy and justice
- A parent’s loving sacrifice

The thing you cannot do when writing memoir is tell a bunch of stories. On the surface, that’s what memoir appears to be, but it’s more than that. Good narrative nonfiction always connects the reader’s heart to a deeper truth.

Rule #3: It Must Be Personal

Don’t make the mistake of thinking memoir is autobiography. It’s not. Memoir is about something bigger than you. It’s about a part of life we can all connect to.

Ironically, the way you accomplish is by focusing on the small, seemingly insignificant details. Where were you when you realized you were going to be a parent? What flavor of gum was your boyfriend chewing when he proposed? These are the details that mean the most to all us and what make us connect with you, so you can take us somewhere else.

Memoir Changes the World

A good piece of memoir begins with the author's perspective but doesn't end there. It leaves the reader—often implicitly—with a decision to make or action to take.

When millions of college students read *Blue Like Jazz*, they had a framework for processing their faith in a postmodern world. Thousands began living more adventurously after reading *Eat, Pray, Love*. And after finishing *Same Kind of Different As Me*, I was compelled to spend more time on the streets with the less-fortunate.

Good memoir is powerful. It can change lives, if you make it personal — not just for you, but for the reader.

Memoir Is Vulnerable

You know you've done your job when a reader finishes your story about growing up in the Midwest and tells you it reminded her of summers spent in Maine with Grandma.

Great writers work their way into our hearts by being vulnerable, sharing the ugliest parts of their story, the parts any normal person would prefer to hide. And that's what makes them so believable.

Ever notice how self-effacing Anne Lamott can be, how crude David Sedaris sometimes is? There's a reason for that. They know their first job is to earn our trust. And the best way to do that is to embarrass themselves, to expose their humanity. How else will we believe them?

If you are going to write memoir, if you are going to share a story that matters, then you must be willing to do the thing that so few people are willing to do. You must be human, at once whole and incomplete. And if you do this well and honestly, we just might let you share some deeper truth.

What do you look for in a good memoir?

PRACTICE

It's time for you to write your memoir. Now that you know good narrative nonfiction is about more than where you were or what you were doing, you must pick a theme and begin telling your story. So let's start:

1. Pick a theme for your memoir. What will it be about? Forgiveness? Justice? Redemption? Overcoming fear? Choose something that is true for you and will be for others.
2. Choose a scene in the story that is interesting, that drives the theme in some way.
3. Write that scene, sharing personal details but also universal truths. Shoot for 250 – 750 words (max).

Source: <http://thewritepractice.com/write-memoir/>

Check out Jeff's new book, [*The In-Between*](#), a memoir about how to not waste our times of waiting. Find out more at inbetweenbook.com.