

10 ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR NONFICTION WRITERS

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WHERE
FICTION &
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THE TOP
TECHNIQUES WRITERS
SHOULD STEAL FROM
NOVELISTS.

BY
HEATHER
VILLA

AS A FREELANCE REPORTER, I relied on the five Ws: who, what, where, when, and why. However, when an editor told me a submitted article seemed stiff and too business-sounding, my approach was challenged. “The goal is to make the reader feel like you’re sitting across from them, telling them the story – not reading it from a brochure,” she said.

Excessive facts dominated the verbiage. As a result, the story was missing. I needed to set aside my clinical approach and figure out how to tell a story in the way it deserved to be told – all while preserving reality.

Writing nonfiction became easier the moment I began to think like a fiction writer. After all, elements that make a story inviting are characters, desire, and conflict. Even a well-written brochure could contain these elements.

Using fiction techniques to write nonfiction isn’t a new concept and certainly not an idea I claim as my own, but it is one worth exploring.

“Generally, a (true) story should have a narrative arc with a beginning, a middle, and an end, but of course good writers have been known to mess with that formula,” says William Reynolds, a professor at Ryerson University School of Journalism in Canada and co-founder of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS). He mentions a true story should also contain some basic elements of fiction writing, such as scenes, details, dialogue, and point of

view – literary techniques pioneered by writers like journalist and author Tom Wolfe in the 1960s. (See “New Journalism: Fact-based storytelling” on page 30 for more information.)

As Mitch Hoffman, a fiction and nonfiction literary agent at Aaron M. Priest Literary Agency and former editor of *New York Times* best-sellers, says, “Strong storytelling is what makes otherwise inaccessible subject matter accessible.” And who better to teach us about storytelling than fiction writers?

Here are the essential fiction techniques necessary to write a compelling nonfiction story.

1 Use sensory details to set the scene and engage the reader.

Alissa Greenberg, a freelance writer and editor whose byline has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, understands the importance of documenting surroundings while reporting. “I take time to jot things down that I notice,” she says. She also observes people closely, noting if a subject wears shorts on a cold day, for example.

“Not all of the details go into the story,” she adds, but emphasizes to err on the side of detail. “Detail is where you find the story.”

The day following our chat, an article Greenberg wrote about the California fires in Napa and Sonoma counties appeared on the front page of the *Washington Post*. In the opening paragraph of her story, “A recipe for disaster: Urban growth fuels deadly California wildfires that challenge traditional firefighting tactics,” the details immediately set the scene for the reader. “The fire had already come down one side of the hill and been beaten back,” Greenberg writes. “Now, it was backtracking across the gully, low tongues of flame threatening a house with gray shutters at the end of the cul-de-sac.” Later in the article, descriptions such as “scorched eucalyptus” and “a tangle of burned vegetation” employ carefully placed details used to further set a scene and evoke emotion.

When you’re trying to decide what details to include in your story, consider Hoffman’s advice. “If a reader just wants an information dump, they can find it. The basic ‘who, what, where, when, and why’ are available through academic or professional sources,” he says. “But if your goal is to write for a popular, general readership, and to build a bridge between the sources of rarefied knowledge and the rest of us, you can earn an audience’s interest and attention by making sure you are answering these two questions for readers, on every page: Why am I reading? Why should I care?”

2 Introduce the main characters to create a connection with the reader.

Get to know who you’re writing about. Character studies allow personalities to come to life, revealing universal wants and needs. Then, find out who else is part of the story. No story ever involves just one person. Not even a memoir. Someone else is always involved, be it friend or foe.

Naomi Hirahara, an Edgar Award-winning mystery writer and social historian who has written and edited multiple nonfiction books on the Japanese American experience, uses concrete details to humanize her real subjects. “For instance,” she says, “for a nonfiction book, *Life after Manzanar*, I recently wrote about a Buddhist priest, his wife, and three young daughters leaving a detention camp in California’s Owens Valley in November 1945, almost three months after the official end of World War II. I included this concrete detail from the point of view of the then-8-year-old middle daughter: ‘Her most treasured possession had been a Jeannie Walker doll that her younger sister had ruined by combing out its hair.’”

Hoffman offers a similar perspective. “If a writer is attempting to communicate complex ideas that usually require a certain level of expertise in order to be fully understood and appreciated, giving the readers characters who they can care about and are invested in becomes the engine for carrying their audience on a journey through the otherwise intimidating terrain of the unfamiliar and into the promised land of ‘Ah ha! I get it now!’”

The intimacy happens when a writer spends time with a subject, either through in-depth research or face-to-face conversation. Getting to know the main players you’re writing about is imperative.

3 Reveal the problem to launch the inciting incident.

Well-written novels include conflict. Conflict is a main story ingredient, and Hirahara doesn’t shy away from writing about it.

“As I’m a former journalist turned social historian, I was trained to look for conflict in opening our stories,” she says. “The issue for both fiction and nonfiction is to look for the conflict underneath the surface, the unexpected contradictions.”

Conflict in nonfiction is often exposed when uncomfortable

questions are asked. Greenberg explains that journalists have a privileged ability to talk with other people. She begins an interview process by asking the easy questions. This standard interview design, she explains, allows for the interviewer to set a calm and polite tone and to build trust before the more difficult questions are asked. Greenberg mentioned she attended the 2017 commencement at her alma mater, UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, where journalist Jorge Ramos offered advice about asking difficult interview questions. Ramos, an Emmy Award-winning journalist who has covered events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, explained, “If I don’t ask that [difficult]

NEW JOURNALISM: FACT-BASED STORYTELLING

The immersive writing techniques Tom Wolfe and other pioneering nonfiction writers adopted in the 1960’s broke from conventional reporting, helping to create a style called “New Journalism,” which included an experience-based perspective instead of merely presenting facts. The result, in works like Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, was engaging, story-driven reportage that read like a novel. Though many have argued that New Journalism was never “new” to begin with, citing engaging literary nonfiction written by the likes of Daniel Defoe, Mark Twain, Joseph Mitchell, and the muckrakers of the late 19th and early 20th century, the movement did help ensure creative nonfiction was seen as a respectable (and marketable) genre for writers in the years to come.

CONFLICT IN NONFICTION IS OFTEN EXPOSED WHEN UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS ARE ASKED.

question, no one else is going to do it.” While the advice he offers is geared toward journalists, his guidance could apply to all writers.

When I accepted an assignment to write about a well-known vacation retreat, I found the real story was about a couple’s partially constructed mansion that never became a home to their seven children due to financial issues. The couple ultimately turned their liability into the popular destination 10 years following the construction standstill. Had I not established a rapport with the couple, followed by asking an uncomfortable monetary-related question, I wouldn’t have found a drama that ended in redemption.

4 Produce ongoing suspense by divulging the conflict.

Before my father and I went on a road trip to a remote area of Northern California where he once lived and worked, I knew I’d write about our excursion. But my essay ultimately turned into a piece about an unscripted 60-year reunion between my father and his friend. The reunion happened because my father found his friend’s name and address in a thin motel phone book. “I used to room and board with the guy and his family,” he said before asking me to drive to the house. “Could it be that my

friend still lives in his childhood home?” Ringing the doorbell unannounced collided with my etiquette. An older gentleman answered the door of a turn-of-the-century home – while I squeamishly waited in the car and watched. After a wide-eyed reaction, followed by obvious small talk, the older gentleman waved me inside the house. As I sat on the stranger’s couch and chatted with one of the few living people who knew the younger, fresh-out-of-college version of my father, I learned endearing anecdotes, like how my father found homes for kittens who had been placed in a bag and destined for a river.

Become uncomfortable and daring enough to learn something new, to see what’s hiding or even what’s right before you.

“In my decades as an editor,” Hoffman says, “I was always desperate to work with writers who could translate esoteric, academic, or obscure and forgotten topics into stories that felt relevant and immediate. So as an agent, I know very well the value of a writer – whether they’re a journalist who has access to experts at the top of their fields or the expert themselves with the ability and desire to communicate their knowledge to a wide audience – who can fashion page-turning, dramatic nonfiction on the page.”

5 Go beyond a simple resolution. When I asked Hirahara why resolutions in nonfiction are important, she answered: “Truth be told, I struggle with this area of resolution in nonfiction. For one thing, sometimes the end of a real-world conflict defies understanding. Our subject doesn’t do what we would hope for her; the victory in a court case doesn’t result in the reconciliation or happiness that would be emphasized in a fictional movie. Digging deeper for the reasons or motivations in real life, however, can be more illuminating than those we can superficially conjure up in our minds.”

As Janet Reid, a literary agent at New Leaf Literary & Media, Inc., who specializes in crime fiction and narrative nonfiction and offers straightforward writing advice at jetreidliterary.blogspot.com, explains in her post “Querying for memoir:” “There has to be a story. A story is more than what just happened. The story is the POINT you’re making. The reason you write a memoir is not to tell us what happened, it’s to tell us how what happened changed you (and better yet, changed lots of things).” She also adds that memoirs should contain elements found in novels – such as dramatic stakes and choices – and her advice seems sound for all nonfiction forms, not just memoir.

Whether you’re writing a memoir, book, exposé, article, or even a brochure, present a real story, one your audience will find relatable and irresistible.

“How do you know when a nonfiction author creates a connection between the storyline and the reader?” I asked Hoffman.

“That’s easy,” he answered. “When the reader can’t put the book down. When they want to know, with every turn of the page, *what happens next?*” **W**

Heather Villa is a former cartographer and told stories with maps before becoming a freelance writer. Visit HeatherVillaWrites.com or say hello on Twitter: @HeatherVilla1.