

## Writing Narrative Non-Fiction - True Stories: True Art

What is narrative non-fiction?

Definition: Narrative non-fiction, often also referred to as creative non-fiction, is a literary term for a text that presents a true story written in a style more closely associated with fiction.

The writer pays close attention to elements of plot structure, character development and themes to make the story as compelling as possible.

Why write true stories instead of fiction?

The differences between narrative biography, historical fiction, and biography.

The basic objective of creative nonfiction: capturing and describing a subject so that the most resistant reader will be interested in learning more about it. – Lee Gutkind

An increasing number of historians are creative nonfiction writers and are being described as “narrative historians.”

### Writing Narrative Nonfiction

Examples:

“Battle Cry of Freedom” by James McPherson

“Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil” by John Berendt

“The Killer Angels” by Michael Shaara

“Night” by Elie Weisel

“The Last Full Measure” by Jeffrey Shaara

“Seabiscuit” by Laura Hillenbrand

“In Cold Blood” by Truman Capote

“The Right Stuff” by Tom Wolfe

“Ronnie and Nancy” by Bob Colacello

“The Hiding Place” by Corrie Ten Boom

“Run, Baby, Run” by Nicky Cruz with

“Nina” by Craig von Buseck and Carol Oberg

“Nobody Knows” by Craig von Buseck

## Writing the Narrative Biography

Examples:

“Unbroken” The Louis Zamperini story by Laur Hillenbrand

"Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy" by Eric Metaxas

“The Wright Brothers”, “John Adams”, “Truman”, “Mornings on Horseback” (Teddy Roosevelt)  
by David McCullough

“Chesapeake”, “Texas”, “Hawaii”, “Tales of the South Pacific”, “Centennial” by James Mitchner

“Gone with the Wind” by Margaret Mitchell

“Scarlett” by Alexandra Ripley

“Rhett Butler’s People” by Donald McCraig

## Plot and Structure

The LOCK System (James Scott Bell):

L is for Lead

A strong plot starts with an interesting Lead character.

In the best plots, that Lead is compelling...

...someone we have to watch through the course of the novel.

The lead doesn’t need to be entirely sympathetic.

A skilled writer can make us feel that “there but for the grace of God go I.”

O is for Objective

Interest in our character increases when we see his or her motivation.

What is it that the character wants?

What is the goal?

Objective is the driving force behind a story.

It generates the forward motion of the Lead.

An objective can take either of two forms:

To get something; or

To get away from something.

Effective plots have one and only one dominant objective for the Lead character.

This objective forms the “story question”...

...will the Lead realize her objective?

In narrative non-fiction you need to focus in on what the objective is before you begin to write.

This is the take away.

Write the take away and post it near your writing space – or carry it with you on a card.

The objective has to be essential to the well-being of the Lead.

Structure Holds the Plot Together

Objectives can external or internal.

Confrontation can be physical or psychological.

An objective can be staying alive.

An objective can be keeping someone else alive.

An objective can be maintaining happiness.

It can be achieving a long-sought-after goal...

Graduation

Winning the championship

Defeating the bad guy/guys

Getting the job

Getting the girl/guy

Having a family...

C is for Confrontation.

Opposition from characters or outside forces bring a story to life.

This is the conflict that the Lead must overcome to reach her or his objective.

The reader subconsciously wants to worry about the well-being of the Lead.

“Get your protagonist up a tree...

...throw rocks at him...

...then get him down.

K is for Knockout.

Readers want a knockout ending.

A great ending leaves the reader satisfied.

Take your Lead through the obstacles of conflict and confrontation to reach the objective...

...then give them a knockout at the end.

If your true life story doesn't have a knockout ending in reality, it may not be worth writing.

You can't manufacture a knockout ending in narrative non-fiction.

Read the "Nina" ending

Structure is Glue

Structure holds the plot together.

It is the orderly arrangement of story material.

Plot is about the elements of a good story.

Structure is about timing...

...where in the mix those elements go.

If you want to connect with readers, you need to understand structure.

Beginning

Middle (or “Muddle”)

A Strong Ending

Beginnings are about the who of the story – the Lead.

The entry point is the Lead character.

The writer should begin by connecting the reader to the Lead as quickly as possible.

The Beginning must:

Present the story world.

Tell us about the setting, the time, and the immediate context.

Establish the tone of the story.

Is it fast and mad capped?

Is it action packed?

Does it dwell on the internal conflict of the character?

Is it fast moving, or leisurely?

The Beginning must:

Compel the reader to move on to the middle.

Answer the “so what” question.

Introduce the opposition.

Who or what wants to stop the Lead from achieving the objective?

Middle (or “Muddle”)

The major part of narrative non-fiction is the conflict/confrontation.

The Middle must:

Deepen character relationships.

Introduce and expand the opposition.

Show that the opposition is stronger than the Lead.

Introduce the “adhesive” – the reason that the Lead can’t just walk away from the problem.

Keep us caring about what happens.

Set up the final battle that will wrap things up at the end.

A Strong Ending

The Ending must:

Tie up all loose ends.

Give a feeling of resonance.

Answer the question, “What does the story mean in the larger sense?”

“Your first chapter sells your book. Your last chapter sells your next book.” – Mickey Spillane

A great ending feels perfect for the book.

A great ending surprises the reader.

The Disturbance

The beginning of your story introduces the main character in his or her ordinary world.

The character is forced to change and leave his ordinary world by the conflict that blocks his or her objective.

Only a threat or a challenge is of interest to the reader.

Very early in Act I something has to disturb the status quo.

The disturbance is an implicit promise of an interesting story yet to come.

#### The Disturbance and the Doorways

Despite the disturbance, it is not the main plot because there is no confrontation.

The opponent and the Lead are not yet locked in an unavoidable battle.

The confrontation doesn't happen until the Lead passes through the first doorway of no return.

The first doorway is how you take the reader from the Beginning (Act I) to the Middle (Act II).

Like all humans, our characters are creatures of habit who search for security.

Something needs to thrust them out of that comfort zone and into the conflict.

Your true story must have something that kicks the Lead out of the ordinary and into the confrontation.

The fight goes on throughout Act II, the middle.

The second doorway of no return must send the Lead hurtling toward the knockout ending.

These two doorways hold your three acts together.

Before you begin writing, you need to identify the disturbance and the two doorways of your real life story.

If you can't, write a traditional biography instead.

#### The First Doorway

You need to identify the scene in the lead characters life that thrust him into the main conflict...

...and the adhesive that kept him there.

The key question:

"Can my Lead walk away from the plot right now and go on as he or she has before?"

If the answer is yes, you haven't gone through the first doorway yet.

Act I: Lead's normal world, which is a place of safety and rest.

Problems happen here, but they don't threaten great change.

Lead is content to stay here.

Then something happens to push her through the first doorway of no return.

Life will never be the same for the Lead.

### The Other Side of the Doorway

Act II: The other side of the doorway.

This is the outside world, the great unknown.

It is the dark forest of Snow White.

It is Sherman marching into Atlanta in Gone with the Wind.

It is a place where the Lead is going to have to dig deep inside and show courage, learn new things, and make new allies.

It is the increasing conflict against the antagonist, leading to the great confrontation at the end.

### The Doorways

The first doorway should usually happen before the one-fifth mark – or sooner.

If it happens later the story will seem to drag.

We need some adhesive to keep the Lead in the conflict during the second act...

...a professional or moral duty;

...the threat of physical, professional, or psychological death; or

...some sort of obsession or physical limitation.

The second doorway can come at the three-quarter mark – or later.

### The Final Confrontation



To move from the middle (Act II) to the end (Act III), something has to happen that sets up the final confrontation.

This is usually a huge setback or crisis, or a major clue or piece of information, that hurtles the action toward a conclusion.

This second doorway of no return usually takes place with one quarter or less of the story to go.

The crisis will go on indefinitely unless some crisis opens the door to a path that leads to the climax.

### The Final Choice

Once through the second doorway of no return, the Lead can gather his forces, inner and outer, for the final battle...

...or the final choice that will end the story.

There is no going back ... the story must end.