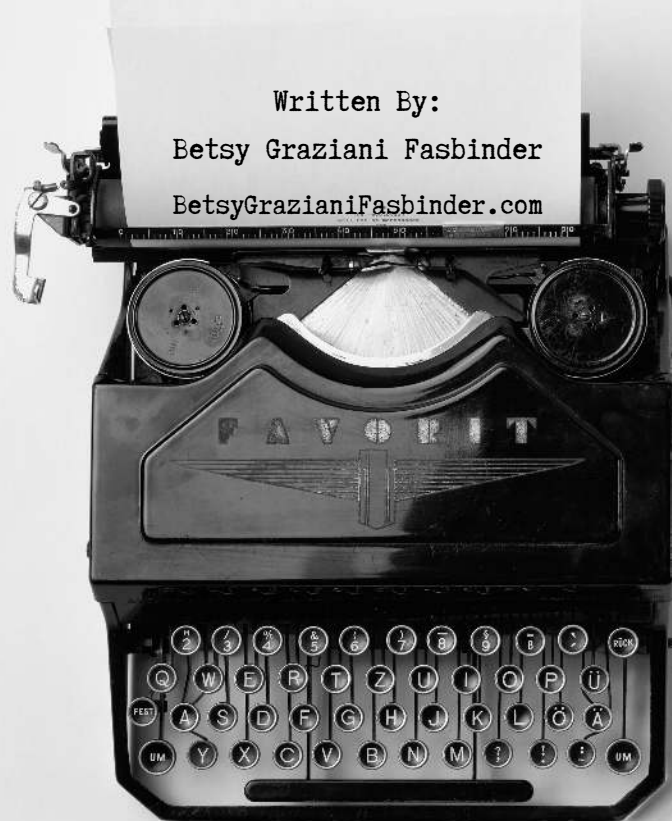


WRITER TO WRITER

Tips From a Genre Jumper



Writing Essential Truth Across the Genres

We are living in an era in popular culture and politics when falsehoods have been celebrated as facts, facts have been called fake news, and "alternative facts" have tried to make truth and lies synonymous. It's crazy making for those of us who value honesty and integrity.

Truth matters. It matters in our personal lives, our politics, business, and certainly in journalism. It also matters in our art. I believe there is a calling for a special kind of truth in the creative writing arts, both in memoir and fiction, and across every genre. The truth yardstick I use as measurement in my own writing and for the writers I coach is what I call essential truth.

What do I mean by essential truth?

Merriam-Webster's defines essence as "the most significant element, quality, or aspect of a thing or person". So writing essential truth is about writing the most significant aspects of a person or an event. To describe Adolf Hitler as an animal lover and a vegetarian may be factually true, but it is not the essence of who he was, and to emphasize those qualities and omit the far more significant and horrifying aspects him would not be essential truth writing.

Essential truth is not about rationalization, deceit, or revisionist history. It's not justification for writing a story to trash an ex with false accusation or to describe a dramatic skydiving experience when we never left the ground. That's just lying. Determining essential truth in creative writing, even in memoir, is less black-and-white than that.

Essential truth is about authenticity and emotional honesty without a manipulative agenda on the part of the writer. This means that in our memoirs we don't misrepresent what happened, though we may take liberties (which we disclose) to fashion the reality into a readable story. In fiction, it means that even though the story itself and the characters are imagined (or at least partially so) the emotional landscape of the story feels...well, believable.

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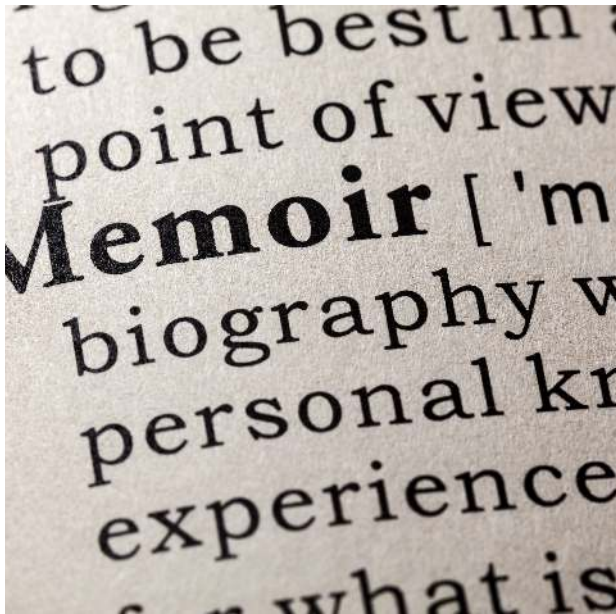
*Everything I write is
true. 80% of it actually
happened.*

~Pam Houston



Essential truth is about authenticity in the writing, irrespective of genre, and it's about authenticity and integrity in the intention of the writer.

Essential truth in Memoir



I'll not justify embellishing a memoir with fiction just because the story sounds more sensational. If we're writing memoir, we must represent the circumstances and the characters (who are real people) authentically, to the best of our abilities with every attempt to own up to our own faulty memories and slanted perspectives. We must not exaggerate or leave out information that changes the essence of the experiences we've lived or the people that we portray.

Memory is fallible—incomplete at best, biased necessarily, and sometimes missing altogether. Writing memoir is far easier if we own up to that. Memoir is not just-the-facts-ma'am documentation of our lives; it is our story about our lives. By virtue of selecting and deselecting, we are already straying from the "whole truth", but we needn't stray from the essential truth.

To make a memoir readable, we often need to consolidate time frames, omit real-life characters not salient to the story, and take liberties with the symbolic or thematic choices we are making. It doesn't matter if you were wearing a red or a blue coat on your first day of kindergarten, and perhaps you don't even remember. But if you are telling a story of feeling conspicuous when you arrived on that first day and the red coat represents that, by all means, give yourself a red coat! The essence of the story is an overwhelmed kindergartener, not her wardrobe. That's poetic license for artistic purpose and using vivid imagery, and symbolism; it's not lying to misrepresent the events.

When we write dialogue in memoir, we can't possibly remember word-for-word what was said when we were seven—or for that matter what was said at breakfast this morning—but we are charged with representing the essential qualities of the characters speaking and the gist and tone of the conversation as closely to real as we can. If we do this with honest intention, this works as essential truth.



So how do we write "essential truth" in memoir? I find this checklist helpful:

- **Check your motives:** Writing for revenge, to misrepresent yourself or others, or changing details to make the story more sensational is a perpendicular path to essential truth. Examine why you're including or omitting details and events. If it's about exacting revenge or fashioning your image, look at it again.
- **Disclose:** You can offer disclaimers at the beginning or the end of a story, letting readers know if you consolidated time, combined multiple characters into composites, or changed names in order to protect the privacy of others. Throughout the story you can own any conjecture you make. You can make distinctions between what you have witnessed, what you've been told, and what you've figured out after any given moment in the story. Disclosing openly gives you more poetic license as a storyteller.

- **Be vulnerable:** Even if you're a noble person, you have flaws, selfish thoughts, lusts, and lived mistakes. By showing those, you make yourself more accessible to readers and the story becomes truer. Nothing reads less true than a memoir that portrays a flawless protagonist.
- **Don't write to flatter:** Including those not relevant to the story in order to flatter them, or cleansing a loved one's character, making them into a saint makes for a story that reads false. If Aunt Tilly is not important to the story, leave her out. Thank her in acknowledgements. If Dad is a great guy, show it, but also show his flaws. It'll make him more real to your readers.
- **Recognize your wounds:** If you're writing about traumatic events, deep grief, or abuse in your life, I invite you to get some distance and some support before you publish a memoir about it. Writing can be both a healing experience and a painful one. Whether it's through therapy, spiritual practice, a recovery program, or something else, I invite you to take care of yourself. The writing itself of a past loss or trauma—even if you never publish it—may prove a healing and reparative experience; it often does. But it's best when you have support for painful experiences. Such support can also help you to write in a more rounded way, rather than only from your wounded experience.





- **Then, write YOUR story:** Others in your life may not agree with your memory of events. If you've suffered abuse, the abuser may deny it. Your siblings may remember a camping trip as loads of fun while it was a torturous experience for you. In the end, once you've verified what facts and context you can, stepped back to gain perspective, and checked your motives, you get to write your essentially true story. Others can write theirs.

What about essential truth in fiction? How does that work?

I recently read *Nothing to See Here* by Kevin Wilson. This is a story about an unlikely modern-day governess whose two young charges have the unenviable condition of spontaneously combusting when their emotions over take them. Yes. The kids burst into flames when they're upset and they don't burn up in the process. The premise is preposterous! But somehow, Wilson make it *believable*. He's done it by adeptly employing emotional authenticity along with some pretty skillful writing. When I found myself rooting for the combustible kids and wondering if I'd be as good a governess to them as the protagonist was, I knew I was reading essential truth.

In fiction, essential truth is all about emotional authenticity, even if the story is utterly imagined. Did you love Harry Potter and Ron and Hermione? Did you despise Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Did you weep when *E.T.* grew pale and looked as though he would die? Does Ebenezer Scrooge's transformation lift your spirits? That's because you read or watched essential truth—emotional authenticity— in the writing of a fictional storytelling.

To write essential truth in fiction, I find these ideas helpful:

- **Avoid stock characters, cliché, and stereotyping:** Canned characters read false and sometimes confirm unfounded stereotypes, and even bigotry. Complex characters with both strengths and foibles, who break from stereotype, are not only more interesting, but more true to life.

- ***Borrow details from real life:*** Maybe you left your favorite Aunt Tilly out of your memoir, but her habit of spiking her Earl Gray tea with a shot of bourbon might find its way into your fictional character. Perhaps your protagonist is fighting an intergalactic war and has courage and a love for RC Cola inspired by your very earthbound dad. The flaws and attributes of people you know can add verisimilitude to your fictional characters.
- ***Don't "pretend" your memoir into fiction:*** While our fiction can certainly be inspired by real events and people in our lives—much fiction is—it seems disingenuous to simply write your lived experience, change only the names and hair colors, and call it fiction. It's better to take the essence of your lived experience and use it as part of a fictional story. That way it's not a memoir disguised, but fiction, partially inspired by real life.
- ***Use your sensory and emotional awareness:*** While your characters and circumstances may be completely imagined, their sensations and inner thoughts and feelings can be drawn from your own. What does your belly feel like when you're frightened, excited, or in love? What does the fragrance of lavender conjure for you? Physical and emotional sensations are part of the palate of paints that we have for creating our characters, and there's an infinite rainbow of them, right there for us to use.



I invite you to a challenge. Select a book of any genre that you have loved—one that moved you, captured your imagination, and that the characters linger with you a long time after reading it. Now, pick it up again and read it, this time, making note of the qualities I've described as essential truth: emotional honesty, absence of manipulation from the author, believability of the characters, their sensations, and their emotions. If it's memoir, note the disclosures before, during, and after the story. By recognizing essential truth in the stories you enjoy, you'll be able to employ it in the stories you write.



We are ink-slingers, lovers of storytelling, seekers of truth in both our lived and imagined stories. At a time when so much truth has been put into question by our culture and politics, it is the artists—us—who must both strive to understand and to reveal essential truth.



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