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DOES YOUR MEMOIR NEED A FIX?



Memoir writing students (from left) Michael Yates, Barbra McCune and Richard Mills show memoir writing teacher Daphne Larkin the places in the world where their memoirs are set.

By Daphne Larkin

Many of you may be writing stories about your life for, after all, you've got a good one to tell. But the story that started out so well is beginning to drag, to seem dull, boring even. Horrors! How can this be when your story is so full of life?

Your story has caught the common cold of new writers. Most likely, you've written many pages of such and such happened, and then something else happened. But now, even you are going to sleep. Hold on! There is a remedy with a simple RX fix.

I see this all the time with my memoir writing students. When I tell them straight narrative is lifeless without scenes, they look crestfallen. Don't worry, I say. Go ahead and get your story down in narrative form. Write what happened from start to finish. Now, after your house is framed, add rooms, and put your people in them. Remember the childhood rhyme? "Here's the church and there's the steeple. Open the door and see all the people." It had it right. To be compelling, stories need people doing things, whether they are in church or someplace else.

Now that you've done this, begin writing scenes to insert within your narrative. Once you have the idea – and it takes practice – you'll find yourself easily including scenes as you write your story. Writing a scene can be fun because you get to recreate and relive an important moment in time. In a scene, you take us into the heart of the action, whether it's in the kitchen of an Appalachian log cabin, a swamp boat floating down a Louisiana bayou or a Honduran medical clinic for the poor. You show us what's happening, you don't just tell us.

One way to think about creating scenes is to see your story as a movie (and while you're at it why not consider which fabulous actor plays you?). In movies, the main character doesn't just tell his story as a voice-over narrative, we see him in action. We watch one scene after another as he moves through his world, talking with others, tasting a good wine, eavesdropping on a conversation, feeling ecstatic over a new love, holding his baby for the first time.

Scenes are action-oriented and must move the story forward. So how do you write a good one? You place the scene in a specific setting, you describe key elements in the setting, and you get your characters talking. Let's discuss these three building blocks of a scene.

THREE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A SCENE

- SETTING:** The setting is the place where you and your characters are and in which the scene unfolds. It sets the mood and the context of what's to come. It must look and feel real. You will use visual imagery and sensory details to describe it. Are you in a windowless doctor's office or hiking in a tropical rainforest? Driving recklessly in a car or swimming in an icy mountain lake? At a picnic enjoying a barbecue or in a church praying for courage?

- DESCRIPTION:** When writing description, whether it's about your setting, your characters, or your feelings, you paint a picture using the five senses. To do this well, requires you to become observant in your everyday life, to pay attention to what's happening around you. Carry a pocket notepad and take notes so you can recall the details later. In his memoir "Growing Up," Russell Baker uses sensory details to recall the day his father died when Russell was 5 years old. "I can still hear people talking that day. I know what the air smelled like. I know what people's faces looked like. How they were dressed. What they were eating."

- DIALOGUE:** Dialogue is used to advance the story, but "Sometimes it is the story," as author Ron Carlson notes in his book "Ron Carlson Writes A Story." Characters reveal themselves through dialogue, so get your characters talking and show us who they are. Read your copy out loud and make sure it sounds honest and believable. Does it pass "the ear test?" If you can't remember the exact words a character said, stay with the meaning of what was said rather than the actual words. Even tape-recorded dialogue doesn't make good copy and needs to be edited.

Now that you know how to "take us there" with active scenes, go through your story narrative and figure out where scenes are needed. Then write them! Once you've nailed your setting, fired up your five senses, and got your people talking about their hopes and dreams, despairs and joys, your story will have made a miraculous full recovery!