

The Non-Fiction Author as Storyteller

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There is no excuse for boring writing. Manuscripts full of vivid stories and imaginative phrases belong not solely to the fiction writer who creates worlds of his own, but also to the non-fiction writer who invites readers to see and experience the realities of the world in which he lives from a different perspective. It is a travesty that so many readers pass by shelves of historical tomes in search of a more appealing historical fiction novel, or that biographies gather dust while fanciful accounts of vampires and sorcerers hit the top of the best-seller lists.

Perhaps it is not without cause that non-fiction books have earned a reputation as dry, vapid accounts of little interest to the casual reader. I confess that I myself plowed through such a biography earlier this year, finishing it out of sheer determination and the hope that value would be realized in spite of the uninspiring presentation of facts. But contrast this with the nearly magnetic force I felt as I was pulled into the picturesque world Alexis de Tocqueville paints for his reader in his acclaimed, "Democracy in America." Consider his opening sentence: "Amongst the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions." How many a writer might have stated the same sentiment thus: "When I was in the United States, I especially noticed the general equality of conditions"? Do you see the difference? Do you *feel* the difference?

As writers of non-fiction, we, too, must aspire to be storytellers – artists painting pictures in the minds of our readers with words carefully chosen to capture their interest and evoke the desired emotions. How is this accomplished? Here are three practical tips that will help you succeed in this endeavor, whether your topic is as exciting as the French Revolution or as mundane as identifying varieties of plants. (Of course, if you have the liberty to pick a topic about which you are passionate, that will help a great deal – even if it is the identification of plants!)

Visualize – Use your imagination to picture what is taking place, and then describe it in a way that will allow your reader to become a part of the experience. Ultimately, you want the reader to feel like they are part of the story, not a disengaged bystander. I love the kind of book that leaves me wondering, years later, if the image I am recalling was actually from a book or a movie. The text doesn't have to be verbose and flowery to accomplish this. In fact, I personally find well-structured, precise descriptions more captivating. A quip I learned in a storytelling training class once has served me well for many years: Don't tell *about* the story; just tell the story! Which leads us to the next point...

Use Active Verbs – Active verbs engage the reader, while passive ones leave them glancing up at every distraction or wondering what's for dinner. An example is the best way to illustrate this important concept. Instead of this passive statement: "As Anna was going to the grocery store, she thought she heard a sound behind her," try this: "As Anna strolled down the tree-lined sidewalk, the sound of scampering feet grabbed her attention." Here's another. Instead of telling: "Once there was a boy who..." how about: "A freckle-faced boy tumbled down from..." Active verbs draw the reader in and make them wonder what is happening and what will happen next. And it is your job to keep them riveted to their seat, ignoring the hunger pangs as they keep reading "just one more page"!

Choose Your Words Intentionally – No writer is ready to publish a work until he has felt the agony of hours of searching for just the right word to adequately express the desired thought. In fact, it once took me a month to start an article on a topic that had been flitting around my mind for some time because I couldn't think of the key word that I needed to make my opening point. Then, all of a sudden, one day it arrived at the forefront of my mind and the article was written in thirty minutes. Granted, this is not the most efficient approach for those under time constraints, but for those of us who have the luxury of writing without the pressure of looming deadlines, it is a valid way to work toward excellence.

You must have a dictionary and thesaurus constantly at hand. Dictionary.com is undoubtedly the most frequently visited site on my bookmarks toolbar. Don't settle for something ambiguous when a more precise word will do a better job of making the point or creating the mental image. Similarly, a good writer should always be on the lookout for ways to build their vocabulary. I recommend, first of all, reading books that contain words you do not know, and second of all, making a list of those words and their definitions as you go. Try to assimilate them into your thoughts and then incorporate them into your writing and/or conversations when appropriate.

Above all, continue in your quest to be a better writer. Keep the creative juices flowing every time you put your pen to the paper – or your fingers to the keyboard. And maybe, just maybe, one of our readers will be inspired to head for the non-fiction shelves of the bookstore the next time they are looking for a good read!

Natalie Wickham is a lover of all things creative. She enjoys trying new things and looking for better approaches – whether it be in teaching, writing, speaking, cooking, etc. She has tried many approaches that haven't worked so well, but finds great security in the unchanging character and Word of God, which remains her anchor in the midst of it all. She is the author of the book, *Pajama School – stories from the life of a homeschool graduate*. Feel free to visit her at: <http://pajamaschool.com> to find additional articles and resources.