

PERSONAL WRITING MAGIC



get in the **HOT** spot 

BY ANNABEL CANDY

About the Author

- I have 16 years experience in designing and writing for the Internet.
- I have an MA in Design for Interactive Media from Middlesex University in London but I'm not a technical person. I'm a writer who enrolled to get over my fear of technology, and because I realised creative people need the Internet as much as it needs us.
- My main interest is people, and how we can use computers and the Internet to improve our lives. The Internet is a brilliant tool to help people reach and engage with each other, and I want to make it accessible for everyone. It saddens me that many small business owners and creative people are put off blogging because of the technical side. If you're one of those people I want to show you how to outsource technical issues confidently (and make sure they get done properly) without overwhelming you with technological instructions.
- I've written theses on how to build communities, increase user interaction and make the Internet experience enjoyable. I love putting this knowledge to practice on my own blog and teaching other people how to use it to their advantage.
- My blog and writing has featured in print media and online, and I've written for some of the most popular blogs on the Internet including Problogger, Copyblogger, Zen Habits and many more.
- I'm married with three kids and run my own business, so I focus on getting results fast and saving time.
- After 12 months of starting my blog Get In the Hot Spot, I built it up to more than 1,500 subscribers, with around 5,800 unique visitors per month from 165 countries. As I write this it has more than 3,600 comments from engaged readers - a steadily growing and appreciative community.
- My blog has brought me focus, clarity and confidence in both my business and personal life. I want you to experience the many benefits and opportunities blogging has brought me too.
- I've slept free in Germany, run out of my room naked after having a very realistic nightmare in Greece and hitched rides on a fire engine in Turkey, a gravel truck in Zimbabwe and by donkey cart in Tunisia. I've traveled the globe to spot animals in the wild and ended up sharing my home with scorpions, bats and birds.
- I write travel stories on my blog Get In the Hot Spot (www.getinthehotspot.com) as well as for print and online travel publications. I live with my husband and our three children in Queensland, Australia where I help writers tap into the power of blogging at Successful Blogging (www.successfulblogging.com), take daily beach walks and dream of zipping back to Africa for an extended safari.



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Essential Personal Writing Tips

It's not just us budding writers who are interested in personal writing. Readers are too. There are thousands of people online right now seeking entertainment, escape and emotional release – and many of them get it by reading personal stories on blogs.

Look at some of the most popular blogs in the world and you'll find they're personal blogs. Many personal writing blogs like Dooce have become massive hits because of the personal stories they share. Even bloggers like Leo Babauta (personal development) Darren Rowse (blogging) and Penelope Trunk (careers) who aren't known for their personal writing per se, have risen to the top of their field because their personal story made them unique and interesting.

We all have a story to tell and many of us have a burning desire to get it out. Writing down what's happened to us can be therapeutic. It's great to get things off our chest and share how we feel with other people. It gives us a sense of being part of something bigger, it lessens the loneliness of the human condition.

I wonder how many thousands of personal stories need to be told but are still safely locked away in people's heads? Like skeletons in the cupboard those stories will rattle round and keep us awake at night until we let them out.

We need to write them down and sometimes we want to share them, but it's essential to at least write your personal stories, even if you don't make them public. Otherwise the creative process is hampered by those ghost stories we want to write but haven't.

Getting Your Personal Writing Noticed

There are thousands of personal blogs out there so how do we make our personal writing and our story stand out amidst all that noise? How do we make our personal story resonate with people, make them want to read more and recommend it to their friends?

5 Essential Personal Writing Tips

1. Get Up Close and Personal

You have to get up close and personal if you want to shine at personal writing. You have to be honest and really share yourself. That's why what should be easy is so hard.

Most of us hate writing about ourselves. It's almost as bad as public speaking. But you have to do it because you have a story to tell and it needs to be told.

People love reading personal stories and that's why blogs have become so popular. Because people want to know about YOU. No one wants to hear it from corporate writers, paid stooges or even slick Pulitzer prize winners every time.

People want to read personal writing and stories by real people, quirky people they can relate to. Check out the comments on my post 35 Ways I Don't Fit In if you don't believe me.

To begin with it's all about exploring what you know, what you want to say and how you'll say it.

2. Be Brave

Just do it. Give fear the finger and start now. You may not know what you want to write about or how to write it until you start writing. So set yourself a workable routine and stick to it.

Writing every week day for 60 minutes and, if you have a blog, publishing one blog post a week would be a great start.

Accept that to begin with your writing will be rusty. That's normal. They're called first drafts. From those rough sentences final drafts will spring.

Professional writers are lucky to have ruthless editors to

pare, improve and fine-tune their writing. You probably don't. Of course editing skills can be learnt too but editing comes later. First you need to write. Personal writing, like all writing isn't about being perfect. It's about getting started and having something to show for it.

3. Ignore the Voices

You know the ones I mean. The negative voices in your head. I'm not even going to mention what they say here because they're not getting any space, time or recognition. They don't deserve it.

It's our duty as human beings and fearless writers to drown those voices out no matter how. Sometimes, singing helps. Or replacing them with positive mantras like "I love telling my story" or "I write daily because I enjoy it."

Wine sometimes helps but that's naughty. Have just one glass if you must, but you don't want to have too much too often and end up like Earnest Hemmingway.

You'll need to write something to discover what your story is. Then you'll have to rewrite it to work out why your story's important, and rewrite it again to make the story clear to your readers.

4. Keep it Simple

Some people are brilliant storytellers. They can hop around from one event to the next with ease. There are a few tried and tested ways of telling any story – including personal ones: chronological order, flashback, and starting at the end. Don't worry about that yet if it confuses you or worries you.

Just concentrate on telling a story from the beginning to the end and getting people engaged and feeling like they were really there with you.

5. Start a Blog

Your blog doesn't have to be made public, but if you do decide to go public with your personal writing, you may want to change names, places or locations to protect the innocent... and stop the guilty from suing you.

Or you could write an anonymous blog.

Private, public or anonymous, blogging offers a great way to organise your writing, get yourself in the habit of regular writing and manage your stories.

Personal Writing Round Up

I hope you'll get into personal writing because it's fun and therapeutic too. But you have to be brave and give yourself away. So stop hoarding what you've got and share it with the world if you dare.

Let's aim to make our personal writing as compelling as fiction and evoke feelings people can relate to. Your readers weren't there but if they understand how you felt, and if they've ever felt that way themselves, you become more than just a writer, you become a friend.

That's what puts the personal into personal writing and makes it universally popular.

That's what makes readers love reading and what makes good writers popular.

Personal Writing Activity

Choose one turning point or huge event in your life and write about it. Imagine no one will ever read it and really let your feelings show.

Storytelling Devices for Memorable Personal Writing

Oh my goodness, you are NEVER going to believe this! So starts many a true story.

But when telling interesting news have you ever said:

“Hang on a minute. Just let me start from the beginning will you?”

Like that story about your cousin’s wedding when Uncle Harry ended up dancing on the table then running off with one of the bridesmaids?

Sometimes a story is just too good to share only the edited highlights. To help your listener enjoy and understand what really happened you need to get them clued up on the background details as well as the actual punchline and the final outcome.

We all know a story has a beginning, middle and end but sometimes, because we know it so well or are in a hurry to share it, a story spills out willy nilly. Then we have to backtrack because we forgot to mention an important detail or introduce an important new character properly.

Storytellers need to remember these personal writing tips and include them in every single story, whether we’re telling it orally, or writing it to share on our blogs or elsewhere.

Memorable Personal Writing and Story-Telling Tips

1. Story Order

Every story needs a clear beginning, middle and end. As we get more confident and experienced in our writing we can play around with plot devices like flashbacks or starting our story at the end then writing about how we got to that point. But to begin with chronological order is unbeatable.

The opening and closing sentences are the most

important sentences in your story. The first line gets the reader hooked and sets the tone for the story. The last sentence wraps things up and gives the reader closure. Try writing the first and last sentences of your story before you write the whole thing.

2. Writing tone

Will the tone be humorous, descriptive, serious, confidential or dramatic? Imagine who’s going to read the story and what tone will appeal to them then stick with that tone throughout the story.

You may combine two tones but once you’ve chosen the tone it gets easier to choose the right words to use to tell your story.

3. Plotlines

Like other stories personal writing deals with these four elements:

- Who?
- What?
- Why?
- When?

Who - Even though you’re writing your personal story you might be focusing on other characters. It’s probably you, but if not, you need to decide who your main character is. They are your hero or heroine and need to be kept in the spotlight. Every story needs a main character, an obstacle that causes their transformation and an end result.

What - We usually start writing with a clear idea of what happened and what our story will cover. But often other ideas pop up and we can get distracted so you’ll need to ask what really happened each time you edit the story. Can you explain what happens in one sentence?

Why - Why do you want to tell your personal story? What makes it important, memorable, interesting, funny or poignant? How do you want your readers to feel at the end of the story? Maybe you want to inspire them, share a moral message or make them laugh.

Choose your words to evoke feelings without telling your readers how you want them to feel. To help your reader experience what you experienced you have to give them clues about how you felt without making it obvious. Remember to show, not tell your readers how you felt.

When - Some stories are set in a timeless era and an anonymous place and they work. But usually it's best to set a clear scene and time to help your readers transport themselves there.

4. Rewriting

In the essential personal writing tips I mentioned:

"You'll need to write something to discover what your story is. Then you'll have to rewrite it to work out why your story's important, and rewrite it again to make the story clear to your readers."

Rewriting and editing is key. Even if you can tell a good story in the first writing it will always improve the more you work on. Great stories and books have been carefully constructed, revised and improved and it's worth spending time on. I don't know about you but I'd prefer to write one great story than several so so books.

But put limits on rewrites. Don't be a perfectionist and do quash your inner critic. Set a time line for finishing your story or publishing it on your blog. None of us are going to be great writers unless we practice and keep churning out new writing.

Remember no story is ever perfect and writers are often their own worst critics, but your story needs to be told so writing it down is a great starting point. Before you start writing ask:

What's the most important point you want to make?

What's the effect you want to have on the reader?

Then keep reminding yourself of those points as you write, revise and edit.

5. Use dialogue

Dialogue creates immediacy and give other characters a voice that makes them real. Use dialogue to change the tone or pace of your story and give readers candid insights.

6. Embellish where needed

Don't be afraid to embellish your story or exaggerate a bit. In real life we often underplay stories but personal writing is not the time for that.

Embellished stories are still true, so don't just write that someone looked like a wierdo. Tell us they had google eyes, a festering pustule on the end of their nose and a snow drift of dandruff on their shoulder.

Creative embellishment is your job as a story-teller so play up your personal story – have fun with it your readers will too.

Making Personal Writing Memorable

We might say "you'll never believe this," but a good storyteller makes people suspend their disbelief and captivates them completely. A good storyteller writes stories that are so memorable other people tell them too.

What do you think are the most important elements about personal writing and telling your story?

Personal Writing Activity

Write about a funny story or interesting anecdote that you often tell people about. Focus on the story order and creating a strong hook and closing sentence

Personal Writing and Self-Discovery

Personal writing is often therapeutic as well as creative. It can help you gain insight into who you are, what makes you happy and how you want to live.

Blogging has become my passion because it links my three loves of new media design, teaching and writing. Blogging is far more than just a job. It's the creative outlet I've always craved.

I've prioritised lifestyle for decades. I live in a gorgeous place and work from home so I can spend time with the kids. Now I have a job I love all those things combine to make me feel fulfilled and content.

I feel lucky and never take that for granted because it hasn't always been that way.

For the first 10 years of my adult life I wasn't sure what to do when I grew up. Travel and teaching English filled the gap and postponed the time when I actually had to grow up.

Then I had a baby, another baby and another. Suddenly I was a mother of three but I still hadn't worked out my place in the world.

Post-natal depression set in.

Motherhood is a time when many women lose track of who they are and stop looking after themselves and I was no different. Seana Smith, co-author of *Beyond the Baby Blues*, says 16% of women suffer from post-natal depression after becoming a new mother. Many more new mums endure stress and anxiety.

When I was depressed, although I ran a successful business and enjoyed web design and copywriting I still felt there must be more in life. I was usually stressed out and generally unhappy.

The kids pulled me one way, the business another and household duties ruled my life. There was no time to nurture my creative inner child and be me. It wasn't

that I'd forgotten who I was, more like I never spent time working it out.

I was almost 40 when I realised I needed to prioritise myself and my writing. I vowed to liberate myself from drudgery, put housework, laundry, shopping and cooking on the backburner and make time for writing because I needed to nurture my soul. I needed to feel fulfilled.

My awakening didn't happen overnight. It took 40 years and help from *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron, a book I recommend to anyone who needs help discovering or recovering their creative self.

Personal Writing and Self-Discovery

For better personal writing it helps to know:

- Who are you?
- Why do you write?
- What defines you?
- What do you stand for?

How can you really tell your story to your readers unless you know exactly what your story is?

Personal Writing Warning

There are many great reasons for personal writing:

- It's fun.
- It gives people the feeling of really knowing you.
- It makes you seem more human and helps people relate to you.
- It lets you take a trip down memory lane.
- It captures people's imagination and evokes their emotions.

But beware.

Personal writing is great unless you get too personal. You don't want to scare your readers and should never use them as a dumping point for your pain. Personal writing is about sharing your story, it's not a therapy session.

A lot of the writing you do may be something you can never share with anyone. The point of that writing is to help you learn about yourself and grow until you can write a good personal story that enlightens you and your readers.

Need more help finding out who you are?

Read my posts [How To Work Out What Your Dream Is](#) and [What to do With Your Life if You Don't Know What to Do](#).

Check out [The Artist's Way](#) by Julia Cameron.

Otherwise remember to take time to do these personal writing exercises and try to hang out with other motivated writers.

Personal Writing Activity

I've suggested fun personal writing exercises before here, but I've got more quick ideas below for exploring who you are.

They won't help you find out who you are if you're really lost but if you're on the right track you'll enjoy doing them and get to know yourself a bit better through writing them.

Take a moment for yourself, sit down with a nice cup of tea and relax with a pen and paper while you do them. You deserve it.

1. Choose 10 adjectives that describe you: 5 Strengths and 5 Weaknesses.
2. Choose an experience that shaped who you are today and what it revealed about you.
3. Choose one person who's influenced you and what that relationship revealed about you.

7 Top Personal Writing Themes

“Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.”

William Wordsworth

As a personal writer, your goal is to create a shared emotional experience with your audience.

Pathos describes your ability to evoke reader emotions but to do that you need to be aware of the wide range of emotions, decide which emotions to evoke, and practice evoking them in your readers.

Start with your emotion. What made you sad, angry, embarrassed, cringe, laugh, scared, proud, happy, jealous or worried?

Now choose a story people can relate to with universal experiences such as childhood pets, school, teachers or your first kiss.

For good storytelling every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end with a starting point, impact and end result.

Now think about how to convey that to your reader through the story without explicitly telling them how you felt.

7 Top Personal Writing Themes

Choose one of these to get you started:

- a perfect place;
- an embarrassing moment;
- a proud moment;
- exhilaration;
- funny times;
- someone who influenced you;
- an obstacle overcome.

What makes a story feel real and brings it to life?

It's the details that make a story feel real so if you can't remember them make them up. Exaggeration is part of the storytelling, don't underplay your story. Feel free to embellish it.

Personal Writing Activity

I'm publishing short examples of my own personal writing on my blog Get In the Hot Spot. Will you join me?

Just choose one of these themes then write your story and publish it on your blog. If you'd like to share the link to this book so your readers can join in too. Please tweet me the link (@getinthehotspot or share it on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com.getinthehotspot>). That way I can read your story and promote it.

There's no need to write anything long, just have fun with your personal writing and see what you come up with.