

**2023 Palliative Care Volunteer Conference**  
**How to Write A Truthful and Engaging Biography**  
**Karen Lane (Writers Boot Camp Australia)**

In May 2021, I conducted a Zoom session with volunteers from the Biographical Services of St Vincents Hospital in Sydney. A followup face-to-face session was planned for March 2022, however Covid cancelled that plan.

For those who attended the Zoom session, it is not compulsory but it would be wonderful if you could do a little preparation for our conference session.

- bring along your definition of the word 'truth'
- if you're using a truth disclosure at the top of your biographies, how have you worded this? Bring along your version.
- at the conference, please share with us where you are having trouble engaging your audience, for example, using show don't tell

For those new to this discussion, you do not need to do any preparation or pre-reading however you may wish to think about the following:

- what is your definition of the word 'truth'
- what problems have you experienced – or expect to experience – in writing biography?

And this is for everyone – and 'yes' these days it's ok to start a sentence with the word 'and' – please bring along paper or a device to write on, as during this face-to-face session we'll be completing some practical writing exercises including;

- stream of consciousness writing
- show don't tell

We'll also discuss those difficult to write areas of biography such as;

- capturing the flaws of your client and how these can be used to positive effect
- how to ensure your personality style such as your sense of humour, does not 'contaminate' your biographical writing

## **NOTES FOR OUR CONFERENCE SESSION ON 23 OCTOBER 2023**

### **1. ESTABLISHING CLARITY**

In your role as a volunteer biographer, you're a vehicle or channel for someone else's words (and world). Help keep your channel clear by using something like Stream of Consciousness (S.O.C.) Writing. S.O.C. writing or automatic writing is where you write down whatever is in your head - you do not edit nor check spelling/grammar/punctuation or worry whether it makes sense. When you run out of things to write about, take a breath or two but don't let your pen leave the page or your finger leave the keyboard. Stay connected to your writing. Stay there even when the words don't come - write 'keep writing' until the words return. If you don't find S.O.C. useful, use something like meditation or jogging to clear your mind.

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## 2. ESTABLISHING CONNECTION

As writers, we want our words to connect with readers. In order to achieve that, we first need to connect with ourselves and engage with our own world. The quickest way to achieve this is to rekindle the wonder and curiosity we had as children – to play and have fun.

Adults have a lot of trouble prioritising fun - this may help. <https://lifelabs.psychologies.co.uk/posts/4292-the-positive-benefits-of-creativity>

2.1 If I have yet to convince you of the benefits of play and fun - here's the research.

- Researcher Stuart Brown shows how enemies can become friends.

[http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart brown says play is more than fun it s vital](http://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_says_play_is_more_than_fun_it_s_vital)

- Here's even more research showing the improvements to a range of personal and career aspects when adults take the time to play.

<http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/health/wellness/advice/a18873/happiness-project-having-fun/>

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-robinson/why-is-the-key-source-of-b\\_809719.html?ir=Australia](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-robinson/why-is-the-key-source-of-b_809719.html?ir=Australia)

2.2 If you need more help, here are examples of the kind of play and fun I have each week; walking backwards/singing/dancing/cooking/pottery/sculpting/drawing/painting/photography/stargazing/cloud watching/ birdwatching/tree-hugging.

## 3. ESTABLISHING TRUTH

Memoir and biography are all about capturing the facts of a life, the truth of a life. What's your definition of the word truth? .....

One definition of truth suggests in our world of imperfect humans, truth varies depending on your perspective. For example, when two people argue over the truth of a matter, the truth may be found somewhere in the middle of the argument.

How is this useful for writers? What one person views as being the truth of a matter may not be the truth as viewed by someone else. It is that person's truth, it is a truth but not the truth.

We rely on our memory to record details and report facts. Many people are shocked to learn their memory is not as reliable as they think. We do not have to have dementia or alzheimer's disease to have a less than perfect memory of conversations or events.

There's much research in this area - here's one example. <http://teachertoolkit.me/2015/09/08/unreliable-memory/>

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If you're worried about upsetting a friend or family member, then place this disclosure (or your version of this) at the front of the writing.

**'This is the truth of the matter, from my perspective. I understand that truth is more relative and less absolute than humans believe. I understand I don't have to have dementia or alzheimer's disease to have a less than perfect memory of conversations or events. But for the record, this is my truth of events.'**

This disclosure will be enough to smooth over most issues with friends and family but what about the others? What about those who may feel the truth has damaged their reputation? In this case, it's best to camouflage those bits of information so they (the other) can't be recognised; try changing the location of the event, the age and gender of the other.

#### **4. ESTABLISHING THE POINT OF DIFFERENCE -UNIQUENESS- OF YOUR CLIENT**

Writing someone's life story is difficult but trying to piece it all together into a coherent whole creates another degree of difficulty.

Due to time constraints, many writers use chronological order. Sometimes chronological order is boring because it's predictable e.g. birth, education, career, falling in love / breaking up, marriage, death. However, you can find creative ways to disguise the chronology by dressing up the chapters or 'table of contents' using your subject's point of difference(s) or uniqueness.

There are lots of creative ways to categorise a life into chapters: use their career(s) or hobbies to create categories of interest. If they've lived in many different homes or have a huge collection of objects, use those to signpost significant events. For example, for an antique bottle collector, use the bottles to break up the life and create interest and intrigue e.g. chapter one could be named after the first bottle found e.g. 'Old Blue'. Of course, where possible, use pictures to create interest. FYI If you have no idea about antique bottles, check this out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD06tLAwo-8>

For music and movie buffs, create a table of contents which illustrates the sound track or 'movie scape' of their life. e.g. here's an extract from my memoir.

**Chapter One - The mid 1960s - *The Sound of Music*:** "I remember walking with my Nanna to the old Astor Cinema in Mt Lawley to watch, *The Sound of Music*. Those times with Nanna were the best times. She unconditionally loved all her five grandchildren but I felt she loved me the most. It was just a feeling I had. As a child, whenever we left Nanna's house I felt the loss, the emptiness.

When I was five or six years of age, I remember asking my dad (who was my Nanna's eldest son), 'When we leave Nanna's house do you feel sad?' I was surprised to hear him say 'No'. I remember feeling confused about this.

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When she died in 2004, there was a hole in my heart that took 12 years to heal.”

**Chapter Three - The mid 1970s - *Jaws*:** “The first time I heard my mother swear was while watching *Jaws* at the Esperance drive-in. When that huge shark rose unexpectedly out of the water, one word came unexpectedly out of my mother’s mouth. ‘Shit’.

Even to this day, my mum rarely swears. I remember one Christmas when I was in my twenties, she asked my sister and I what the word ‘fuck’ meant?

My sister and I looked at each other and smiled. I let my sister explain...”

**Chapter Eight - The late 1990s - *Titanic*** “The endless stream of tears I shed at the end of this movie, broke open a reservoir of emotion I’d unknowingly stored after ending an on/again, off/again relationship with ‘the man of my dreams’.

He was suppose to be the one, the one who ticked all those boxes. Yes, he had openly declared ‘his love for alcohol’ yet I thought I could change him.”

## 5. THE “SHOW DON’T TELL” WRITING CONCEPT

SHOW DON’T TELL is an important writing concept. It can be a difficult concept to teach so I usually summarise it using the mnemonic A.D.D.S.

Showing is when you provide enough details/descriptions so the reader can paint a picture in their own mind of what’s happening.

In this way, showing A.D.D.S. value to your writing by helping the reader feel closer to the character(s) and the event(s) by not just announcing the details and description e.g. ‘He was sad’ or ‘It was cold’ but instead helping them paint an image of what’s happening.

This is why many people prefer the novel version of a story rather than the movie, as they’ve already painted a picture in their heads of what characters look like – often the actors in the movies do not resemble the pictures formed in the readers’ minds.

Have a go at using the mnemonic A.D.D.S.

**Action** - use the most appropriate verb to elevate the sentence from ordinary to extraordinary.

**Description**, in particular make use of all the five senses not just sight and sound.

**Dialog** - use the actual words spoken or as close as possible to the actual words spoken.

**Some thoughts and feelings.**

This is a helpful show don’t tell youtube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRUCyOtwRFU>

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## 6. WHEN IS A BIOGRAPHY COMPLETE?

The biography is finished when the timeline shows you've asked and answered the important questions about who, what, where, when, why and how.

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If you're struggling to complete a biography, then use autobiographical 'flashbulb' memories of world events such as these to ask questions such as where were you and who were you with when:

Date/Year	SIGNIFICANT WORLD EVENT (birth/ death/ marriage/ problem/ debate/ indecision/ solution/ triumph/ tragedy)
22 Nov 1963	Assassination of US President J F Kennedy
16 July 1969	Man first walks on the Moon
25 Dec 1974	Cyclone Tracy hits Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia
11 Nov 1975	Dismissal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam by Gov Gen Sir John Kerr
16 Aug 1977	Elvis Presley dies
8 Dec 1980	Assassination of John Lennon (founding member of The Beatles)
29 July 1981	The Royal Wedding of HRH Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer
26 Sept 1983	Australia wins the America's Cup Yacht Race (with their winged keel)
28 April 1996	Port Arthur Massacre in Tasmania, Australia
30 July 1997	Landslide in Thredbo in New South Wales, Australia
31 Aug 1997	Death of Princess Diana in a traffic accident in Paris
11 Sept 2001	9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA: World Trade Centre and The Pentagon
March 2020	Australia goes into its first COVID lockdown
19 Sept 2022	Funeral of Queen Elizabeth II