

Ethics in Memoir Writing

Lifescapes 2020

3 key elements to an ethically sound memoir:

1. Accuracy
2. Respecting Privacy
3. Seeking Permission

These 3 elements will be the focus of the handout.

1

Accuracy

Factual Truth

This type of material is **objective** and its **accuracy can be seen.**

- Photos, original works of art
- Letters, journals, diaries
- Government records (i.e. birth certificate)
- Documented events (court transcripts, news stories)

Factual Truth

- This type of truth can strengthen your story by supporting your narrative
- But remember to **cite** this information!
- **Label photos** when necessary (who owns the picture, location, people featured in it, etc.)

Emotional Truth

This type of material is
subjective and its
accuracy is based on you
knowing it to be true.

- Memories
- Feelings
- Opinions
- Impressions
- Beliefs

Emotional Truth

- Present emotional truths accurately as your **own memories and thoughts** *rather* than hard facts
- **When in doubt, give yourself an out:**
 - Saying **“I remember it happening this way ...”** or **“According to Grandpa’s stories ...”** or **“I was a child, maybe 10 or 11 years of age, when it happened ...”** is an excellent way to protect your narrative

2

Respecting Privacy

Incorporating Other People: Benefits

- Family, friends and acquaintances are invariably involved and therefore are needed to understand the story
- Allows writers to explore and reflect on those relationships

Incorporating Other People: Challenges

- Not everyone wants to be immortalized in someone else's story
- Possibility of offending others with your words

In Memoriam

If someone in your story is no longer living, consider whether your words will affect their **reputation**, their **legacy**, or any **surviving family**.

Establish Boundaries

- Only include necessary details about others that enrich your story
- Limit use of names and identifying information when not relevant or possibly damaging (occupation, address, last name)

3

Seeking Permission

Approval

- Try to give anyone who is identified in your story the opportunity to read over and approve it before publication
- Consider using waivers for controversial content that you deem necessary to include (this can somewhat protect you legally)

Questions?
Comments...

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