

English 3350: Life Writing

Fall 2015

Tuesday and Thursday 9:00 a.m.

Dr. Judy Elsley

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# English 3350: Life Writing

Fall Semester 2015

Tuesday and Thursday 9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.

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**Office Hours:** Tuesday and Thursday 12 noon to 1:15 p.m. and by appointment

## ***Required books:***

- Barrington, Judith     *Writing the Memoir*     Eighth Mountain Press  
ISBN: 0933377401
- Spiegelman, Art     *Maus*     Random House (Paper)  
ISBN: 0394747232
- Hanff, Helene     *84, Charing Cross Road* Penguin USA (Paper)  
ISBN:0140143505
- Packet from the Book Shop
- Class book of student work     (about \$10)

## ***Class Purpose:***

This is a reading and writing class primarily focused around writing about our lives. I will help you put various writing “tools” into your tool kit so that you can express yourself vividly and effectively in your life essays.

## ***Grades:***

As there are no exams or tests in this class, your grade is based on your continuous, active participation in class activities, journals, and essays throughout the semester. There are no extra points to earn, and if you miss an assignment, you can't make it up later. If you do the work every week, attend class regularly, and don't take time out, you'll probably get a good grade in this course.

## ***Attendance and participation policy:***

**15%**

Not only does your attendance contribute to the community we make in this class, your contribution to class discussion also shows me that you've read and thought about the assigned

texts. I grade your participation according to the number of times you attend class during the semester, working on the basis that you can't participate if you don't attend. Here's how it will work:

1-2 absences = A; 3 absences= A-; 4 absences= B+; and so on. You have two "freebies." Your freebies are intended to cover such emergencies as the day you were sick, the day the baby sitter didn't make it, or the day your car broke down. After your freebies, every absence counts against you in terms of your attendance and participation grade, regardless of the reason for not attending class.

### ***Journals:***

#### **40% for the journal and feedback papers**

I want you to write a LOT in this class, so I'll be asking for two journal pages every week, that's ***2 single-spaced pages per week***, which you'll hand in to me on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. I'm asking you to produce a full, single-spaced page each time. Why a full page? Because a page gives you the opportunity to really dive into the topic, whereas less than a page only allows you to put one big toe in the water.

Your journal will consist of a response to your reading: Barrington will be our ongoing, weekly text, as you can see from the assignments listed in the syllabus. We will supplement this text with our other books and other students' essay drafts. I will also assign you writing exercises to give you practice at the writing skills we learn in this class.

Here's the purpose of writing a journal:

***For me:*** your journal writing shows me that you've done the reading, thought about, and understood what you read. It also shows me that you're using the writing tools you're putting in your "writer's tool kit."

***For you:*** your journal is designed to prompt you to do the reading, encourage you to prepare for class discussion, and practice your writing skills.

Your journal is a place to relax and explore the class material without judgement. The one expectation is that you'll write ***two full, single-spaced page per class session, two pages a week. I don't accept late journal pages.***

Please hand in your journal after each class session.

Computer generate your journal entries. In the top left hand corner of each journal, print:

Name:

Date:

Topic:

You'll get journal credit if:

1. You give me honest, full, single-spaced pages. No extra-large margins or big type please. You may, of course, write more than two pages per class.
2. I can tell from your writing that you've done the assigned reading.
3. You hand your work in each class session. (No late work, please!)

I won't grade you on spelling or grammar, but I will ask you to rewrite if I'm stumbling over too many errors. Your grade will be based on how many full pages you hand in. You have two freebies, and after that you'll lose points if you don't hand in a journal: -3=A-; -5=B+; -7=B; -9=B- and so on. I will give you a journal topic or question each class session to give focus to your writing and our discussion. You're free, however, to write about something else, so long as it's related to our reading, and fulfills the journal requirements stated above.

**Please Note:** You earn a hefty part of your grade (50%) through the journal and attendance because I consider them so important in this class. Think of attendance and journals as a two-step process. First, you read the texts and practice using the writing tools in your journal. Then, you come to class and take part in the discussion to find fuller meanings in what you've read. You get credit for participating in each step through attendance and your journal. A little Math will show you that it doesn't take more than a couple of missing pages and a few absences for your grade to drop. There's no extra credit in this class.

### ***Read a Book***

**5%**

Read a biography or autobiography of your choice (something you haven't already read), and come to class on **Thursday, October 29<sup>th</sup>** ready to give a five minute oral presentation on your book based on the following questions:

- Which of our writing tools did your author use to tell his or her story?
- What were the strengths of your book?
- Were there any weaknesses? What were they?

### ***Life Writing Essays***

**40% (10% per paper)**

Over the course of the semester, you'll write *two* essays, each of which you'll rewrite once. In other words, you'll write a first draft, receive feedback from your group, revise, and then get a grade from me. You'll then rewrite the essay, after you've had my feedback, and receive a second--hopefully--higher grade. In effect, you'll be submitting 2 essays four times this semester. If you earn an "A" on your first submission, you won't need to revise your essay, and you'll earn an automatic "A" for the second submission of that essay.

You'll probably generate these essays out of your journal exercises, and then work to revise and polish them into finished pieces. Each essay will be approximately three to five double spaced pages long, although I look at quality and a sense of completion, not quantity. I suggest you focus on autobiography for one essay, and biography for the other.

### ***Field Trip***

**5%**

Find a situation where people are telling stories, either about themselves or other people; a social gathering with friends, perhaps, or a family get-together.

What kind of stories does this group tell?

Why do they tell them?

Is there a theme to the stories?

How do the stories give definition and identity to the groups or individuals?

How do your field observations relate to, or differ from, ideas we've talked about in class?

We'll read "The Stories That Bind Us" for inspiration. Write up your observations in a two page, double-spaced paper, and prepare a five minute oral presentation for the class. The paper and oral report are due in the last week of class: **Tuesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>**.

### ***Class Publication:***

At the end of the semester, you will have the opportunity to contribute your best piece of writing to a class book. I'll have copies made for each of you who wish to participate (at a cost of about \$10 per person), and we will present a copy of the manuscript to the Stewart Library where it will be professionally bound, cataloged, and shelved. Your contribution to the book is due on Tuesday, December 1<sup>st</sup>

. This is an opportunity rather than a class requirement, so there's no grade allocation for submitting to the class book.

### ***Grades:***

Attendance	15%
Journal and feedback papers	35%
Life writing essays	40%
Field Trip	5%
<b>Total:</b>	<b>100%</b>

### ***Class Expectations:***

I expect you to:

- \* attend class regularly, and on time;
- \* take part in discussions and group work;
- \* do the homework conscientiously;
- \* hand in papers on time.

***Read this carefully:*** If you have difficulty meeting any of these expectations, please talk to me. Make a note of my e-mail address printed at the top of this syllabus. If you can't make a

deadline, contact me to negotiate a new date *before* the work is due. I rarely accept late work unless you and I have negotiated a new date *before* the official due date has passed. (I respond more quickly to e-mails than phone.)

### ***The Legal Bit:***

Because an important part of being a college student is academic honesty, the university expects you to complete all your academic work without cheating, plagiarism, lying and/or bribery. Penalties include failing this class or being suspended from school. It's a good idea to familiarize yourself with all aspects of the Student Code as it includes a list of prohibited behaviors, and procedures for dealing with infractions.

### ***The Writing Center:***

Tutors at the Writing Center can help you, on a one-to-one basis with your writing, but you have to take the initiative to go there. It works best if you go early in your writing process rather than using the center as a night-before-fix-it-shop. The center takes students on a walk-in basis.

Location: Elizabeth Hall 210

Telephone: 626-6463

## **SYLLABUS**

***Please note:*** Do the readings *before* the date indicated below so that you can come to class ready to discuss the assigned reading. Each week, we'll read a chapter of Barrington's guide to writing a memoir for guidance. We'll read our other texts in the weeks noted below.

### ***Week 1:***

Tuesday, September 1<sup>st</sup>

Introduction to the class

Thursday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>

Essay topics

### ***Week 2:***

Tuesday, September 8<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 1: What is the memoir?

Thursday, September 10<sup>th</sup>

### ***Week 3:***

Tuesday, September 15<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 12: Feedback

Thursday, September 17<sup>th</sup>

How to give feedback

**Week 4:**

Tuesday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>  
Thursday, September 24<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 2: Who cares?  
*Essay I, draft I: peer groups*

**Week 5:**

Tuesday, September 29<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, October 1<sup>st</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 5: Scene, summary, musing  
Using conversation

**Week 6:**

Tuesday, October 6<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, October 8<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 6: Moving around in time  
*Essay I, draft I: due*

**Week 7:**

Tuesday, October 13<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, October 15<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 7: Use your senses  
Barrington, Chapter 8: Naming names

**Week 8:**

Tuesday, October 20<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>

*Essay I, draft 2: peer groups*

**Week 9:**

Tuesday, October 27<sup>th</sup>

*Maus*

Thursday, October 29<sup>th</sup>

*Book Report*  
*Essay I, finished draft: due*

**Week 10:**

Tuesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Thursday, November 5<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 4: Telling the truth  
*Essay 2, draft I: peer group*

**Week 11**

Tuesday, November 10<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, November 12<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 9: Writing about other people  
*Essay 2, draft I: due*

**Week 12**

Tuesday, November 17<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, November 19<sup>th</sup>

Barrington, Chapter 10: Finding Form

**Week 13**

Tuesday, November 24<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, November 26<sup>th</sup>

*Essay 2, draft 2: peer groups*  
Thanksgiving

**Week 14**

Tuesday, December 1<sup>st</sup>

*84, Charing Cross Road*  
*Essay for publication due*

Thursday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>

*Essay 2, finished draft: due*

**Week 15**

Tuesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>  
Thursday, December 10<sup>th</sup>

*Field trip paper due*  
Wrap up

## Essay Topics

What do you enjoy about your life?

What belongings do you consider to be family heirlooms? The heirloom doesn't have to be valuable, so long as it is important to the family.

Write about a childhood family tradition. Do you have current traditions that either mirror or counter those childhood experiences?

Do you have a mentor? Are you a mentor for someone? Write about your relationship.

Write a list of "firsts" (i.e. first time you drove a car, first job, first time you lived alone etc.) Select one and write about how you changed as a result of that experience.

Write about the places you have lived. What was unique about each one, and reflect upon your life at the time.

Write about your memories of summer.

Write about a person that you love.

Write a recollection about a friendship you had at some point in your life.

Write about two people with whom you have lost contact. Write first about your relationship with each. Continue the exercise by writing about why, or if, you would like to reconnect with that person again.

Did you grow up with pets? Write about one particular pet.

Write about an event or time that you made a deliberate change. What motivated you to make the change, and how you think that change has affected your life?

Write about a job you had that you either learned a great deal from, or which you dreaded.

Write the story of how you came by your scars. Describe the scars, including their locations.

Were you ever in a contest or competition? What prompted you to participate? What made the experience meaningful to you?

## Guidelines for Writing an Essay

### 1. Title

The title should be a *mini-thesis*, and interesting enough to *grab the reader's attention*. You will probably write the title last of all, like putting a bow on a gift you've just wrapped.

### 2. Introduction

In a traditional essay, an introduction is made up of two parts: the *topic*, and the *thesis*. The topic is the subject you will be writing about (for example, my grandmother). The thesis is your *opinion* about that topic (My grandmother was one of the most influential people in my life). A thesis is:

- \* an opinion, or *point of view* about your topic
- \* usually placed as the *last sentence* of your first paragraph

A thesis is a contract you make with the reader. After reading your thesis, the reader should be able to tell exactly what you're going to be writing about. In the case of your grandmother, we know you will be telling us how and why she influenced you. You won't be telling us about her World War II experiences as a nurse in Europe. The reader will be confused if you don't stick to your thesis, or if you include other material. The reader looks for your thesis much like a traveler reads a map: they both give direction and shape to the journey on which you, the writer, and I the reader, are embarking.

It takes a lot of writing to discover and refine a good thesis, so don't be discouraged if you struggle with it and have to rewrite it many times.

### 3. Body

The body of your essay allows you to *develop and explore your thesis* in a logical and well organized way. The body is made up of paragraphs, each of which should:

- \* explore, develop, and *be related* to the thesis in some way.
- \* begin by introducing the single idea of that paragraph in a *topic sentence*.
- \* include *examples or evidence* to back up the main idea.
- \* make a *transition*, or bridge, at the beginning or end to connect it with the paragraph before and after it.

For example in the essay about your grandmother, you may want to tell the reader four ways she influenced you:

1. She was a hard worker
2. She gave me love and attention
3. She had a great sense of humor
4. She gave me a healthy perspective on life.

Each of these four idea would be one (or more) paragraphs.

One paragraph in that essay might look like this:

My grandmother showed me the importance of a sense of humor. (**Topic sentence**) The lines around her eyes and mouth showed a life time of smiling, and laughter was usually the first thing I heard when I went to her house. She'd always have a joke to tell me. "Hey, Marcie, how many balls of string do you need to reach the moon?" she'd ask.

"I don't know," I'd reply.

"One, but it better be a big one!" And then she'd laugh at her own joke as if she'd heard it for the first time herself. (**Examples and evidence**) I often went to her house to watch *Elementary* with her, or if it was late at night, one of the British comedies. Grandma's sense of humor made her fun to be with, and I always saved my best jokes to tell her. However, humor was more than just amusement for Grandma. It was her way to show me that not everything that happens in life has to be treated as a crisis or a trauma. (**Transition to next paragraph** about a healthy perspective on life.)

#### 4. Conclusion

Your conclusion should **wrap everything up without repeating** what you've already said. This is sometimes hard to do. Please don't treat your reader as if she's stupid by first telling her what you're going to say in the introduction, then telling her, then summarizing again in the conclusion. If your thesis is well written, your reader will understand you the first time. Here are some suggestions for ways to conclude:

- \* If it's appropriate to your subject, look to the **future**. (Tell us about a trip you and Grandma are planning to England next summer as a way to show us how close you are.)
- \* Come **full circle** by returning to your thesis and first paragraph, showing how you've moved forward in your thinking from the beginning of your essay. (Show how Grandma's influence on you has helped you influence others.)
- \* Keep **one example** that sums everything up for you to use in the conclusion. (The time Grandma bailed you out of jail, and laughed all the way home.)

What's the point of these essay writing rules? Your reader needs a reason to read what you write. If the reader says, "So what?" at the end of your writing, you've failed as a writer. Your thesis answers the "so what?" question. The rest of the guidelines help you to lead your reader clearly and smoothly through your writing.

Can you break these essay writing rules? Sure! But you must always have a good reason for doing so. If you break the rules, be aware that you're doing that, and know why you're doing it.

## Effective Writing Groups

4. You, the writer, bring printed copies of your draft for each person in the group. It's easier for your listeners to pay attention if they can *see* as well as *hear* the text.
2. You may introduce the piece briefly, but try not to apologize before you start. We all know it's a draft, and therefore it's not perfect. If there's something in particular you want feedback on, ask for it now.
3. Read your draft out loud.
4. The listeners have pens ready, and mark up the drafts you gave them with anything related to the questions below.
5. When you've finished reading, the listeners take a few minutes to go back over the draft, write out comments and questions, and prepare themselves to give some feedback.
6. The listeners take turns giving their feedback. Everyone in the group says something about the piece s/he's just heard. Avoid comments that begin, "If I were you....You really should....." Most of us hate getting Good Advice, so don't give it unless specifically requested by the writer. Formulate your comments as "I Statements": "I really liked....I didn't understand when you said....I wanted to hear more about...."
7. Although you, the writer, are sorely tempted to explain/expand/disagree with the comments you hear from your listeners, you *zip it up*. We don't have time for you to respond to every comment. Moreover, if it wasn't clear in the writing, explaining it orally won't help. Your job, as the writer, is to listen carefully to every comment, make notes, and *keep quiet*. You don't have to accept or agree with all the comments, you just have to listen to them.
8. The listeners give you their marked up copies of your draft, and the group moves on to the next piece.

### Focus on these questions to keep your feedback honest and kind:

- A. What did you like about this piece of writing?

- B. What was unclear in the writing?
- C. What would you like to hear more about?

Only comment on other things if the writer specifically asks for that kind of feedback.

# An Eating Guide to England

Dr. Judy Elsley

Thomas Wolf says you can never go home again, but this summer, I tried. After living in the U.S. for 25 years, Alan and I exchanged houses with an English couple for three months. While they lived in our house, looked after Willow and Betsy, our two cats, and drove our Subaru Forrester, we took over their semi-detached house in Deddington, a village on the edge of the Cotswolds, and drove their old but capacious diesel Volkswagen Passat.

For Alan, it was an opportunity to experience the everyday life of the country in which his wife grew up. For me, it was a chance to see how much England had changed, and to ask myself if I would or could live there again. As my friends and relatives grow older, I watch them returning to the places they were raised. “The Spawning Salmon Syndrome” seems an almost unconscious process of returning to a childhood home, a reminder to me that we humans are very often driven by the same imperatives as the rest of nature. I’m 61, and it hasn’t kicked in for me yet. I moved to the Southwest in 1979, and while I’ve visited my family and friends in England at least once a year since then, I’ve not yet felt the desire to live in the U.K. again. For me, the U.S. has been that cliché—a land of opportunity—and I doubt I could have made as satisfactory and rich a life if I’d stayed in England.

In some ways, England and the U.S., cultures George Bernard Shaw described at “two nations divided by a common language,” share a great deal. They used to be more different before the global market, instant mass communication and easy international travel. These days, if you walk into an English shopping center, you’ll see the ubiquitous Gap, while in the U.S., you encounter The Body Shop. For me, the ATM machine represents the intertwining of the two cultures. When I arrive at Heathrow airport, I put my local credit union debit card into the nearest ATM and draw out pounds with the same ease I would get cash in Ogden. The distance between the two cultures has definitely shrunk.

There are still, you’ll be happy to hear, some significant differences, and it’s the peculiarly English experience of eating I’d like to focus on here. Any tourist can tell you about the obvious differences: historic buildings, the quaint smallness of the country, the difficult driving through winding, narrow, badly signed streets, and the variety of English accents. I’m describing here some of the less well known delights England offers, most of which counter the prejudices many Americans hold about England.

Yes, I know. There's not a decent meal to be had in the whole of England. Anyone who tells you that hasn't been to England in the last ten years. The most easily accessible good food can be found at the local pub. Every village has a pub, and most of them serve food, often excellent food at a good price. For the uninitiated, a pub is not the equivalent of an American bar. I associate American bars with alcoholism and depression (I carry prejudices too), but an English pub is primarily a place to socialize. The liquor is secondary to that purpose. Every village in England has a church, a post office and at least one pub. Deddington, where we stayed, had a sixteenth century church, a post office and five pubs. For a population of about 2200. But you knew about the pubs; you probably visited a few and were impressed by the variety of food available, from toad in the hole to shepherd's pie, ploughman's lunch to pan fried trout.

Did you know about the sandwiches? All over Great Britain, stores sell freshly made sandwiches. Each sandwich is cut crossways, making the two triangles which are then packed in triangular plastic boxes. What's so great about British sandwiches? For a start they're readily available and freshly made. Boots, the Chemist (drug store), Sainsbury's the grocery stores, even Marks and Spencer's which is an English institution in the same way Sears is in this country, sell sandwiches. The English eat so many sandwiches, there are chains, such as Pret A Manger, that sell nothing else. You can choose smoked salmon and cucumber on rye, or egg salad and cress on white, or perhaps cheese and pickle on whole wheat. Then there's coronation chicken, prawns in mayonnaise, or turkey and stuffing. Unlike American sandwiches whose load of meat is unhealthily large, the English sandwich provides sufficient innards to satisfy without excess. And to go with your sandwich, you can buy rosemary and olive oil crisps (chips to you yankees), or perhaps you prefer something healthier like a mix of vegetable chips, including parsnip and rutabaga.

I often wondered where are all these sandwiches were made. Is there some central factory with a cunning machine, untouched by human hands, that then labels them all for the different shops? They mostly taste and look as if they've come from the same place. Or are they made individually by a great covey of English matrons, who slap each sandwich together individually, all working at daybreak in city kitchens all over the country? Even McDonald's, the grand-daddy of fast food, realizes the potential of the English sandwich, and has bought 33% of Pret a Manger with the option to buy the whole company in 2005. Where ever they're produced, the English sandwich is interesting, nutritious and adventurous.

Few Americans visiting England bother with the local grocery stores; they have grander ambitions like Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. But Sainsbury's, the largest chain of grocery stores in England has revolutionized my pleasure in grocery shopping. Most towns have one, there are 572 in England. This is not the exotic experience of Harrod's food hall,

but the common experience of many English shoppers. Even so, this is a store that carries a dozen different cheeses, including gambazola sage derby, wenslydale, and double gloucester. Let's take the humble potato, one of England's favorite vegetables, as an example. If you want to buy them raw, you can choose between King Edwards, organic new, Maris Piper, Desiree, white or baking.

When you enter the store, you pick up a “gun” that allows you to scan your purchases as you go so that when you reach the checkout you merely hand over the gun and credit card for a speedy exit. Hardly any waiting in line, and only the occasional check that you've been honest. And if you can't find something, there's a desk at the front of the store permanently staffed by someone who looks up your item and a second person who goes to look for it. When you're done with your shopping, you can exit by means of the Sainsbury restaurant where you can indulge in the all-day breakfast or my particular favorite, baked beans generously spooned over a baked potato and topped with grated cheddar cheese. Forget the Tower of London or the House of Parliament. If you're traveling to England, I urge you to indulge in the Sainsbury's experience.

## **Publishing Opportunities**

### **Weber State:**

#### **Metaphor**

*Metaphor* is Weber State University's undergraduate literary journal

<http://www.weber.edu/metaphor/>

#### **Epiphany**

The mission of *Epiphany Nontraditional Student Literary Journal* is to provide a venue for talented, previously unknown nontraditional student writers to present their work for publication.

<http://www.weber.edu/nontrad/nt/Epiphany.html>

#### **Verbal Equinox**

The WSU Writing Center holds writing contests and publishes a journal.

<http://www.weber.edu/WritingCenter/default.html>

## **Ergo**

The Office of Undergraduate Research sponsors this annual journal with a focus on student research. <http://www.weber.edu/OUR/ergo>

## **National**

Start with *Writer's Market*, an annual publication that lists publishers, agents etc. You'll find the latest copy in the Stewart Library, or you can subscribe online at: <http://www.writersmarket.com/>

Your Name  
Your street address  
Your city, state, and zip code  
Your phone number  
Your e-mail address

Today's date

The editor's name and title  
The publication's name  
The publication's address

Dear (Mr./Ms.) (editor's last name),

Enclosed is a copy of my biographical essay, "Title of Your Essay," for consideration in "Title of the Journal." I can also send you an electronic copy of my work.

Thank you for considering my work.

Sincerely,

**Your signature**

--

Your name printed here

## Writing the Memoir: Journal Assignments

### Chapter 1: What is Memoir?

Barrington gives us a number of definitions in this chapter. What are the characteristics of a memoir? What is it exactly we're writing this semester?

### Chapter 2: Who Cares?

Show me you've read this chapter on the all-important "So What?" question, and then answer # 6 on p.47.

### Chapter 3: Finding Form

How does the content of your first essay shape the form the essay is taking? Write half a page about the relationship between your essay's form and content, and then answer #1 on p. 61.

### Chapter 4: The Truth

After reading this chapter on telling the truth, write about how much truth you can tell in your auto/biographical writing. What are your guidelines, your challenges, and your conundrums with this issue?

### Chapter 5: Scene and Summary

What does Barrington mean by "scene and summary"? Can you find an example in something you've read recently? Practice this skill by doing #s 1 and 2 on p.91.

### Chapter 6: Moving Around in Time

Breaking the chronological order of events is often a very effective way to tell your story. After reading the chapter, experiment with # 4 on p.105. Take a look at the time sequence in the essay you're currently working on: could you tell the story better by playing with the time? Try it!

### Chapter 7: Using Your Senses

We experience the world through all 5 senses, but we often write about it only using sight. Go through your current essay to see where you could add sound, touch, smell, and taste to better bring your writing to life. Pick **one** assignment on p. 117 as your journal response.

### Chapter 8: Naming Names

Even if we don't know the people and places you describe in your writing, we *feel* as if we do once you name them. Go through your essays, and put in names where ever you can. Make the names up, if you have to. For your journal, Do # 1, 2, 4, **or** 5 on ps. 127-128.

### Chapter 9: Writing about Living People

Writing about living people is always tricky; whose perception is right? After reading this chapter, choose **either** #s 1 and 2, **or** #s 3 and 4, **or** #s 5 and 6. Let's **not** share this journal with our groups. You can show it to me, or if you'd rather, just wave it in front of me, and I'll give you credit.

### Chapter 10: Your Memoir and the World

As writers, we're aiming for a healthy balance between the inner and the outer world. We need both. Choose **one** of the exercises on p. 151 for your journal.

### Chapter 11: Watch Out For the Myths

So sorry to inform you, but the writer's life just isn't as dramatic and glamorous as most of the myths. Choose # 1, 2, **or** 3 on p. 161, **or** answer this question: what myths are you rejecting, and what realities embracing as you become a better writer?

### Chapter 12: Getting Feedback on your Work

How does Barrington's description of a group at work compare with the one I gave you? Does she have some insights that will be valuable to us?

### Appendix: Your Memoir and the Law

Just as well to know who can sue us for what. Read this for your information, and keep it as a reference.

## **84 Charing Cross Road**

1. Would you describe this book as biography or autobiography?
2. The content (two people exchange letters about books) is clear; but what is the meaning or significance of this book? How do we answer, in other words, the "So What?" question?
3. What kind of character development do we see through the course of these letters?
4. What characteristics does this book share with fiction? How is it, say, like a novel?
5. What markers indicate to us that the book is, in fact, non-fiction? Can we trust those signs?

6. This correspondence was probably edited for publication. Is anything missing? Did you want anything made clearer or explained further?
7. What can we learn about our own writing from this book?
8. Because this book takes an untraditional form, we readers are invited to think about the relationship between form and content. Do form and content work effectively together in this book? If so, how and why?

## Maus

### The Narration:

1. Whose story is this: Art's or Vladek's? Is this biography or autobiography?
2. How reliable is Vladek's version of the story? He always appears to be heroic in his retelling of his life, but can you find cracks in that projection?
3. Why does Art tell us about Vladek's first girlfriend, especially after Vladek expressly asked him not to write about it?
4. How reliable is Art's version of his dad's story? Does Art's emotional baggage with his dad effect the way he tells the story? Look, for example, at the beginnings and ends of the chapters where Art shows us the present: there's almost always some sort of conflict between father and son.
5. Does Spiegelman move around in time?

### Art's Mother:

6. Why is the section on Art's mother's suicide included in the book? Compare the drawing style (the artist's "voice") of this section with the rest of the text. What do you notice?
7. Look at the physical placement of the section on Art's mother in the book. What does that artistic choice suggest to you?
8. Art's mother permeates the book as an absence rather than a presence: what do you make of that?

### The Cartoon Form:

9. Does the cat and mouse metaphor work to describe the political situation between Jews and Nazis?
10. Telling the story of the Holocaust as a cartoon is a risky choice on the part of the artist. Does the cartoon form, which we usually associate with humor and childhood, work to tell this grim story? If so, why?
11. Take a close look at some of the cartoon frames. Spiegelman is a sophisticated and adept craftsman. Find places where you can see his skill as an artist.

**Personal Response:**

12. What was your personal reaction to reading this book?
13. What can Maus teach us about our own writing?
14. What is the purpose of this book?

# Writing Prompts

## **Five Senses**

Describe a perfect summer day from your childhood.

Write about an experience with color.

What's the worst weather you've ever experienced?

Write about bread.

Describe a home you have loved.

Write about your experience with libraries.

Write about water.

## **Scene summary and musing**

Describe your first job and your reaction to it.

Write about a death that has had an impact on you.

How old are you? How do you make peace with your age?

Write about your life as a writer.

## **Names**

Describe a journey you take regularly. What do you see outside the vehicle?

Describe the street where you grew up.

Write about music you love.

Write about a hobby you love

Describe a home you have loved.

## **Moment of Tension**

Write about an accident you've had.

Write about a sport you enjoy.

## **Conversation**

Start a piece with the words, "So here I am . . ."

Tell a family story that's often been repeated.

When have you told a lie and why?

## **Time Shift**

Write about a family conflict you had as a child that involved an adult.

How old are you? How do you make peace with your age?

Why did you choose your college major?

Write about someone you have lost, through death, divorce, geographical distance etc.

Start a piece with the word, "Recently . . ."

### **Details**

Write about a book that has deeply influenced you.

Write about one piece of clothing.

Write about a typical day in your life.

What words do you love? Make a list. Then pick one, look up its etymology and write about why you love that word.

Describe your current job and how you feel about it.

### **Describing People**

Describe your mother.

Write about the first time you fell in love

Write about a parent/grandparent coping with a serious illness.

Write about your grandfather.

Write about your relationship with your father.

Write about sitting in the backseat as a child overhearing an adult conversation

Write about a sibling.

### **Metaphor**

Write about an unexpected gift.

Write about a move from one environment to another. Compare and contrast the two places.

Write about a memory evoked by a particular object.

Dr. Judy Elsley

## Writing Tool Box: Using All Five Senses

In our daily lives, we use our five senses all the time: sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. In fact, if we couldn't use one of those senses, we'd be disabled. In our writing, however, we tend to use only one sense: sight. Why?

\$ Because it's the easiest of the five to describe; we have a hard time describing smells, tastes, and sounds.

\$ We're unconscious of the other four a lot of the time. Yet, it's often smell or taste or sound that brings a memory back most vividly: the smell of disinfectant reminds me of a hospital stay; when I hear Martha and the Vandellas sing "Dancing in the Streets," I'm in my last year of high school again.

If you want your writing to come alive for the reader, use all five senses, not just sight, because that's the way we experience the world.

### Mark up the different senses in these examples:

Where I was born--Greenville, South Carolina--smelled like nowhere else I've ever been. Cut wet grass, split green apples, baby shit and beer bottles, cheap makeup and motor oil. Everything was ripe, everything was rotting. Hound dogs butted my calves. People shouted in the distance; crickets boomed in my ears. That country was beautiful, I swear to you, the most beautiful place I've ever been. Beautiful and terrible. It is the country of my dreams and the country of my nightmares: a pure pink and blue sky, red dirt, white clay, and all that endless green--willows and dogwood and firs going on for miles. Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*

The first week of school the indoor air was sultry with held-over August heat and farm kids too recently reined in and washed up. I was tall for my age and sat towards the back, looking down on a row of raw necks and homemade haircuts. The sound of a pickup on the country road lured us like a bird's song. When it shifted down for the corner, we went along with it, anticipating each rev and crank of gears – some neighbor going to town, checking cattle, returning a borrowed tool somewhere up the road. In the next second the familiar pattern broke and we came to full attention. Instead of swelling, then fading into the distance, the noise grew steadily louder. Dust streamed through the open windows as a rust-colored pickup eased around the building to the eastern side and rattled to a stop by the front steps. The engine cut out, lugged a few times, and was still.  
Judy Blunt, *Breaking Clean*

The train crawled sluggishly farther and farther away from the city and their homes. It was not a clean train—the upholstery of their carriage had the dank smell of unwashed trousers, and the

gusts of hot steam rolling backward past their windows were full of specks of flimsy ash, and sharp grit, and occasional fiery sparks that pricked face and fingers like hot needles if you opened the window. It was very noisy, too, whenever it picked up a little speed.

A.S. Byatt, "The Thing in the Forest." *The New Yorker*, June 3, 2002

## Writing Tool Box: Describing a Person

When you introduce us to someone, you want to create a vivid image in the reader's mind through your use of words. We readers want to see, hear and understand the people you describe. General words like, "short," "plump," "long-haired," "old." are vague, and we're aiming for a portrait that will make the person individual and particular. So drop the adjectives and stereotypes in favor of a few distinctive details that show not only the external appearance of a person, but also some internal traits.

For example:

I'm not hard-pressed to imagine my mother as a young woman, for even in her seventies, she remains independent, opinionated and fiercely practical. She'd been born late in the lives of her parents, one a homesteading schoolteacher up from the Dakotas, the other a Scots farmer who had emigrated from Canada to farm with his teams of horses in far Northern Montana. . . . She learned at her mother's elbow. By the time she entered high school, she could sew expertly, cook adequately, milk a cow, break a colt, tend a garden, and preserve the vegetables it produced. Unlike many women of her generation, she finished high school and went on to take secretarial and bookkeeping courses at a community college. From her gentle Scots father, she'd acquired a love of horses and from both parents, a love of reading. Judy Blunt *Breaking Clean*

A really good description may also suggest the writer's relationship with the person:

Hunched in a corner of the Grill and flanked by four hoary cohorts of the film industry, Martin Ritt, seventeen years and several centuries my senior, wore a revolutionist's black shirt buttoned to the neck and a pair of baggy pants held up by elastic and nipped at the ankles.. And, of all extraordinary things, in my eye, an artisan's flat cap with the peak turned up where it should have been down. But worn indoors, you understand, which in my diplomatic England of those days was about as acceptable as eating peas off a knife. And all this on the bearish frame of an old footballer run to fat, with a broad, bronzed, Middle European face etched with the pain of ages, and thick, swept-back, graying hair, and pitch-dark, watchful eyes and black-rimmed glasses. John Le Carre describing film director, Martin Ritt. New Yorker 4/15/13

As you write a description, consider such things as hair, shoes, hands, gait. Ask yourself:  
Is there a particular smell you associate with him or her?  
What kind of clothes is this person comfortable wearing?  
Where are you likely to find him or her?  
What kind of activity is she or he happiest doing?  
And most important, let your person talk. Try to use the phrases and words he or she would use, and let your person talk about something important to him or her.  
Try to use some of the five senses as you describe someone, particularly sound, sight and smell, as that's often how we experience people in life.

### **Writing Tool Box: Conversation**

#### **Conversation works powerfully to:**

5. uncover character and feelings
6. show relationships in action
7. give us a sense of immediacy in the situation, as if we're present
8. move the plot along
9. demonstrate tension

It may feel strange to write conversation at first, but don't let that stop you; it's remarkably powerful for your reader.

**BUT**, don't include conversation just to put it in. For example:

- hello!
- hi.
- how are you?
- fine thanks. How about you?.
- good.

This is a static conversation. We don't learn about the characters, or their relationship, there's no tension, and it doesn't move the story along.

Here's a classic example of good conversation at work:

“You can be at no loss, Miss Bennet, to understand the reason of my journey hither. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I come.”

Elizabeth looked with unaffected astonishment.

“Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam. I have not been at all able to account for the honor of seeing you.”

“Miss Bennet,” replied her ladyship, in an angry tone, “you ought to know, that I am not to be trifled with. But however insincere *you* may choose to be, you shall not find *me* so . . . A report of a most alarming nature, reached me two days ago. I was told that *you*, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. Though I *know* it must be a scandalous falsehood; though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you.”

“If you believed it impossible to be true,” said Elizabeth, coloring with astonishment and disdain, “I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?”

“At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted.”

“Your coming to Longbourn, to see me and my family,” said Elizabeth coolly, “will be rather a confirmation of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence.”

“If! Do you then pretend to be ignorant of it? Has it not been industriously circulated by yourselves? Do you not know that such a report is spread abroad?”

“I never heard that it was.”

“And can you likewise declare, that there is no *foundation* for it?”

“I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. *You* may ask questions, which *I* shall not choose to answer.”

“This is not to be borne, Miss Bennet. I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?”

“Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible.”

“It ought to be so; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But *your* arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and to all his family. You may have drawn him in.”

“If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it.”

“Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this. I am almost the nearest relation he has in the world, and am entitled to know all his dearest concerns.”

“But you are not entitled to know *mine*; nor will such behavior as this ever induce me to be explicit.”

“Let me be rightly understood. This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never. Mr Darcy is engaged to *my daughter*. Now what have you to say?”

“Only this; that if he is so, you can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me.”

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

**How to set up conversation:**

Every new speaker gets a new line.

Minimize the “he said,” “she responded” comments, especially if your conversation is between two people.

Try to limit your conversation to two speakers. Any more, and the reader is likely to become confused.

Use quotation marks, *or* indent with a hyphen, but not both. If you use quotation marks, all the other punctuation goes inside.

## Writing Tool Box: Naming Names

“We did a long hike overlooking a pretty valley, so high up we walked directly above a local ski resort.”

“The Skyline Trail took us about eight hours of up and down, but the views over the Eden Valley and Pineview Reservoir made it worthwhile. The hike started with a thousand foot climb up, so that we hiked along the crest of the hill, directly above Nordic ski resort for part of the trail.”

Can you see the difference? Even if you're unfamiliar with the particular places, they seem more real to you because they're named. When we refer to “Uncle Eustace” instead of just “my uncle,” he becomes an individual. Naming names is another way to include details in your writing, to bring your descriptions alive in the mind of your reader.

Other reasons to name people and places:

- \* Reveals the history of the place
- \* the musical quality to the sound of the name
- \* establishes your authority as a writer.

**Here are some examples from professional writers:**

“When James got home, the house was still dark, except for Uncle Leonard’s window on the first floor, which glowed redly. When Leonard Mallow had come to live with them five years before, Kate had asked him what colour curtains he would like and he had said at once, “Oh red, dear. Really red. As red as you can get them.” He was a man of decided tastes. He loved cricket and the works of John Buchan and anchovy paste and Mrs. Cheng, the small, impassive Chinese woman who helped Kate with the cleaning.” Joanna Trollope, *The Men and the Girls*.

“At the end of Bell Street, McKay Street, Mayo Street, there was the Flood. It was the Wawanash River, which every spring overflowed its banks.” Alice Munroe, “The Found Boat.”

“I am Gimpel the Fool. I don’t think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that’s what folks call me. They gave me the name while I was still in school. I had seven names in all: imbecile, donkey, flax-head, dope, glump, ninny, and fool. The last name stuck.”

Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Gimpel the Fool.”

“So it happened, whether through accident or design, that I came to know and love the land that was my new home. I walked the Prowdy Pines and drove the trail to Beauchamp Creek to mine the shale banks for marine fossils and buffalo skulls washed out by spring floods. I rode horseback up the slope and down the length of Stouts Coulee and Pea Ridge, following an unbroken string of hay meadows tucked into the bends and curves of Fourchette Creek all the way to the Fields Cabin”

Judy Blunt, *Breaking Clean*

## Writing Tool Box: Details! Details! Details!

The more details you give, the more vividly your writing comes alive. Use details, rather than adjectives, to describe a person, place or emotions. **BUT**, you have to be careful to include only *appropriate* detail. Don't give every detail or the reader gets bogged down. You want the synecdoche that stands for the whole.

### Here are some examples:

On Mondays, the house would throb to our washing machine, which used to crawl itself berserkly across the kitchen floor, howling and bucking, sending gallons of hot gray water along its fat beige tubes to spit and gush into the sink. The manufacturer's name on its metal badge was Thor. The god of thunder sat and growled in the outer reaches of suburbia.

Julian Barnes, "The Fruit Cake." *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2002

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow, a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks. James Joyce, "The Dead"

The main schoolroom held it all – students, teachers and eight grades' worth of books, materials and supplies. Book-cases and shelves lined the walls below the windows and rose the ceiling in places, every inch of space crammed with books, paper, flash cards and art materials. A large blackboard dressed the north wall, and strung along above it was a permanent display of the Palmer Penmanship alphabet, the uppercase letters made grand with a fat swirl at the start, a bit of

flourish at the end. We used the flattop heating stove as a storage table until it had to be lit in October. Standard-issue portraits of George Washington and Abe Lincoln glowered down upon us, and before Health Inspection every morning, we stood beside our desks and pledged allegiance to a flag propped in the corner behind the teacher's desk. Judy Blunt *Breaking Clean*

### **Writing Tool Box: Start at a Moment of Tension**

***There are a number of reasons for starting your story at a moment of tension:***

- C            You will immediately draw your reader in because you set up a problem or situation right away that the reader wants to see resolved.
10.           The moment of tension invites you to play around with the chronology of your story, make some time shifts, and thus organize your story in a more complex and compelling way.
11.           The moment of tension will help you, the writer, figure out your main point, and keep you on track with the focus of your story.

***Take a look at these opening lines from professional writers:***

"When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."     Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

"Tioga County landfill is where Hector, Jr., is found. Or his 'remains'—battered and badly decomposed, his mouth filled with trash."     "Landfill" by Joyce Carol Oates

"Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast."     E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web*

"If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth."     J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

"Now is the winter of our discontent."     Shakespeare, *Richard III*

"It happens that I am going through a period of great unhappiness and loss just now. All my life I've heard people speak of finding themselves in acute pain, bankrupt in spirit and body, but I've never understood what they meant. To lose. To have lost. I believed these visitations of darkness lasted only a few minutes or hours and that these saddened people, in between bouts, were occupied, as we all were, with the useful monotony of happiness. But happiness is not what I thought. Happiness is the lucky pane of glass you carry in your head. It takes all your cunning just

to hang on to it, and once it's smashed you have to move into a different sort of life.”

Carol Shields, *Unless*

***However, don't overdo it:***

“My muscles clench as I stare 1,000 feet down the nameless 55-degree couloir we've just climbed. I'm on a narrow platform of hard snow that took me 15 minutes to chisel with my ice tool. Above our small party is a massive cornice; below walls of granite plunge to form an hourglass with a waist 12 feet wide.”

“Heaven is Made of Ice: Tribute and Terror on Skis in Antarctica,” Ben Shook *Sierra Magazine*

## **Writing Tool Box: Moving Around in Time**

We live our lives in chronological order, moment after moment, but it's often more interesting to tell a story out of time order.

### **Why?**

If you begin your narrative at a moment of tension, you draw your reader in immediately. The process of shaping a story into writing also involves shaping time. You had to live an event in chronological order, but as you look back, you have the perspective to pick and choose the important parts and place them in the order that makes the story the most effective.

As you reorder the time in your narrative, be careful with transitions. Your reader should know from the first words of your paragraph if you've shifted time. Identify the new time and use correct verb forms to indicate time changes.

### **Here are two examples:**

*Chapter One, opening paragraph:*

“I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years . . .”

*Second paragraph:*

“One day last summer, my friend Rahim Kkan called from Pakistan. He asked me to come and see him . . .”

*Chapter Two, opening sentence:*

“When we were children, Hassan and I used to climb the poplar trees in the driveway of my father's house and annoy our neighbors by reflecting sunlight into their homes with a shard of

mirror.”

*The Kite Runner*

Khaled Hosseini

“The ad read “CINDERELLA SCHOOL. Learn English and find your dream. Fast, affordable, flexible hours.” I found it in *Our Brooklyn*, the thickest and trashiest of all the Russian newspapers . . .

A couple of weeks earlier, my husband, Vadim, said that the only people who could make in immigrant business were dishonest and unprofessional . . .

The next day, I put the diploma in my purse, took the Q train down to the Sheepsherd Bay stop, and walked up a side street . . .

The room was small and dimly lit . . .

Ten minutes later, the door opened with a bang . . .

Vadim didn’t like it when I called him at work, and I usually didn’t.

But that day, I simply couldn’t wait. “

”Cinderella School” Lara Vapnyar  
*The New Yorker*, May 22,  
2006.

## Writer’s Tool Box: Scene, Summary and Musing

**Scene:** Events as they happen, moment by moment. Lots of conversation and detail.

**Summary:** The long view: Setting the scene into the context of before and after, connecting one scene with the next over a period of days, months or even years.

**Musing:** How you, the writer make sense out of the scene and summary both at the time it happened, and from the present moment of writing. In other words, what do the scene and summary mean?

### Using scene, summary and musing allows you to:

Control and vary the pace of your writing;  
Focus on the parts of your story that really matter, and drop the details that don’t;  
Bring depth to your writing by putting an experience in context (summary), and explaining why it’s meaningful (musing).

**Here’s an example:**

--

The first story about me goes like this: The summer Judy was four she trotted into the kitchen, so full of importance, you could have popped her with a pin. We had company, but she was holding something and I looked over to see what she'd dragged in. She had one of those big round cockleburs. "A cactus just calved," she said, and held up the baby to show it off. "I saw the whole thing happen."

It's hard to telling what I have actually seen that day, perhaps a simple trick of wind and weeds, my childhood elements of weather and imagination. But by the day's end I have seen the eyes around a table light up with genuine respect for wit, for the art of timing, the deadpan delivery. My parents look right at me and smile. That smile is not about innocence. By age four, I had witnessed a wide range of barnyard conceptions and deliveries. Cats had cats and cow had cows, and I knew why. What do they see in my yarn about a cactus calving a cocklebur that makes it worth keeping and telling over and over?

I believe the truth is this: the summer I was four I spoke my first good story and was born into my community, into the collective memory of my family, into a mythology that grew more real to me than fact. For the balance of my childhood I danced and waved on the fringe of a world defined by its miracles and natural disasters, observing and imitating, trying to amount to a good story – or barring that, to tell one.

Judy Blunt, *Breaking Clean*

## Scene and Summary

"Runnin Down a Dream"

It was a beautiful day, the sun beat down  
I had the radio on, I was drivin  
The trees went by, me and del were singin  
Little runaway, I was flyin

Yeah runnin down a dream  
That never would come to me  
Workin on a mystery, goin wherever it leads  
Im runnin down a dream

--

I felt so good, like anything was possible  
I hit cruise control and rubbed eyes  
The last three days the rain was unstoppable  
It was always cold, no sun shine

Yeah runnin down a dream  
That never would come to me  
Workin on a mystery, goin wherever it leads  
Im runnin down a dream

I rolled on as the sky grew dark  
I put the pedal down to make some time  
There's something good waitin down this road  
Im picking up whatever is mine

Yeah runnin down a dream  
That never would come to me  
Workin on a mystery, goin wherever it leads  
Im runnin down a dream

Written by Tom Petty, performed by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

“Me & Bobby McGee”

Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waiting for a train  
And I's feeling nearly as faded as my jeans.  
Bobby thumbed a diesel down just before it rained,  
It rode us all the way to New Orleans.

I pulled my harpoon out of my dirty red bandanna,  
I was playing soft while Bobby sang the blues.  
Windshield wipers slapping time, I was holding Bobby's hand in mine,  
We sang every song that driver knew.

Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,  
Nothing don't mean nothing honey if it ain't free, now.  
And feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues,  
You know feeling good was good enough for me,  
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee.

From the Kentucky coal mines to the California sun,  
Hey, Bobby shared the secrets of my soul.  
Through all kinds of weather, through everything we done,  
Hey Bobby baby? kept me from the cold.

One day up near Salinas ,I let him slip away,  
He's looking for that home and I hope he finds it,  
But I'd trade all of my tomorrows for just one yesterday  
To be holding Bobby's body next to mine.

Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose,  
Nothing, that's all that Bobby left me, yeah,  
But feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues,  
Hey, feeling good was good enough for me, hmm hmm,  
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee.

Written by Khris Christopherson and sung by Janis Joplin

## Writing Tool Box: Metaphor

### Why use metaphors in your writing? Because:

Metaphors act as comparisons with are a common way humans understand the world: we know light because we experience dark; we understand sweet because we know the taste of sour;

The comparison, especially with something unexpected, makes us see something familiar in a new way;

It's fun and amusing for the reader;

A fresh metaphor shows your creativity as a writer.

### But, DON'T:

Use cliches: "She wept like a baby;" "He was as fit as a fiddle;" "He ate like a pig." These hackneyed phrases are dead wood in a piece of writing. Better to use no metaphors than a cliché.

Use "as...as" or "like" if you can avoid it.

Use such a far-fetched metaphor that it doesn't work.

Don't mix metaphors.

### A Puppy Called Puberty

It was like keeping a puppy in your underpants  
A secret puppy you weren't allowed to show to anyone  
Not even your best friend or your worst enemy

You wanted to pat him stroke him cuddle him  
All the time but you weren't supposed to touch him

He only slept for five minutes at a time  
Then he's suddenly perk up his head  
In the middle of a school medical inspection  
And always on bus rides

So you had to climb down from the upper deck  
All bent double to smuggle the puppy off the bus  
Without the buxom conductress spotting  
Your wicked and ticketless stowaway.

Jumping up, wet-nosed, eagerly wagging -  
He only stopped being a nuisance  
When you were alone together  
Pretending to be doing your homework  
But really gazing at each other

Through hot and hazy daydreams  
Of those beautiful schoolgirls on the bus  
With kittens bouncing in their sweaters.

Adrian Mitchell

## Writing Exercises

**Exercise 1:** Think of an object or possession that means a lot to you. What is it? Describe it as specifically as possible. Now, make connections between yourself and the object:

Why do you care about it?

What does it say about you?

What history has it been through with you?

Use the object as a way to explore who you are, what you care about, and your priorities.

**Exercise 2:** This exercise will help you “show not tell.” Think of someone you know well. Write down his or her name. Now answer these questions:

What kind of hair does he or she have?

Describe a typical pair of shoes he or she wears.

Look closely at his or her hands. Describe skin, nails, and rings he or she might wear.

What kind of clothes is this person comfortable wearing? Describe them in detail.

Where are you likely to find him or her? Put your person in a comfortable setting.

What kind of activity is she or he happiest doing?

Let your person talk. Try to use the phrases and words he or she would use, and let your person talk about something important to him or her.

**Exercise 3:** Write about your physical body. Focus on a time when you were aware of your body, either negatively or positively.

**Exercise 4:** Identify your priorities. Write a letter to an 18 year old, the son or daughter of a friend, a niece or nephew, a younger brother or sister, your own son or daughter, or a peer who has asked you, “What really matters in life?” Pick out three things, and then try to illustrate each idea with a particular example.

**Exercise 5:** Write a letter (you don't intend sending) to someone who was troublesome in your past. Be completely honest with yourself and the other person. It's OK to let rip because you'll eat this letter sooner than send it.

## **The Stories That Bind Us**

I hit the breaking point as a parent a few years ago. It was the week of my extended family's annual gathering in August, and we were struggling with assorted crises. My parents were aging; my wife and I were straining under the chaos of young children; my sister was bracing to prepare her preteens for bullying, sex and cyberstalking.

Ka-boom! My sister snapped at me to not discipline her child. My dad pointed out that my girls were the ones balancing spoons on their noses. My mom said none of the grandchildren had manners. Within minutes, everyone had fled to separate corners.

Later, my dad called me to his bedside. There was a palpable sense of fear I couldn't remember hearing before.

"Our family's falling apart," he said.

"No it's not," I said instinctively. "It's stronger than ever."

But lying in bed afterward, I began to wonder: Was he right? What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, happy?

It turns out to be an astonishingly good time to ask that question. The last few years have seen stunning breakthroughs in knowledge about how to make families, along with other groups, work more effectively.

Myth-shattering research has reshaped our understanding of dinnertime, discipline and difficult conversations. Trendsetting programs from Silicon Valley and the military have introduced techniques for making teams function better.

The only problem: most of that knowledge remains ghettoized in these subcultures, hidden from the parents who need it most. I spent the last few years trying to uncover that information, meeting families, scholars and experts ranging from peace negotiators to online game designers to Warren Buffett's bankers.

After a while, a surprising theme emerged. The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.

I first heard this idea from Marshall Duke, a colorful psychologist at Emory University. In the mid-1990s, Dr. Duke was asked to help explore myth and ritual in American families.

“There was a lot of research at the time into the dissipation of the family,” he told me at his home in suburban Atlanta. “But we were more interested in what families could do to counteract those forces.”

Around that time, Dr. Duke’s wife, Sara, a psychologist who works with children with learning disabilities, noticed something about her students.

“The ones who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges,” she said.

Her husband was intrigued, and along with a colleague, Robyn Fivush, set out to test her hypothesis. They developed a measure called the “Do You Know?” scale that asked children to answer 20 questions.

Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of 2001, and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the children’s results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, and reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more children knew about their family’s history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The “Do You Know?” scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children’s emotional health and happiness.

“We were blown away,” Dr. Duke said.

And then something unexpected happened. Two months later was Sept. 11. As citizens, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush were horrified like everyone else, but as psychologists, they knew they had been given a rare opportunity: though the families they studied had not been directly affected by the events, all the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time. The researchers went back and reassessed the children.

“Once again,” Dr. Duke said, “the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress.”

Why does knowing where your grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?

“The answers have to do with a child’s sense of being part of a larger family,” Dr. Duke said. Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative, he explained, and those narratives take one of three shapes.

First, the ascending family narrative: “Son, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your father went to college. And now you. ...”

Second is the descending narrative: “Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything.”

“The most healthful narrative,” Dr. Duke continued, “is the third one. It’s called the oscillating family narrative: ‘Dear, let me tell you, we’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.’ ”

Dr. Duke said that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Dr. Fivush call a strong “intergenerational self.” They know they belong to something bigger than themselves.

Leaders in other fields have found similar results. Many groups use what sociologists call sense-making, the building of a narrative that explains what the group is about.

Jim Collins, a management expert and author of “Good to Great,” told me that successful human enterprises of any kind, from companies to countries, go out of their way to capture their core identity. In Mr. Collins’s terms, they “preserve core, while stimulating progress.” The same applies to families, he said.

Mr. Collins recommended that families create a mission statement similar to the ones companies and other organizations use to identify their core values.

The military has also found that teaching recruits about the history of their service increases their camaraderie and ability to bond more closely with their unit.

Cmdr. David G. Smith is the chairman of the department of leadership, ethics and law at the Naval Academy and an expert in unit cohesion, the Pentagon’s term for group morale. Until recently, the military taught unit cohesion by “dehumanizing” individuals, Commander Smith said. Think of the bullying drill sergeants in “Full Metal Jacket” or “An Officer and a Gentleman.”

But these days the military spends more time building up identity through communal activities. At the Naval Academy, Commander Smith advises graduating seniors to take incoming freshmen (or plebes) on history-building exercises, like going to the cemetery to pay tribute to the first naval aviator or visiting the original B-1 aircraft on display on campus.

Dr. Duke recommended that parents pursue similar activities with their children. Any number of occasions work to convey this sense of history: holidays, vacations, big family get-togethers, even a ride to the mall. The hokier the family’s tradition, he said, the more likely it is to be passed down. He mentioned his family’s custom of hiding frozen turkeys and canned pumpkin in the bushes during Thanksgiving so grandchildren would have to “hunt for their supper,” like the Pilgrims.

“These traditions become part of your family,” Dr. Duke said.

Decades of research have shown that most happy families communicate effectively. But talking

doesn't mean simply "talking through problems," as important as that is. Talking also means telling a positive story about yourselves. When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identity tends to get locked in during adolescence.

The bottom line: if you want a happier family, create, refine and retell the story of your family's positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come.

## The Do You Know Scale

Please answer the following questions by circling "Y" for "yes" or "N" for "no." Even if you know the information we are asking about, you don't need to write it down. We just wish to know if you know the information.

1. Do you know how your parents met?Y N
2. Do you know where your mother grew up?Y N
3. Do you know where your father grew up?Y N
4. Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?Y N
5. Do you know where some of your grandparents met?Y N
6. Do you know where your parents were married?Y N
7. Do you know what went on when you were being born?Y N
8. Do you know the source of your name?Y N
9. Do you know some things about what happened when your brothers or sisters were being born?Y N
10. Do you know which person in your family you look most like?Y N
11. Do you know which person in the family you act most like?Y N
12. Do you know some of the illnesses and injuries that your parents experienced when they were younger?Y N
13. Do you know some of the lessons that your parents learned from good or bad experiences?Y N
14. Do you know some things that happened to your mom or dad when they were in school?Y N
15. Do you know the national background of your family (such as English, German, Russian, etc)?Y N
16. Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young?Y N
17. Do you know some awards that your parents received when they were young?Y N
18. Do you know the names of the schools that your mom went to?Y N
19. Do you know the names of the schools that your dad went to?Y N
20. Do you know about a relative whose face "froze" in a grumpy position because he or she did not smile enough?Y N

Score: Total number answered Y.

Important Note: About that last question! Fifteen percent of our sample actually answered "Yes!" This is because the stories that families tell are not always "true." More often than not they are

told in order to teach a lesson or help with a physical or emotional hurt. As such, they may be modified as needed. The accuracy of the stories is not really critical. In fact, there are often disagreements among family members about what really happened! These disagreements then become part of the family narrative. Not to worry!