**This Is How You Write a Memoir**

Rules for the much-maligned form.

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Elizabeth Wurtzel

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There has lately been a rising backlash against the ubiquity of personal writing. Hamilton Nolan’s [anti-confessional diatribe in Gawker](http://gawker.com/5972454/journalism-is-not-narcissism) claims that journalism students are now taught only to write about themselves, which I can say as a full-time faculty member at a journalism school is patently absurd, but he raised some interesting points about the dubious rise of confessional writing over the last two decades and the market pressure, especially on younger writers, to make a splash, or at least publish something somewhere, by turning to their own, possibly limited, life experience. And then, of course, there were recent [critiques](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/01/07/elizabeth_wurtzel_in_new_york_magazine_confessional_writing_hits_bottom.html) of [Elizabeth Wurtzel](http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/01/elizabeth-wurtzel-on-self-help.html) babbling incoherently about her pure heart in *New York Magazine*.

All of which leads me to believe it may be time to think methodically about what separates good confessional writing from bad confessional writing. It’s dangerously cartoonish to say all personal writing is bad, and to automatically attack every writer who dares to delve into his own experience, but there are a million different ways to write personally and some of them are undoubtedly better than others. Here, then, are some basic principles I have come to over the years as both a professor and a writer (though, of course, I am still puzzling through them and tinkering with them and will continue to do so probably for the rest of my life):

**1.** The writer should turn her fierce critical eye on herself. (One of the great masters of this is Mary McCarthy, who was terrifying and brilliant in her critiques, even of her own pretentions and snobbisms.) It is always satisfying to read a writer who sharply and deftly attacks the hypocrisies and delusions of the world around him, but we trust that writer more completely when he also attacks himself, when he does not hold himself to a different standard, or protect himself from scrutiny. Take David Foster Wallace’s famously dazzling essay, “[A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again](http://people.virginia.edu/~jrw3k/mediamatters/readings/cult_crit/Wallace_A.Supposedly.Fun.Thing.I%27ll.Never.Do.Again.pdf).” He obsessively, comically, gorgeously dissects everything around him on the cruise ship, but does not exempt himself from his high level satire:

All week, I’ve found myself doing everything I can to distance myself in the crew’s eyes from the bovine herd I’m part of, to somehow unimplicate myself: I eschew cameras and sunglasses and pastel Caribbean wear. … But of course all of this ostensibly unimplicating behavior on my part is itself motivated by a self-conscious and somewhat condescending concern about how I appear to others that is (this concern) 100% upscale American. Part of the overall despair of this luxury cruise is that no matter what I do I can not escape my own essential and newly unpleasant Americanness. … I am an American tourist, and am thus *ex officio* large, fleshy, red, loud, coarse, condescending, self-absorbed, spoiled, appearance conscious, ashamed, despairing and greedy: the world’s only known species of bovine carnivore.

**2.** Personal writing should seem honest. The reader likes personal writing to feel “honest.” (This does not mean that the memoir is “honest”—who knows how the writer really felt about something that happened 20 years ago, or yesterday. It just needs to *feel*honest.) The reader is as adept as Holden Caulfield in detecting phoniness, fakeness, posturing, and is as allergic to them. If the reader senses the writer is lying even to himself, or using the essay as a piece of propaganda, a forwarding of his own personal mythology in too clumsy or transparent a way, she will react against it. (This can cause readers to react against the personal writing of even very intelligent and stylish writers like [Jonathan Franzen](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0312426402/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0312426402), who will include great scenes of penetrating self-deprecation but seems to be doing so in such a self-conscious writerly way that he may in fact be celebrating himself by way of self-deprecation.)

**3.** Personal writing should entertain the reader. (And by this I do not mean the voyeuristic train wreck entertainment that one gets from reading, say, [Naomi Wolf’s](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/roiphe/2012/09/naomi_wolf_s_new_book_about_her_vagina_is_ludicrous_.html) account of losing the Technicolor

Wizard of Oz–like effects of her orgasms. It should be deliberately entertaining, not accidentally funny.) Most readers don’t care about the writer and are distracted instead by small things like their own lives, and so it is incumbent upon the writer to make them care or draw them in by being fascinating or funny or unusually observant.

The writer does not have to take on huge dramatic subjects to engage the reader’s interest, though there is of course a natural interest in huge important subjects (See Christopher Hitchens’ excellent [*Mortality*,](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1455502758/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1455502758) or Harold Brodkey’s [*This Wild Darkness*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000H2N9PO/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B000H2N9PO).) A brilliant or resourceful writer like [Gary Shteyngart](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/30/opinion/sunday/a-trans-atlantic-trip-turns-kafkaesque.html?_r=0) can entertain his reader with a subject as inherently plotless and unexciting as a plane delay, or of course, someone like David Foster Wallace can entertain with a subject as uneventful and unpromising as a cruise. The subject, with apologies to hopeful suffering young writers, doesn’t have to be inherently extreme.

**4.** In fact, even if your subject is extreme or shocking, it won’t be interesting in any but the most prurient terms, unless it is written well, and surprisingly. For instance, the novelist Darin Strauss’ [*Half a Life*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0812982533/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0812982533) is an excellent reflection on his experience of killing a girl in a car accident in high school. But it is excellent because it is controlled, because the details are as carefully selected, the pacing as carefully moderated as that of any novel. The reason the book is so good is that he manages to tell the reader something she doesn’t know or can’t imagine; he gets beyond the generic, the cliché, which a surprising number of published personal writers never do. There is one moment when the teenage Darin, on the roadside after the accident, in shock, leans down on the ground, with his head in his hands, like an Olympic athlete overcome with emotion, to impress some pretty girls who happen to be standing there too. His inclusion of vivid, unsettling, surprising moments like this lifts the book to its higher plane of observation, its position as art rather than sheer confession.

**5.**The standards of craft in personal writing should not be lower than in fiction. There is no reason why something true should be sloppily or boringly written. Many writers seem to feel that they are “expressing themselves” if they just get their feelings down on the page, but expressing yourself is not enough. Toward this point, Joan Didion, one of the most admired personal writers in American prose, said this extraordinary thing in a *Paris Review* interview: “When I am working on a book, I constantly retype my own sentences. Every day I go back to page one and just retype what I have. It gets me into a rhythm. Once I get over maybe a hundred pages, I won’t go back to page one, but I might go back to page fifty-five or twenty, even. But then every once in a while I feel the need to go to page one again and start rewriting. At the end of the day, I mark up the pages I’ve done—pages or *page*—all the way back to page one.” She is not, in other words, dashing things off. She is not mistaking writing for therapy—the salient difference between the page and a therapist’s office being that not every thought in your head, every tiny moment of heartbreak, every fleeting fantasy or disappointment, is interesting to your reader.