


How to Write an Anecdote That Makes Your Nonfiction Come Alive

 jerryjenkins.com/how-to-write-an-anecdote/

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You have a message to share with the world, but so far, people don't seem interested.

Are you wasting your time?

You are if **your nonfiction** fails to engage an agent or publisher.

You may have forgotten the importance of **storytelling** — yes, even in nonfiction.

Adding stories to your nonfiction:

- Hooks your reader from the get-go
- Transforms dull writing
- Makes your point quicker and more clearly than mere narrative summary

People are drawn to stories. I know I am.

Which would more engage you, an essay on how and **why to do something**, or an anecdote that begins, “Joe had a problem. He...”?

Stories make concepts more relatable. That's why we tell children the tale of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf,” rather than simply saying, “Don't lie.”

Anecdotes can be true or fictitious — whichever best serves your purpose. Just be sure to make clear to the reader which is which. That's as simple as how you begin your anecdote. You should be able to tell immediately which of the following are true or not:

My sister-in-law faced a dilemma with her daughter recently...

Consider the father of, say, two preschoolers. He...

Several years ago, I...

If a boy being raised in a broken home...

6 Tips for Writing Killer Anecdotes

1) Study the best

Skim nonfiction books you love, keeping an eye out for anecdotes.

Examples:

- *The Butterfly Effect* and *The Traveler's Gift* by Andy Andrews
- *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell
- *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller

2) Study fiction writing

Writing anecdotes requires fiction techniques:

- Use **action verbs** and go light on adjectives and adverbs
- Even a brief story needs a **main character**
- That character (real or imagined) must have a clearly defined challenge
- Use **dialogue**, **setting**, conflict, tension, drama, action — yes, even in a very brief anecdote

That will make your message come alive to your reader.

3) Start with a bang

You can spend years on a **nonfiction book** and get fewer than five minutes of an agent's or publisher's time. Sadly, they can often tell by page two whether they're interested.

That's why you must learn to hook them from the get-go.

Consider this anecdote from Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*:

"Thirty years ago my brother, ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write. It was due the next day. He was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task. My father sat beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'"

Notice that the first sentence both sets the scene and immediately introduces the problem: a massive report due the next day.

Another writer might have started by describing the setting and establishing the family dynamic. Lamott starts at the moment of crisis.

An anecdote gives you a much better chance of **impressing a publisher** than starting with observations or persuasion.

4) Avoid preaching

Imagine you've confided to two friends that you've run into financial trouble.

The first says, "Here's what you need to do. Start by..."

The second drapes an arm around your shoulder and says, “I was in your place once. Let me tell you what I learned and how I got out of it.”

Which friend are you most likely to listen to?

I call that second approach the Come-Alongside Method. It avoids preachiness and allows the reader to get the point without having the spotlight shone in their face. When considering an anecdote, think reader-first. How will it best benefit him?

5) Go easy on description

Show, don’t tell. Rather than writing, “It was cold,” show your character hunching their shoulders against the wind.

Anton Chekhov said, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

Less is more. This is especially important when using only a couple of sentences to tell a story that supports your point.

6) Cut to the bone

Become an aggressive **self-editor**.

- Omit needless words
- Avoid subtle redundancies such as “He shrugged his shoulders” (What else would he shrug?)
- Look for words that can be cut without changing the meaning, like *up*, *down*, *very*

Make every word count.
