

How to Write your Story

Pre-Writing Assignment & Guidelines

The Assignment:

Our storying time together will include experiential learning, small group interaction, prayer, laughter, and stimulating conversation. Story work is designed to help you own and process the writing of your story more fully and richly in order to more deeply love both the story and the Author. To move us toward that end, there are two things you need to complete and submit as we move forward:

1. **Create a short list of five of the most significant events from your childhood.** First, pray and ask God to guide you in this. Then consider and compose your list, especially reflect on those times when God seemed absent. It may be a headline event such as the death of a parent or perhaps something that seems relatively insignificant like a comment by your uncle about your developing body. Small events, though seemingly minor, can symbolize many other tragedies and large events are things that you know have significantly shaped your sense of being and your understanding of who you are. This list is meant to provide an illuminating window into your life.
2. **Prayerfully choose one of the events from your list and write a 600 - 1000-word story about the event writing from the perspective of being there, in the first person. Please choose an event that marked your life uniquely through its pain.** In response to the inevitable question of "why do I need to write a story about my pain?", please consider these words from Dan Allender's book *To Be Told*:

"Our lives are filled with tragedy. But far more amazing, we live out our stories surrounded by an angelic host and a multitude of stories that serve to put our lives in context and give meaning to our heartaches....And it is in the midst of our tragedies, both past and present that we will see how the waters of suffering have cut our terrain and formed the contours of our character. More than anything else, tragedies shape our identity and our character." (p.74)

3. **Return your assignment to krankin888@hotmail.com by the provided deadline, & make sure to:**
 - a. Include the list of 5 childhood events and your 600-1000-word essay in the one single document together.
 - b. Include your full name as a header within the document
 - c. Return your assignment in a Word Document via email.
 - d. PLEASE NOTE: Do not exceed the 1000-word limit on your written story and submit by the stated deadline. Your work will be reviewed and may be returned for editing. If ample time is not available for such, your writing will not be able to be read, edited, or reflected on in advance, which would be a significant loss to you and would dramatically impact your experience of our meeting together – thank you for adhering to the 1000-word limit and turning in your assignment by the due date.

"Land the Plane" and Other Suggestions for Writing Your Stories

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Over the past several years, as I have commented on the stories sent in by Story Workshop participants, I have found myself writing the same suggestions on nearly every story. If I had to sum it all up in one sentence, I'd say, "Be present" or "Show, don't tell." Too often we write our stories as a newspaper report instead of writing

to better understand God and our own souls. We may write the sequence of events, but we avoid details and emotions. When we don't fully engage with our stories, we keep a comfortable distance but rob ourselves of an opportunity for growth. As you write your story, keep the ideas below in mind. You may also wish to read *To Be Told* and do some of the exercises in *To Be Told Workbook*. Both will help you to more fully engage with your story.

Land the Plane / We often tell our painful stories from a safe distance, say, 30,000 feet. We are in a plane, commenting on the terrain below. "There's a mountain. There's a river. It curves and makes a gorge and then tumbles over that cliff." Will you land the plane and walk around on the ground? Identify the plants, look for animal tracks, smell the wet dirt, listen to the birds.

Mind the Gap / As you look over your story, look for gaps in time and for missing people. What have you skipped over? Did you include details for one part but use broad generalities to describe another part? Are there major characters who are conspicuously absent in your story? Be aware of how you write about the most painful parts of your story. You can also think of this cinematographically. Where do you look at your story through a wide-angle lens? Where do you do a close-up? Why do you zoom in some places and zoom out in others?

Use Your Senses / What do you feel? What do you see? What do you hear? Wise writers keep in mind the saying "Show, don't tell." Instead of *telling* the reader it was a beautiful day, *show* the reader by describing the sky, breeze, and scent in the air. Stay present in the story, ***writing from the perspective of being there, in the first person.*** Do the same thing as you write about emotions. Avoid words like *angry* or *sad*. Try writing about where you feel it in your body. What does grief feel like? Where in your torso do you feel anger? How does your face register shame?

Follow Strong Emotion / Where do you feel tears coming to your eyes as you write? Where do you feel disdain or disgust for yourself as a child? Where do you think, "I should have known better" or "It was my fault"? Where do you feel the flame of anger? Write more about the emotion then, as you experienced it, and now, as you write. What did you do to survive? What vows did you make to avoid future harm?

Embrace Complexity / Are you the victim of all your stories? Was your mother always wonderful and your father abusive? Are you letting someone off the hook because he/she "did the best he/she could"? What was the impact of those people who seemed to be on the sidelines of the action in your story?