



The Story Workshop: Guidelines for Engaging & Writing Your Story

Our time together will include teaching and small group interaction. Each aspect 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, here are the things you need to complete and submit prior to your arrival:

- 1 Create a short list of five of the most significant events from your childhood. Consider especially those times when God has 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 to 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 Choose one of the events from your list and write a 600-1000 word story about the event. 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 storyworkshop@theallendercenter.org by the provided deadline, and make sure to:
 - Include the list of 5 childhood events and your 600-1000 word essay in the one single document together. Do not exceed the 1000 word limit on your written story.
 - Include your full name as a header within the document.
 - Return your assignment in a Word Document via email. We cannot accept mailed hard copies.
- Before submitting your assignment, please review your submission to make sure it meets the writing requirements. You will be asked to rewrite or edit the assignment if it does not meet the requirements. If ample time is not available for editing, your writing will not be able to be read or reflected on by our workshop leaders in advance. This would be a significant loss to you and would dramatically impact your experience of our weekend together.
- My Childhood Narrative is set in my childhood from the age range of 3-18 years old.
 - I have focused my writing on one particular story in the Childhood Narrative portion of the paper (vs. sharing snippets of multiple stories or events over a wide range of years).
 - I have stayed within the word count guidelines for my Childhood Narrative.
 - I have properly formatted my assignment (see #3 above).

“Land the Plane”

& Other Suggestions for Writing Your Stories

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 for The Story Workshop, keep the ideas below in mind. I also recommend that you 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. 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?