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*The Lifewriter's Digest*

## Writing about people

# How much truth to tell: facts

by Denis Ledoux

Facts, such as dates, addresses, names, and relationships are a special feature of lifewriting.



**1) Lifewriting cannot, without deleting from its value, omit dates and specific identification of locales, names of individuals and their relationships to one another.** A lifestory without these facts is like a map without route numbers. Whether I know the people in the stories or not, I always want to be able to move easily in the complicated terrain of relationships and the sequence of events so that I might, through reading, form my own views about the character.

Facts help us to evaluate. That someone started to play with the symphony orchestra at age 15 is very different from starting to play at age 20 or at 25. At fifteen, one is a prodigy; at 20, gifted; at 25, talented. It is impossible for the reader to assess subtleties of character without this information.

Facts determine relationships with precision. I want to know whether Uncle Ralph was Grandmother's youngest brother, or Grandfather's older one. Or, even more complicated, was he in fact a cousin who because of a close relationship, was always called Uncle Ralph. The writer may know the answer but it's almost guaranteed that the writer's grandchildren will not and certainly the grandchildren's children will not. The reader who has bought the book will be unable to capture the nuances below the surface of the story without these details.

Facts help the reader to locate parts of the past shared with the writer. When you say you were born downtown in a tenement—exactly where was that? Was it on Oak, or Birch, or Walnut St.? Besides helping the reader to interpret your story, this information certainly will make it possible for someone to go to the actual site where you were born, or empathize because of his or her own experience.

Facts help the reader to maintain an independence from the writer. When these sorts of details are omitted, the reader is forced to rely on the writer to understand what the story might mean. (Most readers are not comfortable with this relationship to the writer.) Sometimes, the information is also important if readers are to know which parts of a lifestory is appropriate to apply the lessons of to their own lives.

We've all had the experience of meeting someone in person after having been "told all about them" through another's description—only to realize that the description we received reveals more about its author than its subject.

**2) The omission of facts can be a kind of falsifying.** As a young man, I was very encouraged in my commitment to being a writer by reading Anaïs Nin's *Diaries*. In these pages, Nin portrays her struggle to succeed as a writer. She writes about stretching her budget and learning to succeed. At no time, of course, did I read about her "day job" during this period when she was not yet publishing. She was apparently doing well enough at writing from what I could read to pay her own way, I thought.

It was only years later in rereading her diaries that I was struck by a phrase that I had not previously noticed. On the second page of the first diary, Nin writes: "The day begins always with the sound of gravel crushed by the car." This had been an innocent enough sentence when I had read it as a younger man but now I asked myself who or what caused the gravel to crunch at seven in the morning? The answer was obvious and it rendered invalid everything I had ever read or thought about Anaïs Nin. Her omission of the fact that she was married to a man who was footing her bills had been a form of lying to me and to all her readers!

Because a husband went to work every day and earned money, it was possible for Anaïs Nin to have her bohemian life (and have it with the style I was somehow not managing to

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create for myself). Afterwards, a bit of sleuthing (by then biographies had begun to appear) revealed that Nin was indeed married to an upper-income executive who bankrolled her writing for years.

This was a case, I now feel, of willful deceit on Nin's part (an attempt to create the public image of an independent artist who had done it all on her own). Had I suspected that Anaïs Nin was a well-to-do woman playacting as a bohemian without the risks that I myself was running I would have been more wary of her as a role model.

When I shared my Anaïs Nin story at a workshop, one woman said, hitting her fist against the table, "I feel ripped off!" If you do not tell the entire truth, but nurture it as Nin did, you risk "ripping off your readers." When lifewriters fail to give pertinent details, perhaps they are misleading to their readers. And even if they are not willfully misleading, the result can be the same.

### **EXERCISE**

- Reread stories you have written to see if you have unwittingly created lies by omitting parts of the truth that might change how a reader interprets this story.
- Return to a story you found difficult to write with honesty. How does your protection of yourself or another character lead to misrepresentation of the overall truth of the story? Can you insert details and facts that will clarify that truth?

For more writing exercises visit The Writing Clinic at Soleil Lifestory Network.  
<http://www.turningmemories.com/clinic.htm>