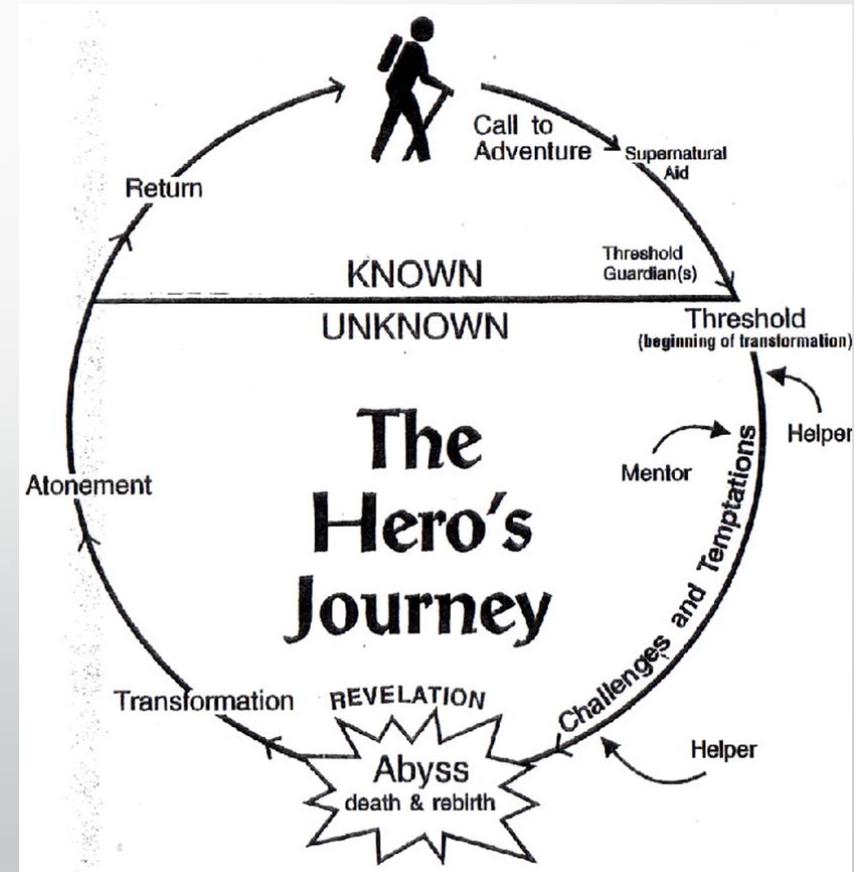


Writing Your family History
Dr. Angela Sutton,
Vanderbilt University

Session 3-The Craft of Nonfiction

Last Time

- Using the tools of fiction in plotting: an external conflict that is difficult to solve because of an internal conflict, the transformation that takes place inside as the character handles that conflict, climax, resolution, then some sort of indicator that they are forever changed when they return to their lives.
- Strong characters: heroes, villains, and the supporting cast need to be interesting, relatable, sympathetic, complex, and like real people, full of contradictions (nature v nurture).



Writing Exercise

Troubleshooting: By now, most of you will be nearly done with your story. Take a moment to reflect on what writing that felt like for you. What was the most difficult part of writing your piece? Did anything unexpected come up while you were writing? What are your thoughts about your piece going forward?



Discussion

“Driving Mr. Albert” – James Paterniti

Dialogue

- What is said matters less than HOW it is said.
- Good dialogue is not verbatim, it is a condensed version of speech that pulls out only the words which move the story forward or reveal character.
- Less is more. A rule of thumb is to only use dialogue when it is necessary. Avoid the temptation to use it as a shortcut to dump information.
- Summarized dialogue is good for: condensing speech, setting the pace of a scene, revealing attitudes, and emphasizing the crucial lines of the actual dialogue (like a punchline).
- Intersperse your dialogue with action
- Dialogue is an opportunity to **show**, instead of **tell**. The way a character talks (vocabulary, tone, style, sense of humor, what they choose to say and what they choose to not say) can tell your readers so much.

First Aid for Plot

- Getting Stuck: If you find yourself stuck, it means your story has run out of forward momentum. Sometimes it means you don't have enough of a story, but sometimes it means you haven't explored enough possibilities. Try thinking through the stakes for each character.
- Did you choose the right moment to write about? What happened right before the moment you're telling? What ends up happening after? Which of these is most interesting and conflict-ridden?
- You're the boss: you have to report the truth, but consider all the choices you have in the way you do that. Who's truth are you telling? At what time? Which things are you choosing to focus on? Which things are you omitting?

The Elements of Style

- Style is a personal signature. It is part writer's personality, part your own particular vocabulary, sentence structure, choice of subject, tone, vision, and attitude toward life. The more you write, the more your style will reveal itself.
- Less is (almost) always more. Most writers overwrite. Try to show more than you tell, and show it only once.
- Most writers have crutches or ticks. The best way to spot yours, is to read your work out loud, marking down all the places you stumbled, or it sounded weird.
- Did you do a good job separating out the author, narrator, and character?
- Are your transitions clear? Can the reader tell what time period all scenes are occurring in? Can they tell what is a flashback?
- Did you avoid unnecessary clichés? "He flew off the handle," "She wore her heart on her sleeve," "They were on cloud nine"
- Did you keep your audience in mind? How might your story be different if you were telling it to your parents, your children, your therapist? Who are you writing for?

Quick Style Improvements

- Ensure sentence lengths & structures are varied.
- Pare down adjectives & adverbs (use strong verbs instead).
 - Instead of “he had a cocky walk,” try “he sauntered.”
 - Rather than “she was angry,” try “her fist slammed the oak table, knocking over the salt shaker and hot sauce.”
- Change most of your passive voice to active voice.
 - Rather than “She had been hurt by his behavior,” use “His behavior hurt her.”
 - Instead of “He was hit by the car,” try “the car careened into him.”
- Avoid most weird dialogue tags.
 - If it’s clear who is speaking by the action, don’t include one. If it’s not, use “said” for 95% of them. If you are using one that is not “said,” make sure you have a reason.

Freewriting & Homework for Thursday

- Most importantly- if you have not yet done so, finish your first draft! Then, go back through it and improve your dialogue, fix your plot holes, and inject some writing style. When you get tired, stop. Your piece will never be finished, just abandoned. For Thursday, bring 4 printed copies of your work so we can workshop it.
- Readings: “How To Give Constructive Criticism” by Marcy McKay (<http://positivewriter.com/how-to-give-constructive-writing-criticism-that-actually-helps/>), “How To Give and Receive Constructive Feedback as a Writer,” by Kimberly Coyle (<https://thewritelife.com/tips-for-writing-critique/>)