

# *Writing as a Ministry for God's Glory*

## **Chapter 2** **Writing Personal Experience Articles**

**by Kathy Collard Miller**

*For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.—Acts 4:20*

The personal experience article is often the first way a new writer begins her writing career. Not only is it an important place to start, it is an essential tool for any writer to communicate what God has done in her life. Because of its importance, we will spend an entire chapter focusing on this important vehicle for writers.

My own writing career began with writing my personal experience, as I shared with you in the first chapter. That article, which was the first article I ever sold, has been reprinted many times. I've also rewritten that story in other ways from different angles for other articles. In addition, those stories have been reprinted numerous times. Personal experience stories are used by many print magazines, online magazines and blogs.

A personal experience article tells yours or someone else's story. After writing my own story, I went on to find other people who had good stories and wrote about them.

One day I read in the newspaper about a woman who had a ministry to people with a certain disease which she had. It sounded like she was a Christian and I wondered whether I should try to contact her and write an article about her. But I felt hesitant. Thinking my husband would give me an excuse because he wouldn't think it was a good idea, I asked him what he thought of it. He immediately said, "Sounds great. Go for it!" Now I would have to do it. I was able to contact her, interview her, write up her story, and sell the article.

The main goal of Christian personal experience articles is to impact a reader's thinking and feeling so they are inspired by the spiritual journey of another Christian and learn to trust God more themselves.

### **The Key Elements**

The key elements of the personal experience story are:

1. *Identification.* Identification means we want the reader to identify with us by having his or her emotions involved. We want to involve the readers' mind, emotions, heart, and senses. This is why in many ways personal experience stories resemble fiction. Fictional techniques like dialogue, plot, description, suspense, and creating scenes are used for full effect.

What if the reader has never experienced what you are writing about? Through writing techniques, we want to make them think, "This could happen to me" or "I'm experiencing similar feelings in my challenge right now." We desire the reader to think, "If this ever does happen to me, I want to remember what I've learned" and "if this person learned to trust God more then I can too in what I'm currently going through."

2. *Benefits for reader.* Through a personal experience story, some word or encouragement will help

the reader in her own life. Although personal experience stories aren't usually thought of as a kind of "self help article," they often have that effect anyway, whether the help is offered overtly or subtly.

3. *Spiritual or moral take-a-way.* Not only do we want emotional encouragement for our reader, we want to encourage her to grow closer to the Lord by making wise, righteous choices. We want her to have greater faith in God's power and think, "If God can work in that person's life, I can trust Him with my problem."

Every personal experience story may not have all three elements, but the more elements a story has, the more powerful and effective it will be.

### **Types of Personal Experience Stories**

Here are the types of personal experience stories:

1. *Physical Healing/Coping:* stories about illness, death, handicaps, or injuries.

2. *Emotional Healing/Coping:* problems of fear, loneliness, widowhood, job loss, or addictions like it alcohol, drugs, gambling, pornography.

3. *Relationships:* how relationship were healed or improved; or how acceptance of a poor relationship brought greater dependence on God.

4. *Adventure:* people in dangerous situations, or maybe a situation not having as much danger but still strong suspense.

5. *Conversion:* shows how someone came to know the Lord, often focusing on the "before" of their lifestyle and their "now" relationship with God. This is most likely the most common kind of personal experience story printed in Christian magazines.

6. *Personality profile:* includes a famous person or a person who has done something unique or important for the Lord. This can be written in the "as told to" or "with" style. But it could also be written in third person.

For instance, I once wrote a personal experience story about a woman who overcame bulimia and then began a ministry to women suffering from eating disorders. I wrote this story in first person from her perspective and the byline included her name and then "as told to Kathy Collard Miller." The phrase "as told to" indicates the article was written by someone else but with a the first person style.

In the personality profile, be sure to include descriptions of your subject's appearance and show their personality through mannerisms and the actions or decisions they make. Be true to their way of talking in any dialogue yet do not make them look ridiculous with bad grammar or inappropriate word usage.

It's appropriate to show them as human with imperfections or weaknesses. But if you tell about them making a poor decision, include some "redemption:" in other words, that person learning from the experience and indicating it was ungodly.

7. *Organization/Ministry/Service:* this article tells about the efforts of a group who is serving the Lord in some way or an individual who is ministering for God in personal ministry.

With an organization, it's usually a good idea to tell the story through the eyes of one person who is a part of that group because it seems more personal and interesting. The person could be the founder, president, or a person benefiting from their services, or some volunteer working with them.

Even though in a sense you are "reporting," don't make it sound like that. You will still want to use fiction techniques, which we will explain later.

It may be appropriate to make a composite "person" of many people involved if there needs to be anonymity or privacy.

Look at the list of the seven types of personal experience stories. Which ones could you immediately begin to write about? Make plans now and as you do, keep in mind the following ideas for writing such a story in a powerful way.

### **Writing the Personal Experience Story**

The most important concept you must remember is "Show—Don't Tell." If you have been to any kind of writing conference or seminar, you've heard this concept before but we can never hear it enough.

"Telling" uses passive verbs like "be" and "was." "Showing" uses powerful verbs. The concept of "showing" is especially important in writing personal experience stories because it's through "showing" that the reader will become involved and touched at an emotional level.

Here are some examples:

*Instead of writing "I was afraid" write:* My throat felt dry and I couldn't swallow. "What am I doing here?" I wondered, as I rubbed my sweat-soaked hands on my jeans.

*Instead of writing "She was uncomfortable" write:* She wiggled in her chair as if she were sitting on an anthill. Her eyes darted back and forth between me and the minister.

*Instead of writing "The mountain was very high" write:* My eyes kept looking farther and farther up trying to find the peak of the snow-covered mountain. "It'll most likely take me a year to climb it," I muttered out loud to anyone standing close.

Can you see the difference? *Telling* kind of writing is passive and boring. But when we *show*, we more powerfully communicate through the senses.

### **DEA Elements**

I like to use the acrostic DEA to help us remember elements of *showing*.

D: dialogue and detail

E: emotion

A: action

Here are more examples. Find the DEA elements:

*Instead of writing, "Tony said he was angry" write:* Tony slammed the slim, tan-colored phone down and screamed, "I can't believe she did that!"

*Instead of writing, "I was afraid" write:* My throat felt dry and I couldn't swallow. "What am I doing here?" I wondered, as I rubbed my sweat-soaked hands on my jeans.

I used the DEA elements when writing the opening paragraphs of my personal experience story telling how God delivered me from being a child abuser. Instead of writing, "I was a child abuser," I wrote:

I rounded the corner of our living room and stopped. My two-year-old daughter, Darcy, sat on the edge of the fireplace sifting ashes through her fingers. The black cinders littered the carpet and bricks.

"Darcy!" I yelled. "I've told you three times today, don't play in the fireplace!"

Anger boiled within me. I didn't need another mess to clean up with company coming that evening. I strode over to her, yanked her up by her arm, and began hitting her bottom and legs. "Look at the mess you've made," I shrieked as my hand slapped against her skin again and again. "Why do you keep disobeying me?"

Darcy's hysterical screaming finally brought me back to reason. I sank to the floor beside her and cradled my head in my hands. "Oh God," I pleaded, "I did it again! I promised I would control myself today. What happened?"

If you would like practice writing powerfully using "showing" instead of "telling," rewrite these "telling" statements in a more powerful way by using active verbs and descriptive words:

"He was sad"

"Carla felt delighted"

"Fred was tense"

### **Expanded Elements of DEA**

*An important way to "show" is to use dialogue frequently.* Show personality and choices through interaction with others. Obviously, this takes more words and space on a page and in a limited-word article this could be a problem. But still use it as much as possible.

For instance, in an article I found entitled "My Mother Has Alzheimer's," the author, Sharon Fish, effectively uses dialogue to describe the condition of her mother. She wrote,

I can still remember that day in the doctor's office when Mom was diagnosed. Her conversation with a young neurology resident served to reinforce their findings:

"I just want to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Fish," he began.

"Okay," my mother replied.

"What year is it?" He asked.

"It's 1960," she said.

"No, it's 1980," he corrected. "What month is it?"

"May," she answered.

"No, it's December. What's today's date?"

"The first. Is that right?"

"No, it's the 10th. What is the day of the week?"

"You're so smart, you tell me," my mother said.

I hope you can see the value of such dialogue. Sharon Fish effectively used dialogue to communicate her mother's condition. She could have written, "It was sad when my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's by a young neurology doctor." That statement lacks the power that was communicated through the dialogue between the doctor and Sharon's mother.

*Another way to "show" is to write about action/emotion.* If a person is angry, show them throwing something or yelling. If they are feeling depressed, show them staring at the TV hour after hour. Use strong emotional words like: "furious," "despairing," "jubilant," or "broken-hearted."

*In personal experience stories, instruction should be subtle.* Don't refer directly to the reader using the word "you." If you do, it will come across as "preaching" and turn the reader off. Also it can destroy the atmosphere of having the reader feel they are a part of the story.

We don't even want to write something like, "If you ever experience something similar." Don't worry; you're going to teach them without actually pointing out to them what they're supposed to learn.

I struggled with that concept early in my writing. My first book idea was to instruct parents on how to deal with their parenting frustrations. But the editors I contacted said I was not qualified to give such instruction. Instead they suggested I write my story in book form. I resisted that idea because I wanted to give practical ideas that would help people.

When I finally gave up, I wrote my personal experience book and I've found that parents have still been helped as they read it. Today, that book is titled *No More Anger: Hope for an Out-of-Control Mom*. The reader experiences and learns from what I went through. The "teaching" is included without it being direct instruction. The reader learns through my example.

In other words, I don't tell the reader how to discipline her child better to deal with frustration. I "show" techniques I used to have more patience from disciplining my daughter effectively.

If you're feeling fearful that your strong message isn't going to get across without "preaching" to the reader, remember it's the Holy Spirit who will actually do the teaching within their hearts, using your written words.

If both you and your editor believe the practical instruction is necessary, an option to consider is the "sidebar." A sidebar is information encased in a border, separate from the article. It can be a useful way to communicate further information or suggestions for change.

*Avoid the temptation to include every little detail of your story.* Yes, that detail may have significance for you but unless it's truly significant to the story, edit it out. Be very selective. A good idea is to get the input of an objective reader or critique group. In a later lesson, we will talk in more depth about a critique group.

*Don't get distracted onto "rabbit trails."* Rabbit trail writing goes off in a different direction than the purpose of your article. Keep to your point. Have only one main theme or focus.

*Help the reader "see" the story as much as possible.* Give short, concise descriptions of the surroundings. Describe clothing, appearance, facial expressions, or other facts that will help the reader's "mental eye." For an article, these must be short but therefore powerful, including what's really important. For a book, you can go into more detail.

*Dive right into your story.* Sometimes the hardest thing to do is get the story started. It is best not to give a lot of background at first. Dive right into your story to quickly involve your reader.

When I am first working on a personal experience story, or any article for that matter, I usually end up cutting the first two paragraphs out of the first draft. It seemed like I was cutting information the reader should know, but usually the story was fine without it. If not, I could put it in later.

For instance: here's a first draft for my personal experience story about being an angry mother:

I didn't know how I'd become so angry after becoming a mother, but just gradually I'd become a screaming meanie. All day long it seemed like I couldn't say a positive thing to my two-year-old daughter. Why was I acting like this?

One day I found Darcy playing in the fireplace for the third time that day and I screamed, "Darcy, how many times do I have to tell you. Don't play in the fireplace."

I edited that to:

"I marched over to two-year-old Darcy and screamed, "Darcy, how many times do I have to tell you? Don't play in the fireplace."

### **Cautions for Personal Experience Articles**

Here are some additional cautions to consider.

*There should be a certain amount of emotional healing* before the story is told about those who have experienced trauma or victimization. Total healing isn't necessary or possible in most cases, but there must be a certain amount of objectivity from your subject in order for you to be able to share their story without other issues clouding the purpose and message.

For instance, if you are a victim in the story and you haven't forgiven the perpetrator, bitterness and resentment may come across in your story.

It's alright to identify and admit where healing still needs to occur. You could write: "Although I'm not totally healed yet from this experience, I have seen the Lord work on a lot of issues in my life and I'm confident He'll continue to do that."

*No happy ending is required.* You don't have to give a happy ending if that's not true. "They lived happily ever after" stories can sometimes be a disservice because a reader wonders why her life isn't working out the same way. Be real and honest about any continuing struggles or weaknesses if they are pertinent to the story.

### **Additional Instruction**

As you write your personal experience article—or any article—keep the following rules in mind. They were written by Susan Titus Osborn for an article in *The Christian Communicator*. You'll find instruction for good writing within these tongue-in-cheek guidelines. She has entitled it, "Avoid Bad Writing." You may have to think about these instructions twice, but it will be worth it. *Remember: these are actually pointing out the wrong way of writing.*

1. Use strong vocabulary words instead of *gimmicks* like "underlining," "bold face," "italics," "quote marks," or "exclamation marks"!!!!!!
2. Don't mix your metaphors or your writing will sound like a cat out of water.
3. Don't be a writer who uses "their" or "they" with a singular noun because they don't know if the writer is a male or a female.
4. Don't any words out.
5. But be sure not to start your sentences with a conjunction.
6. Learn the difference between its and it's. Its not too hard.
7. Don't pepper, your writing, with commas, especially, ones you don't, need.
8. Don't ever, under any circumstances, make hasty generalizations like everybody does all the time.
9. Communicate comprehensively with noncomplex verbiage.
10. Avoid contractions in formal writing. They're distracting and we won't take your writing seriously.

11. Don't use vague referents. They'll look funny on your end.
  12. Abbrevs. are infrml. and confus.
  13. Don't have more than one main idea in your sentence or you will have a run on sentence and people won't be able to follow what you are saying and they will forget what they are reading so you should avoid that.
  14. Double negatives are sneaky. You don't notice them because they aren't far apart and don't get lost from each other.
  15. Like get real! Don't use cool language that's outta here before you get your story hot off the press.
  16. Avoid incorrect forms of verbs even if they snuck into our everyday language.
  17. Don't lie the misuse of lay and lie only on people who lay around without using correct grammar.
  18. People who write good know how to use good and well.
  19. Obviously, there's no need to use terms like "it goes without saying," "obviously," "as you well know."
  20. Remember, computer spell checkers can only tell ewe that all you're words are reel words, knot if they are the words ewer looking fore.
  21. Writers should never shift your point of view.
  22. Don't assume.
  23. Be sure pronouns are near in the sentence, like often before the verb, their antecedents.
  24. Avoid repetition since repeating yourself, or saying things in too many different ways, so that you go over the same thing again and again and again, frustrates, angers, and irritates your reader or listener.
  25. Like the saying goes, avoid cliches like the plague.
  26. If you end a sentence with a preposition, make sure it is clear what it refers to.
  27. Do not forget to be sure not to write in negative form when you can write in positive form.
  28. Bad sentence fragments.
- (Used by permission, *The Christian Communicator*, May, 1992.)

I hope these rules and the information you've received in this chapter for writing a personal experience story will inspire you. Whether or not you have written before, or been published, the personal experience story is a powerful way to show God working in our lives. I encourage you to make plans to write such a story.

Kathy Collard Miller is the author of over 50 books and can be reached through [www.KathyCollardMiller.com](http://www.KathyCollardMiller.com). Her books are available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). She is also a speaker who has spoken in over 30 US States and 8 foreign countries. As a lay counselor, she meets frequently with those looking for greater sanctification.

Copyrighted material  
Do not reproduce, share, or print without including the author name and copyright  
Contact Kathy at [www.KathyCollardMiller.com](http://www.KathyCollardMiller.com)