

How to Nail Nonfiction: Developmental Approaches to Make That Story Stand Out

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Angie Fenimore: Hello, I'm Angie Fenimore and I am a New York Times and international bestselling author and I'm the creator of Calliope Writing Coach.

Thank you for having me. So we're going to talk about nonfiction and developmental approaches to make that story stand out.

Since this is the editing track and we're in the class, we're not in the classroom with students so much, but we're kind of in the teachers lounge, we're going to have some very straight conversation. When So what I'm going to share is going to make you a more effective editor, it's going to make your job easier and it's going to make a huge difference for your writers.

Since I only have a limited amount of time, we're going to address two critical pieces of drawing that story out of your writers and supporting them in such a way that the final manuscript is not just well developed and tight and compelling, but the writer has a full experience of ownership, like it's truly their work and their voice. So, since these two things go hand in hand, we're going to go back and forth between the two things that we're going to talk about. So the very first thing that we need to establish, whether you're writing nonfiction or your authors. . . if you're editing nonfiction, is that you want to tell that story in such a way that it's going to sell.

It must be told in a fiction arc. Yes, even self-help and memoir needs to be written in fiction a fiction arc, if you want it to be effective and successful. So when I sent my proposal for "The Sparrow's Lens" to my agent, Jill Marshall, she sent it back. She said, "Really great. Now, put it in a fiction arc." So I've learned a lot since then. And I've coached a lot of writers now to become

best-selling authors themselves. I've reverse engineered what masterful writers do of both critically acclaimed and best-selling works, what they've done that creates that magic.

So here's what I've discovered: exceptional writing isn't about talent; it's math and science. A writer that we'd call genius, does that math. They just do it so quickly that those equations are hidden in the background. You don't see it. They don't see it. They don't even know they're doing it.

So I'm not dismissing strokes of inspirational genius. What I'm saying, is that even when that magic happens, where you have a deluge of inspiration and the writing is just extraordinary, the product of that downpour, is also mathematically perfect. So I'd need a few hours, at least, with you, to examine story design and how to create a compelling story every single time. So, I'll give you and your clients a tape discount to the Calliope Writing Coach Submission Possible Series Online Writing Coaching Program, so that you can fully learn the Calliope method for story design, if you'd like to take that deep dive. So here's the thing.

I'm not talking about formula. I'm talking math, science, and method. We have students who have who have hit best-sellers lists, USA Today bestsellers list, who wouldn't even consider themselves to be writers. We have a writer whose spiritual self-help hit number one on Walmart's ebook site when it came out. We were all holding our breath when her book passed "Girl, Wash Your Face." Her second book is at print now and when she started, she would say that she's not a writer, she's a science nerd. So the ability to tell story embedded deeply within our DNA. We are all writers; all human beings are writers.

Being creative got trained out of us when we had to employ linear learning in order to survive school. The creative thinking part of our brains cannot operate at the same time that the internal critic part of our brains is active; like it's impossible—they don't work together. So anyone, whether they love to write and see themselves as a writer, or someone who has no interest in writing but has an important story to tell, can use the Calliope Story Design Method to unleash that creative genius that's buried within us.

We see it happen over and over again. Okay, so I'm not bragging. I'm just demonstrating how effective this method is.

We're at 100% for pages requests from top deal making literary agents, film producers, acquisitions editors at the Calliope Advanced Pitch Conference. We're in our sixth year and we're nearing about a thousand participants now and we've never, in all this time, we've never had a student who didn't receive at least one submission request.

And most leave the conference with four, five, or six requests. A lot of them, half of them, are nonfiction writers who've never written before.

So the point, is they aren't exceptionally talented—most of them aren't even writers—they just feel the call to get their story to others to make a difference. So the Calliope Method for Story Design is effective. And the Calliope Method for Empowering Writers keeps them supported through the process of writing that manuscript.

So since I'd need to train you for several hours in story design, I'm going to speak from common language here. I'm going to kind of give you a crash course in this, But I'm going to speak from a language that we're all familiar with, which is very basic fiction structure and you're still going to walk away with valuable tools that you employ. So, we're going to come back to story design in just a minute.

The second thing that you have to have your eye on, if you want your writer to be able to go the distance and produce a piece of work that doesn't need hours and hours of rewriting, is how to keep your writer empowered through the process of editing, and through the process of writing.

So for a writer to stay empowered, they must have a real and sustained belief that they are capable of writing that book. So now this is the part where we're kind of stepping into the teachers lounge.

When we have the experience of being critiqued, what happens is that our brains light up with all of the traumatic experiences that we had as children, when we had the experience of rejection or not being enough. We can't help it. This is survival wiring that's in place to keep us alive, to train us from a very, very young age to avoid pain. So physical and emotional pain, it's part of our warning system, like this internal, excuse me, warning system that we all have.

Excuse me. We take those early experiences, and maybe we forget those actual events, but there's like this muscle memory, if you will. And we take those events forward throughout our lives, as like an early warning system that keeps us safe, and it keeps us small. So this is what you're up against. So how it shows up in a writer, which is by the way, kind of an invitation, if you're going to write a book, it's an invitation to the cosmos to inflict you with self-doubt, defensiveness, anxiety, oh! and staring at a blinking cursor on a blank Word doc, right. Ya'll know what I'm talking about.

It doesn't look or resemble that event in second grade when that teacher called you out in front of the whole class for getting the wrong answer. But all of the emotions those self-deprecating thoughts and body sensations, those are the same.

Your brain knows that if you write, someone will eventually see it and they just might say, "Meh." Right? Okay, so that stops writers; that gets in the way of their ability to be creative, because those two parts of our brain don't operate together—being creative, and critique. They don't go together. So a book that never gets finished, never gets published. The first thing that you can do to support your writers is have them write a two-page storyboard.

Even if they're coming to you with a completed manuscript, one page includes the inciting incident, the three try-fail cycles, and the end, from the writer's life, like the the memoir part of the story, okay. So, just for the crash course, if you don't know what a try-fail cycle is, the story structure that is most effective that occurs most often in a New York Times Best-seller is the roller coaster, goes like this, right. So you start with the inciting incident. This is what. . .

the moment that the story begins, the event that creates that there is a story to tell, okay. And then a try-fail cycle is the hero is up against the conflict or, you know, the thing that they're coming, you know, against, and they try to overcome and they fail. Okay, so try-fail cycle one, your readers should have the experience of, uh-oh. You get to try-fail cycle two and the stakes are increased, the antagonist is bigger and badder, and your hero's up against the conflict, tries to overcome, fails. Try-fail cycle three, the difference is at try-fail cycle three, and if your writers are writing nonfiction, this is the way this goes. At try-fail cycle three, it looks like all is lost, And we can't see how they can overcome and come back from this. And then they overcome, okay. And then the ending—how does it end. All right. What's the secret staircase? What's the thing that, you know, you pull out at the end that it's like, we didn't see it coming. So for example, in "The Wizard of Oz", The secret staircase is the shoes, the ruby red slippers. We've seen them all through the story and then all of a sudden right there at the top of the third try-fail cycle, Dorothy always had the power to go home. Click, click, click—there's no place like home. Okay, that's a secret staircase. And so that's what you need: the ending, the three try-fail cycles, and the inciting incident. It's no more than a page long.

Then it's a second page. And that's a list, like a bulleted list, of all of the principles that your writer wants to teach all the reasons that they're writing a book in the first place, but you don't merge them yet. You don't put them together yet. You just keep them separate, okay. So, whether they're writing memoir or any other kind of nonfiction, fiction arc is what works, if you want agents, publishers, critics, and readers to be invested.

The storyboard should include those five elements within their own life, that are the high points growing in intensity that paint the picture of the story that they're telling.

They're aligned with the through-line, okay. The second page is the list of bullet points—the, the elements, the principles that they want to teach, or the points that they want to make, okay.

So the storyboard will keep your writer trued-up as they write.

It may change as the story emerges, but they should always have a working storyboard to make sure that the story is viable, sound, on track, and builds with a fiction arc, and this is how they keep their eye on the ball. You want to, even if your writers come to you with a full manuscript and they think it's the best that they can do, they should start with a storyboard, because that will tell them immediately, do they have those basic elements, okay. So then you want to have them very, very quickly draft a skeleton of the entire manuscript from the first page of the storyboard.

This is far more fleshed out than an outline, but it's not what you call a full draft either. Once they have that complete all the way to the end, you want them to merge the bulleted list with the first page, or with the draft that they've written.

Place the teaching points inside of the draft where the story provides the opportunity to teach that point, then they start from the top and massage that draft into something that makes sense.

In our programs, we draft our manuscripts in six weeks. We give our students an extra two weeks if they need it, but everybody, everybody has a full draft within that time, because if you never finish, then it doesn't get published, and most writers tend to polish and polish and polish. We have a great first three chapters, and then what happened? Right? So this is how you get it all the way complete. It also allows them to have, it's like grass growing, to allow the whole story to have the same quality, the same skill level, if you will, is across the entire story rather than having something really great at the beginning, not so great in the middle, and then what happened at the end, or vice versa, or whatever. It allows for the whole story to emerge evenly.

So the most important and supportive thing that you can do as an editor is to keep your eyes and your hands out of that manuscript until the writer's finished several revisions. I know this is counterintuitive. I promise it'll make sense in a minute.

So their creative brain will start shutting down if you get in there too early in the process, and if their creative brain gets shut down, your job just got a whole lot harder. It's really, really tough to

get that back if it just, you know, evaporates too early in the process. So, when I do start that process with my clients, where we are actually looking at that work and saying, you know, this, this, this, this, I use a very particular method that supports the writing, in staying, the writer. . . I'm sorry, in staying in creative brain. So, here's what you want to do; you want to read the first time, like your first read-through that whole manuscript, as if you picked it up at Barnes and Noble.

You read it like you're reading for pleasure rather than critiquing. And why do you think that we do that, that we want to read from enjoyment, rather than like an editor or promoting critique? So number one, you will, not might, but you will shut down that writer if they get disempowered.

And number two, it's their story, right? Once your hands are in there, you know, it's really hard for them to own it ever again.

So then they become like they need you more, and you want them to emerge. It's like, you know, it's their baby. They're the ones giving birth and you're the doula.

You're the doula, right, and you want to stay in that powerful position where you are allowing them to have that story emerge, rather than, you know, trying to do the work that the mama does, okay. So, your first pass should be to obtain the raw data, the empirical information about strictly whether the story works or it doesn't.

and where the problems lie. So if you critique or provide opinion, then that writer can become creatively crippled or their voice can be shut down.

All of a sudden, they don't know what they're doing and they need more help. So I'm going to read to you. I'm just going to read straight to you the instructions that our readers.

Give to their beta readers. So like our writers in our programs that they give to their beta readers, okay. So, Even if you don't typically read this genre, read as if you just happened upon this book at Barnes and Noble—not like you're reading to critique, but rather like you're reading for enjoyment.

Keep a notebook and a pen with you while you're reading. Jot down anything that you feel like it might be valuable.

I'm interested in things like gaping plot holes typos, the experience that you're bored or that the material is beyond difficult to be with like you wouldn't pick it back up because it's just too gruesome or offensive, etc.

I also need to know where the material is redundant or needs more elaboration. Just the basics. Don't go crazy by offering ideas on how to solve such problems; just capture a note.

You want to read the entire project in one sitting if at all possible. If you can't do that, you want to mark the day and time you start and then mark the day and time you stop.

You want to mark the page in paragraph, you're on when you stop and you want to mark the day and time you pick it back up and start reading again.

Whenever you stop reading, you want to mark what time it is when you stop and why you stopped. Did you have to pick up kids? Did you have to go to the loo, get another diet coke, answer the phone? Or did you get to, or did you get, I'm sorry, or did you have to get at least an hour of sleep before you went to work? And what time did you pick it back up? Was it three days later, or did you start reading again on your lunch break? Make sure you include the chapter, page number, and paragraph that where you, where you were when you put it down. Write down your emotional state, your thoughts, and your mental state when you put it down.

You also want to mark where you have the experience of boredom; you find that you're falling asleep, or you find yourself checking out. You want to write down if you keep reading through your boredom, if you picked it up at Barnes and Noble.

Anytime you get chills, find yourself holding your breath, you cry, or you want to cry, or you have the experience of surprise—mark the exact place.

Wherever you have strong emotions of any kind, mark the exact place when you have the experience of communion confusion or that you don't have enough information to latch on to the story.

or when you feel like you were spoon fed too much information, mark that exact place. Do you feel connected to the main character? Do you feel connected to the antagonist? Do you feel connected to the other characters? Do you want to turn the page? And do you believe the story? Okay, so From there, what you want to establish our it's like what you're looking for.

Is how this story emotionally impacts you when you're looking from there, what happens is you can pull raw data and And then you can empower your writer to focus on the problem, rather than they have an experience that they can't do this.

And it also keeps your opinions out of the manuscript, then you can ask them questions and you can point to, okay, so not invested here and then you can look for where the problem is. So problems almost always lie upstream.

They present like a rotting deer in a stream, polluting the water downstream. So if you aren't invested, then you aren't in the point-of-view character's skin.

And if you're not in the point-of-view character's skin, it's really consistently, almost always, there's backstory on page one.

They aren't writing from the senses, or they're telling rather than showing. It's those very basic things. So if you point to well, I lost interest here—this is where I wasn't invested anymore—usually, the problem isn't right there. It's upstream a bit, and we weren't in the point-of-view character's skin.

That's all it was. You can also start to look at what percentage of time or, you know, stage time, does the point-of-view character have on that page one.

They should have at least 65% of time. If this is a story with a lot of characters, you really want to make sure that the point-of view-character is really represented in that screen time early on in the manuscript, because that's how a reader latches on, climbs into that avatar and experiences the story. So here's the thing, is in nonfiction, we think that the main character is the author.

Well, the main character is the reader and the author is the point-of-view character. So always in self help, what you have are people who have picked up that manuscript, or that book, because they have a problem that they want solved.

They are reading that book because they want to experience resolution to their problem. And so they need to climb into an avatar skin; so your writer is the point-of view-character, but your reader is the main character. Okay, so when you take this approach, you keep that writer empowered so that they can access creativity and they can elevate their manuscript. Your job is easier; it takes far less time and it just provides that writer with an opportunity to stay inside of a context for themselves that they can do this.

And then if they've got more books in them, they are far more empowered to continue to write, to continue to make the difference that they want to make out there with their nonfiction.

Typically that's why people write nonfiction; it's because they want to make a difference for others. So okay, so I'm just going to recap.

Okay. So it's two things that you want to look at. The first is keeping your writers empowered. The second is getting that story out of them, okay. And we want to put them together. So you start with a two-page storyboard.

The first page is the five elements that every compelling story has: inciting incident, the three try-fail cycles, and the end.

And it's really nice if they work in that secret staircase; what's the thing that gave them that moment of inspiration, the unexpected, you know, element that changed the course for them, okay. The second page is the, oh and I'm sorry, and the end. Okay.

The second page is the bullet point list, the principles that they want to teach. Have them quickly write a skeleton draft from page one of their storyboard.

Then merge the list of principles with the draft. Take it through revision and keep your eyes and hands out of it. Let them go through that. Let them grapple with it for a while, okay.

And then they can work out, you know, what else they need to incorporate. Do they need some case studies for that manuscript to work, you know, not just them, right? They can work out the details of do they want to tell this story or that story. Is there something that they don't actually want to tell that they're really, really uncomfortable telling? What could they substitute in that would demonstrate the same points that are on that bullet point list, right? Okay. And so then you merge the list of principles with the draft, take it through revision, and you keep your eyes and hands out of it. Let them grapple with it.

Then you want to do a read for your emotional feedback. Collect the empirical data. And if you bring in beta readers, it's really great if you can have three; three's kind of the magic number.

A table with four legs can wobble and table with two won't stand, and a table with three legs, always stands, even if those legs aren't completely equal in length. If you're going to bring in beta readers, then you can compare the feedback and you can look at, okay, where are they all putting it down. And is this one, you know, somebody who reads the genre? is this my

audience? And this one's my mother who will lie to me because she loves me and oh, it's all wonderful and, you know.

Or and then you can look and see, okay, Mom put it down for a week, but this reader, who's my actual audience, stayed up all night reading; plus my third reader stayed up all night or, you know, they put it down for ten minutes. Then you can eliminate mom's feedback as being, you know, something that you want to, you know, pay attention to. Right. And then what you're looking at, is the emotional feedback. Where did they get chills? Where did they cry? Because that's what you're doing as a storyteller. That's what writers are doing is, you are manipulating people's emotions and delivering on catharsis for them.

That is what we're, that is what we're doing. So, in order to write effectively, you've got to look from emotional feedback, okay.

All right, so you're going to read it for emotional feedback, collect the empirical data, and then when that writer has really done the best that they can, that's when you can get in there, okay. But remember, once you start critiquing, you trigger a survival reaction in that writer.

They can't help it, and they don't even know that it's happening. So if that book is going to get finished, they really, really have to be able to keep writing. And the minute that you tell them, okay do this or do that, you're going to get that, whatever got put in place, whatever default got put into place for them, as a really young kid that They cannot, they can't even see it happening. They're just responding, and you can't work with that. You cannot support them, impact them; they can't hear you—all they hear is, you know, how they've done it wrong. And then they respond defensively or they respond with hands in the air, they can't do it, you know.

And so in order to really produce a great work, you have to stay out of it as long as you possibly can, down to the end. Okay, so, storytelling is in our DNA.

We've been storytellers from the beginning of human history. And then we went to kindergarten and, it happened with all of us, everybody. So anytime you're. . .

if you are also a writer, this is really great information to have anytime you get shut down. You just got triggered by something. Your brain, it's happening in the background and your brain doesn't even. . .

you don't know it consciously, but your brain knows, someday somebody's going to look at that and they might just go, "meh." And that's it. The manuscript gets tucked away for twenty years. Okay. Well, thank you for having me and I look forward to chatting with you on the q&a.