

How to Use Your Personal Story in Your Professional Writing

“One last preliminary note: while the subject of rule by presidents for life was an intrinsically depressing one while it lasted, I would like to end this brief preface by testifying to the excitement and entertainment I have experienced from talking with knowledgeable colleagues, teaching the enthusiastic Harvard students of History 1891, and persuading many friends to act as my eyes and ears in places in the Arab world that I have been unable to visit myself.”

—Roger Owen from the Preface to *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*,
Harvard University Press, 2012

Telling Your Story in Your Professional Writing

Adding your own personal story to a piece of professional writing can greatly enhance the value of your work. Sometimes a piece calls out for lengthy personal reflection. Other times, a simple, short personal comment derived from your own life and story can have a powerful impact on your professional message.

Knowing how much to say, and identifying where and when it would be appropriate can seem challenging, but asking yourself a few questions, and adding a few rewarding steps to your writing process can help ensure that you pick the right place and the right time to add your personal voice to your professional work.

Helpful Questions for Reflection:

How much personal reflection does the professional structure of a piece allow me to include?

Does the theme of the piece, or a specific point I am trying to make, match the theme of my reflection?

If I were a professional reading this piece without any knowledge of the author, would I find a personal comment valuable to the piece or a distraction from it?

Steps for Seeing if a Personal Reflection Belongs in Professional Work:

1. Identify two places in a professional piece, where you feel your own story would enhance your message.
2. Write down three words that characterize the tone of the piece.
3. Insert some element of your own story into one of the two places you have identified, using the tone of the piece to determine how to structure your story.
4. Ask friends and colleagues to read and comment on your draft piece without prompting them.
5. Talk to them afterward about having added your own voice and story and refine your message based on their comments.

Your goal should be to comfortably learn where and when to add your story to your work over time, creating a personal comfort with readers that other writers may not have. If you share your piece with others and they do not notice your personal reflection, you should not necessarily try to add emphasis to your own story.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, when a reader doesn't notice a specific story within a text it can sometimes mean that the story fits comfortably within the overall work. Remember that your professional work is still the purpose of your piece. Sometimes this means your story can be strongly embedded, sometimes this means it can gently contribute to your argument.

Telling Your Story for Yourself

Everyone leads a busy life, and we often end up feeling that we have little time to write down our reflections about events that we've experienced, even if they're the most important events in our lives. Yet there are quick ways to reflect on an experience that can help you remember events as you see them and think about how others might have viewed you at the time.

Writing three reflections of 180 characters or less (tweet-length) can provide you an invaluable point for telling your story for yourself in a way that distills the most important takeaways, and gives you the ability to use your story in your professional writing for years to come.

1. Write a Twitter-length comment about the most important thing you take away from your story.
2. Write one Twitter-length comment from any one of the following viewpoints:
 - What would your biggest adversary say about you at the beginning of your story?
The end of your story?
 - What would your closest friend say about you at the beginning of your story?
The end of your story?
 - What would an observer say about you, watching you live your story, without knowing what you know?
 - What would you say to yourself at the beginning of your story, knowing how it ended?
3. Compare your tweet from #1 and your tweet from #2.
4. Write a Twitter-length comment on anything you find interesting about your tweet in #1 and your tweet in #2.

Exercise:

Write a tweet-length reflection using one of the prompts from #2.

Examples of Telling Your Story for Yourself

George H.W. Bush, Diary Entry

I keep hearing the critics saying we're not doing enough on Eastern Europe; here the changes are dramatically coming our way, and if any one event—Poland, Hungary, or East Germany—had taken place, people would say this is great. But it's all moving fast—moving our way—and you've got a bunch of critics jumping around saying we ought to be doing more. What they mean is, double spending. It doesn't matter what, just send money, and I think it's crazy. And if we mishandle it, and go way out looking like [promoting dissent is] an American project, you would invite crackdown and ... that could result in bloodshed.

NOVEMBER 8, 1989

One day before the fall of the Berlin Wall

Excerpted from "A World Transformed" by George H.W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, 1998, Alfred A. Knopf Publishers.

Ted Cruz "The Whole World is On Fire" via Twitter

Tweet #1:

Amanda Terkel @aterkel Mar 23

3-year-old hears Ted Cruz say "the whole world is on fire." Gets scared it's really on fire.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/report-cruz-will-launch-white-house-bid-monday/2015/03/22/5e81fa00-d064-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html ...

Cruz's pitch can border on apocalyptic. "The Obama economy is a disaster, Obamacare is a train wreck and the Obama-Clinton foreign policy of leading from behind — the whole world is on fire," he said recently in New Hampshire, which hosts the first presidential primary.

Cruz's characterization caused a startled Julie Trant, 3, to wonder aloud from the audience whether the world was actually on fire, drawing smiles from adults there and later jokes from late-night comedians.

Tweet #2:



ThinkProgress @thinkprogress Mar 23

Seth Meyers confronts Ted Cruz on climate change: 'I think the world's on fire, literally'
<http://thkpr.gs/3635376>



A Subtle Example of Telling Your Story in Your Professional Work

Elements of a Theory of Strategy:

The apparent restrictiveness of an assumption of “rational” behavior—of a calculating, value-maximizing strategy of decision—is mitigated by two additional observations. One, which I can only allege at second hand, is that even among the emotionally unbalanced, among the certified “irrationals,” there is often observed an intuitive appreciation of the principles of strategy, or at least of particular applications of them. I am told that inmates of mental hospitals often seem to cultivate, deliberately or instinctively, value systems that make them less susceptible to disciplinary threats and more capable of exercising coercion themselves. A careless or even self-destructive attitude toward injury—“I’ll cut a vein in my arm if you don’t let me . . .”—can be a genuine strategic advantage; so can cultivated inability to hear or to comprehend, or a reputation for frequent lapses of self-control that make punitive threats ineffectual as deterrents. (Again I am reminded of my children.) As a matter of fact, one of the advantages of an explicit theory of “rational” strategic decision in situations of mixed conflict and common interest is that, by showing the strategic basis of certain paradoxical tactics, it can display how sound and rational some of the tactics are that are practiced by the untutored and the infirm.

Excerpted from “The Strategy of Conflict” by Thomas C. Schelling, 1960, Harvard University Press.