



Be Real #3: Hold the Schmaltz

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"Our ball was rather more amusing than I expected. ... The melancholy part was, to see so many dozen young women standing by without partners, and each of them with two ugly naked shoulders! It was the same room in which we danced fifteen years ago! I thought it all over, and in spite of the shame of being so much older, felt with thankfulness that I was quite as happy now as then." Jane Austen, letter of December 9, 1808

INTRODUCTION

Sentimentality is the exaggerated and affected use of emotion in writing. It bypasses complexity, looking at things as clear-cut, black and white, relying on cliches and abstracts to grab at a reader's heartstrings.

Sentimentality is indulgence in emotion of its own sake, or expression of more emotion than an occasion warrants.... Sentimental literature is "tear-jerking" literature. It aims primarily at stimulating the emotions directly rather than at communicating experience truly and freshly; it depends on trite and well-tried formulas for exciting emotion; it revels in old oaken buckets, rocking chairs, mother love, and the pitter-patter of little feet; it oversimplifies; it is unfaithful to the full complexity of human experience." Sound and Sense, Laurence Perrine

This lesson addresses ways to convey emotions in a meaningful way. Do you have to totally abandon colorful adjectives and abstract names for your feelings? Not totally. If you can present the concrete details that prove those abstracts, then go right ahead. In the opening quote to this lesson, Jane Austen speaks of “amusement,” “melancholy,” and “happiness.” Take a look at the quote, though, and see how she earns these abstracts. It’s that concrete detail—*to see so many dozen young women standing by without partners, and each of them with two ugly naked shoulders!*—that evokes the world and the very emotions Austen names.

Several actions to take when scrapbooking pages that have a lot of emotional content follow, with examples. Here are some particular instances when we’re all susceptible to “schmaltz” or sentimentality:

- **celebrating people, accomplishments, personalities.**

“See Why” on page 5 and “I Think You Sparkle” on page 7 are examples of this.

- **telling a hard truth or sharing something difficult.**

See “Open Invitation” on page 7 for an example of this kind of page.

- **recounting an experience that evoked a lot of feelings.**

“Power Outage Day 5” on page 9 is a recount with distance in the journaling.

- **exploring disappointments.**

“Late To the Party” on page 11 goes beneath the surface of a small disappointment.

GET EMOTION WITHOUT SENTIMENTALITY ONTO THE PAGE**1. Eliminate fuzziness by paying attention to the senses.**

In both your writing and your photos, focus on conveying how you experienced something concretely (as opposed to naming your feelings) including any of the five senses for which you have **relevant** information. Relevant is key -- detail for details sake can weigh things down and make it hard for the reader to figure out what's important.

Photos can show lighting, colors, and specific sights. In your writing, you can include smell, sound, touch, and taste.



The best way to do this writing is to allow yourself to initially free write and then revise with a checklist:

- Use no more than 20% abstract concepts and 80% concrete description. (We talked about abstracts and concrete details in class #1.)

- Avoid “pretty prose” by eliminating streams of adjectives, adverbs, and metaphors.
- Avoid clichés, simplistic expressions, and “Hallmark”-isms.
- Be clear. Revise language that’s “fuzzy,” i.e., sweet and abstract, and replace it with concrete details.

How I used concrete details in a celebration of my father in “See Why:”

- ◇ Photos. Views of land with lots of green grass, blue sky, bits of water and trees all give a sense of the natural world in which my father has moved about his entire life. He is in most of these photos and highlighted in one.
- ◇ Journaling. The journaling opens with a listing of the constants of a farmer’s life and a brief history of how my father got here, then moves in to a recounting of a specific outing. This outing provides a few concrete details that supplement the photos -- and that build up to provide the basis for my new understanding of where he’s coming from.
- ◇ Title. The title (and the opening lines of the journaling) set the focus here -- an exploration of why my father has chosen and stuck with his way of life.

JOURNALING for “See Why:” Mostly, we’ve all said this about you rather than to you: Why? Did the work of farmer choose you or did you choose it? Why choose work that goes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, fixing machinery in the cold garage at night, putting up hay in the heat, being always available, subject to the whims of weather and animals?

You came here at 10 years old. Your dad died when you were 19. You are 64 now, and the cows are gone and your body has been so well used, you cannot walk any great distance. This July day, I have come with you to the dump--riding in the wagon your tractor pulls--to help unload the heavy stuff. The sun is bright and warm and we bump down a rutted road, leafy branches brushing the wagon sides. When we are done, you say, “You want to go for a ride?” These photos show only a bit of where we went, through this land that is yours, that you have known for over fifty years, that you have cared for and that has cared for you back, and I’m seeing it all now as you choose to show it: both simple and grand. And now is when I think: So, this is why. Of course. This is why.

2. Evoke an emotional response with color, image, motif and design choices.

On a scrapbook page, you have more than your journaling available for conveying a feeling. It's possible to use a combination of images, color, and motif to convey the joy or disappointment of a moment, place, or subject. In writing about art (specifically about Hamlet), T.S. Eliot talked about the "objective correlative," a set of objects, or a situation, or a chain of events that evoke an emotion in the audience. Rather than writing "He felt sad," in a story, the author can use weather, gestures, and even the things the character observes to the same purpose. On many of the pages you scrapbook, you will absolutely have a feeling or attitude about the subject you're scrapping. Consciously think about every choice you make to create a whole that's evocative of a mood or emotion.



JOURNALING for "I Think You Sparkle" Isaac, I've recently started calling you "Sparkles." In addition to always looking for a joke (combing your hair weird or dancing "like an Egyptian") you've become a constant companion to me on all kinds of errands and outings. What's more, you smile and yak as you show me things like ice scrapers at the gas station. You just enjoy getting out & being my company no matter where I'm going--even coming along to the hairdresser last week. Time with you is a joy. Love, Mom

Specifically, you can work with:

- ◇ color associations;
- ◇ pattern (oversized, stylized florals convey a different tone than bright dots on white background);
- ◇ photo cropping and editing; and
- ◇ image and motif

How I use image, color, and motif to convey a feeling in "I Think You Sparkle:"

- ◇ Design. Strong contrasts in color and alignments give the page an energy that goes with the main subject.
- ◇ Title. Oversized acrylic alphas give a sense of shining. The title itself borders on being cliché, so the details on the page need to earn that statement. The insertion of "I think you" into the title adds perspective and lets you know that this is a personal statement.
- ◇ Photos. Repeated photos of the boy I think sparkles show him smiling and playing around AND with me --- because this page is about how *I* regard him. It's about our relationship right now as much as about his "sparkling."
- ◇ Embellishment. Glittery flourishes, a star and a heart all support the page themes and add to its "sparkle."
- ◇ Journaling. The journaling is minimal here -- with a few specific details to support my assertion that my son "sparkles."

3. REFRAIN from judgment.

Hold back from telling the viewer what they should think about your subject (or at least save it for the end). Trust that if you report an experience as truly and accurately as possible that it will speak for itself. Do not try to shape response, but, rather, seek to present the kind of clear picture that lets viewers come to their own understanding of meaning.

4. Let one incident stand for the rest.

When you have an incident that evokes an emotion that you've encountered more than once with a particular person or people, the telling of that one story will stand for more.



JOURNALING for "Open Invitation:" Matt is getting divorced, currently living with Mom and Dad, and Jenna and Kass are with him on Wednesdays and every other weekend. When we visit in the summer, we get to see them a bit. The three of them are in and out, running of errands, eating most of their meals out. There are times when they say "hi" and answer our questions and there are times when they don't respond. While I initially persisted in trying to get a response from then, I no longer do.

This summer day, Mark & Pepper were down with their kids, and everyone (including Matt but not including Kass and Jenna) was engaged in a water war -- guns, hoses, buckets, coolers--everything was fair. Kass and Jenna watched from the backroom, and we invited them to join in but didn't insist. While they didn't play, they did watch and we're all hoping they know that any time they want to play with us they have an open invitation.

How I scrapbooked an incident that represents ongoing behavior and tried to refrain from judgment in "Open Invitation:"

- ◇ Title. The title comes from the last line of the journaling and sums up the relationship our extended family has with my brother's daughters.
- ◇ Journaling. The journaling presents the facts--both background that needs to be known and the details of this one incident. I tried to keep my own judgment and feelings out of this journaling, trusting the details to reveal the obvious and guide viewers to their own understanding of what's going on under the surface.
- ◇ Photos. The photo of the girls watching the play outside is set apart from a grouping of photos of the play they are watching. I had many more photos from the water war, but for this page, I only selected two so that the emphasis was on the girls.

5. Insert distance.

If you're having a hard time telling a story without inserting your own judgment or including a lot of adverbs and cliches and abstracts, try stepping back. You'll need to understand, first, where you stand in relation to the experience you're conveying. Once you've established that, push back a little, including multiple viewpoints even, perhaps, writing in 3rd person point of view, and minimizing the number of sentences starting with "I."

How I inserted distance in scrapbooking "Power Outage Day 5:"

◆ Journaling. So much went on every day during our recent 6-day power outage and our emotions fluctuated from depression at the ongoing inconveniences to the joy of coming together with others in the community. I am scrapbooking each day of the outage, and on this one, I decided to take a journalistic approach. I reported from my point of view, but tried to get back far enough to include how others were feeling. I included a lengthy letter from our town administrator that reveals many

Tuesday December 16, 2008 - 11:50 AM

Dear Members of the Community, Progress Being Made in Durham. I am pleased to report that FSNH deployed a French-speaking Canadian Hydro Electric crew in Durham Monday evening which was successful in restoring power to the High School and Middle School. (No determination has been made concerning school opening for Wednesday but many roadways in Durham, Lee and Madbury are still blocked, we will make this call on Tuesday afternoon.) In addition power was restored last evening to wooden Road, Deminion Road, Coe Drive, parts of Emerson Road, Little Hale Road and the Madbury Road side of Bagdad Road. This morning 12:45 PM a FSNH crew are in town working along Ganney Road and Bagdad Road. In the last three hours, power has been restored to Edgewood Road, Emerson Road, and Hampshire Avenue, we believe the work being undertaken at this time at Ganney/Bagdad will bring the entire Ganney Farms development back on line.

Seacoast FSNH Crews ARE NOT Being redeployed to Southwestern Hill, until work is accomplished here. About two dozen residents have called us this morning outraged by information on the FSNH web site indicating that crews from the Seacoast were being redeployed to southwestern Hill, essentially abandoning residents here, we immediately contacted FSNH and were assured that until power is restored here, the crews would not be redeployed. Durham is serviced by the Spring Office and, in actuality, 10 additional crews arrived in the Spring region this morning.

Shelter Information: the regional Red Cross shelter located at the Oyster River High School located on Coe Drive in Durham will remain open until no longer needed. Numerous families have stopped in to warm themselves, eat a warm meal, or to spend the night. In addition, residents can fill water jugs if needed at the shelter for drinking or for toilets.

Downtown Durham is Open for Business! A reminder that the businesses and restaurants in downtown Durham have

power and are open for business. Downtown has been hopping over the last two days. If you need supplies, consider shopping locally and supporting our downtown area.

FNH and Durham offer Additional resources to residents and students in Off-Campus housing without power:

- The Haseel Rec Center and the UNH Field House are available as additional resources to all residents who want to take a shower.
- Holloway Commons and Philbrook dining halls are serving meals to Durham residents until power is restored. The reduced cost for an all-you-can-eat buffet-style breakfast, lunch and dinner is \$5 for adults, \$2.50 for children under 10, and free for children under four years of age during this period of duress. Holloway was teaming with Durham families last evening at dinner. It was a wonderful way for UNH to make itself of benefit to the Durham community.
- The Memorial Union Building began screening "Kid friendly entertainment" beginning at 10am on Monday morning. Children must be supervised. I have heard from a number of Durham families with small children who are clanking the walls at home that this was a great resource.

What Should Individual Residents Do to Let FSNH Know They Still Have No Power? It is recommended that residents contact FSNH daily to inform/resist them that power is still out at individual residences. Don't be shy, and don't be put off by operators who may not have information from the day before. The magnitude of this event is stretching FSNH to its limits so expect that information may be lost/dropped. By reporting information will be lost or confused within a large bureaucratic entity, it is in rarely disappointed. The FSNH customer number is 1-800-662-7764.

Need Assistance? If residents need assistance, please contact the Durham Police Department 267 at 865-2526, we'll be happy to assist you in any way that we can.

Sept late, burned rolls on the stove, & did puzzles. Continued to grade exams & started to get depressed. Swept the hearth again & carried in MORE wood. At long last, Debbie's laptop arrived!

day 5

power outage

Hey! That's what got us into this trouble to begin with. With reports of more snow & school opening uncertain, Isaac was taking no chances and put his pjs on inside out and backwards AND he put a eppan under his pillow—which they'd both done last Thursday night.

details about daily life and community actions during the outage.

- ◇ Photos. As series of photos--none of them particularly outstanding--documents the details of this one day.
- ◇ Design. The design is journal heavy with the look of a dense report--which is how things were feeling at that point with everyday slogging along.

JOURNALING for “Power Outage Day 5:” Tuesday, December 16, 2008 was day 5 without power for many of us in New Hampshire, and the point at which everyone in the Niman home was staying in bed as long as possible – not even feeling like stoking the fire early, not feeling like figuring out how yet another day with no electricity would go. We had become frozen--not as in cold, but as in unable to function normally--preparations for Christmas were halted, work as we knew it was stalled. Rumor was we’d be getting power by 11pm . . . the NEXT day, but at this point, we just didn’t know what to think.

The rolls that Iz and I tried to make in a frying pan on the wood stove burned while we got lost in our puzzles (Akari for me--& sadly I was now able to do “hard” ones). Neil had been bearing up the best I’d ever seen in a power outage, but today, we were all feeling discouraged--though at least his exams were getting graded. Isaac tricked Joshua out of bed with the promise of crescent rolls--which we’d just burned and put out on the deck so they wouldn’t smell up the house.

There was no way I was leaving the house until my new laptop arrived & I kind of just wanted to be alone to wallow in puzzles & bring order to the house, so Neil and the boys set out for his office and warmth and computers, while I tidied, & carried in wood--getting things in order for when we finally got power. The computer’s arrival was the high point of the day for me. A party given by the UNH President (to which Neil was invited) was the high point for the boys--they experienced their first chocolate fountain! & while it might have been nice if they’d held back on the buffet since they were technically party crashers, everyone was in storm mode & feeling generous & cookie-grabbing boys were welcome (it did help that the President’s kids are the same age and came, too).

For dinner, it was an office picnic of pizza from DHOP & goodies from the DuMP (Durham Market Place). At dinner time, there was no news about whether school would open the next day, BUT there was news of a significant amount of snow moving in in the early hours--so we just stayed until 9ish--me loving getting my new laptop set up--and all of us charging our electronics for some screen time at home the next morning. Before bed, the boys did the snowstorm-pj routine . . . which I really didn’t think was a good idea since that was what they did the night before all of this started.

6. Explore complexities.

Admitting or describing complicated situations is hard. Using sentimentality means you present them in black and white--but you're not delving into the complications that actually exist. Dare to dive into this complexity rather than staying on the surface.



How I went beneath the surface in "Late to the Party:"

- ◇ Journaling. This page is what writers call a bit of "naval-gazing." The feelings I journaled are not tremendously earth-shattering and they're not real important to the state of our world, but, they are feelings that I, nonetheless, thought a lot about. I do use abstract names for what I'm feeling at the beginning and then move into the details of what happened during the campaign and on election day to explore the many aspects of how I was feeling.
- ◇ Photos. Photos covering over one year help show the complexity of this story.
- ◇ Design. Patriotic motifs and colors cue the viewer to the page subject and to the double meaning of the title. The photos from my time on Hillary Clinton's campaign are grouped together, while the photo of Obama's supporters on election day is the focus and counterpoint.

JOURNALING for "Late to the Party:" I hadn't anticipated how sad I would feel on election day '08 until it came. Even though I was now supporting and voting for Barack Obama, and believing he would win, and thrilled at what his win would mean--I was grumpy and dragging and just feeling down. My sadness was two-part: 1) I'm really, really sad that Hillary isn't going to be our president; and 2) I contributed to my boys being "late to the party."

Living in NH, they could have been a really active part of this major event in their lifetimes. I early on encouraged them to make their own choice, and, to my surprise--their friends all loved Obama--they chose Hillary (& surely the phone calls they heard me make, the signs they held, the speeches they attended, & the hours they spent sitting around campaign offices contributed to this). When Obama was nominated, I decided to support him, but I didn't put a sign in the yard or even get a button or one of those *awesome frameable posters*. It seemed phony--'cause there were a lot of things I really disliked about him during the primary--to put on his button after the many more months I'd worn a Clinton button.

When we arrived at the polls, one of the Obama supporters was a UNH student we'd worked with on the Clinton campaign and he came up and hugged us dramatically-- with a little regret and a lot of optimism. And while we were late--it *was* nice to be welcomed to the party just the same.

TRIGGERS: evoking emotion without sentimentality

When you compare two unlike things and suggest a unity between them you are using metaphor. Aristotle in Poetics said: "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor." It is "a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars."

examples of metaphors:

heart of stone

heart of a lion

pull your socks up

elephant in the room

window of opportunity

couch potato

road hog

One challenge in writing without sentimentality is to come up with original metaphors that make the right connections for your subject.

Check out the exercise on the next page for developing your own metaphors.

WRITE YOUR OWN METAPHOR

Select an item you'd like to describe: _____

What qualities does it have? Brainstorm here (i.e., is it useful? does it fly? does it shine? does it have a smell?) Jot down whatever comes to mind.

What are are some other, different, items that have these same qualities?

Make comparisons between your original object and to your comparing object. Try to develop a metaphor from this.
