

Writing a Memoir

Three Tips For Using Fiction Techniques



Written by [Denis Ledoux](#)

We all love well-told stories. We love the entertainment, the sound effects, the punchy plot built around solid characterization. As we share stories in our everyday conversations, we inevitably use fiction techniques to keep our listeners' attention and interest. When we say "And then she said...," we are using dialogue - that's a fiction technique.

In our memoir writing, we will often veer toward the same techniques fiction writers use. In fact, we don't seem to need urging at all to adapt our stories to make them more compelling or to ensure that they drive our point home. We do this spontaneously.

Many life writers ask, "But, am I twisting things when I use fiction techniques? Is it really okay?"

> Should a writer invent dialogue between his characters? He does not, after all, have a tape recording of the conversations of the people he is writing about.

> Can the writer ascribe articles of clothing to an individual? He can't really be sure that that individual wore that article on a particular day.

> How does a writer share with his reader the thoughts that he suspects an individual might have had? After all, he was not in that person's head!

Different individuals come to different solutions to the problems posed in these questions. Here are three possibilities available to life writers who feel a conflict in ascribing dialogue or other details to their stories.

1) Write an introduction or preface to your life story. In this piece, mention that you are using fiction techniques when you ascribe specific conversations and reactions to an individual. You attest that each of these elements are, to the best of your knowledge, typical of what the character might have said or worn or done. You might write that the tone and choice of words ascribed to a person is in keeping with how the person might have spoken and in a tone the person would have been comfortable with. As to clothing, you might write that you wish to give a sense of the total person and are sharing information about the character and inserting this information in such a way as to be unobtrusive, but the reader should not infer that all the pairings of clothing and times are factual.

2) Use indirect dialogue. Indirect dialogue is speech that is introduced by "that" whether used or implied. "My grandmother said [that] she would not leave her house" is an

example of indirect dialogue. ("My grandmother said, 'I will not leave my house'" is direct dialogue.)

Indirect dialogue is often used when you don't have exact quotes, when you are reluctant to attribute specific words to an individual, or when you want to soften the impact of a piece of dialogue.

With indirect dialogue, you will sacrifice immediacy and impact. Because of this, indirect dialogue is often less attractive to writers than direct dialogue. But it is a useful tool when you don't want to, or can't honestly, place specific words directly in someone's "mouth." Indirect dialogue permits the writer to manipulate the presentation of a story.

3) Never use dialogue or make any reference to action or setting that is not authenticated. This choice can be very limiting in terms of storytelling. In this instance, your characters never actually say anything in their own voices. They never appear on the page with particular pieces of clothing. They probably don't ever look out of windows or eat a meal--all fiction-based details that will make your characters come alive.

Without fiction techniques, your story will have a certain flatness rather than the you-are-there immediacy of storytelling at its best. But, if your choice is to eschew fiction techniques altogether, you will have told your story in the way you want to tell it, with utmost truth.

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