

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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## For a winning memoir, write like a novelist

“It doesn’t matter whether you write fiction or nonfiction,” says Ursula Le Guin, the late master of fantasy. “All storytellers work with the same box of tools.”

Once upon a time, my favorite books were novels. Now my favorite read is a memoir – provided it offers me all the pleasures of a novel.

**A memoir must have a plot.** It must contain suspense. It must contain a narrative arc. It must tell a story.

To help pull the narrative thread taut, stage and screen writers swear by a **logline** that conveys the gist of a script in one or two sentences: Who is the main character? What is he or she trying to achieve? What or who is in the way? What will happen if he or she fails?

Logline writers put it like this: When (inciting incident) occurs, (protagonist) must (objective), or else (stakes). Spending the time to construct a good logline could help many a memoirist.

**Vivid characters** are as important in a memoir as in a novel. Can you make a character sketch of each main character – mother, father, grandmother? Who are your supporting characters? Why is each one essential to the story?

Just like fiction writers, those of us who write from life must take special care to distinguish one character from the next. As a novel reader, I rarely lose track of who's who. But with a family story, all too often I get confused between Uncle Eddie and Uncle Freddie.

In a first-person narrative, the "I" has to be just as vivid a character as every other. Try pretending you're writing about someone else. Who is this Ellen who goes off on a Jewish roots journey? What is she after? What happens to her? How does she change?

A memoir, like a novel, must contain **vivid scenes**. On occasion, the action must slow down and the writer must draw me in close, supplying plenty of sensory details.

The impulse to write a memoir may feel quite different from the desire to spin a yarn. In fact, the memoirist may feel like forgetting about all the tricks of the trade and just telling the truth – honestly, with all its glorious quirks.

That raw reality is what gives memoirs their special power, and that's what I love in them. But if you don't shape your material into a story, you let me down.

If, on the other hand, you put the novelist's tools to use and tell me a story – a *true* story, no less! – then I'm yours.

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Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).