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EDITORIAL

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Writing Compelling Nonfiction

Barbara Oakley, US



When I set about writing the book *Evil Genes* , I quickly obtained a set of riveting facts. At least, *I* thought the facts were riveting. But I knew that just writing those facts would never capture people's attention. At least, not the way their attention should be captured.

What I also needed was *story* .

Neuroscientists have found there is a reason people the world over tell stories, and always have. There is something about putting yourself in the mystical place of a tale that opens your mind to new possibilities-this actually allows you to learn more easily. The best tales involve something called "narrative transport"-that feeling you get when you are so engrossed in a story that you're unaware of the external world. These kinds of nar ratives have long served a valuable purpose-providing stories of hope, courage, good, and evil, and helping knit together the human social structure.

Our minds are constructed to see story in everything related to humans-characters, plot, and purpose. This makes spinning tales easy for fiction writers, with their protagonists, antagonists, and moral dilemmas. But writing nonfiction that also tells a story is *work* . Sometimes painful work

> *...In writing Evil Genes , I realized that no matter how many study findings were cited, those facts would never give a gut feel for the real life impact of a "successfully sinister" person. Yet I myself knew of that painful impact, because of my sister. It was a very difficult decision for me to tell of my experiences. And it was even more difficult to wrap those experiences into a narrative sweep that remained true to the facts. Yet I've been told time after time that it is this personal sharing and storytelling that draws people in to read and reread the book...*

You see, if you write nonfiction as story, you must construct a narrative. And the most compelling narratives are often about what we know up close and personal-something involving ourselves. For us often-shy folk who wield facts for a living, stepping back and showing ourselves can be a painful experience.

In writing *Evil Genes* , I realized that no matter how many study findings were cited, those facts would never give a gut feel for the real life impact of a "successfully sinister" person. *Yet I myself knew of that painful impact, because of my sister.* It was a very difficult decision for me to tell of my experiences. And it was even more difficult to wrap those experiences into a narrative sweep that remained true to the facts. Yet I've been told time after time that it is this personal sharing and storytelling that draws people in to read and reread the book.

There's a reason academic publishers don't plan on selling a lot of any one of their books. Nonfiction without story is generally boring and forgettable. Who wants to spend time wading through a mountain of facts except for the handful of scholars who specialize in the topic?

Much of the best nonfiction being written today is constructed in the form of story, using elements of plotting, characterization, tension, and pacing that have been developed for fiction. With dozens of important breakthroughs being made daily in highly technical areas, finding a way to tell a topical story can sometimes be challenging. Yet I believe we are embarking on the very beginning of a great age of compelling nonfiction writing. The best, using storytelling techniques I haven't even dreamed of applying, is yet to come.

-Barbara Oakley
US

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