

Editor's Note

Tell Me a Story

By Lori Hidinger

At 8:30 PM on the Wednesday of the SRM Annual Meeting in Denver, my reserves of charm depleted, I retreat to the hotel for room service and to doze in front of the TV. On “Showtime’s Inside the NFL,” NFL Films President Steve Sabol shares the philosophy behind his company’s much-lauded films: *Tell me a fact and I’ll learn, tell me the truth and I’ll believe, tell me a story and I’ll keep it in my heart forever.* I jump up, grab a pen and paper, and try to scribble this down as best I can. It resonates with the conversations I have had over the previous 4 days about what *Rangelands* could/should/would be.

During my week in Denver, I heard that *Rangelands* was too “sciencey” and not science-based enough. Rather than let this contradiction drive me insane, I interpret these suggestions as a desire to have articles that are supported by evidence and the knowledge of our profession, written in a manner that is accessible to a variety of readers. I’m the first to admit that this is easier said than done. Our contributors who are researchers are trained to write in the particular styles of scientific journals, but they have a culture that praises publication and often job requirements that they publish their work. Managers and practitioners may be accustomed to writing reports, assessments, and plans, but may not be pushed to publish. And, granted with some exceptions, many of us do not have the training or experience to write for “popular” audiences.

The Alumni Lounge in the Memorial Union at Arizona State University fills with over 200 faculty, staff, and students who have come for the first session of a workshop, “Rethinking our Writing, Rewriting our Thinking.” Organized by Lee Gutkind, the workshop is designed to aid academics in sharing their work with an informed and curious public.ⁱ Gutkind, editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction* and dubbed the godfather of creative nonfiction by *Vogue*, has organized a series of workshops to whet the appetites of ASU’s research community in exploring the

style of narrative or creative nonfiction. Narrative nonfiction is becoming a popular way for experts to share their knowledge in a way that readers can embrace.

Stories have engaged humans throughout history—just think of the rich treasury of legends, folklore, and myths from cultures around the world designed to teach moral lessons. The human brain has an affinity for narrative—it actually remembers more from narrative than other styles of writing.ⁱⁱ In *Keep It Real: Everything You Need to Know about Researching and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, Gutkind and colleagues describe the “five Rs” of creative nonfiction: Rel-life; Reaching out to make a connection to the reader; Research or reportage on the information that supports the story; Reading, not only research material, but other writers; and Riting, the creative part of creative nonfiction.ⁱⁱⁱ Gutkind extols the virtues of creative nonfiction as a way for academics to connect with non-academic readers.

A professor with ASU’s Hugh Downs’ School of Human Communication and distinguished writer in residence at the Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes, Gutkind is a man on a mission. His brain seems to be moving faster than his mouth as he rushes to describe “scenes” as the building blocks of creative nonfiction. Scenes are little stories, episodes, and anecdotes woven through the information the author wishes to convey.ⁱⁱⁱ They serve to drive the narrative story line and support the broader frame or theme of the author’s message. Gutkind stresses that while creative nonfiction employs literary techniques, the information presented must be factual, and proper accreditation must be provided for any ideas for information from other sources.ⁱⁱⁱ

“This book cannot begin with the tale of the telekinetic monkey” reads Joel Garreau, author, former writer, and editor for *The Washington Post*, and current faculty member with ASU’s Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law. The

ⁱ Podcasts from these sessions are posted on the website of Arizona State University’s Graduate College. Available at: <http://graduate.asu.edu/sfs/workshops/Writing+in+Graduate+School>.

ⁱⁱ McADAMS, D. P. 2008. *The redemptive self: stories Americans live by*. New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press. 400 p.

ⁱⁱⁱ GUTKIND, L., AND H. FLETCHER [EDS.]. 2008. *Keep it real: everything you need to know about researching and writing creative nonfiction*. New York, NY, USA: W.W. Norton & Company. 167 p.

monkey, while real, makes the book, *Radical Evolution*, seem too much like science fiction. Instead he begins his book with the tale of a young woman confined to a wheel chair, using her story to gently introduce the reader to the scientific developments of human enhancement. Only later in the book does he return to the monkey and the role it plays in this cutting-edge research. Garreau advises that authors should give readers something to which they can relate—people care about people, culture, and values. When he writes he considers what would interest his mother.

In the second session of the workshop, investigative journalist and author Terry Greene Sterling recommends that would-be writers train by reading the types of articles they aspire to write, recording observations of their experiences, and practicing. She shares advice from John Mecklin, Editor-in-Chief of Miller-McCune.com. Mecklin suggests that writers should write as if they are talking to an intelligent friend, who is not an expert in their field, using a sophisticated but conversational tone free of jargon. He advises that fine writing mimics the rhythms and tone-changes of pleasing speech. This echoes advice from Garreau to read your article aloud, and if you stumble over some text, go back and rework it.

The third session of the workshop is smaller and more intimate for a “more serious, focused conversation about narrative” between Gutkind and Dan Sarewitz, monthly *Nature* columnist, co-director of ASU’s Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes, and my boss. In creative nonfiction, there is a tension between the creative and the nonfiction. “Writers obsessed with style forget to have substance and meaning, while academics obsessed with substance and meaning are lacking in making their words sing,” says Gutkind. While including narrative when writing about an academic subject is very difficult, Sarewitz notes,

“Just because we’re scientists doesn’t mean we have to write in the passive voice or in an incredibly boring style.” He states that even when writing a grant for the National Science Foundation, he tries to remember that there is a human being sitting at the other end who would appreciate being engaged.

I am not suggesting that all submissions to *Rangelands* must, or even should, be written in narrative format. There are many styles of writing, and authors should use the approach that they feel best conveys their ideas, information, and stories to their readers. I am working with the Steering Committee and Editorial Board to find an appropriate tone and style for *Rangelands*. We have developed and posted a revised style manual and instructions for contributors^{iv}. We encourage authors to write in the active voice—as if you are telling your story to an intelligent, interested friend who is outside your expertise—and eliminate jargon or define it in accessible terms. We also want to encourage managers and practitioners to submit their stories. There are interesting and exciting things happening in our field, and we are striving to position *Rangelands* as the vehicle for sharing these with each other and the public. Like any cultural change, this will take a few early adopters, time, and practice. But stick with us dear reader; both the journey and outcome will be exciting.

^{iv} Rangelands style manual. April 2010. http://www.srmjournals.org/userimages/ContentEditor/1270766189225/Rangelands_style_manual_2010.pdf.

Author is Editor-in-Chief of Rangelands and the Managing Director of the Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes at Arizona State University, lori.hidinger@asu.edu.