



Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction

Jack R. Hart

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From the work of the New Journalists in the 1960s, to the *New Yorker* essays of John McPhee, Susan Orlean, Atul Gawande, and a host of others, to blockbuster book-length narratives such as Mary Roach's *Stiff* or Erik Larson's *Devil in the White City*, narrative nonfiction has come into its own. Yet writers looking for guidance on reporting and writing true stories have had few places to turn for advice. Now in *Storycraft*, Jack Hart, a former managing editor of the *Oregonian* who guided several Pulitzer Prize-winning narratives to publication, delivers what will certainly become the definitive guide to the methods and mechanics of crafting narrative nonfiction.

Hart covers what writers in this genre need to know, from understanding story theory and structure, to mastering point of view and such basic elements as scene, action, and character, to drafting, revising, and editing work for publication. Revealing the stories behind the stories, Hart brings readers into the process of developing nonfiction narratives by sharing tips, anecdotes, and recommendations he forged during his decades-long career in journalism. From there, he expands the discussion to other well-known writers to show the broad range of texts, styles, genres, and media to which his advice applies. With examples that draw from magazine essays, book-length nonfiction narratives, documentaries, and radio programs, *Storycraft* will be an indispensable resource for years to come.

Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction Details

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Kim Stallwood says

Of all the books about writing, editing and publishing I've read over the years, I cannot think of one that stood out more than just offering a nugget of information here and some insight over there. They were helpful but not memorable. Or even enjoyable to read. *Story Craft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction* by Jack Hart, however, is different and comes highly recommended.

Let's take the author first. For 25 years, Hart served as managing editor, training editor, and writing coach at *The Oregonian*, the Pacific Northwest's largest newspaper. He edited four Pulitzer Prize finalists, including winners in explanatory journalism and feature writing. He also edited a portion of the work recognized with the 2001 Pulitzer Gold Medal for Public Service and the 2006 breaking-news Pulitzer. He's internationally recognised as an authority in narrative nonfiction.

What is narrative nonfiction?

Well, it's not fiction because it's nonfiction. Because it's nonfiction it has to be based in fact and tell a true story. But it doesn't read like journalism because it isn't written around the traditional newspaper writing style of who, what, where, when, and why. It reads like fiction even though it's nonfiction. So, narrative nonfiction is a creative form of writing with a narrative arc telling a factual story. But it's more than that. There are different types of narratives and narrative arcs. There are issues about whether the author writes him or herself into the narrative. There's the matter of research and investigations that are necessary to write narrative nonfiction. Some authors immerse themselves in their subject. For example, to write *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond lived among poor and working class people for months to understand the people and the issues touched by evictions. So, in short, narrative nonfiction is creative writing based on truth that tells a story.

Of course, narrative nonfiction is much more than that and Hart does a fantastic job exploring and explaining why. The chapters address such issues as structure, point of view, character, scene, action, theme, and so on. He draws from his experience with *The Oregonian* to recount and analyse the articles he published and the writers he worked with in producing them. The book is a fine balance of theory and practice, and it's easy to learn from Hart how to use both to create fine writing.

Further, the book is illustrated with the most helpful figures which depict the various structures that can be used to write narrative nonfiction. I found them to be particularly insightful in helping me to figure out the approach and structure to one of my writing projects. For example, the figure on the right shows how to structure a piece of writing as a narrative arc that's "built from the orderly progression of facts through specific story elements." (p. 24)

"Great narrative," Hart writes, "rests on the three legs of character, action, and scene, and character comes first because it drives the other two." (p. 75) If you want to write great narrative, then you can do no better than read this book.

Peter Gibb says

The rise in popularity of non-fiction in recent years owes a great deal to the practitioners of "New journalism" and new age journalism owes a great deal to thoughtful editors like Jack Hart who saw the intersection of story telling and journalism, and practiced the art of these two disciplines with the highest of ethical standards. I learned a lot from reading this book, and reviewed many concepts that I was already familiar with but needed a good refresher. As a memoir writer, I'm always looking for new approaches to get at the truth and communicate it in a way that engages the reader deeply. Hart filled that bill fully, and gave me a satisfying picture of what he did as a senior editor at The Oregonian. Fulfilling, satisfying, educational, entertaining ... when you can do all that in one book, you get 5 stars from me.

Robert DiCello says

A must read for anyone who writes life stories

This is not just a book, it's a source of guidance and insight which reminds me over and over again how best to approach the work of telling life stories.

Stella Budrikis says

This is one of the most practical and comprehensive books I've read on writing non-fiction. It includes lots of examples which illustrate the points being made, but the examples are short enough not to get in the way of the flow of the argument.

Ariel Curry says

Excellent guide to narrative nonfiction! Before I started this, I didn't really know what differentiated narrative nonfiction from other types of reporting—or other types of nonfiction (like memoir, etc.). This book showed me everything I needed to, and now I'm noticing narrative nonfiction everywhere! Great for editors and writers of any type of nonfiction.

Peter Gibb says

One fabulous, intelligent, ethical, inspiring book.

I am a memoir writer and have recently expanded my "field" to include other forms of personal, narrative non-fiction. I also teach, and thought this book might be helpful. I couldn't put it down, and learned so much from it. Jack Hart is the kind of writer / story teller / teacher we need. Although I am not a journalist in the strict sense of the word, all writers are journalists. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in becoming a better non-fiction writer.

Wynn Netherland says

A very approachable and well-organized book, I'll keep this one on the shelf for a topical reference. It's an entertaining read ? I now want to track down and read the complete pieces the author quotes and builds upon in each chapter.

Sophia Lee says

Every nonfiction writer -- journalist, memoirist, biographist, columnist, essayist-- should keep this book on the desk.

Sharon Orlopp says

Jack Hart's book, Story Craft, is an excellent guide for writers. I took notes from cover to cover and it inspired me to evaluate current writing projects. Many items grabbed me, including:

1. Setting is the gift wrap; story is the gift.
2. What is the story's engine?
3. Placement of plot points on a narrative arc

Hart seamlessly covers character development, inciting incidences, driving the action forward, setting, conflict, and resolution. He provides many specific examples from authors and books---which significantly increased my "to read" list.

I highly recommend Story Craft!

Sarah says

This is the how-to guide you're looking for, if you're looking.

Steve Greenleaf says

The art of telling an effective story, whether as a matter of fiction or of non-fiction, has become increasingly celebrated and promoted as the most effective means of communicating a message. Wherever we turn for advice about communicating effectively, we are told about the power of story—or of narrative, if you prefer the more hifalutin term. The reasoning is simple: we seem programmed to remember stories, tales across time involving characters who engage us in their quests.

Jack Hart is a professional journalist who shares the skills to write an effective non-fiction story for a newspaper or magazine. The book provides a number of tips and explanations about how good stories come

to written, including consideration of the usefulness of ways of communicating other than by narrative, such as by explanation. But the stories that Hart's colleagues have written about all manner of topics that have enhanced their effectiveness (and one assumes their readership) by use of a strong narrative line. The elements, when you reflect upon them, seem almost self-evident: characters (persons that we can care about and understand), a conflict or obstacle that present the characters a challenge, change through time (a narrative arc), and a well-researched facts. Like lawyers, journalists have a professional ethical obligation to "tell the truth", as problematic has that statement always is. Both professions require us to ground our narrative in some sense in "what really happened", perhaps easier for journalists because they don't (or least shouldn't) work for self-interested clients. One of the points that Hart rightfully addresses includes the ethics of required for appropriate truth telling.

Who might enjoy this book? Anyone who might want to tell a story, fiction or non-fiction. (In truth, the fundamentals are not so different and Hart draws in a number of sources that originally addressed issues of fiction and play-writing.) However, I read it from the particular point of view of a lawyer, an attorney, an advocate. I'm convinced more and more that our first job as an advocate is to learn and tell our clients' stories in a comprehensible and engaging manner. In some cases the law may prove an insurmountable road block to a remedy, but in most cases, especially any case that requires a trial or hearing to resolve the issues, telling the clients story, and thereby making the client and the client's plight as sympathetic as possible the most important aspect of representation. Lawyers don't write essays about "why my client should win" in "25 words or less", but our briefs come close to allowing us to do that (and considering the "25 words or less" isn't a bad idea either). As advocates, attorneys need to become as literate in telling a story as we are in forming an argument (which, of course, may incorporate storytelling). We especially face issues with younger jurors and lawyers who have a more native mastery of visual storytelling that older, logocentric persons like me lack. If the book has one weakness, it's that it is limited to telling stories through the written word. Oral and visual storytelling must gain a place in the advocate's arsenal as well as the use of the more traditional written word.

A fine book, well considered and well written (not for the most part in storytelling mode, I might add) that most anyone with curiosity about this topic could benefit from.

Justin Podur says

This is a great book about how to write creative nonfiction. I've been trying to up my writing game this year and this book has helped. Thinking about story structure especially - the idea of a protagonist, a complication, and a resolution being the standard structure of a story - was helpful.

Laura Reinhardt says

What an excellent book for writers who are considering pursuing narrative nonfiction storytelling!

Danielle says

I've read a few books on creative/narrative nonfiction and this is by far the best. Many of the other books on

craft are pretty general and after reading one, the others seem like a regurgitation of the same information. Hart's chapters on scene, characterization, and dialogue are full of helpful examples from stories he edited at the Oregonian as well as other essays. All of these are framed by concrete advice that I already know I'll be using in my own writing.

The chapter on ethics was also fantastic. I was expecting it to be a scant few pages because it seems like most people just throw this chapter in almost as an afterthought. Instead, it was a well-researched discussion of ethical issues across the entire spectrum of nonfiction, from memoir to journalism. Hart mentions journalists and authors who've found themselves in hot water (or completely defamed) and examined why and to whom their actions were controversial. In a lot of cases, there's no black and white and I found it super helpful especially when thinking about personal essay. Just one last thing about the ethics chapter—I thought his discussion of journalists' different perspectives of truth is particularly interesting considering all the "fake news" arguments out there today.

James says

I encountered "Storycraft" during a visit to the library. It wasn't one of those, "I need a specific book days", but rather an, "I'm just going to meander through the stacks and find something unread that grabs my attention sort of day". I have a strong interest in writing, although I don't do much of it. To help me do more I've been reading more about style and the experience of writing.

"Storycraft" was an excellent choice because it satisfies my need to better understand storytelling but more importantly non-fiction storytelling. While I enjoy fiction, I've never really written it. Narrative non-fiction seems to me the next best thing, a sideways approach to better understanding story by grounding it in the telling of fact.

The book itself is well structured, well organized and blends examples well. At times I thought some of the examples ran a little long in demonstrating an idea, but otherwise I suggest this as a strong source to better understanding the building of any story fact or fiction.
