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FOREWORD BY *NEW YORK TIMES* EDITOR PETER CATAPANO

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# *Dedication*

To my Fantastic Five: Jack, Mickey, Brian, Eric, and Mike,  
with eternal love and gratitude

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# Foreword

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PETER CATAPANO

One of the fun things I get to do in my job as a *New York Times* editor is visit Sue Shapiro's writing classes at The New School and disagree with her. This is bad manners on my part, since Sue has always been very nice to me (and my books) and frequently invites me to speak to her students, which is flattering, probably good for my résumé, and is something I actually, really, truly like to do. It can also turn out to be embarrassing because Sue is usually right.

For example, Sue will tell one of her students trying to sell a short personal essay or op-ed piece, "Make it timely!" (There are often exclamation points at the end of things Sue says, I just know it.) I will add something dangerously misleading like, "We've got timely up to *here*. Why not make it weird, obscure, and also timeless?" I do this at least once per visit, partly because I truly am fond of odd and offbeat writing, but also because it reinforces my long-cherished notion of myself as a rebel who has no use for practical advice, either giving it or taking it. A week or so later, I will find myself rejecting an odd and offbeat piece and accepting another one because it is more timely. And so it goes.

I do this a few times a year in my capacity as a member of the Opinion section of *The New York Times*, where I develop and edit online series, usually weekly installments of first-person essays or commentary on a range of topics such as mental health, psychology, philosophy, music, religion, war, and peace. These venues are not restricted to "experts" in their chosen field; they are platforms for people from all walks of life and levels of experience. We welcome new writers, not just "experts," as long as they can write well and make compelling arguments or tell great stories that will appeal to our readers.

Many of Sue's students, coached by her on the ins and outs of narrative technique, to-the-point pitching, and common sense publishing etiquette, have found their way into *The New York Times* as well as other newspapers, websites, and magazines. These clips have led to more than one hundred books. So she and her recruits are doing something right.

Sue has told me that one of the reasons she invites me back every term is that I'm "optimistic"—something no one who has had to live with me would agree with. What I think she means by this is that I firmly believe these are good times for writers, and that, with new publications and websites sprouting up every day, and new readers with new interests and appetites wanting to read them, the landscape for writers looking to publish their work is far more promising than it has ever been. The days when one had to print out his work with a cover letter, put it in an envelope, lick the stamp and affix it, then send it off in a mailbox like a message in a bottle only to wait weeks, sometimes months, for a reply—usually a polite "no"—are over. These are boom times (for words, if not pay). Today, I can honestly encourage a classroom full of aspiring writers.

Sue's classes—and by extension this book—are like a journalistic and literary boot camp. They provide a set of rigorous practical steps that few new writers would ever dream up themselves. You must write and write fast—don't be fussy about it, because Sue doesn't tolerate dawdling. Develop strategic plans to identify and pitch editors just as quickly. Do your homework. Figure out who edits what. Take names. Didn't get the nod on your first piece? Brush yourself off and do it again. Ding! Then again. Write some more while you are at it. And move that middle part to the top—that's the hook right there, and you buried it. Brush it up, check your spelling, your flow. Be sure the pitch is short and to the point. And never send it on a Friday. Need to follow up? Be polite but persistent. All the things I never learned but should have when I was starting out as a writer. (It is the rare editor who didn't start out wanting to be a writer.)

In class, I field questions from new recruits, rapid-fire, about thirty in an hour, on the practical aspects of writing and publishing. These

Q&As are a little like speed dating, without the prospect of a date. Part of what I try to offer new writers is a sense that editors—particularly editors at higher profile places like *The New York Times*—are humans, rather than rigidly judgmental authority figures stamped out of a culture machine. Each one of us has our own tastes and inclinations, with passions, pet peeves, and sometimes odd obsessions. Most have hectic schedules, exploding e-mail inboxes, and lots of actual editing to do. But for the most part, we are happy to discover new writers, and we'd much rather say yes than no.

Another thing I never fail to mention: A writer who can produce good, skillful copy on time and conduct all the business of pitching, writing, and revising in a calm, professional manner is an editor's dream. That is the sort of writer this book is meant to produce.

I am also sometimes asked about how I got to do the job I now have. (I sometimes forget that it is a rare and wonderful one, and that question reminds me.) In the interest of the whole "editors are really just people" theme, I cough up a few details: Growing up in a Catholic working-class Staten Island family, I cared more for baseball than books and set my sights on the typical career choices of clueless boys—race car driver, big league pitcher, or if none of those worked out, a firefighter, like my dad. But a transformative head-on collision with Kurt Vonnegut in Mrs. Jocelyn's sophomore English class, and a realization that I couldn't break the town speed limit with my fastball, set me on another path. I had fallen in love with literature (as well as the cute, book-loving girl who sat in the next row). I was going to write.

I could have used a book like this in 1986 when I moved back to New York after graduating college. I arrived with a degree in history from Cornell University (thanks to financial aid, student loans, and my dad, who took on a second job) and a plan. It involved writing, yes, but it was devoid of the practical steps regarding what I might do when the writing was done. I figured my brilliance and undeniable talent would simply manifest itself, at which point an agent, an editor, and a publisher would materialize unbidden to nurture my genius. I would be discovered.

Much to the dismay of my parents, who were still paying off my student loans, I avoided steady work so I could write short stories, poems, and eventually, *The Novel*. I enrolled in an M.F.A. program and scraped by as a waiter, a bartender, a tutor, a drummer in a few rock bands, a middle school science teacher, and a part-time copy boy at *The New York Times*, where I delivered piles of breaking news updates, on actual paper, that came chattering off the wires, and where I began the slow process of learning about the business.

I wrote a handful of music reviews and profiles—of a jazz club owner, a bus driver, and a musician working in an Indian restaurant on Sixth Street—but I didn't have much guidance on how to be a working writer. Eventually, I lost my focus, and more important, my discipline, and gave up on the idea that I could figure out how to make a living from my first love.

What Sue's class and this book offer is not so much advice as a game plan, a practical to-do list that you'd never figure out, let alone follow, on your own. Think of Sue as your personal writing coach.

Working as an editor on the lookout for new writers has kept me busy. I have not yet written that novel. But so far, the publishing gods have been good to me. I have co-edited two essay collections, *The Stone Reader* and *Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments*, published by Liveright Publishing Corporation. And I still hammer out the occasional essay. The most recent, which ran in *The New York Times*, recalled how my mother wouldn't let me play football when I was a sports-mad kid. As Sue joked, except for the high-profile report on the dangers of playing football released just days before, which I linked to the piece, it wasn't timely at all.

—Peter Catapano, Editor, *The New York Times*



# Introduction

“You’re gonna sell your poems on the sidewalk?” my father asked. “Stop wasting time writing. Go to law, medical, or business school and get a real job.”

As a Jewish kid growing up on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, he’d carried blinds and fabric up broken tenement steps for my grandpa’s window shade store. My parents met in the neighborhood as teenagers. My mother was an orphan who’d lost her parents young, already moonlighting as a secretary by tenth grade. “Just got into medical school in Chicago. Ya coming or not?” was his marriage proposal, according to family lore. They worked hard to give their four kids what they never had.

Yet I was an overly sensitive outcast in my big Midwest clan. I had a brilliant but conservative doctor dad I couldn’t please, a redheaded domestic goddess mom I paled next to, and three sharp science-brain brothers who called me “Morticia” for my dark hair and clothes. They trashed my Dylan music, lefty politics, and poetry. When arguing, I couldn’t finish a sentence without interruption. I felt silenced, inferior, outnumbered. Scrawling my hurt into secret notebooks was soothing. My fantasies of being an acclaimed author were fueled by the desire to be heard.

At the University of Michigan (which my dad called “The People’s Republic of Ann Arbor”) I was pleased to have my prose printed in a literary journal, though they only paid in extra copies. As an NYU grad student, I studied with Nobel and Pulitzer prized luminaries whose published work I revered. Sitting around a table in class after my poems were praised, I asked my professor, “Which editors do you submit to?”

“If you’re worried about selling your work so soon, you’re not serious,” he sniffed.

I *was* serious. And desperate to learn if the obsessions I explored in verse might be expanded to prose I could earn money for. Nobody knew or would tell me. So after six years of higher education with two degrees, I didn’t even know how to craft a cover letter to submit the pages I’d spent years perfecting. My folks urged: Move back to Michigan, marry, have kids, get a “normal” career. But I didn’t want to be normal. I wanted to be a writer.

Miraculously, a former professor I hounded recommended me for an editorial assistant job at *The New Yorker*. I was overjoyed, though it was mostly typing and paid only thirteen thousand dollars a year, before taxes. Coincidentally, my first week at work, Monica, a fellow peon, introduced me to a *Cosmopolitan* editor in charge of the “Outrageous Opinions” column. The glossy magazine offered me five hundred dollars for a humorous essay about my confusion when using labels like “date,” “guest,” and “plus one” when referring to the guy I was seeing, who wasn’t really my boyfriend. (Among others, I suggested: “I just met the man I want to father the children I don’t want to have.”) How jazzed I was to find stars in the margins and edits on my draft from their famous editor-in-chief, Helen Gurley Brown!

At twenty-three, seeing my name in a national magazine was exhilarating. When it came out, I ran ten blocks in heels to a newsstand, buying all the copies they had. Getting the check for my first byline was redemptive. Writing allowed me to talk without being interrupted. Publishing was like winning a prize for my words.

“I owe you my life!” I told Monica. She sort of took me up on it when she married my surgeon brother, moved near my parents, and had four kids, becoming the daughter my parents always wanted. I chronicled my jealousy over this triangle (“My Best Friend Stole My Brother”) for my next piece, earning one thousand dollars. As Nora Ephron once said, “Everything is copy.” At twenty-four, I met a *New York Times* editor who assigned me book reviews. Soon I had my own paperback column at *Newsday* that was syndicated across the country.

These early feats convinced my skeptical parents that I should keep trying. Not wanting to stay on the editorial route, I left my full-time nine-to-five to focus on writing. Since I was single and soon broke, my mother complained, “You’re freelance everything!” After earning anywhere from one hundred to five thousand dollars each for many clips over several years, I still couldn’t afford my rent. To cover my bills, I taught feature writing at NYU’s journalism school by night. I loved teaching, which pleased my father who said, “Finally, a real job!” Yet I was disappointed by the administration’s dismissive attitude toward helping students get bylines. My department heads pushed me to assign 8,000-word third-person term papers to my classes, instead of the intimate three-page stories using *I* that editors coveted. “Nobody will buy long researched coursework from newcomers,” I argued. “But editors pay for good essays based on firsthand experience every day.”

“We don’t care about publication or payment. We’re not a trade school,” I was told.

My higher-ups shared the opinion of many in the ivory tower. They charged as much as business, medical, and law schools, seventy thousand dollars a year, to study great works. But unlike those other fields, they never shared practical guidance to help students land well after graduation. I was confused and frustrated by the discrepancy between what top educational institutions taught and what was needed to launch a profitable career. It was a glaring gap, as if wanting to support yourself with the craft you studied was greedy and shameful.

Most writing courses I took focused on reading famous texts and studying syntax, structure, and subtexts, relevant mainly in academia. So in 1993, when The New School offered me a job teaching classes for people of all ages, they let me try something different: I assigned short pieces editors wanted. Remembering how early bylines fueled my self-esteem, the goal of my course was: “Write and publish a great piece by the end of class.” Parodying my impatience, with a nod to the late, great Carrie Fisher, I titled my method “Instant Gratification Takes Too Long.”

I sped up the results by critiquing assignments not only on whether they were *good* for the classroom, but if they were *publishable* in the marketplace. Instead of analyzing metaphor or meter, I questioned if the story was engaging, original, wise, topical, or relevant to readers. We studied the best short nonfiction pieces. I showed my classes how to make their pages fit a specific newspaper or magazine column, which editor to try, and ways to craft a cover letter to get it read ASAP.

Best of all, The New School allowed me to invite wonderful editors to speak to my class, like the charmingly contrarian Peter Catapano! We'd go around the room to ask specific questions: "Which kind of pieces are you open to?" "How long?" "What should new writers never do?" Editors answered! These amazingly generous pros—twenty per semester—not only gave clear, smart, technical inside advice, they encouraged my students to submit work. "The worst that will happen is I might say 'No, thank you,'" Peter reassured, in a compassionate way that eliminated their fear.

In my initial New School class of twelve, many heard "Yes." Eight students got published and four made one thousand dollars or more. I instituted a rule: If anyone earned four figures from my assignments, they owed me dinner. I've rarely paid for a meal since. By giving the same homework and hosting varied editors, half of my classes published each term. Others sent clips and links later. With each student who sold a piece, I felt a vicarious thrill, remembering the euphoria of seeing my first byline.

Over two and a half decades of teaching, I learned that everybody has a story. But few know how to tell it well, where to send it, or how to convince an editor to pay for their words. The process seems insurmountable for someone new. Yet ironically, many editors would rather promote a debut over reprinting familiar voices. That's why it has been rewarding to show my students the steps to success.

Of course, even with a dramatic, burning story to tell, it's difficult to dive into feature journalism with no experience. But you don't have to be an English major, college grad, or take a class to get published. You just need a strong idea, three great pages, and a seasoned editor or

guide to help navigate the process. I taught a workshop at Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen for thirteen years with *New Yorker* humorist Ian Frazier, helping homeless members—some without high school diplomas—sell beautiful, dark, honest work about their experiences on the streets. It inspired an anthology, *Food for the Soul*,<sup>1</sup> which was featured on NPR and *The Today Show*. Several contributors said seeing their name in print was life changing.

For twenty-five years, despite several recessions, aspiring authors and non-writers alike have filled my courses and seminars. With the rise of social media, it's easier to make your opinion and narrative known. Anyone with access to a computer can submit work to an editor who'll pay. Everyone from teenagers looking for a sideline, to students applying to colleges, to professionals, to retirees on fixed incomes, can benefit from creating a platform and reaching a big audience fast.

I've become practically psychic in figuring out where a piece might land, and I love moonlighting as a literary matchmaker. I joked to my students that getting “clips,” copies of published pieces, is addictive: Like crack, you keep wanting more. Three people who studied with me joined *The New York Times* staff; one was hired at *The New Yorker*. So far, 105 books by my students have been sold to mainstream publishers (with \$5,000 to \$500,000 advances), many launching projects from their very first essay. When I offered endorsements to anyone who began their book in my class, I had no idea more than one hundred plugs would cause my book editor to call me “a blurb whore.” Several students had the nerve to get bigger offers on books that sold more copies than mine.

After acing my fifteen-week class, the CEO of Mediabistro asked if I'd teach a five-week version for their adult education wing. On my college syllabus, we had five-month semesters to go from rough idea to completion. Yet even in my shorter five-week version, students sold pieces by the fifth class—or sooner. It was not only doable, it was fun to be more focused. As they say, “Obsession rids the mind of clutter.” Undergrads and graduate students appreciated having the whole term to develop their work. But adults who were broke, impatient, and time- or

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1. Seabury Books, 2000

childcare-challenged voted for the thirty-five-day version. When Mediabistro was sold, I kept teaching the short classes on my own. Tons of successful five-weekers took the class repeatedly to up their game and land bigger clips and book deals.

Lots of old-schoolers scorn the speed of e-publishing, lamenting the loss of lead times and big bucks for print pages. Yes, you're now more likely to get one hundred than one thousand dollars for a debut piece. Still, I rejoice in the vast opportunities provided by such websites as *Salon*, *Slate*, *Quartz*, *BuzzFeed*, *VICE*, *Vox*, *Bustle*, and *Tablet*, who are eager to pay newcomers for original work. Newer online versions of top newspapers and magazines like *WashingtonPost.com*, *TeenVogue.com*, and *Esquire.com* pay less to start, but unknowns can break in every day with first-person stories.

While I've personally mined my dating, mating, and addiction disasters, my students tackle more global issues, harnessing the power of the press to speak out on topics they're troubled by, in profound pieces this book will share. Alex Miller detailed his trauma as an African-American Navy vet fighting the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs system in a *New York Times* op-ed. In *Tin House*, *Psychology Today*, and *The New York Times*, Aspen Matis revealed she was raped on her second day of college. Haig Chahinian depicted the difficulties of a gay Armenian man raising a biracial daughter for *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Daisy Hernandez confessed she'd avoided explicitly telling her conservative Spanish-speaking New Jersey mom about her girlfriend by using the code words "I'm staying in Nueva York" in *Ms.* magazine. English wasn't his first language, yet my Muslim student Kenan Trebincevic chronicled surviving the ethnic cleansing campaign in his Bosnian hometown for *Esquire*, *Slate*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. A twelve-year-old victim became a thirty-year-old champion for his people.

Getting published is not only empowering and transformative—it can be lucrative and lead to more career triumphs. After his *New York Times* piece, Alex, the Navy man, was offered a full-time hospital job. Aspen's essay on her sexual assault led to a book and paid lectures for

RAINN (the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network). Kenan became a Bosnian spokesperson against genocide, earning as much as seven thousand dollars per speech, lecturing around the country, as did Kassi Underwood, who published two pieces and a book on her abortion. Che Kurrien, an Indian-born undergrad, penned a *Newsday* op-ed on the culture shock of being a Mumbai immigrant in Manhattan. He contacted me ten years later to say everything I'd taught also applied to his job in his homeland, where he's now the editor-in-chief of *GQ India*.

Meanwhile as I aged, I tried longer, more literary ventures. When I showed a mentor my novel about two sisters-in-law who switched lives, she said: "You have no imagination whatsoever. Quit fiction." Fearing she was right, I took my own advice to "write about your obsessions." I chronicled quitting self-destructive relationships, cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. At forty-one, I sold my debut memoir to Random House. That led to a stream of nonfiction books, two that were bestsellers. But I never gave up revising my novel, which finally sold to St. Martin's Press thirteen years after I started. Instead of a book launch, I threw myself a book mitzvah. My publishing motto: No never means no. It means keep revising until it rocks. In a student's parody of my class, a perky teacher character critiqued a piece, saying, "This is really fantastic. Now just rewrite the whole thing and make it much better."

When students asked a seasoned editor visiting my class if the successful writers he knew had the most talent, he answered, "No. They're the most obsessed." To quote Goethe, "At the moment of commitment the entire universe conspires to assist you." Indeed, my method is no longer shunned. I recently traded up to the Ivy League for a term, teaching a Columbia University M.F.A. course and Skyping into a journalism seminar at Harvard taught by a star ex-student. While many of my protégés are flourishing at a young age, it took me until my forties to live well doing what I love. Still, how many people nail their dream?

Last summer, I received a missive from Olaf, the doctor taking care of my eighty-five-year-old father in the hospital. "Your dad says you're a very important author and a generous professor who assists aspiring writers," Olaf wrote. "I could use your advice." I helped Olaf publish

his first piece in *Quartz*, where my former student was his editor, which tickled my dad.

“So what did you tell Olaf about me?” I asked him.

“That I’m proud of my successful daughter,” he said, melting me. “He says you’re the real deal.”

“Why don’t you ever tell me that?”

“I am now,” he said.

I flashed to *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown, who grew up poor in Arkansas feeling like an ugly outcast “mouseburger.” She discovered that success and power produce their own kind of beauty. I’m grateful she gave me the chance to see my words go national and to pass along the honor of giving voice to others.

After spending a quarter of a century teaching the class I wish I could have taken, I’ve now written the guide I’d needed to read, sharing the inside secrets for landing an impressive byline in lightning speed. Focusing on longer projects, I thought I’d tire of short nonfiction. Yet it turns out the best way to generate interest in a book at any stage is to publish three pages on the topic. This past fall, when I sold a short piece mentioning *The Byline Bible* in my bio, it wound up going viral. I was trending for ten minutes, my smartphone burning up and buzzing during class. I walked home on air. Even after doing this for three and a half decades, it’s still magic to see how quickly three pages can change your life.



## CHAPTER 1

# Where to Start

### ..... ASSIGNMENT #1

The best way to break into publishing is with a great three-page double-spaced personal essay.

There's nothing more engaging than an intimate tale told with insight, humor, or candor. That explains the acclaim of such anthologies as *The Best American Essays*, moving first-person forums like *The New York Times*' "Modern Love" column and podcast, NPR's popular *This American Life*, and all the memoirs on nonfiction best-selling book lists—often sprung from one essay. Unfortunately, not all first-person narratives are as compelling for the editor and audience as they are for the author. Still, there's no reason you can't turn your private experiences into wise, eloquent, and publishable prose.

Early in my career, I sold short, provocative pieces to women's magazines about relationships, family, and work problems. Coming from a confessional poetry background, I knew that a surface-level appreciation of one's mate, parents, or children would not lead to brilliance. Love letters and light slices of life rarely engendered profundity. Showing off how great you are is superficial and will make readers hate and resent you. Writing usually becomes much richer when you focus on your vulnerability and explore your regrets and struggles. Think in extremes: the night that changed your life, the lover who shattered your heart, the embarrassing addiction you couldn't get over. Trying to tackle unfinished, messy, and uncomfortable conflicts led me to authentic, meaty subjects and often a cathartic release, not to mention money, success, and acclaim.

## STEP ONE: WHAT SHOULD I WRITE?

The most frequent mistake newcomers to nonfiction make is to pick a subject that's lackluster, self-congratulatory, or just a diary-like rendering of something mundane they went through. Sorry, but no editors I know want to publish a piece about how cute your cats, gardenias, or grandchildren are. I know it's counterintuitive, but what makes you successful and lovable in real life might make you unlovable and unknowable on the pages of a short essay. So if you portray yourself as strong, wealthy, good-looking, and happily married, audiences might stop reading after the third line. I learned this the hard way when I first brought a piece into my writing workshop about an ex-boyfriend whose surprise visit rattled me.

"She comes off like a well-off, white, forty-year-old married woman with a good husband [but] who still has feelings for her old flame. I hate her guts," one critic told me.

I was hurt and confused by the negative response, since I was the "she" being critiqued. Clearly there was something wrong with the way I was telling my story. I wound up reorganizing the details and reframing the events, offering a deeper, more vulnerable context. In my revision, I confessed that I was going through difficult infertility treatments and rejections from a series of book editors my literary agent had contacted on my behalf. It was at this moment that the college beau who'd unceremoniously dumped me twenty years earlier showed up at my doorstep. To make the timing worse, he handed me a book he'd just published—though he'd been a biology major who used to tell me that my English degree was "worthless." I weaved in the humiliating events that had happened the day before my ex came over when I'd received two phone messages. In the first, my fertility doctor shared disappointing results of tests my husband and I had taken, proving it was unlikely I'd be able to get pregnant. In the next call, my agent informed me that five editors had rejected the novel I'd spent five years on.

"I felt like she was saying, 'The only baby you have is ugly and we don't want it,'" I wrote, holding back tears.

“Wow, you should have gotten old and bitter a long time ago, because this rocks,” remarked the critic after she heard the new passages a week later. Indeed, that much more dark and vulnerable revised version of my essay wound up being published in *Marie Claire* magazine and launching a first memoir about all my horrific breakups: *Five Men Who Broke My Heart*.<sup>1</sup>

After learning how important it was to express vulnerability on the page, I began my first feature journalism class by asking everyone to write a “humiliation essay,” revealing *their* most embarrassing secret. I shared the basic, technical writing rules for the type of short nonfiction personal essays I’d had so much luck with.

1. **AIM FOR 500–900 WORDS**, around three double-spaced typed pages, the most likely length an editor will publish fast by a new scribe. Not 3,500 words. Stick to the word count.
2. **PUT EVERYTHING IN NEW YORK TIMES FORMAT**, which most publications use. You can buy their style manual,<sup>2</sup> or just pick up their Sunday newspaper and emulate the way they title every piece, put bylines under those titles, and indent for each new paragraph and line of dialogue.
3. **PICK A STORY THAT YOU CAN PUT YOUR REAL NAME ON**. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *TIME* magazine, and others will not allow you to use a pseudonym (though a few women’s and men’s magazines might allow you to use a maiden name or “anonymous”).
4. **DON’T USE FAKE NAMES FOR THE OTHERS**, which many editors will also not allow in nonfiction. To avoid specific monikers, try using labels like “my old best friend,” “my former flame,” “my ex-girlfriend,” “my relatives,” and/or using pronouns throughout. Sometimes you can get away with saying, “My ex, let’s just call him Pete,” as long as you indicate to the reader and editor you’re making a change. Or you can use real nicknames or labels you make up, as

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1. Delacorte Press, 2004

2. *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, Three Rivers Press, 2015

I did in my memoir (about Mr. Studrocket, Beach Boy, Root Canal, Hamlet, and The Biographer).

5. **SHARE YOUR BACKGROUND AND ETHNICITY** so people can picture, relate, and like you. You're familiar with your family lineage, background, and physical looks. But your photograph or bio won't necessarily accompany your pages. So describe yourself with unique, idiosyncratic details. My student Saba Ali began her first *New York Times* piece: "Born in Kenya of Indian heritage, I came to the United States at age six, settling with my family in upstate New York, growing up Muslim in suburban America." Include specific religious, ethnic, cultural, and class conflicts, especially since multiculturalism is hot.
6. **FOCUS ON ONE CURRENT SCENE OR ONE PROBLEM IN ADULTHOOD.** Since most editors are over eighteen, it is much harder to publish a piece about childhood, though strategic flashbacks later in the piece can work.
7. **SHOW, DON'T TELL.** Use very specific, fleshed-out details, including dialogue, external settings, and physical descriptions. Some novice writers think staying general is more universal, but it's just the opposite.
8. **DON'T OVERLOAD THE READER WITH BACKSTORY** or expository facts that ruin the momentum. Nobody wants to read "then-this-happened-then-that-happened." Playwright David Mamet says only three things are relevant to drama: Who wants what from whom? What happens if they don't get it? Why now? Make sure you answer those questions on your first page. If you need to, you can subtly weave in important background details later.
9. **DON'T LIE.** In nonfiction, you can't make things up. While you can exaggerate a little or re-create dialogue from the best of your ability, you can't make up stories, actions, or characters. Everything you write has to have really happened. Some editors work with fact-checkers or will Google you to test your veracity. *The New York Times'* "Modern Love" editor often shows a piece to the ex-spouse, mother, or brother in the story to double-check the essay's accuracy.

10. **GATHER PROOF.** Just in case an editor, fact-checker, or book publishing lawyer asks in the future, keep your old diaries, letters, and photo albums. Ask if you can tape conversations with loved ones (several ex-boyfriends surprisingly agreed when I interviewed them for my first memoir). File printed-out e-mails and texts, as many journalists do. In order for someone to win a lawsuit against you in nonfiction, he'd have to prove you lied, with malice intended, and show damages. So keep any evidence that shows you're telling the truth.
11. **CLARIFY YOUR EMOTIONAL ARC.** There's a saying you should "start in delight, end in wisdom." Though I can also understand the Seinfeldian rule "no hugging, no learning," you certainly don't want to start angry and end angry. Something has to be resolved or changed from your first line to your last. What did you learn or have to unlearn? What did this occurrence teach you? How can this experience help others? In my *New York Times Magazine* essay "The Bride Wore White—and Black," I was proud to wear all black to my cool, bohemian wedding, shunning convention. I concluded with the second ceremony, where I wore a white dress, with a rabbi and cantor, and we married all over again, for my mother, realizing it was worth it to make her happy.
12. **DON'T START BY GIVING AWAY YOUR END.** While provocation can get attention, if you confess "We broke up and then my first love died" right away, why would we keep reading? Add suspense, intrigue, mystery, or counterintuitive irony. Let your last line contain a big surprise.

During the second week of that initial class, my students turned in chronicles of their bad breakups, addictions, illnesses, and domestic fissures, as well as assaults, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and trouble with their families, bosses, and the law. I was so blown away by all of the brave, beautiful, and distinctive and dramatic essays they handed in—and later, by how many of those wound up published—that it soon became my signature assignment. It's tough to argue with stellar results. Over the last twenty-five years, this exact prompt has led to

thousands of wise, well-crafted first bylines for my students. (Many I'll quote and offer links to throughout this book to make them easier to look up and read.)

While some critics find confessional writing to be self-indulgent, editors of almost every newspaper, magazine, webzine, and book publisher buy them constantly. That's because audiences love to read personal writing, the most popular of all types of pieces. Best-seller book lists show millions of memoirs sold every year. The chance to get paid for a big byline has been dwindling—along with newspaper and magazine pages. Writing the “humiliation essay” is one of the best ways to beat the odds and break in.

Your first idea may not be your best one. So write a list of several topics you might consider. My student Sarah Herrington, a yoga teacher, at first complained, “But I don't have anything humiliating to write about.” After hearing the other students' ideas she came up with: “Teaching a kids' yoga class, a little girl had a panic attack. I helped her through it since I'd had panic attacks myself.” That wound up in *The New York Times*, the first of a long series of revealing essays Sarah went on to publish. Here's the advice I give my classes when it comes to figuring out good essay topics for my infamous humiliation essay assignment.

1. **LEAD THE LEAST SECRETIVE LIFE YOU CAN** (without getting sued, divorced, disowned, killed, or arrested).
2. **EXPLORE YOUR WORST ADDICTIONS OR OBSESSIONS THAT YOU CAN PUT YOUR NAME ON.** Pick a subject you find enthralling or that you have expertise on, especially if it's in the news or permeating current culture. My only students who've published pieces about the Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam wars have been veterans, military spouses, or children of vets. Conversely, pupils have aced essays on being addicted to buying makeup at an all-night Duane Reade drugstore, getting tested for HIV, and firing a nanny after reading her X-rated blog. Don't worry if the subject is small compared to world events. You'll bring a theatrical freshness to what fascinates you.

3. **FOCUS ON DRAMA, CONFLICT, AND TENSION.** Don't write an idealistic appreciation of your spouse, parents, or children. Confront unresolved emotional issues about something that's bothering you. As writer Joan Didion said, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking."
4. **FAILURE IS FASCINATING.** Do you remember losing an internship, job, lover, friendship, money, contest, or your pride? Go back there! An author friend suggests starting when you're about to fall off a cliff (literally or figuratively).
5. **CUT TO THE CHASE.** In a 900-word essay, there's no time to meander, explain your entire history, or include the highlights of your résumé. Be as blunt as you can about what your humiliation is. "In December, my husband stopped screwing me" was the first line of a piece I published in *The New York Observer* that led to a book deal. (Of course, I would not have sent that piece to *The New York Times* or *The Christian Science Monitor*. I chose *The New York Observer*—known for Candace Bushnell's "Sex and the City" column—because I knew they preferred very revealing first person.)
6. **AVOID THE OBVIOUS.** While being opinionated or sardonic is great, we already know that terrorism is bad, public schools need money, breakups hurt, and online dating can suck. Be counterintuitive, find idiosyncratic angles, play devil's advocate, twist clichés. When my student Rainbow Kirby explored her thirty-year-old boyfriend's living at home, she smartly began with the film *Failure to Launch*, which had just opened, and sold the flip side—the perks of dating a man residing with his folks—to *Newsday*. My protégée Amy Klein's *New York Times*' "Modern Love" column about being addicted to JDate ended with her missing her Internet stalker.
7. **EDIT YOURSELF.** Just because something really happened is never enough reason to write it. Much of life is boring. Try to get rid of the in-between actions, all tedious back-and-forth talk, and stage directions ("and then we went to the parking lot, got in the car, put on our seat belts, and turned on the engine"). Only include the most significant, fascinating beats to your story.

8. **END AS A VICTOR, NOT A VICTIM.** Personal essays must get personal. But even if you bravely revisit your worst struggles, acting victimized and reciting a litany of injustices inflicted on you is boring and cliché. Question, challenge, reveal, and trash yourself more than others. One colleague wrote about her ex-husband of twenty years who was an abusive alcoholic, listing all of his evils. When she admitted she knew he was a problem drinker after the first year, I suggested refocusing on why she stayed for nineteen more. Turned out her father was a drinker and her mother helped him give up the sauce—at age sixty. So that was her model for marriage. Her revision was a standout.
9. **DON'T FORGET THE WISDOM.** If you heard good advice, repeat it with attribution and share your own solutions to your problems. My favorite essays about quitting addictions include the nitty-gritty on how the writer nixed cigarettes, alcohol, heroin, pills, pot, rampant sex, shopping, or sugar. For example, I chronicled how, when I was going through nicotine withdrawal, my addiction specialist instructed my husband to hold me for one hour every night, without speaking, as we watched a TV show or film. That calmed me down and replaced my toxic habits with love.
10. **REMEMBER, THE FIRST PIECE YOU WRITE THAT YOUR FAMILY HATES MEANS YOU'VE FOUND YOUR VOICE.** (If you don't want to offend anyone, try writing a cookbook.)

## LIST HUMILIATING MOMENTS TO MINE

Like Sarah Herrington, many of my students at first complained that they couldn't come up with any enthralling ideas. I could relate. I always feared my life was too boring to compete with such internationally acclaimed authors as Mary Karr, Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, Etgar Keret, Alison Bechdel, or A.M. Homes. After all, I was a straight white girl from Michigan who'd had stupid affairs and addictions. Moving to Manhattan, therapy helped me quit my toxic habits and I married someone nice. That was it. I'd become a workaholic who sat at the com-



puter most of the day. My parents were not raging alcoholics. I wasn't adopted. I had no children. Nobody important in my childhood died on me. I wasn't a world traveler. I'd never been in a war, race riot, on food stamps, in the hospital more than overnight, divorced, or the subject of a fatwa. There were many other typical freelancers and teachers like me in the world. What could I possibly add to the cultural conversation?

Luckily I learned you don't need a wildly dramatic existence to be a successful nonfiction writer. It turned out that by being brutally honest and extremely revealing about many of the dull day-to-day issues I'd been through made me stand out. Even my silly-seeming exploits and minor adventures resonated with top editors and readers. In fact, Gustave Flaubert advised writers to "Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work."

Here's a list of embarrassing topics I explored for national magazines and webzines over the years. Since they had big audiences across the country, I tried to make my stories both idiosyncratic and universal at the same time.

1. Although I lie and pretend otherwise, I really get sick of seeing all the pictures of my friends' kids. (*Goodhousekeeping.com*)
2. I started a secret Facebook friendship with my ex's wife. (*Elle.com* and picked up on *Redbook.com* and *Esquire.com*)
3. I fixed my brother up with my best friend and lost them both. (*New Woman*)
4. After a bad breakup, I felt suicidal and needed therapy to save me. (*Cosmopolitan*)
5. Though I was happily married, I developed a crush on a physical therapist half my age. (*New York* magazine)
6. My best friend stopped returning my phone calls and e-mails, breaking my heart. (*Oprah.com*)
7. I was a feminist who intentionally avoided female doctors. (*DAME* magazine)
8. I was sure I was the type who never held grudges. But then I realized I was incapable of forgiving anyone unless they give me a full-out apology. (*Salon*)

9. Because I was broke and desperate, I had to ask my conservative father—a doctor—to write me a prescription for birth control pills. (*Jane* magazine)
10. I couldn't see that criticizing my husband was ruining my marriage. (*Marie Claire*)
11. In graduate school, I dated a professor I felt harassed by, but later realized I was the aggressor and he was the victim. (*New York* magazine)
12. When my husband stopped initiating sex, I started overeating. (*Psychology Today*)
13. I thought quitting diet soda would be easy. Then I stopped and went into withdrawal. (*Newsweek*)
14. I gave away two old Barbie dolls to a friend's young daughters, then missed them. (*Daily Beast*)
15. I won't let anybody take selfies of me because I hate how I look in candid photographs. (*Yahoo*)
16. I was secretly ashamed of my family's politics. (*Salon*)

Here are my personal essay topics that I made more timely or specialized to publish in particular newspaper or web sections.

1. Though I swore I would grow old naturally like Gloria Steinem, at the first sight of a gray strand, I ran to the beauty salon to get my hair dyed. (*The New York Times Magazine*)
2. After I quit smoking and drinking, I'd swim a mile every day in my Greenwich Village roof pool—until I got the only back injury in the world that made swimming impossible. (*The New York Observer*)
3. After I lost my favorite job, reviewing five books a week, my boss hired someone to take my place and let her do only three books weekly for the same salary. (*Quartz*)
4. The friend who fixed me up with my husband danced the hora at my wedding, then stopped speaking to me. (*The Forward*)
5. I needed a shrink to help me write a book with my Manhattan shrink. (*The New York Times Opinion*)

6. I de-friended people on Facebook who had political opinions I disagreed with. (*The Washington Post* Opinion section)
7. Although it was supposed to be nonaddictive, I got hooked on smoking pot and don't celebrate all the marijuana reforms. (*Los Angeles Times* Op-Ed section)
8. When my best friend from high school visited me, I found myself completely jealous of her domestic life in Israel. (*Tablet*)
9. The first day I tried to quit cigarettes, I wound up searching the garbage for half-smoked butts at three in the morning. (*The New York Times*)
10. After I quit cigarettes, alcohol, pot, gum, and bread, I became addicted to quitting things every New Year. (*New York Daily News*)

## WHAT IF MY TOPIC IS TOO ORDINARY?

My students sometimes get hung up on finding the perfect, original idea that will go viral, propelling them into print, book publishing, or notoriety. I tend to agree with the late British novelist and critic Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, who said there are only seven stories in the world: Man against Man. Man against Nature. Man against himself. Man against God. Man against Society. Man caught in the middle. Man and Woman. (Feel free to update with your own gender and pronouns.)

So it's not necessarily the saga itself that will get you noticed, paid, and published, but the way you tell it. To quote the German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: "God is in the details."

That said, some tales really have been told too often for editors to keep printing. The frequency of a universal issue getting covered doesn't imply you can't attempt another go. But be conscious what you're up against, be innovative, and add a signature spin when visiting places many others writers have already trod.

"Losing a loved one is the most common essay theme we see," a top editor once told my class. "My bosses declared: 'We have a moratorium on dead parent stories.' There are too many, they're too depressing, and they're mostly the same, so they're rejected."

Many other editors I know have echoed that sentiment. It doesn't mean you can't write about the intense pain of losing your mother, father, or grandparents. To publish it, you just have to be more creative in the way you spin that saga. Here are some examples of unusual twists that worked.

1. In "Agreeing to Accept and Move On," my student Elizabeth Koster's *New York Times*' "Modern Love" piece centered on how—while her mother was sick with cancer—Koster desperately tried to find a husband so she could introduce them before it was too late.
2. My student Bryan Patrick Miller's *New York Times Magazine* piece "Return of Glavin" chronicled how he tried to fulfill his mother's deathbed request that he visit their ancestral home in Ireland, where their lineage was highly regarded. Turned out, their bloodline was filled with scoundrels who'd been run out of town.
3. "Rhode Island Author Searches for Father's Forgotten Grave," the *Providence Journal* essay by my student Judith Glynn, centered on her quest to find out exactly where her divorced, estranged late dad was buried and visit him there.
4. My friend Alice Feiring's *New York Times* piece "Writer's Block at the Tombstone" is about how, after her brother Andrew passed away, she and her mother were appalled that her sister-in-law only etched "Beloved husband and father" on his tombstone, without also putting "brother and son."
5. The *Salon* essay by Rebecca Lanning called "Death Doesn't Come Like It Does in the Movies" delineated what her mother's last days with cancer taught her about our right to die and the importance of assisted dying.
6. In his *New York Times* essay, "A Son's Initiation in the Fraternity of the Lawn," my colleague Rich Prior remembers all the gardening and landscaping advice his late father gave him over the years while Rich mows the grass at his own summer house.
7. "The Way They Were," my colleague Gabrielle Selz's *New York Times* piece, dissected the contrasting ways her parents dealt with death. Her shy, late mother never mentioned any last wishes and died in

the hospital. Her take-charge, still-living ninety-six-year-old father, on the other hand, has been obsessively preparing every detail of his demise for the last twenty-six years, including drafting his obituary and buying his burial plot, along with the gravestone to mark it.

## WRITE A HOLLYWOOD MOVIE PITCH

It helps—for many reasons—to condense the idea of your essay in one or two succinct fun or fascinating lines. Try to slip in specific idiosyncratic details about yourself, whether it's your age, religion, color, ethnicity, or background. Be witty, provocative, or vulnerable. Here are descriptions of humiliation essays that my students pitched me, and editors over the years, which sold to national magazines. While a small percentage of the publications or sections might no longer exist, many do. I've included some pieces in full, and most of the others you can look up online. Because these ideas are so crazy, weird, or heartfelt, I bet they'd sell just as quickly today.

1. I wasn't afraid of going to bed with him. I was afraid to sleep with him—because he didn't know I was a sleepwalker. (Kathleen Frazier, *Psychology Today*'s "Two-Minute-Memoir")
2. I couldn't wait to flee my suburban family and escape to Los Angeles—until a back injury left me no choice but to move home so they could take care of me. (Lawrence Everett Forbes, *Newsday*)
3. During my difficult divorce at forty-three, I decided it was okay to let my two daughters see me cry. (Beverly Willett, *Good Housekeeping*)
4. I had a big schnoz everyone told me to get fixed. (Sarah Liston, *Marie Claire*)
5. I tried to cure my obsessive-compulsive disorder with prayer. (Abby Sher, *SELF* magazine)
6. Meeting my missing father for the first time, I was afraid he'd think I was a failure. (Kelley Brower, *Cosmopolitan*)

7. None of my friends or co-workers knew I was a Muslim refugee who'd survived ethnic cleansing at age twelve before I became an American citizen. (Kenan Trebincevic, *Esquire.com*)
8. My gynecologist incorrectly decided my husband had abused me when he hadn't. (Aspen Matis, *Psychology Today*)
9. As a kid, I was sexually abused by a neighbor. As an adult, I was afraid to tell anyone. (Jake Cooney, *Newsweek*)
10. I cheated on my husband—with food. (Kara Richardson Whitely, *SELF* magazine)
11. Nobody knew I spent my first eighteen years in America as an undocumented immigrant. (Maria E. Andreu, *Newsweek*)
12. My voice was so high-pitched that people thought I was female. (Mark Jason Williams, *Out* magazine)
13. Studying in Africa made this white girl appreciate her big behind. (Amy Karafin, *Jane* magazine)
14. I was afraid to go out or show my arms and legs because I had a skin disorder called vitiligo. (India Garcia, *TeenVogue.com*)
15. As a first-generation Chinese-American woman who wears a size 36D bra, I can testify to the power of the American fast food diet. (Jennifer Tang, *Newsweek*)

Here are some newspaper and web ideas my students sold:

1. When my elderly mother was sick, I slept in the same bed with her. (Peter Napolitano, *The New York Times*' "Modern Love" column)
2. I was fired from my job for sexually harassing a young co-worker while I was drunk and I didn't even remember doing it. (Mark Hoadley, *The Washington Post*'s "Solo-ish" column)
3. After a long estrangement with my mother, I tried to connect with her on Facebook. (Adane Byron, *Salon*)
4. I'm a liberal New Yorker who has a gun I named Roxy. (Amaya Swanson, *The Frisky*)
5. At forty-four years old, I'm a nomad who has lived in eighteen temporary residences in six years. (Susan Marque, *The Washington Post*'s "Solo-ish" column)

6. As a nice Jewish guy named David living in Queens, for two weeks in 1977, the police thought I was the serial killer Son of Sam. I liked being seen as dangerous. (David Kempler, *The New York Times*)
7. I've been petrified I'll die one second for fifty-seven years, ever since I was diagnosed with diabetes. (Dan Fleshler, *The New York Times'* Opinion section)
8. Facebook suggested I befriend my rapist. (Dorri Olds, *The New York Times'* Opinion section)
9. At thirty-seven, I moved back in with my parents, becoming the rebellious teenager I never was. (Joel Schwartzberg, *The New York Times Magazine*)
10. As a life coach, I hated helping my clients too much. Because when they became successful, they quit me. (Stacy Kim, *Quartz*)
11. My name is Arpard Herschel Fazakas—or at least it was until last year, when, at age fifty-one, I changed it. (Art Segal, *The New York Times Magazine*)
12. As an undergraduate, I fell in love with a guy who had to wear an ankle bracelet because he'd been accused of raping another student. And I hated how passive he was sexually. (Ashley Cross, *The New York Times'* “Modern Love” column)
13. I never should have followed my dreams and left my boring job, because now I'm broke, out of work, and even more depressed. (David Sobel, *Salon*)
14. As an Asian man, I was afraid to tell my family I was most attracted to blonde American girls. (Tuan Nguyen, *New York Press*)
15. I thought I could handle getting an abortion, but when my ex-boyfriend had a baby with another woman three years later, I flipped out. (Kassi Underwood, *The New York Times'* “Modern Love” column)
16. I tried to become a spy to get away from my conservative parents. (Carolina Baker-Norko, *Slate*)
17. Ever since a car accident landed me in a wheelchair, I've done more immoral, illegal things. (David Birnbaum, *The New York Times Magazine*)

18. My whole family was out of work at the same time. So how could I help my daughter find employment when I couldn't get a job myself? (Lisa Reswick, *The Wall Street Journal*)
19. I was roofied at fifty—and nobody at the school function where it happened did anything about it. (Linda Kleinbub, *The New York Observer*)
20. My Asian parents didn't care if I got Cs in school. They weren't tigers; they were pussycats. (Kate Chia, *The New York Times*' "On Campus" column)
21. I had "man boobs," a condition called gynecomastia, and I never told anyone I had an operation to fix it at age fifteen. (Zachary Valenti, *Salon*)

## FIGURE OUT YOUR MAIN GOAL

So you've picked your subject. Before trying to decide where you might publish a piece, I ask my students to first figure out exactly what their goal is. Here are some typical responses.

1. "I've never published before, so I just want to see my work anywhere, even if I don't get paid." In this case, I would research *The Rumpus*, *Tin House*, *Honeysuckle Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, and *McSweeney's*, which usually don't pay for pieces, but publish many short essays by new writers all the time.
2. "I'd like to get paid something, as long as my piece will be published quickly." If this is how you feel, check out *AMNY*, *Metro*, *The Villager*, *The Establishment*, *Ravishly*, and *Bustle*, which sometimes pay only fifty dollars but come out quickly.
3. "I want a prestigious byline, no matter if it just pays one hundred dollars." The more respected a publication, the more competition you'll have. So make sure to first peruse many pieces from *The New York Times*' Opinion and Well Family sections and its "Modern Love" column, as well as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Salon*, *Slate*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New Yorker*.



4. “I’m hoping to make the most amount of money possible.” When finances are your main motivation, I recommend buying and studying the hard copies of such women’s and men’s magazines as *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Men’s Journal*, *Men’s Health*, *Marie Claire*, *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Redbook*, which often pay between one and four dollars a word. (I have a karmic theory that if you want to get paid from a publication, you have to buy the paper version, you can’t just read it online for free.) But be warned: The higher the fee, the slower and more difficult it will be. In some cases it can take a year or two to get a yes, a clip, and a check. Some publications pay on acceptance—not necessarily a good thing. *The New Yorker* once famously bought a piece it didn’t run for fourteen years!
5. “I’m aiming for the best publication in the world.” If you want only the top, study *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *The Paris Review*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine*. But again, you might need to take the long view.
6. “I want to get published but there is no way I can ever put my name on this.” I’ve never known *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* to allow the author of a first-person essay to use a pseudonym. However, *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire* have published my students’ work under an alias or “anonymous.” Focus on women’s and men’s magazines. Make sure to let the editor know in your cover letter you won’t be able to use your legal name, knowing that might be a deal-breaker.
7. “My dream is to launch my book project with an essay.” From my experience, the best places to make a splash that will interest literary agents and book editors are *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, and *The New York Times*’ “Modern Love” column—the latter has inspired about fifty books so far, according to editor Daniel Jones. But he also takes three to four months to get back to you on submissions. So don’t submit your Valentine’s Day story on February 1. And the minute you submit your piece, start something new.