




Royal Flying Doctor Service
QUEENSLAND SECTION



WRITING YOUR OWN STORY



“From our earliest ancestors telling dramatic tales of hunting the mammoth, it seems that we humans have always loved a good story. We are entranced by them from the time we are infants, and as adults we are suckers for those with the gift of the gab.

Some of us find it easy to write down that one great story each of us have inside. Most of us find it hard but still give it a go. I believe that all of us have something to say, one great yarn at least, to pass on, to entertain or enlighten others (or ourselves) by sharing it in writing.

Some of us write simply because we love it, and a few of us get published but that's not who this article is about. This is for those who want to write for all sorts of other reasons. For example:

- to leave a family memoir of themselves, their home place, and their time for their grandchildren.
- to write about their place and community for their local historic record.
- to write a short story, perhaps for a competition.
- to contribute to a local anthology, such as 'Gulf Women', a contemporary snapshot of women's lives around the Gulf of Carpentaria.
- to write about a time or an incident that has been painful or traumatic, to try to come to terms with, or even to increase understanding and ease its distress.



During September 2019, in conjunction with the Dept of Infrastructure, Drought Community Outreach days, and sponsored by RFDS, I gave sixteen writing workshops and one-to one discussions in outback South-west Qld drought affected communities. From these, I want to talk about the reticence people have about beginning to write; the 'buts', and what we can do about them.

Unfortunately, many of us associate writing with school, marked essays, exams, or even worse, that grumpy teacher. The joy of now being adult is that this no longer looms over us. We can write as well as we can with no-one judging what we write about or how we put the words together. My mantra: 'If you can think it, you can write it down.'

-Bronwyn Blake



"But how do I start?"...

(Panic, panic, I don't know what to write about!)

The answer is, with the first sentence that runs through your head. It doesn't have to be the start... **just write down that first thought.** First thought is a good thought.

You'll find immediately that **it brings up associated thoughts**, other connections forwards and backwards in time, other incidents that relate to that first thought. In expanding on that first thought, and in jotting down ideas about other events in dot points, you'll find that you have a plot developing under your fingers.

For example:

- **First thought**... "I can honestly say 2018 was the worst year of my life."
- **Associated thoughts**... to jot down quickly with key words: e.g.: drought, bank, stock, feed, water, kids, school, relationships. How / why this happened was...etc.

"But it looks a bit bare!"

Yes, it's a bare plot. So this is where you start writing about the place **where this event happened**. Tell others about your property / farm / town, and then its place in its greater perspective.

For example:

- "Our home straddles the once beautiful XYZ Creek. It was..."
- "Our nearest neighbours are 68ks in one direction and 34ks in the other. Our closest town is..."

"But it's still bare bones"

True, so now **expand your environment using all your senses**. What can you see far and near, above and below? What can you hear? Use those evocative smells. What do you love and feel about here? All these things will be unique to the place where the event happened.

For example:

- "When I look out my back door, above me is.."
- "In the far distance I can hear..."
- "After rain the eucys smelled..."
- "Beneath my feet now is..."
- "It's hard to remember when..."
- "Before the drought we had..."

"But I just seem to be writing about myself"

You are not alone. **Talk about the others around you** impacted by this event. Develop their characters to make them jump up as real people. You'll also find that this expands your plot with their stories. Remember small things show a lot.

For example:

- "Our ringer, Shorty, was a huge man with gentle hands like meat plates..." (an instant visual of the man)
- "He once took on a wild mickey bull..." (plot expansion)

Finally...

Don't be afraid to **write from your heart**. "I feel...", "I hope...", "I worry that...", "I love...", "I have learned..."

No one ever needs to see your work – but if you do choose to share it, you will be expressing our common humanity. We all have hard, funny, poignant, horrible, joyful and sad times, and the older we get, the more experiences we gather, so for all our sakes don't be shy about writing them.

The last few years have been devastating for many living in drought, experiencing flood and fire, trying to keep going when things are beyond tough. **It could just help to write about it.** Even if it's not for yourself, then to share with family, friends or with the wider community that often has little idea of the losses and the heartbreaking years past, and the times that are still being lived by many in the outback.

As we heard from participants in the writing workshops, the simple act of putting down one's thoughts and feelings on paper, helps to understand and clarify the hurt we are experiencing. Through the process of expressing our pain and frustrations in this way, we can think more clearly about those events and their consequences. As a result of this greater clarity, we can help ourselves gradually come to terms with the outcomes, painful though they may be.

So what is free writing?

In free writing, not worrying about spelling or grammar, we can help ourselves to make sense of, and better control, our often-overtaxed emotions. When we understand our feelings and their impact on us, we are better able to make positive steps towards managing the stress of past events. We can understand that although we cannot alter these events, how we deal with their consequences can have a major impact on our mental health.

There is a large amount of research finding that writing in a story or journal about a traumatic event or time can be beneficial. Writing about traumatic, stressful or emotional events has been found to result in improvements in both physical and psychological health [The Royal College of Psychiatrists 2005].

In Jane Turner's (a psychologist and author) article [InPsych 2015], she summarises much of the research of the last couple of decades showing the healing power of creative writing. Research has indicated that the natural process of writing stories can improve mood, emotional health, PTSD symptoms and physical health. It can increase the understanding of the writer's experiences and themselves and reduce the impact of bottled up emotions.

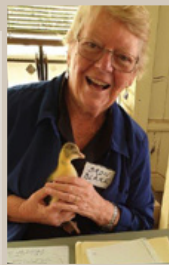
Some research shows developing a well-structured narrative can show greater benefit than simple expression of thoughts and feelings. Writing can be meditative and relaxing, and it can help lift your mood, which is good medicine for improving your health and helping to ease anxiety, anger, depression, or loss.

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Writing as well about non-stressful events, things you are grateful for, or introducing humour into your story, can be liberating, entertaining, imaginative and good mood-altering fun. Even in the worst times, there is usually some humour...even if it's dark! It might even make you laugh... the best medicine! And if you are going to share your writing, humour is an excellent way to let your reader better understand you, your values and your strengths.

— Cath Walker





Bronwyn 'Bron' Blake is a published author of thirteen books for young adults and adults, including 'Gulf Women, Voices from Remote North West Queensland', and the recently published 'Beyond the Outback' [Hachette, 2019].

In 2019, Bron travelled with the Royal Flying Doctors Service (Queensland Section), to deliver sixteen writing workshops, or one-to-one conversations, with people living in drought affected areas wanting to write their story.



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