

The Epic Event Exercise©

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We’ve all grown up telling stories about our lives. We each have a handful of stories that we tell again and again, events that we simply cannot get out of our minds. I call these our “personal mythologies”, and these stories are a fantastic place to start in the writing process. There are reasons we can’t get these stories out of our minds. They often touch upon our soul’s yearning, and like fables or fairy tales, often have morals at the end.

So, to start the writing process, I suggest picking three epic events that happened to you before the age of 14. They can be simple events, but they're ones you've never been able to get out of your mind. They’re the stories you always tell people, the stories your family laughs about to this day.

The stories should be events that occurred during a limited time period, say a 2- to 6-hour period. Do not choose a recurring event like: Every summer we would go to the river to go fishing with my father. Instead choose one specific day that you went fishing with your father, and on that day something of particular importance happened. Trying to write about events that happened every summer or over a long period of time can be difficult and vague. If you’ve ever done this in your own writing, you probably were not able to finish the story. Limiting the time-scale helps you sink your teeth into the details story.

Try not to choose a traumatic event. Trauma can give us instant writer’s block. Choose the first three events that pop into your mind. Don’t overthink it. Don’t get your ego involved – oh, I’ll choose this event because it’ll make me look cool. Avoid that. Be real.

Off the top of my head, my three events are:

* + Bicycle accident with Cathy when I was in 3rd grade
	+ The time Aunt Jackie gave me the book Little Women for Christmas when I was 11.
	+ Getting the Miss America bike for Christmas when I was 8.

Now, sit down and write a summary paragraph of each event. On the computer, or by hand, do a quick paragraph about each event. This is to get the literary juices and the memories flowing. Don’t think too hard about this, just write. It’s okay to be sloppy. The most important thing is to get the story out of your head and onto the paper. Here are mine:

* 1. Bicycle accident with Cathy. We were in the front yard of the 2 story house. I remember it was stinking hot. The tar boiled on the road. There were dry dirt patches in the yard. The grass was yellow. Cathy begged me to let her ride me down Cochise on my new bike. She’d just learned to ride. I’d just gotten my Miss America bike the Christmas before. She did a backbend. Oh please, let me. Please. How could I say no? We walked the bike up the steep hill. She got on front. Our cousin Joylyn was there with her bike. When we were ¾ of the way down, I could feel the bike wobble. I worried Cathy would throw us over. Down we went, the road burning the flesh. We cried all the way up the hill to the house. The frame of my new bike was bent, which upset me more than anything else.
	2. Aunt Jackie gave me the book Little Women. It was Christmas. I was upstairs looking out the dormer window, waiting. Jackie and Mac drove up and parked at the curb. They had a boy whose name I could never remember. I waited until the adults called my name. I went down and stood in front of them. I waited for this all year. They were my God parents and gave good gifts. It had red Santa Claus wrapping. When I tore it off, I couldn’t believe my eyes. A book. I’d never owned a book. In our house, we only had the King James Bible and the Farmers’ Almanac. I stared at it and went cold. I never read it. I ended up sleeping with it, and going to college with it. I ended up breaking the binding. But I never read it. How could I read something so precious? A book. My first book!
	3. Getting the Miss America bike for Christmas when I was 8. It was bitterly cold. I remember blowing great billows of white from my lips. Mom and I were in downtown Jefferson City. There were no other cars. It was like a ghost town. For some reason we were here outside the bicycle shop on a frigidly cold day and it was closed. Every shop was closed. I saw the Miss America bike through the window, red white and blue streamers like mystical hair, stars on the banana seat, red, white and blue stripes on the frame, a plate on the side that spelled out Miss America. I put my palm on the frigid glass. The bike was a dream. The bike was a dream to fly. We were poor. I would never ever be able to own such a bike. I let the image of it sear my soul, knowing it would never be mine. But then on Christmas morning there it was. The lights from the tree bouncing off its frame, oh praise the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord; I nearly fell headlong down the stairs getting to it.

Now, pick one of the events. I am drawn to the story about Aunt Jackie giving me the gift of a book. There is no wrong answer with this one. Whichever event you pick will work great. Again, do not over-think it. Which story most touches your heart and soul?

Write the story you’ve chosen from beginning through the middle to the end in one sitting. Sit at your computer, or with a pad of paper or a journal, and do not get up until you tell the story through to the end. This is not about being clever, or fancy or smart. This is about telling the story. Often the ego interferes when we’re trying to write something, and we try to sound smart on the page. Just tell the story. Write it chronologically. Keep it simple. Write it like you’d tell people at a dinner party the story. The single most important aspect of this exercise is to get the story out of your head and onto the page. This is called the rough draft phase, and there’s a lot of magic and energy in writing it roughly. Don’t polish that first sentence; leave it and keep moving! We want flow, energy, power, and it’s okay if you misspell and use incorrect grammar and do not punctuate correctly. Just tell the story!

Later, you can adapt this story, polish and revise it, and turn it into the first chapter of a memoir, or into an essay, or fictionalize it for a short story or a novel. You can also go back to the other two epic events you listed, write those out in rough draft, and eventually polish those, as well.

Remember, through my writing coaching company Art of Storytelling, we offer coaching services. Contact me if you want a free initial consultation. artofstorytelling@gmail.com