



How to Get Going with Personal Narrative in Scholarly Writing

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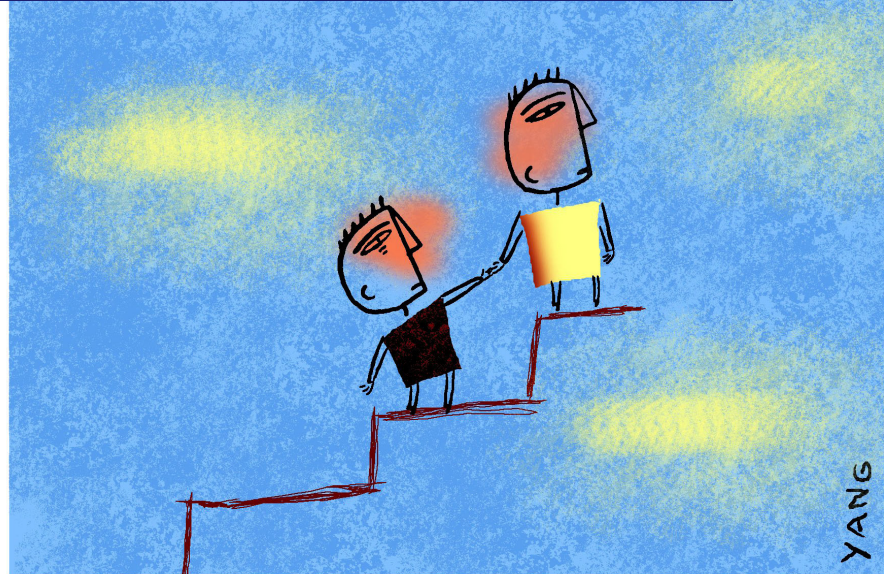
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by Yvette A. Hyater-Adams



Ornate carvings in the ivory dining room chair resemble a throne from some great Asian dynasty. It is the seat of thought and creation. Leaning on the shoulders of sages, a cumulation of research across disciplines, conversations, and experiential activities, form emerging theories as a first draft of my graduate thesis. I sit patiently in my dining room chair, listening to Lara St. John's violin passionately lean into one of Bach's Concertos for Two Violins. I await a 2:00 p.m. call with Caryn, my thesis advisor.

"Well dear," Caryn eases into a conversation after our opening pleasantries, "you've got some great ideas going on here and I like how it's coming together."

"Great," I exhale, reaching over to turn down the speaker and Lara's powerful strokes. I replay time spent digesting more than 150 books, articles, and position papers; how I attended conferences, conducted interviews, and led experiential workshops.- all of this to support graduate work in how creative and expressive writing can break silences and improve the emotional and physical well-being of middle class African American women. Living near Philadelphia, I have a rich audience to work with using this research.

"There is a place where we need more work though," Caryn interrupts my meanderings, "I don't see you in this writing. Where are you?"

My eyebrows drop to the bridge of my nose, an inherited scowl signaling that I am not quite sure what she means.

"Your research is sound, showing a vast range and depth as you explore the contradictions and make meaning out of the research, yet, I don't *hear you* in this," Caryn pauses, allowing a few breaths to quiet our thoughts. "Where is the African American woman who is writing and healing from this work? I need to hear your voice, your experience."

I thought scholarly writing was to be written from an objective viewpoint? Was I not to remain invisible? The notion of putting "I" in academic writing was a huge no-no. Writing annotations was one thing, but for my thesis? Yet I am asked to "be seen" in the writing.

"I'm not sure how to do this Caryn," a familiar pit in my gut speaks up. "It feels pretty vulnerable what you are asking me to do."

"So Yvette," I feel Caryn's nudge all the way from Kansas, "it seems like the women you'll be working with just might understand where you are."

After sitting with Caryn's feedback for a bit, I finally get it. Caryn needs me to blend the research and the analytical with the emotional and personal. I have much work to do.

What is personal narrative with scholarly writing?

This story was my introduction to weaving *personal narrative with scholarly writing*.

There is an emerging trend in the worlds of the social sciences, communications, education, and management studies: self-narration is accepted as scholarship. Methods such as autoethnography, scholarly personal narratives, and transformative narratives are approaches available to researchers and OD-ABS practitioners to write about their fieldwork in a creative, honest, first person voice, and with scholarly rigor. This type of writing expands the pool of those interested in contributing toward scholarship, especially with non-traditional and marginalized voices. Research, emotion, and experience are recognized as key components in the written work.



What are the theoretical origins of personal narrative in scholarly writing?

One path is through ethnographic writing in which cultural stories are collected and crafted as part of the qualitative analysis in research. This method is typically used by cultural anthropologists, and the stories are commonly directed at the “other” versus the self - although the researcher sometimes includes brief self-narrations. Autoethnography grew out of this discipline. This method of self-narration recognizes the research, the researcher, and the cultural audience(s) as critical to the scholarship. A leading voice in autoethnography is Carolyn Ellis, Professor, Communications Department at the University of South Florida, USA. Ellis along with colleagues Tony E. Adams and Art P. Bochner provide a definition for autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)”.ⁱ Ellis also challenges the polarization of autoethnography--that it is both an art AND science embracing Self AND culture.ⁱⁱ

A sister of autoethnography is *scholarly personal narratives* (SPN), also finding its way into the academy while opening doors for scholars to publish their work within professional and academic journals. SPN was coined by Robert J. Nash, Professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, Burlington, USA. Nash is author of *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, and along with DeMethra LaSha Bradley, wrote a second SPN book called *Me-Search and Re-Search*. According to Nash, SPN is similar to memoir and personal essay with a key difference - the writing is specifically organized around themes, issues, and constructs that link the personal to a larger worldview.ⁱⁱⁱ Nash encourages SPN writers to add a meaningful voice to your discourse and “rewrite, if you dare, the currently dominating scholarship in your profession”.^{iv} He continues, “remind yourself every day that you have the power and the right to compose your own scholarly story”. Like Ellis, Nash challenges singular thinking in providing quality analysis in scholarship. Both believe there is room to honor self-narrative and traditional aspects of qualitative and quantitative research.

First cousin to autoethnography and SPN is a method I call *transformative narratives*. Transformative narratives 1) emerge from real and imagined visual, written, and spoken stories, that 2) become material to use for self-awareness, meaning making, insight, and visioning, and 3) crystallize into deliberate actions for change.^{vi} This method is part of my ongoing research on how imagination, experience, and knowledge can “re-story” and shift one’s narrative. The notion of re-storying in autobiographical narratives is based on the writings of Gary Kenyon and William Randall where they posit, “our life is a set of stories we tell ourselves about our past, present, and future”. They continue, “these stories are far from fixed, direct accounts of what happens in our lives, but products of the inveterate fictionalizing of our memory

and imagination...re-storying goes on continually within us”.^{vii} Transformative narrative deviates from the other two methods as it acknowledges the fictionalized aspects of our “memory” when we write our personal narratives. Our recollection of events are, at times, not as clear as we believe, therefore we tend to “fill in the blanks” with patterns or habits from our lived experience. This requires a flow of writing that is emotionally honest and skillfully crafted to report our truths, while creatively bridging the gaps in memory and story. Like the other two methods, the scholarship must be sound. In transformative narrative, the writing begins at the experiential level, then revised with techniques used in memoir and fiction create a strong pace for the story, while “showing” and “telling” the narrative.

When is it best to use personal narrative in scholarly writing?

As OD and ABS practitioners, the good news is that personal narrative in scholarly writing fits easily in our field of study. At the same time, this is an unconventional method in sharing one’s scholarship. Barriers may be created by publishers of our work or academics struggling with embracing the form. As with any change process, traditional approaches do have value and historical relevance. But cultural norms for scholarship work are shifting. Nash and Bradley offer advice for approaching university faculty or editors with caution and respect.^{viii} Seek out advocates or sponsors for your research project or in publishing your work. Enlist a colleague, or known voice in your field of study, to review your manuscript and give feedback on how you present your scholarly work. Stay positive and keep an open mind for a ‘both/and’ view for presenting your scholarly work.

How do I get going with personal narrative in my scholarly writing?

Since that awakening moment when writing my graduate thesis, I have stayed with blending personal narrative with scholarly work. I have added this course of study to my portfolio of creative writing workshop offerings. It has opened an invigorating way to work with OD and ABS practitioners to write their work honestly, personally, and with scholarly rigor. Writing with the personal “I” can be quite liberating while contributing to the ABS field. I am often asked, *how might I write up my work to be published in journals without having it be immersed with-in text citations, saturated with quantitative analysis, and communicating in non-jargon language?* There are some tried and true choices for literature-based, accessible language, and academically sound writing.

Ellis models this well in her book, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, where she educates her reader about autoethnography theories and techniques using a form that reads like a novel or memoir. In the book, Ellis sets the scene of a fictional graduate course she teaches (that is derived from a composite of real life classrooms) and shows, through the



interaction between her students and herself, an unfolding process of the inner workings for this method of research.^{ix} She opens by sharing with her students how she began working with autoethnography. Ellis cleverly moves in and out of her internal exploration as she grapples to achieve a deeper understanding of herself while staying grounded in the “here and now” of her students. Ellis’ writing incorporates all the good powers of fiction-imagery, dialogue, and pacing.

Nash and Bradley offer a seminar for graduate students in which the first task is to see if SPN is an appropriate method for the research. In their view, the work begins with developing research questions that guide the selection of the methodology.^x Nash speaks to ten tentative steps that guide SPN writing.^{xi} In *Liberating Scholarly Narratives*, he gives rich descriptions for each of the following guidelines:

Robert Nash’s Ten Tentative Guidelines for Scholarly Personal Narratives

1. Establish clear constructs, hooks and questions
2. Move from the particular to the general and back again...often
3. Try to draw larger implications from your personal stories
4. Draw from your vast store of formal background knowledge
5. Always try to tell a good story
6. Show some passion.
7. Tell your story in an open-ended way
8. Remember that writing is both a craft and an art
9. Use citations whenever appropriate.
10. Love and respect eloquent (i.e., clear) language

One valuable lesson learned from Nash is to use footnotes or endnotes to cite sources. I, too, like endnotes because it is less distracting than using APA referencing in text citations that govern most OD and ABS writing.

For my transformative narrative method, “I” content is built through experiencing a set of writing exercises and prompts similar to those used in workshops for memoir or personal essay. A series of long and short writings are created, and like a 500 piece puzzle, a narrative begins to shape how the research wishes to be written.

Rewriting, rewriting, rewriting to the eighth power is the writing process. There could be as many as 5 to 25 drafts before all feels ‘done’. Descriptive writing, dialogue, and metaphor are particularly helpful for breathing life into research that can be dry and technical. Borrowing from techniques used in fiction, I encourage writers to paint a portrait in our minds. Writer and teacher Rebecca McClanahan makes this clear in her book *Word Painting*: “like painters, writers are the receptors of sensations from the real world and the world of the imagination, and effective description demands that we sharpen our insertions of perceptions”.^{xii} Writers use the human senses and pacing to create a motion picture-like story in our minds. In transformative narrative work, striking a balance between *showing* (staging personalities and expressing emotions) and *telling* (providing sound theories and applying the concepts) become the focal point of the writing.

What should we watch out for when using personal narrative in scholarly writing?

There are a few worrisome pitfalls when using personal narratives in scholarly writing. In her book *Autoethnography as Method*, Heewan Chang, Associate Professor of Education at Eastern University USA, raises potential drawbacks, as she cautions us to be mindful of the watchful eye of critics and skeptics concerning self narrative methods.^{xiii} Because these doubters struggle with self-narration work as sound scholarship, the quality of our content needs to be well-grounded. Chang shares four areas to avoid that can easily be applied to the methods we have discussed, 1) excessive focus on self in isolation of others, 2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation, 3) exclusive reliance on personal memory as a data source, and 4) negative ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives. She also states that we should refrain from inappropriately naming work as autoethnography (or in my view any scholarly self-narration process) when it does not hold to the boundaries of the respective methods. OD and ABS practitioners considering using personal narrative as scholarly writing would do well to consult with the resources listed at the end of this article.

Where can I learn more about personal narratives in scholarly writing?

Self-narration in research methods and writings offers a holistic view from the voices of the scholar-practitioner, studied audiences, sages, and experiential work. I found my voice as a result of my progressive education in graduate school. It would be difficult for me to go back to writing without pronouns and be void of emotion or believe I am objective in my research. When owning up to my biased lens in understanding others’ research - I do my best to take in, interpret, challenge, and support it. I become an *active learner* and a *part of the conversation*. In turn, I feel seen, heard, and validated.

To learn more about personal narratives in scholarly writing, seek out the articles and books listed under



references. NTL's Research Community of Practice is an excellent resource for bouncing around ideas for writing scholarly work and possible methods. I am also happy to provide additional resources as well as be in conversation with people interested in the methods discussed in this article.

BIOGRAPHY

Yvette A. Hyater-Adams, MA-TLA writes poetry, memoir, and essays. She helps OD-ABS practitioners write their work using her transformative narrative method. Yvette uses narrative methods in coaching, consulting, and as faculty. She is board director for NTL Institute and is Co-Steward for the Coaching Community of Practice.

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