

## **Some Reflections on Writing Non-Fiction Papers for the Literary Club**

You are in the Literary Club because you have a more than casual interest in writing. You already write well enough to pass our admission requirements, yet you presumably are here because you hope to improve your skills. In return, I hope I can say a few things that will be helpful in your journey to be a better writer.

Some of you may be lawyers or journalists who write for a living, in a manner of speaking. I mention this because I think you will agree that what you produce at work is different from what you would—or should—expect to hear from a Club paper.

For one thing, the audience is different. At the Club, the audience are friends and they are friendly. They wish to be informed and to some extent entertained, and you want to meet their expectations. They also are critical. They won't tell you directly if you disappoint, but they will talk among themselves and, believe me, you really don't want their disapproval.

So, my first piece of advice is never forget who you are writing for. The Club is not an academic conference, even if your paper is about an historical event or a bit of scientific lore. Your audience is interested in what you have to say, but the presentation needs to be clearly comprehensible in forty minutes or less, and it will go down better if seasoned with a little humor. Avoid technical terms if possible; if not, define them clearly. Footnotes and a bibliography are fine, but don't read them out, for Goodness sake, and don't let them tangle up your narrative.

Another crucial difference between Literary Club and workaday writing is that Literary Club papers must be read aloud in a formal presentation. This is a very important difference, and it is a feature that has wrecked more than one presentation of what otherwise would have been a good paper. Your paper will end up in our archives and will be read by some, perhaps years later, but it will be remembered by most as something they heard once and either liked or found wanting. What the members hear is far more important than what they may or may not read.

Writing for oral presentation is different from writing for visual review. Some words and phrases do not trip lightly off the tongue. Avoid them. The best way to test your writing's oral viability is to read it aloud several times, perhaps to a long-suffering wife or companion, or in default thereof to the family dog. I guarantee you that this practice will uncover infelicities of style that you never suspected from a visual read. Your paper will be the better for it. It is also the best way to test the timing of your reading. Reading something aloud takes longer than reading it visually. Reading something too fast hinders comprehension and destroys the effect you want to create. So, learn to read your paper at the proper speed, both for timing and for comprehension.

A few words on subject matter: there are no limits on subject matter, other than what good taste and sensitivity to the feelings of all members of our diverse audience might dictate. One of the Club's many strengths is the broad experience of its membership, who represent many professions, come from a variety of social backgrounds, and exhibit a broad spectrum of political and religious beliefs.

This can pose a problem for the writer who might like to address a controversial subject. Fortunately, the blight of political correctness has yet to shut anyone down, and a few members have ventured into the field. If that is your inclination, go ahead; just remember your audience and be sure your statements can be supported with facts and logical arguments and that your opinions are sensitively expressed.

One way to approach a controversial topic is by indirection. For example, if you fear that a paper about the Confederate monuments removal controversy would be too hot to handle, how about writing instead about the long history of iconoclasm, both religious and political, which begins with Pharaohs hacking off their predecessors' noses and continues through the purging of icons in Byzantium to Cromwell's destruction of stained-glass windows in England and on to the Taliban's artillery practice on Buddhist statues? You needn't mention the Confederate monuments at all to make your point.

A few recent examples in our own Club literature include a dog bemoaning supposed vandalism in Lytle Park by a certain insurance company and a ghostly protest from Harriet Beecher Stowe about our male only membership rules. The use of fiction softened the blow, although not enough in the Lytle Park paper to prevent a rather prickly rebuttal paper. Tough subjects are possible for the brave and the ingenious, but remember, no preaching!

Another sore spot with non-fiction topics is picking one. Freedom can be daunting as well as exhilarating. Those of you who have interesting life experiences have it easy in the sense that there usually need be no research, but you still have the task of making your story interesting. I'm afraid I can't help much here, except

to say that our archives contain many good examples of great autobiographical sketches. If you're just starting out, read a few and use them as models. Our late Gibby Carey was a master at these kinds of recollections drawn from a lifetime of fascinating adventures. The one thing to avoid is too much genealogy of the "look who my grandfather knew" variety.

The rest of us dull fellows without relatable life experiences will have to rely on researched subject matter. In choosing a non-fiction subject, resort to the Archives can also help, if for no other reason than to make sure the subject hasn't already been covered in recent years.

One question is whether it is inappropriate to write about your work. There appears to be a rumor to this effect, but it is false if it is taken to mean that much of what you know best is off limits. The point is that no one wants to hear from a specialist about a technical subject the audience is unlikely to understand. Yet we once had a member who was an expert on aircraft safety who gave a fascinating account of a crash investigation in layman's language that was truly memorable. We also have serious hobbyists who have a lot of knowledge on a wide range of subjects to share. One member studies steamboats and ocean shipping as a serious hobby, and gave a memorable paper on a famous ship collision. So, start with what you know, and work up from there. The point is to remember your audience, make it interesting and tell a good story in language we can all understand.

Another question is how to approach research. You can't write about something you don't really understand yourself, and that means you must read enough to be secure in what you are saying. I find that a

single book doesn't do it for a historical subject. You need to cross reference the events you are describing to get a real understanding of the subject. What was the background? What happened afterwards? Why are the events significant for us today?

Of course, few among us are real scholars, and your audience doesn't expect true scholarship even from the ones who are. Secondary materials found in books, as opposed to original unpublished sources, are good enough for us amateurs, but if you are lucky enough to find some pertinent family letters in the attic, by all means use them. You can't write a whole paper out of Wikipedia, but it is a useful way to check dates, and there usually is a bibliography to get you started on your research. And you will be surprised to learn what is out there for even the casual researcher. Did you know that the entire 18<sup>th</sup> Century collection of the British Library, including the full transcript of a court martial that was the subject of my maiden paper, is available online for free? So, read enough to tell the story accurately and spice it with some telling anecdotes, but remember that you are not there to impress with erudition but rather to tell a story that your audience will appreciate and enjoy.

After reading into your selected topic, the usual problem is to narrow it down to manageable length. You will only have 30-40 minutes to make your point, and Caesar's Gallic Wars can be compressed only so much. If that's your chosen area, pick a key incident or feature of the great man's work--for example, that this was history's first campaign autobiography--and build a paper on that.

Another way to handle the problem of excessive length is to write out the whole thing, knowing you can't keep it all. Once everything is down on paper, it will be more obvious what can stay and what can go. It will be painful to give up a favorite paragraph or two, and you may have to rewrite some of the connecting passages, but you will be surprised to learn that the shortened paper is actually stronger. And all those clever adjectives and adverbs that you thought added color to your deathless prose? They also added minutes to your reading time. Cut them out and you are inside the 40 minutes of audience tolerance that, if exceeded, will rapidly turn interest into indifference. Don't forget, you're keeping your friends from their beer and cold cuts. They may have been interested in Anglo-Saxon church politics for a short while, but that won't last forever--or even another three minutes.

And, once again, remember this: no matter how esoteric the topic, there will be some member who knows the subject and will spot errors. So do your research and check your facts before approaching that fearful podium! And, equally important, there will be many members who are unfamiliar with the subject, so be careful to include them with clear explanations and definitions of specialist terms if they are needed to get your message across. I still remember my chagrin on learning from one Club member that he had neither understood nor appreciated my paper about the financial maneuvers that led to the infamous South Sea Bubble. Although the story was a rip-roaring good one, its dependence on a certain level of financial knowledge among the audience may have disqualified it as a suitable topic for a Club paper. Once again, know your audience.

I have repeatedly said that oral presentation is very important, and it is. But the paper itself will be preserved in the archives and people do read it as a document, sometimes years later. Proofread your paper carefully before submitting it to the clerk. Although not intended as a work of scholarship, footnotes and a bibliography are always appropriate for a non-fiction paper and are sometimes essential. Quotes should be marked as such and attribution given for non-obvious paraphrases, either by footnote or by textual acknowledgement. A bibliography is not required, but including one will help the reader evaluate your sources.

The Club discourages handouts and other visual aids when papers are read, but maps can be a real help to readers when the paper refers to unfamiliar places or countries that no longer exist. I have probably broken Club rules by leaving a few maps in the back of the room, but I don't hand them out and I always make sure they are preserved in the archival copy of my papers.

With a nearly full membership, you will only need to present a paper once every two years. You could do more with a budget or two, if you want to, and I would urge you to do so, but the lightness of our literary burden can lead to procrastination. A default is a serious matter, which in one case led to a humiliating resignation. Writer's block is a problem we can all face. The only cure is to start writing now and keep writing until that paper is finished. If it is finished well in advance, as it should be, set it aside for a month or so and then return to look at it again. You are bound to see new ways it can be improved.

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