

DAVID SEDARIS

.....teaches.....

Storytelling

&

Humor

* MASTERCLASS *



01 Introduction



“People write for different reasons.
For me, it’s a compulsion.”

David Sedaris was born in Johnson City, New York, and grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his parents, Sharon and Lou Sedaris, and his five siblings, Lisa, Gretchen, Amy, Tiffany, and Paul. David moved to Chicago in 1983 and graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1987.

David debuted on National Public Radio in 1992 when he read “Santaland Diaries” on *Morning Edition*. *Barrel Fever*, his first book, followed in 1994. Since then, he has published nine more books and a play cowritten by his sister Amy; edited an anthology of short stories; and created four audio collections. David has contributed more than 40 essays to *The New Yorker* and completed five series on BBC Radio Extra 4. He has been a frequent guest on television late-night talk shows, such as *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*, *Late Show With David Letterman*, and *The Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson*. Currently he’s a commentator on *CBS Sunday Morning*.

In addition to receiving an honorary doctorate from Binghamton University in 2008, David was awarded the Terry Southern Prize for Humor

in 2018 as well as the Medal for Spoken Language from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In May 2019, he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. David’s books combined have sold more than 12 million copies and have been translated into 27 languages. His 2018 collection of essays, *Calypso*, is a *New York Times* bestseller and a *Washington Post* Best Book of the Year. The audiobook of *Calypso* was nominated for the Spoken Word Album Grammy in 2018.

David can be seen on tour in roughly 45 cities every spring and fall. He divides his time between homes in Sussex, England, and New York, New York, with his boyfriend, Hugh Hamrick.

Welcome to David Sedaris’s MasterClass.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Dedicate a journal or a diary to this class. A lot of David's work is inspired by the diary entries he writes daily; he encourages you to make a habit of jotting down your observations of the world, your interactions with others, and the conversations you overhear. Those diary entries might just become the basis for your own book of essays.

MEET YOUR FELLOW HUMORISTS

In the middle of a personal essay and looking for a little feedback? Head to community.masterclass.com to connect with David's other students, ask questions about your own work, and swap writing tips.

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF

WITH DAVID'S BOOKS



Barrel Fever (1994)

David's first collection of stories and essays, which includes "Santaland Diaries."

Naked (1997)

A collection of essays addressing David's upbringing, his mother's death, his college years, and the time he spent hitchhiking as a young adult. Winner of the 1998 Randy Shilts award for gay nonfiction.

Holidays on Ice (1997)

A collection of Christmas-themed essays.

Me Talk Pretty One Day (2000)

A bestselling collection, divided into two parts: the first including essays about his childhood in Raleigh and his time living in New York, and the second composed of essays about his move to Normandy, France, with his boyfriend, Hugh.

Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim (2004)

A collection of essays centered around David's family. The title came from a dream that Hugh had in which he saw someone reading a book with the same title in French.

Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk: A Modest Bestiary (2010)

A book of modern-day fables with animals for characters.

Let's Explore Diabetes

With Owls (2013)

Narrative essays which debuted in the number one spot on the bestseller list. The title is an inscription David wrote in the book of a fan who wanted him to write "explore your inner feelings." David kept the "explore" part.

Theft by Finding: Diaries (1977–2002) (2017)

An edited compilation of David's diary entries.

Calypso (2018)

David's most recent book, a bestseller and a Best Book of the Year.

RECOMMENDED READING

Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules (2005)

An anthology of David's favorite short fiction, from Flannery O'Connor to Joyce Carol Oates to Tobias Wolff.

David Sedaris Diaries: A Visual Compendium (2017)

A collection of images from the visual landscape that David included in his diaries over the years, compiled by David's longtime friend Jeffrey Jenkins.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

- ***David Sedaris: Live for Your Listening Pleasure***
- ***David Sedaris: Live at Carnegie Hall***
- ***The David Sedaris Box Set***
- ***The Ultimate David Sedaris Box Set***

Becoming a Humor Writer



“You have to be on fire with the idea of words.”

Ask David and he'll tell you: To write is a way of life and a privilege. Celebrate your ability to make something out of your experiences, especially the difficult ones. Set yourself up for success by following some of David's most tried-and-true tenets:

WRITE EVERY DAY

David wrote every day for 15 years before his first book was published. You don't need to have a particular story to tell. You don't have to be special or important. Your experience doesn't have to be unique. You just have to be compelled to write, and you have to write every day. If David wasn't published and selling books, he would still be putting pen to paper every day because he is obsessed with the act of writing itself. You have to write because you can't *not* write.

LET GO OF PERFECTION

Don't compare yourself to other writers—comparison is the thief of joy. Instead, find a way to be you. You may not write like David or any other writer whose work you admire, but you can find your way to your own best work. Perfection is not the goal. Wanting to be perfect won't make you perfect, but it could stop you from trying.

BE A BEGINNER

Even the most seasoned and successful writers doubt themselves at times. Learning to trust yourself and your writerly instincts comes with time. You will feel lost, and that's normal. You have to write through it. There is no reason to expect to be published right away or to expect to see improvement right away—let yourself be new at it, and commit to growth over time. If you started playing the piano, you wouldn't expect to perform at a concert in two weeks or two months. It takes time to write well.

PRACTICE UTILIZING HUMOR

There are three main tools that David uses to make the audience or reader laugh: quoting funny people, exaggeration, and self-deprecation. Let's dive a bit deeper into all three—using David's own diary entries as examples.

QUOTE FUNNY PEOPLE

When the people around you are funny, you can bring them into your work. They know they are being witty, and you are taking them with you into the essay as part of the humor.



OCTOBER 18, 2019, GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

The doctor who performed my colonoscopy a few years back came to last night's show and stood in line to have a book signed. "Do you have to get up early tomorrow morning?" I asked.

"At the crack," he said, which I guess is a common joke among gastroenterologists.



MAY 21, 2016, EMERALD ISLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Over dinner last night, Amy recalled her sixth grade health teacher, who separated the girls in class one day and asked, "If you were naked and had only a washcloth, which would you cover, your top or your bottom?"

Amy's answer: "I'd cover my face," is, I think, the best possible response. But still, what a question.

EXAGGERATE

Stretching a scenario into the most ridiculous version you can imagine can be another way to get a laugh.



APRIL 28, 2019, MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

At last night's signing I met an emergency room doctor. We got to talking and she told me about a patient she'd seen earlier in the week who had shoved a dildo too far up his ass. The door shut behind it, so he tried fishing it out with a coat hanger. When that proved the wrong tool for the job, he snipped it with wire cutters, then went after both the dildo and the cut-off hanger with a sturdier fresh hanger. You hear this from doctors all the time: their patients shove lightbulbs up inside of themselves; shampoo bottles; votive candles and they always concoct some incredible story to explain their predicament. "I tripped," is a big one.

And OK, I'm pretty clumsy. I trip all the time, but have never wound up with a pepper grinder up my ass, not even a little bit. I'm pretty sure I could tumble down all the stairs in the Empire State Building, naked, with a greased up pepper grinder in each hand, and a box of candles around my neck, and still end up in the lobby with an empty rectum.

PUT YOURSELF DOWN

Be harder on yourself than you are on anyone else in a story.



NOVEMBER 13, 2015, SPOKANE, WASHINGTON

I was in a murderous temper yesterday. Part of it was lack of sleep, part was general tour fatigue, and part was left over from the night before, when the producers in Olympia stuck me in a sweltering black box for my book signing. Adam was supposed to collect me in Spokane at around noon but his flight from O'Hare to Denver was cancelled, so instead he sent a car service to pick me up. The driver, a plump woman in her early thirties, met me at the baggage claim, and when she asked how my flight was, I knew it was going to be a long ride. It's not her fault, but I've had it with small talk. The same lines day after day. I just can't do it anymore.

I never caught her name, this woman. She wore a flat topped cap, and a hideous tan colored dress that looked like she'd made it herself in the dark. On her left shin was a tattoo that was maybe four inches tall and looked freshly done. "What is it, exactly?" I asked.

"Well, an anchor, obviously, surrounded by some scripture."

"Hmmm," I said.

She smiled. "I see you didn't bring the sunshine with you!"

I gritted my teeth and was quiet until we got into her car, a big S.U.V that smelled like a Yankee Candle shop. "Do you sew?" I asked as we headed into town.

"Me? Gosh no," she said. "But that's a funny question."

I stayed at The Davenport. "How's your day going?" the check-in clerk said.

"I've been here before," was how I answered.

"Well welcome back. I wish you'd brought us some sunshine!"

I moaned.

This morning at breakfast I was escorted to a table by a beautiful young hostess.

"How are you?" she asked.

I said nothing.

"How are you?"

The third time she asked, I told her that I was no longer answering that question. "It's just not important," I said.

She gave me the look a person does when they work in the service industry and need to tell someone, as subtly as possible, that he or she is being an asshole.

I returned her look with one of my own that said, "Actually, you're the asshole."

She walked away and as I lowered my napkin to my lap I noticed that my fly was down. Of course, I thought.

Adam was originally going to drive me to the airport at 8:20 this morning, but instead he changed his flight, so I took a car driven by the same woman I had yesterday. "How was your stay?" she asked.

"Okay."

"How was the show?"

"Fine."

We were silent for a few minutes, and then I apologized for being in a bad mood. "I think I've been on tour too long," I told her. "I just can't take the small talk anymore. Here it is, not even eight thirty and I've already been asked how I am six times."

She nodded.

"It's just a lazy question," I said. "Why not ask, I don't know, 'Have you ever donated bone marrow?' or 'What's the most you've ever spent on a pair of shoes?' If the person you ask is in a bad mood it'll still come back to bite you I suppose. I guess there's just no way to win."

"I see your point," the young woman said. "I'm not intellectual like you, so maybe I wouldn't put it that way, but I understand what you mean."

"I'm not an intellectual," I said. "Far from it."

We were quiet again, and then I asked what she planned to do for Thanksgiving.

"I'm thinking I'll get one of those kits," she said. "The kind that has everything in them: the turkey and stuffing and so forth, and then in the day I'll maybe play football."

"You play football?" I asked.

"Just tag," she said. "Our family does it every year and I got boys."

She seemed so young then. "How many?"

"Two," she said. "One seven and the other eight."

I asked their names and after she told me, and after I had winced, she turned onto the road that led to the Alaska Air terminal. "My husband died nine months ago, so the holidays, they're hard. I'm not sure if I should do the same things we did last year or try something different, you know?"

If she was savvy, she'd say this every time she dropped someone off at the airport. It's what I'd do—claim my husband just died and rake in the tips—but she wasn't like me. She wasn't a snob or a grump, just a young widow in an ugly dress who has two children and is trying to put one foot in front of the other. God, do I feel like an asshole.

ASSIGNMENT

Using one of the three humor tools that David employs regularly, write about watching a stranger and quickly understanding how cheap he is.

Write, Rewrite, Then Write Some More

USE A DIARY TO FIND YOUR VOICE

David has kept a diary for more than 40 years. He started in the 1970s, back when he was hitchhiking across the country and picking fruit in migrant labor camps. With no fixed address at the time, it was difficult for his friends and family to write back to him, so he began to write to himself. He's in good company: Joyce Carol Oates, Joan Didion, Susan Sontag, and Anthony Doerr are all avid journalers who attribute at least part of their success to keeping a diary.

A diary can be a recording of details that make up your days. It can be simple events or facts, especially when you begin. In fact, let yourself start with those things. A diary can train you to write every day and to notice the world around you. Don't judge what you are putting down or worry about whether it's good or clever or funny. Recording anything in your diary is enough.

Let your diary be the beginning of writing every day—of developing habits that will sustain the compulsion to write. But don't read what you've written at first. Don't review it. David sees his diary as a warm-up exercise in the same way a musician might play simple scales ahead of a more complex piece.

THERE'S A WRITING APP FOR THAT

If cutting out distractions the old-fashioned way—you know, turning your phone off and writing on paper—isn't working for you, try using an app to temporarily block out distractions. Here are four that purport to help your productivity:

SELFCONTROL

Block certain sites—Facebook, your email—or eighty-six the entire internet for up to 24 hours. An alarm goes off when the preset time is up, and shutting down your computer or deleting the app won't allow you to access what you've blocked until the time is up.

FREEDOM

This app blocks internet access for up to eight hours, meaning it's ideal for writing that doesn't rely on research. You can disable it by rebooting your computer if necessary.

ANTISOCIAL

Like Freedom (because it's made by Freedom), this app allows you to block your social media sites for up to eight hours, but you can still get on the internet for any research that needs to be done. The app only ticks off minutes when you're actually working at your computer, so if you leave your desk, the timer will stop. The countdown picks up when you return.

FOCUSWRITER

This app blocks everything except the document you are working on. You can also set goals for yourself—time spent writing or word count—and the app will alert you when you reach the goal.

DAVID'S WORK SPACES

When David began writing, he worked for years out of his kitchen or the corner of a shared bedroom. He currently has five separate offices in various locations, which he describes thusly:

1

SUSSEX, ENGLAND

David's Sussex office used to be a stable. It has an upstairs, a fireplace, and French doors leading to a patio. The desk is an old farm table that belonged to Hugh's father and is empty except for a lamp and David's computer. The space also has a wooden chandelier with carved owls—a gift from Hugh—that's thought to be primitive American and was purchased in Amsterdam.

2

LONDON, ENGLAND

With artistically wood-grained walls created by Hugh, this space has high windows that look down onto the street. David's desk and chair are modern, from Italy. There is a fireplace and a locked cabinet where David stores his diaries.

3

PARIS, FRANCE

Again, the walls were wood-grained by Hugh, with a nineteenth-century café table for David's desk. This office includes a number of built-in cabinets (where David can hide things) and an old painting on the wall depicting a woman using a chamber pot while being tormented by an imp. The space has a sofa along one wall and windows that overlook the narrow street below.

4

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

David's work space in New York is on the 19th floor of an apartment building on the Upper East Side. It's furnished with Danish furniture from the early 1960s. He's still settling into this space, but one thing he knows is that he'd like it to feel like a psychiatrist's office.

5

EMERALD ISLE, NORTH CAROLINA

In this house, David writes in the corner of a bedroom at a chipboard desk that was made by Hugh and smells of formaldehyde.

GET READY TO REWRITE

Writing is rewriting. David writes an essay 12 to 18 times before giving it to an editor. He takes it as far as he possibly can on his own and then rewrites it yet again after an editor has seen it.

When you're in the midst of a tough revise, keep the following in mind:

- Don't be afraid of "breaking" your piece. Chances are a rewrite will make it better, not worse.
- Expect a first draft to need major retuning.
- Often all of the "ingredients" of a good piece are there. Sometimes a revision is less a matter of rewriting and more a matter of reordering, digging deeper, slowing down here, speeding up there, and giving the reader the guts and odors on top of the skeleton and shadow.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Emily Dickinson said, "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant." To embrace the idea of rewriting and to immediately make it part of your practice, choose a short piece you've written and write it again in a new way by choosing one of the following:
 - Tell your story from the angle of what you wish had happened.
 - Tell it from the angle of what you'd like other people to think had happened.
 - Tell an absence as a presence, or a presence as an absence.
2. Commit to a certain amount of time when you will only write. Create an environment and a practice. Plan on increasing the time as you go. Begin to keep a diary, a habit of jotting down details you notice in the world.

04

Finding Writerly Inspiration

“You need to be in the world and you need to be engaged with the world. It’s my job to collect jokes. It’s my job to collect startling images. And so when I’m out in the world, I’m at work. And I’m a professional.”

If, as David says, you’re “tuned in” to your surroundings, your life can sometimes feel like a story. If you participate and look beyond the surface, the details in the world unfolding around you can shape your subject. This is the best part of living as a writer—the moment when the story lands in your lap, David says. If you don’t engage with your surroundings, if you live online and use your phone as a shield when you are out and about, the story won’t find your lap.

Keeping a dream journal will train you to remember more and more of your dreams. Keeping a gratitude journal and, each day, writing down what you are grateful for, will train you to look for things to be thankful for. Keeping a diary where you write down things that happen to you, things you find funny or interesting, dialogue you overhear and love, and character traits, will help you see the world differently. Tuning in to your surroundings will open you to moments that could become stories and the parts of your world that belong in your writing.

ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

Remember David's diary entry about the banality of small talk? Excellent. Use it as inspiration for all of your interactions going forward. Don't ask people questions that don't lead anywhere ("How are you?"). If you ask more interesting questions, you'll get more interesting answers. You may even end up asking something so specific to someone's life that it leaves them feeling even more amenable to answering your questions—consider David's example of asking a random chauffeur whether he'd ever run for office (turns out the chauffeur had campaigned to be a judge 20 years prior). Part of your job as a nonfiction writer is live with your boots on the ground, meaning you're learning, observing, and actively attempting to have meaningful connections with people. To write about the world, you have to be *in* the world.

So, how do you train yourself to ask better questions? Good question. David practices by writing postcards or letters to people. What if you tried the same thing and only asked the things you really wanted to know?

REAL QUESTIONS DAVID HAS ASKED WHILE WRITING POSTCARDS TO AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD:

- Do you like milkshakes?
- If you have extra stuffing at Thanksgiving, do you feed it to a dog?
- If you catch spiders, do you put them outside where the air is fresher?
- Are you afraid of large animals like horses and cows?
- Do you like shells and sand?
- Do you have any friends named Daniel?
- Have you ever been to Athens, Greece to feed yogurt to stray cats?
- Do you see a lot of deer where you live?
- Do you know much about the moon?
- Do you like puppets?
- Have you ever eaten pizza with corn on it?
- Have you been to Norway?
- Do you chew your food carefully?
- Do you ever eat with chopsticks?
- Have you ever counted your teeth?
- Do you wear jeans?
- Do you love life?
- Do you ever eat octopus?
- Did you know the German word for bagpipe (dudelsack) is pronounced "doodle sack"?

ASSIGNMENT

Choose five people to whom you want to write postcards. Pick some people you know very well and a few you haven't spoken to in years—just make sure you choose people who you think might write back. Using David's questions above or some of your own, write letters to each of them. Make each postcard as different from the others as possible.

QUIT BEING SO INDEPENDENT

Forcing yourself to rely on other people is one way to create built-in encounters with strangers. David, for example, has never learned to drive a car. As such, public buses, Ubers, planes, and trains are all opportunities for meetings that can lead to diary entries and essays. These are situations that you don't choose or orchestrate, but they can lead to a chance connection that you might end up writing about. These fortuitous interactions are part of what makes life worth living for David.

DON'T RUIN THE MOMENT

Once you're in the habit of writing everything down, you might be tempted to whip out your notebook in the middle of a particularly juicy conversation. But resist the urge. "You don't want to end it," David says (of "the moment" in question). "I was in London and I was in a taxidermy shop. And the owner of the shop showed me these owls that he had for sale. And then he showed me a pygmy skeleton. And then he showed me an amputated arm. And then he showed me a girl's head. So he had some human things that were for sale. And by that time my life really felt like a story. But I knew that if I pulled out my notebook, everything would have ended."

Instead of ending the moment, let a situation play out naturally instead of drawing attention to it by taking notes as it's happening. People might feel self-conscious if they see your notebook, or, even worse, they'll become aware of the way they're being observed by you. That will alter or shut down what might have happened without the notebook. You can always jot down notes once the moment is over.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Think of a series of questions to ask strangers throughout your day. Experiment. Look for questions that encourage people to tell you more about themselves. Make a habit of being in the moment and watching people's faces for reactions to your questions. Note which answers delight you or surprise you or make you laugh. Write these responses in your diary.
2. Write a story in the form of a letter—a letter checking in with a friend, a letter to Santa, a letter to your mother in prison.
3. Write about going home for Thanksgiving from the viewpoint of somebody who hates their family.

LOOK TO OTHER WRITERS TO WRITE BETTER YOURSELF

As David says, “you can’t write unless you read.” Find your own way to books you love and trust yourself if you have no one making suggestions. Read people you can understand and evaluate, not writers who might intimidate you when you are starting out. And when you love someone’s work—a phrase or a paragraph or an entire book—really take it apart and be able to say why you like it. Memorize endings that thrill you and speak them out loud. Let the work get under your skin. Know why you love something and let it live inside you as inspiration.

21 BOOKS DAVID THINKS YOU SHOULD READ

The Complete Stories

by Flannery O’Connor

Jenny and the Jaws of Life

by Jincy Willett

The Collected Stories of Dorothy Parker

by Dorothy Parker

Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned

by Wells Tower

Birds of America

by Lorrie Moore

The Barracks Thief

by Tobias Wolff

Is There No Place on Earth for Me?

by Susan Sheehan

A Violent Act

by Alec Wilkinson

This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage

by Ann Patchett

Tenth of December

by George Saunders

Eileen

by Ottessa Moshfegh

Stoner

by John Williams

Talking Heads (audiobook)

by Alan Bennett

Nothing to Envy

by Barbara Demick

Hunger

by Roxane Gay

Revolutionary Road

by Richard Yates

The Easter Parade

by Richard Yates

A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates

by Blake Bailey

Cruddy

by Lynda Barry

Random Family

by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc

Family Life

by Akhil Sharma

9 PODCASTS DAVID THINKS YOU SHOULD LISTEN TO

The Dana Gould Hour

Comedian Dana Gould takes a look at our world through conversation, music, and monologues. He is joined by fellow comedians and other interesting people with a focus on the weird and the real.

Superego

This absurdist sketch comedy podcast is presented as a collection of case studies, generally improvised in each recording session.

Selected Shorts

This is a weekly public radio show broadcast on more than 150 stations to about 300,000 listeners and featuring some of the finest artists from American theater reading contemporary and classic short fiction.

The New Yorker Fiction Podcast

A monthly reading and conversation with *The New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman.

Fresh Air

The Peabody Award–winning weekday magazine of contemporary arts and issues is one of public radio’s most popular programs. Hosted by Terry Gross, the show features intimate conversations with today’s biggest luminaries.

WTF With Marc Maron

Stand-up comedian Marc Maron hosts a weekly podcast and radio show featuring comedians, actors, directors, writers, authors, musicians, and folks from all walks of life.

The Daily

This news podcast and radio show is hosted by *New York Times* political journalist Michael Barbaro and features *Times* reporters discussing their stories and the issues of the day.

The Paris Review

An audio odyssey that goes behind the scenes of the legendary literary magazine. The podcast blends stories, archival tape, and interviews with the likes of James Baldwin, Ernest Hemingway, and Dorothy Parker.

Real Time With Bill Maher

Comedian and political satirist Bill Maher discusses topical events with guests from various backgrounds.

05

Turning Inspiration Into Essays



“As a writer, you’re sort of exploiting everybody you come into contact with.”

Many of your diary entries will be short and good for a laugh. Some will be longer and will feel more meaningful. The trick is to learn when and where you can make an incident in your diary—a short anecdote or a funny vignette—part of something deeper and larger and, therefore, turn it into a full essay.

An essay or a story is more and does more than a short slice of life. A story includes a struggle that the listener relates to and becomes invested in. A story creates deeper involvement and engages multiple emotions. And a story includes closure for the reader.

Let’s look at two of David’s diary entries, one of which made for a quick story on stage, and the other he was able to spin into a full-blown piece.

DIARY ENTRY #1:**OCTOBER 21, 2019, COLUMBUS, OHIO**

At last night's signing I met a woman who'd just taken her family to a haunted house. "A ghost came up from behind us and said to my twelve-year-old-daughter, 'You smell different when you're sleeping,' " she told me. That is so perfectly creepy. I think that ghost deserves a raise.

This diary entry is often part of David's live shows, where he reads a few pages from his diary on stage. It's possible it could be linked to something bigger and be part of a full essay at some point in the future, but for now, it stands alone.

DIARY ENTRY #2:**NOVEMBER 26, 2013, EMERALD ISLE, NORTH CAROLINA**

Because I've accumulated so many miles, they bumped me up on the flight from Atlanta to Raleigh. I thought our plane would be on the small side, but instead, perhaps owing to Thanksgiving and the great number of travelers, it was huge. Usually, first class and coach are separated by only a curtain. But here, there was an entire galley between them. I was seated on the very first row in front of a woman who looked to be in her early sixties and was letting her hair go from dyed red to gray.

Shortly after settling in, she started a conversation with the fellow seated beside her. That's how I learned that she lived in Costa Rica.

"It's on account of my husband," she said. "He's military. Well, retired military. Though you never really leave the Marine Corps, do you?"

She started explaining how she went from North Carolina to Central America. But then the flight attendant came to take a drink order from the guy beside me and I missed it. Just as I was tuning back in, a man across the aisle tried to open his overhead bin. It was stuck for some reason. And he pounded on it, saying to whoever would listen, "This is like Obamacare. Broken."

Several of the passengers around me laughed. And I noted their faces. Vowing that in the event of a crisis, I would not help lead them to an emergency exit. You people are on your own, I thought. Knowing that if we did go down, it would probably be one of them who'd save me. Not that Republicans are braver or more clear-headed in times of crisis than Democrats. Rather, it's just my luck. After taking off from Atlanta, I pulled out my Japanese notebook. Pretending to study, but actually listening to the woman behind me who continued to talk throughout the entire flight.

"And of course the cost of living is practically nothing compared to what it is here in the States—not that I don't miss anything."

I guess she was drinking just as steadily as she was talking. Or maybe she'd gotten a head start during her layover. She didn't sound drunk exactly, but just shy of it. Loud and adamant. As if the person she was talking to wasn't listening correctly.

"I'm not saying I'll spend the rest of my life there. That's not what I meant at all. Well, what's the rush as long as we're having fun, right?"

It was dark by the time we landed in Raleigh. And as we taxied to the gate, one of the flight attendants made an announcement. The remain-seated-until-the-fasten-seatbelt-sign-has-been-turned-off part was to be expected. But then she added that we had some very special passengers on board. Oh no, I thought. Please don't embarrass me. I was just wondering who the other important person might be when she said, "With us today is the outstanding soccer team from Green Hope High School in Cary, North Carolina."

The woman behind me applauded loudly. Cheering as she did. And when no one joined her, she raised her voice, shouting, "You people are assholes. I mean, what the hell? You can't even clap for a bunch of teenagers."

I meant to applaud, but figured the team was back in coach. They wouldn't have heard me one way or the other, so what difference did it make?

"Pathetic," the woman spat, sounding a little crazy now. "Too wrapped up in your smartphones and iPads to congratulate a team of high school athletes."

And you couldn't say she hadn't nailed us. Still, I had to bite my hand to keep from laughing. It's so funny to be called an asshole by someone who doesn't know you, but then again, knows you so perfectly.

This entry from David's diary is also something he's read on stage. He considered fleshing out the details to make it into a longer piece, but it isn't details alone that build an essay. Once he began turning the piece into an essay, he found that the story moved away from the plane incident and toward meeting his family at their beach house after landing. As David wrote, he ended up surprising himself by finding that the essay veered toward the toxicology report that the family had recently received about his sister's suicide. The vignette became an essay called "A House Divided," which you can read in *Calypso*.

If you allow yourself to sit with and reflect on the things you write in your diary, you'll start to see ways that isolated moments might add up to something larger and fuller and more suitable for the foundation of an essay.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Think back to one observation or moment you wrote about in your diary. Pick one you liked and remember well. Is there another incident from your life—a memory, an event, a milestone—that is tangentially related to the diary entry in some way? Find a way to link a vignette from your diary to something larger and more meaningful to you, then work to flesh out that diary entry into a full essay.
2. Practice eavesdropping. Listen as strangers recount incidents from their own lives and then link those random conversations to something meaningful in your own life. Use the strangers' conversation and the related incident from your own life to start an essay.

06 Writing With Honesty

● “Writing gives you the illusion that you’re in control. But it’s just that: an illusion.”

For a nonfiction writer, connecting to your reader hinges on your ability to be honest with them. Emotional honesty, embracing who you are, and admitting what you don’t always want to admit are a few things that distinguish a great essay from a good one. A reader knows when a writer is being fake or dishonest. It takes practice to let go of the urge to paint yourself in a good light.

Here are a few ways to make sure your work feels more authentic:

DON'T BUILD AN ESSAY AROUND A LAUGH

All writers become intimately familiar with the phrase “kill your darlings” sooner or later. The idea is that we all have to sacrifice particularly self-indulgent lines or passages for the greater good of the piece. For a humorist, this means that you’ll inevitably have to let a laugh go. You might have crafted a really good line that makes people laugh, but that line alone isn’t enough to carry an entire essay. If you try to work around that one laugh, you will lose the audience before you even get to that line.

PORTRAY YOURSELF WITH HONESTY

When you’re writing a scene in which you’re a main character, deploy one of David’s most trusty humor tools: being harder on yourself than any other character in the story. When you make yourself a relatable character, your reader will feel connected to you. Let go of thinking about how you come across and just try to be honest—learning how to laugh at yourself is crucial.

GIVE UP ON CONTROLLING THE READER'S REACTION

It may seem like you can micromanage what your reader thinks of what you write, but you can't. Writing isn't about trying to manipulate what your readers think of you—it's about relating to your readers or eliciting an emotion—joy, sorrow, excitement, anger—from them.

DON'T GET LAZY

After many years of reading on a stage, David has a sense of who his audience is, which makes it easier for him to connect with them. But he never goes for the low-hanging fruit by making a joke that appeals to a particular audience's sensibility. Sacrificing cleverness for something people will applaud and agree with will never be the most satisfying laugh.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. While reading work that moves you, ask yourself what it is about the work that touches you or that has meaning for you. If you study writing that makes you feel connected to the writer or character, you can begin to figure out, as a writer, how to make those same connections with a reader through your own work. Force yourself to choose the exact lines or paragraphs where you feel a strong connection, and determine what the writer is doing to bring you there. Is it confessional? Relatable? Exhibiting vulnerability? Once you pinpoint what it is about the writing that gets you fired up, jot it down in your diary and use it as a reference point for your own work.
2. Write about an event that divided your life into “before” and “after.” The things in our lives that reshape how we think of our past usually have a universal quality to them (meaning they can apply to a wide swath of people). When you write about these things honestly, you connect to your reader.

Can I Put That Person in My Story...?

“When I’m writing about people I know, I’m trying to celebrate them to the best of my ability.”

One of the stickiest situations you’ll encounter as a nonfiction writer is using your very real (and, often, very alive) friends, family, and acquaintances as characters in your essays. But what if one of those people—whom you haven’t spoken to in, say, a decade—doesn’t *want* to be in your essay? Are you allowed to write about them? The short answer is yes. Personal essays are snapshots of *your* memory. If your memory includes ancillary players (and those players genuinely serve the narrative), then they should appear on the page.

The long answer is this: There’s a way to write about the people in your life that honestly portrays who they are but still respects their privacy. You can include them in your writing in a way that makes them your coconspirator—in on the joke. (If you’re worried about it, you can even ask for permission from your subjects before writing about them. As David says, “Whenever I write about someone in my family, I give it to them first. And I say, ‘Is there anything you want me to change or get rid of?’”) You can leave them with their most guarded secrets still untold. You can portray them with real flaws and depth without betraying them. And you can honor their final say over what you put in print about them.

BREATHING LIFE INTO YOUR CHARACTERS

A cast of robust and highly individual characters can aid in an essay's mission to be highly relatable to a lot of people. But how do you make each one of them come alive on the page? Here are a few pointers:

- **Tell us what your characters look like with just a single unusual detail.** The color of a character's eyes or hair are facts that won't necessarily define a character memorably. Look for the unique details about that person. Are their nails bitten? Do they cut their own hair (and badly)? Are their teeth perfect? Are their eyebrows over-tweezed?
- **Describe your characters through their actions.** How do they move in the world? If they're running, how do they run? How do they stand? Where do they go in a crowded room at a party? Are they messy eaters? How do they speak to children? Would they ever pet a strange dog? What would they order in a restaurant? Do they cross their legs every time they sit down? Use an old glove to pump gas into their car because of a fear of germs? Do they knock on wood?
- **Show us who a character is through the use of dialogue.** Dialogue can reveal so much about a character. Do they ask a lot of questions? Do they complain about everything? Use too many adjectives? Ramble? Cut other characters off when they speak? Use demanding phrases? Say as little as possible? Repeat themselves?

Here are a few examples of how David describes the key players in his essays:



EXCERPTS FROM "THE SPIRIT WORLD"

- *"Unlike Lisa and Paul, who are on the west side of the house and could probably sleep on burlap without noticing it, Amy likes nice sheets."*
- *"Amy sat up and moved closer, so that her head was between my seat and Gretchen's."*
- *"If I'm right about the sister as well, the person I'm talking to will become like a cat released into a new setting, very low to the ground and suspicious."*
- *"We were returning from a walk and came upon our father in the middle of the street a quarter mile from the house. He was dressed in jeans and had a flat-topped cap on his head. His flannel shirt was untucked, and the tail of it dropped from beneath the hem of his Windbreaker."*
- *"Her shoes looked like she'd found them in a trash can."*



EXCERPTS FROM “UNDERSTANDING UNDERSTANDING OWLS”

- *“The man who owned the shop was so much taller than me that, in order to look him in the eye, I had to throw my head all the way back, like I do at the dentist’s office.”*
- *“‘Me?’ For some reason I looked at my hands. ‘Oh, goodness no.’”*
- *“The taxidermist invited me to guess again, but before I could, he blurted, ‘It’s a Pygmy!’”*
- *“The three of us can walk into a crowded party and all zoom in on the person who’s missing a finger, or who has one regular-sized ear and one significantly smaller one, while my sister Lisa will pick up something else entirely.”*

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Aside from using your diary as a way to log the day’s events, use it to collect details about the people in your life. Over time, you might form portraits of people in surprising but accurate ways. After a few weeks of collecting these types of details, make a note of who reappears most often. Make a list of the various ways you’ve described him or her to see what kind of portrait you have built. Practice character portraits by making one each for a current or former love interest, your best friend, a sibling, and a pet (dead or alive).
2. Use a page in your diary to describe someone by writing about what they can’t take their eyes off of.
3. Whom would you donate a kidney to, and whom would you refuse? Defend your arguments on a page in your diary.
4. Write a scene about a cruel teacher whom you loved or a kind teacher whom you hated.

08

Story Evolution: “Active Shooter”

“You need to do the best that you can do, and then you need to take the best that you can do, and you need to rewrite it, and rewrite it, and rewrite it, and rewrite it.”

David goes on reading tours twice a year and hits about 45 cities on each tour. He usually prepares four or five essays along with diary entries to read aloud, and at the end he'll do a Q&A session. Reading aloud is another layer of David's editing process—kind of like live workshoping. In fact, he'll make notes on his pages as he reads. “When the audience laughs, I make notes,” he says. “And when the audience coughs, it's like they're throwing skulls at you. They're telling you that if this was on the page, they would be skimming now. At the end of the night I'll lay my story out on the hotel bed and look at my notes, and I'll notice the flow of the laughter. I want there to be a rhythm to it. I want it to be like a roller coaster that the audience is strapped into.”

Even without having an audience's reaction to gauge, reading your work out loud can be an invaluable tool in the writing process. In addition to finding the essays' slow spots, David also uses the method to catch the unintentional repetition of words (“I'm horrified when I realize that I used the same word twice in one sentence”) or other sections that don't seem to land with a broader subset of readers.

FOLLOW THE ESSAY

Below you can follow the entire journey of David's essay "Active Shooter," from its origins as a diary entry to its final form as a published essay in a 2018 issue of *The New Yorker*. Study the changes he made and the turns the essay took through the various drafts.

STAGE 1: DIARY ENTRY



MAY 17, 2012, RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

"You did a pretty good job with that Glock," Lisa said yesterday afternoon as we walked to her car in the parking lot of Pro Shots.

I'd assumed before leaving the house that this would be an open-air firing range. But instead it was at a shopping plaza next to a Chinese restaurant. We'd made our appointment a day in advance and arrived to find what looked like a store. Gun safes the size of closets were displayed near the front door. And further back were cases with pistols in them.

"Smith and Wesson 642, .38 special, \$479.99," read the tag next to one of them. Then came the Rossi R352 which was also a .38 special and was slightly less expensive, \$349.77. On a coffee table beside the purses a person could stick a gun in were copies of Guns & Ammo, American Hunter, American Rifleman, and a magazine called Hand Gunner.

"There should be a magazine called Magazine," I thought noticing that the sign above the restrooms read, "Restrooms. Practice perfect aim here." Then there was a bumper sticker beside one of the cash registers, "Pro Shots, converting pansies daily." Near that was a sign extolling the NRA. The place was fairly busy when we arrived. Two of the male customers looked to be in their late 30s. Another wore shorts with boots and a baseball cap. Another still was drinking a can of Mountain Dew. Our appointment was with a man named Lonny, a co-owner of the business and a retired Winston-Salem police officer. He might have been in his late 50s, a kind looking man in a baseball cap that read Blackwater. His glasses had wire frames and were unobtrusive. And he wore a black Pro Shots tee-shirt. There was a classroom in the back of the store. And after greeting us he led us to a table and asked us to sit down.

"The first thing you need to remember," he said placing a pair of pistols before us, "is that people are stupid. I don't mean you folks personal, but folks in general. So I have a few rules. Number one, always assume that every gun is loaded."

STAGE 2: OPENING SCENE, DRAFT I



My older sister and I were in her clown-sized mini Cooper riding from the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina, to her house in Winston-Salem when we were passed by a silver Lexus. Its owner had used press-on letters to write a message on the rear-view mirror. And Lisa and I read it at the same time. "Jesus is my life." A moment later a young black woman sputtered by in a rusted out Ford Taurus. She too had invested in some stick-on letters, though hers were on the driver's side door arranged to read, "Love, Tay-Tay."

"Do you think she's Tay-Tay? Or do you think she maybe borrowed the car from a friend?" I asked. Lisa thought for a moment.

"No," she said, "that was definitely Tay-Tay."

I was in North Carolina to have a colonoscopy and to talk to my father about his will. It was a double serving of tribulation. And when it was over I wanted to treat myself to a little something.

"Before I leave on Wednesday, do you think we could go to a movie?" I asked. "Maybe something with a gun in it."

Lisa squinted at Tay-Tay's car as it ascended an exit ramp, disappearing into a cloud of exhaust.

"I have a better idea," she said. "How about we go to a shooting range?"

And so it was that the day after the gastroenterology appointment, my colon still so clean you could store drinking water in it, we wound up at a place called Pro Shots.

STAGE 3: OPENING SCENE, DRAFT 2



My sister Lisa can get a little blue sometimes.

“Do you ever say out loud when you’re all alone, maybe taking a bath or something, ‘I have to kill myself. I have to kill myself. I have to kill myself’?” She asked.

We were in her toy-sized car riding from the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina, to her house in Winston-Salem. Before I’d landed it had rained. But the sky was blue now with plump freshly laundered clouds in it.

“All the time,” I said.

And it was almost true. I do say out loud when I’m alone, “I have to kill. I have to kill. I have to kill.” But there’s always a name at the end of the sentence.

STAGE 4: OPENING SCENE, DRAFT 13



My sister Lisa can get a little blue sometimes.

“Do you ever say out loud when you’re all alone, maybe taking a bath or something, ‘I have to kill myself. I have to kill myself. I have to kill myself’?” She asked.

We were in her toy-sized car riding from the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina, to her house in Winston-Salem.

“All the time,” I said.

And it was almost true. I do say out loud when I’m alone, “I have to kill. I have to kill. I have to kill.” But there’s always a name at the end of the sentence. I’m still deluded enough to believe that my problem is other people while Lisa knows that the one who’s bothering her and will always be bothering her is her.

“I’ve been having such a hard time lately,” she said. “Everything just feels so pointless.”

“With me too,” I said. “Every day is worse than the one before it.”

“It’s been going on for weeks,” she told me.

“Is that all?” I asked. “For me it’s been months.”

Lisa rolled her window down halfway.

“I kind of thought about killing myself last Tuesday.”

I rolled my window down all the way.

“I thought about killing myself an hour ago.”

It’s irritating I know. But I always do this with unhappy people, try to one-up them. It’s not that I’m unhappy really. Rather I get scared they’ll do something drastic. So I try to reassure them that what they’re feeling is normal, that everyone lives with a constant low-level fever of self-doubt and despair.

STAGE 5: OPENING SCENE, DRAFT 14



It was spring. And Lisa and I were in her toy-sized car riding from the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina, to her house in Winston-Salem.

“I’m glad you’re here now and not two weeks ago,” she said. “God, was I sick. It got so bad I was having to wear underpants to Starbucks.”

This in one sentence is why I so love my older sister. She opens her mouth to tell you something, and you just don’t know where to begin.

“I had this terrible cold,” she explained. “And whenever I coughed I’d pee a little.”

She sensed me looking at her.

“Not buckets, but just, you know, a few drops.”

“And why would you not wear underpants to Starbucks in the first place?” I asked.

“Because I go in my pajamas.”

“Inside,” I asked.

She nodded.

“Speaking of which, I was there a few months ago and saw a lady with a monkey. I don’t know what kind. But it was small, not much bigger than a doll. It was in a pink frilly dress. And it was just so upsetting to me. I wanted to go up to this woman and ask, ‘What do you plan on doing with that thing once you lose interest in it?’”

Like a lot of pet owners I know, Lisa is certain that no one can take care of an animal as well as she can.

“Look at how that guy is dragging his Irish setter on that leash,” she’ll say, pointing at what to me just looks like a man walking his dog.

Or if the dog is not on a leash, “That beagle’s about to be hit by a car and his owner’s not doing a thing about it.”

No one’s spaniel has the shots it needs. Nobody’s bird is eating correctly or getting its toe nails trimmed to the proper length.

“What made you so sure this woman was going to lose interest in her monkey?”

Lisa gave me the look that said, “A monkey, of course, she’s going to lose interest in it,” and said, “A monkey, of course, she’s going to lose interest in it.”

It was right around there that we came upon a billboard for a firing range called Pro Shots.

“I think we should go to that place and shoot guns,” Lisa said.

And so it was that on the following afternoon we arrived to our 3:00 appointment. I had assumed for some reason that a firing range would be outdoors. But instead it was situated in a strip mall next to a tractor supply store.

Inside were glass cases filled with weapons and a wall of purses a woman could hide a dainty pistol in. This was a niche market I knew nothing about until I returned to Lisa’s house later that day and went online. There I found websites selling gun-concealing vests, tee-shirts, jackets, you name it. One company makes boxer briefs with a holster in the back which they call compression concealment shorts but which I would call gunderpants.

Lisa and I quite enjoyed wandering around the store. “Rossi R352, \$349.77,” read a tag beside one of the pistols. Were I in, say, an office supply shop, I could have made a judgment concerning the cost. But I have no idea how much a gun goes for. It was like pricing penguins or milking equipment. My shooting experience was limited to air rifles. Lisa had no experience whatsoever.

So before stepping onto the firing range, we sat for a 40-minute gun safety class taught by a retired Winston-Salem police officer named Lonny who co-owned the business and was dressed in one of its tee-shirts. The man was perhaps in his early 50s, his pale eyebrows and wire-rimmed, almost invisible glasses shaded by a baseball cap with the Blackwater logo on it.

He might not be someone you’d choose as a friend. But you wouldn’t mind him as a neighbor. “I shoveled your drive while you were asleep,” you could imagine him saying. “I hope you don’t mind. I just wanted the exercise.”

STAGE 6: FINAL PUBLISHED DRAFT



It was spring and Lisa and I were in her toy-sized car, riding from the airport in Greensboro, North Carolina to her house in Winston-Salem. “I’m glad you’re here now and not two weeks ago,” she said. “God, was I sick. It got so bad I was having to wear underpants to Starbucks.”

This, in one sentence, is why I so love my older sister. She opens her mouth to tell you something and you just don’t know where to begin.

“I had this terrible cold,” she explained, “and whenever I coughed, I’d pee a little.”

She sensed me looking at her. “Not buckets, but just, you know, a few drops.”

“And why would you not wear underpants to Starbucks in the first place?” I asked.

“Because I go in my pajamas.”

“Inside?” I asked.

She nodded. “Speaking of which, I was there a few months ago and saw a lady with a monkey. I don’t know what kind, but it was small—not much bigger than a doll—and was in a pink frilly dress. And it was just so... upsetting to me. I wanted to go up to this woman and ask, ‘What do you plan on doing with that thing once you lose interest in it?’”

Like a lot of pet owners I know, Lisa is certain that no one can take care of an animal as well as she can. “Look at how that guy is dragging his Irish Setter on that leash!” she’ll say, pointing at what to me just looks like man walking his dog. Or, if the dog is not on a leash, “That Beagle’s about to be hit by a car, and his owner’s not doing a thing about it.” No one’s spaniel has the shots it needs. Nobody’s bird is eating correctly or getting its toenails trimmed to the proper length.

“What made you so sure this woman was going to lose interest in her monkey?”

Lisa gave me the look that said, “A monkey—of course she’s going to lose interest in it,” and said, “A monkey—of course she’s going to lose interest in it.”

It was right around there that we came upon a billboard for a firing range called ProShots.

“I think we should go to that place and shoot guns,” Lisa said.

And so it was that on the following afternoon we arrived for our three- o’clock appointment. I had assumed for some reason that a firing range would be outdoors, but instead it was situated in a strip mall, next to a tractor supply store. Inside were glass display cases filled with weapons, and a wall of purses a woman could hide a dainty pistol in. This was a niche market I knew nothing about until I returned to Lisa’s house later that day and went online. There I found Web sites selling gun-concealing vests, T-shirts, jackets—you name it. One company makes boxer briefs with a holster in the back, which they call “Compression Concealment Shorts” but which I would call gunderpants.

Lisa and I quite enjoyed wandering around the store. “Rossi R352- \$349.77” read a tag beside one of the pistols. Were I in, say, an office-supply shop, I could have made a judgment concerning the cost, but I have no idea how much a gun goes for. It was like pricing penguins or milking equipment. My shooting experience was limited to air rifles. Lisa had no experience whatsoever, so before stepping onto the firing range we sat for a forty-minute gun-safety class taught by a retired Winston-Salem police officer named Lonnie, who co-owned the business and was dressed in one of its T-shirts. The man was perhaps in his early fifties, his pale eyebrows and wire-rimmed, almost invisible glasses shaded by a baseball cap with the Blackwater logo on it. He might not be someone you’d choose as a friend, but you wouldn’t mind him as a neighbor. “I shoveled your drive while you were asleep,” you could imagine him saying. “I hope you don’t mind. I just wanted the exercise.”

There was a classroom at the back of the store, and, after seating us side by side at one of the desks, Lonnie took the chair across from us. “The first thing you need to know about firearm safety is that most people are stupid. I don’t mean you folks personally, but people in general. So I have a few rules. No 1: Always assume that every weapon is loaded.”

Lisa and I leaned back, wincing, as he laid two guns in front of us. One was a Glock something and the other—the nicer looking one—was a snub-nosed .38 Special.

“Now, are these loaded?” he asked.

“I am going to assume that they are,” Lisa answered.

Lonnie said, “Good girl.”

I found a gun once while cleaning someone’s apartment in New York. It was under the bed where the pornography should be, wrapped in a T-shirt, and it was in my lap before I realized what it was. Then I froze, the way I might have had it been a bomb. Eventually, very carefully, I nudged it back into place, wondering what the person who owned this looked like, for I had never met him.

I used to think that guys with beards had guns. Then I realized by asking around that guys with beards had fathers who owned guns. It was amazing how spot on this was. I once met an Asian-American fellow with a very sketchy goatee—no more than a dozen eyelash-length hairs on his chin—and when I guessed that his dad had bullets but no gun, he said, “Oh, my God. How did you know?”

This was before beards came back into style and everyone grew one. Now I think that guys who wear baseball caps with their sunglasses perched on the rims have guns, if—and this is important—the lenses of those sunglasses are mirrored or fade from orange to yellow, like a tequila sunrise. As for women, I have no idea.

Lonnie had moved on by this point, and was teaching us how to pick up our guns. Like most people raised with water pistols and dart-shooting plastic Lugers, we automatically reached for the triggers, a no-no in the Big Book of Safety. “These weapons absolutely cannot fire unless you tug that little piece of metal,” Lonnie said.

“They can’t go off if you drop them?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” he told me. “Almost never. So go on, David, pick up your Glock.”

I screwed up my courage and did as instructed.

“Good job!”

When it was Lisa's turn, her finger went straight for the trigger.

"Busted," Lonnie told her. "Okay, now, David, I want you to pick up the .38, and Lisa, you go for the Glock."

We'd just advanced to rule No. 2—never point your weapon at another person, unless you intend to kill or wound him—when Lisa explained why she was taking the class: "If anyone ever tries to shoot me? And accidentally drops the gun? I want to know how to handle it properly."

"That is a very good, very smart reason," Lonnie said. "I can tell you're someone who thinks ahead."

Oh, you have no idea, I thought.

Our safety session went a little over schedule, but still allowed us ten minutes of shooting time, which, in retrospect, was more than enough. Seeing Lisa standing ramrod straight with a loaded Glock in her hand was as startling to me as seeing her in front of an orchestra waving a baton. Her first bullet hit the target—a life-size outline of a man—and missed the bulls-eye of his heart by an inch at most.

Where did that come from? I wondered.

"Good girl!" Lonnie told her. "Now I want you to plant your legs a little further apart and try again."

Her second shot was even closer.

"Lisa, you're a natural." Lonnie said. "O.K., Mike, now you give it a try."

I looked around, confused. "Excuse me?"

He handed me the .38. "You came here to shoot, didn't you?"

I accepted the gun, and from then until the time we left my name was Mike, which was more than a little demoralizing. Not getting the "Wait a minute—the David Sedaris?" I have come to expect when meeting someone was bad enough, but being turned into a Mike of all things? I thought of the time a woman approached me in a hotel lobby. "Pardon me," she said, "but are you here for the Lions Club meeting?" That's the Mike of organizations.

Lonnie didn't forget my sister's name—on the contrary, he wore it out. "Good shot, Lisa, now do it with your left eye closed." "What do you say, Lisa, ready to give the .38 a try?"

"Do I have to?" she asked. The fact was that she—that both of us were—already bored. Taking my final shot, I thought of a couple I know in Odessa, Texas. Tom repairs planes, so he and Randy live right there at the airport, in a prefabricated house beside the hanger he works out of. One night, late, a large, crazy-looking man who turned out to be an escaped mental patient drove through the high chain-length fence surrounding their property and pounded on their door. "I know you've got my mother in there!" he shouted. "I know you're holding her hostage, you bastard!"

It was insane, the things he was saying, but there was no dissuading him of it.

Tom and Randy were on the other side of the door, bolstering it with their bodies, and when it started to come off its hinges, Tom ran for his pistol.

"You have a gun?" I asked, surprised, I suppose, because he's gay.

Tom nodded. "I fired at where I thought his knees would be, but he was bent over at the time, so the bullet went into his neck."

It didn't kill him, though. Enraged, the escaped mental patient got back behind the wheel and drove through the massive garage-style door of the hanger. Then it was out through the back wall and onto the tarmac, where he made a U-turn and drove into Tom and Randy's house.

"Wait," I said. "This is like a movie where the villain refuses to die."

"I know!" agreed Randy, who directs his local arts council. "I'm the pacifist in this relationship, never held a gun in my life but there I was while this mad man was driving past my chest of drawers, shouting, 'Kill him!'"

As Tom aimed his gun, the guy passed out from blood loss, and not long afterwards the police showed up. By then, the door was hanging by a thread and had bullet holes in it, the hanger was practically destroyed, and there was a stolen car at the foot of their bed. This, I thought, was exactly why people bought guns. The N.R.A. could have used their story as a commercial.

Who would I want to shoot? I asked myself, looking at the silhouette in front of me and wondering if there was also a female version. Of course it wouldn't have mattered who I imagined killing. The bullet I fired was so off the mark, my only hope was that my enemy would laugh himself or herself to death.

At the end of our session, Lonnie pulled in our target and wrote Lisa's name above the bullet hole that came closest to the heart. Above the one that was furthest away, he wrote, "Mike." Then he rolled it up, and handed it to us as a souvenir. Later, as I paid, Lonnie said that North Carolina had pretty good laws. "We're a very gun friendly state," he said.

I told him that in England a man was sent to prison for shooting a burglar who was breaking into his home, and Lonnie's jaw dropped. It was as if I'd said that where I live, you have to walk on your hands between the hours of 6 A.M. and noon. "Now, that's just crazy," he said. Turning to the fellow next to him, he asked "Did you hear that?" Then he turned back to me. "I'm telling you Mike, sometimes I don't know what this world is coming to."

In the glass case below the counter were a number of bumper stickers, one of which read, "Proshots: Pansies Converted Daily."

"That used to be on their billboard until gay people complained," Lisa told me as we walked out the door.

I'm not a person who is easily offended. There's a lot I don't like in this world. There's plenty of stuff that makes me angry, but the only things I can think of that really offend me, that truly affront my sense of decency are cartoons in which animals wear sun glasses and say "awesome" all the time. That, to me, is crossing the line. It's not because the animal in question—some rabbit or bear or whatever is—being disrespected but because it's training children to be mediocre. Calling gay people pansies is just, "meh," in my opinion.

"What was that 'reason-for-taking-the-class' business all about?" I asked Lisa as we crossed the parking lot to her car. "What makes you think that your attacker is going to drop his gun?"

She unlocked her door and opened it. "I don't know. Maybe he'll be wearing gloves and lose his grip."

As we pulled away, I wondered if depressed people ever took the safety class and turned the guns on themselves once they got on the firing range. "It would be more practical than buying your own Glock or .38 and there'd be no mess," I said. "At least not in your home. And, seeing as how you don't pay until the end of the session it wouldn't cost you anything. Except, you know, your life."

Lisa considered this. "I always thought that before I committed suicide, I'd first kill Henry." She was referring to her parrot, who could easily live to be seventy. "Don't get me wrong, I love him to death. I just don't want him to be abused once I'm gone."

"I thought he went to me after you died," I said.

Lisa signaled for a turn. "You'd just lose interest in him."

Not long after we took our safety class, Sandy Hook happened. Two months after that, ProShots e-mailed a Valentine greeting. It was a photo of a heart shape made of weapons. There were pistols and semi-automatic rifles. Even hand grenades. I read that, after the shooting, gun sales went up, the fear being that President Obama was going to repeal the second amendment. The same thing happened after that guy opened fire on a movie theater in Colorado, and after the massacre at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina.

It's so foreign to me, wanting to own a gun, especially the kind you'd use in a war. I don't know why, but shooting just doesn't appeal to me. I tried it that one time with Lisa, and don't feel the need to ever do it again. People on YouTube blow away bowling balls and old toaster ovens in their back yards and I just don't get it. I've never thought to stalk and kill my own food. I don't worry that a race war is coming and I need to arm myself in advance of it. Neither am I concerned that an escaped psychopath is going to break down my front door in the middle of the night. Things like that clearly happen, but I'd just as soon prepare by having a back door. Where I live now, in the UK, it's hard to get a rifle and next to impossible to secure a handgun. Yet somehow, against all odds, British people feel free. Is it that they don't know what they're missing? Or is the freedom they feel the freedom of not being shot to death in a classroom or shopping mall or movie theater?

Of course, stabbings here are through the roof, but with a knife you're not going to kill more than a few people at a time. Then, too, there's not a movement built around bladed weapons the way there is around firearms. I've yet to see a bumper sticker picturing a fencing sword and the words "Come And Take It" or "Think Twice. Because I Won't." A few days after Sandy Hook, I went on line and saw an ad for the Bushmaster, one of the weapons used by Adam Lanza. It was a picture of the assault rifle, above the words, "Consider Your Man Card Re-Issued."

Every school shooting is different but the same. We see the news footage, the crying children, the flowers and Teddy bears in a pile getting rained on. There are reports that the community is “healing” and then it’s on to the next one. The solution, according to the N.R.A., is for more people to have guns. When, following the mass murder in Parkland, Florida, President Trump proposed arming teachers, I called Lisa, who sounded skeptical. “Wait a second,” she said. “Where did you read this?”

I thought of a dinner a few years earlier. My sister had joined me for a few days in Chicago, and asked my friend Adam. “Are you familiar with a newspaper called The Onion?”

“Of course,” he said.

“I didn’t know what it was, see! Then I read an article claiming that, in order to save money, schools in America were going to eliminate the past tense. After I finished it, I phoned my husband, and told him, ‘This is the last straw.’ Because I used to teach, and the way budgets are being cut nowadays, this seemed entirely possible to me.”

“How do you save money by eliminating the past tense?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know,” Lisa said. “I guess I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

It’s probably for the best that someone so gullible is no longer in front of a classroom. Still, I couldn’t blame her for not believing the armed-teacher business. Who’d have thought that after all was said and done, this would be the proposed solution? A few days later, the Blue Mountain School District in eastern Pennsylvania, put buckets of river rocks in all its classrooms, the idea being for the kids to stone their would be assassins.

I think there might be a few who’d reach for a rock, but wouldn’t most of them freeze, or just start crying? I know I would.

Then came Santa Fe, Texas where to my family’s great shame, the shooter was named Dimitrios Pagourtzis.

We felt the way Korean-Americans likely did after Virginia Tech.

“Oh, no,” we said. “He’s one of us!”

Luckily, the state’s lieutenant governor was casting blame on the number of exits and entrances the building had, rather than on, say, Greece. “The school that I taught at is now holding active-shooter drills” Lisa told me. “That’s where the students—and mine were 3rd graders—turn off the lights and hide in dark corners.” She sighed. “I’m just glad I got out when I did.”

When my sister and I were young, during the Cuban missile crisis, we had atomic-bomb drills. You’d think our teachers would have led us to shelters twelve stories under ground, but instead we were told to crouch beneath our desks. What were we thinking, kneeling there with our hands atop our heads? Did we believe the bombs might, at the very most, blow off a few ceiling tiles, and that after the attack we’d return to our homes and find everything just as we had left it? Our parents, our pets, dinner waiting with maybe a little dust on it?

Being shot is easier for a child to wrap his head around. If you’ve got a TV in your house you know what a gun is, and what happens to people when they’re hit with bullets. You may not have a clear concept of death—its permanence, it’s refusal to be bargained with—but you know it’s bad. The atomic bomb for us at the time, with Lisa in the second grade, and me in the first, was just an abstraction. So when I’d see my sister on the school bus at the end of a drill day—in a dress, and patent-leather shoes, her hair just so, looking far more elegant than she ever would as an adult—I didn’t feel relieved so much as excited the way kids that age are when they’re released into the world at the end of the day. Oh, to be alive, and free.

ASSIGNMENT

Write about a time when you tried something new and it surprised you. Now take what you’ve written and make it exactly 100 words—not 99 or 101. Think about what can be cut and why. What choices do you make and how do you create priorities when editing your work? Now take the 100-word story and write it in six words.

Sharpening Your Writing Skills

“Most of what I know I learned by going to people’s readings and by taking part in readings.”

Writing is often described as a solitary pursuit—but it doesn’t have to be. Going to author readings as well as finding places to read your own work is an extremely important part of the writing process. If reading your work in front of strangers sounds too intimidating for the time being, consider joining a writing group or starting one yourself with a few writerly friends. Use the group as a space to read aloud, give (and receive) critical feedback, and expand your craft.

OPEN YOURSELF UP TO A WRITING COMMUNITY

Finding other writers and writing events in your community can make the writer’s life feel a lot less lonely. If you’re not sure where to start with public readings, try looking up your favorite writers and seeing if they’ll be doing a reading at a bookstore near you anytime soon. Local bookstores, and particularly independent bookstores, have a calendar of events each month, from author readings and signings to open mics and panels. If you live near a college or university, check their events page to see if any writers will be swinging through.

Once you've worked up the courage to read some of your own work in front of a crowd, consider these tips:

- Say yes to every invitation to read.
- Always read something new—don't hop from open mic to open mic with the same piece. (Chances are some of the same audience members will be there, and you don't want to bore them.)
- Don't let the audience see how many pages you have, and don't announce how many poems or essays you're about to read.
- Don't go over your allotted time.
- Dress up for the occasion.

That last one is certainly something David lives by. In fact, he's become known for the ensembles he wears during live readings, saying things to the audience like:



"I look like a rabbi who has been attacked by a tiger."

"Doesn't my outfit make you think of a golf pro put through a paper shredder?"

"Tonight I resemble an English schoolboy who has been dragged behind a car."

In "The Perfect Fit," an essay he wrote for a 2016 issue of *The New Yorker*, David gives you an inside look at his shopping sensibilities:



Normally in Tokyo we rent an apartment and stay for a week. This time, though, we got a whole house. The neighborhood it was in—Ebisu—is home to one of our favorite shops, Kapital. The clothes they sell are new but appear to have been previously worn, perhaps by someone who was shot or stabbed and then thrown off a boat. Everything looks as if it had been pulled from the evidence rack at a murder trial. I don't know how they do it. Most distressed clothing looks fake, but not theirs, for some reason. Do they put it in a dryer with broken glass and rusty steak knives? Do they drag it behind a tank over a still-smoldering battlefield? How do they get the cuts and stains so . . . right?

If I had to use one word to describe Kapital's clothing, I'd be torn between "wrong" and "tragic." A shirt might look normal enough until you try it on, and discover that the armholes have been moved, and are no longer level with your shoulders, like a capital "T," but farther down your torso, like a lowercase one.

Jackets with patches on them might senselessly bunch at your left hip, or maybe they poof out at the small of your back, where for no good reason there's a pocket. I've yet to see a pair of Kapital trousers with a single leg hole, but that doesn't mean the designers haven't already done it. Their motto seems to be "Why not?"

And later in the essay, after a week of shopping, David describes his family at lunch:



One afternoon toward the end of our vacation, settling into our seats at a tempura restaurant in Shibuya, I looked across the table at Amy, who was wearing a varsity sweater from Kapital that looked to have bloodstains and bits of brain on it, and at Gretchen, with her toilet-brush hat on. I was debuting a shirt that fell three inches below my knees. It was black and made me look like a hand puppet. We don't have the same eyes or noses, my sisters and I. Our hairlines are different, and so are the shapes of our faces, but on this particular afternoon the family resemblance was striking. Anyone could tell that we were related, even someone from another planet who believed that humans were as indistinguishable from one another as acorns. At this particular moment in our lives, no one belonged together more than us.

KEEP WRITING NEW MATERIAL

Writing ceaselessly is the only way to improve your craft. Everything you write, even if it never leaves the confines of your hard drive or your notebook, is an opportunity to learn more. Each page presents a new opportunity to try something new or to try something you haven't mastered yet again.

Eventually you will build a body of work. Then, stay open, say yes to opportunities, and imagine every one of these opportunities leading you farther down the path.

A SELECTION OF DAVID'S FAVORITE CLOTHIERS

KAPITAL

The name comes from the location of this designer. Kojima, in the prefecture of Okayama, is an area known as Japan's Denim Capital. The acclaimed denim label, launched in 1996, reimagines mid-century Americana using heritage production techniques to create designs with an authentic workwear feel. The aesthetic is eclectic and handicraft-inspired.

COMME DES GARÇONS

This brand, known for its iconic heart logo, was created by Japanese designer Rei Kawakubo in 1969. For more than 40 years, the brand has enjoyed a loyal global following and is well-known for its offbeat collection of styles for both men and women.

YOHJI YAMAMOTO

Based in Paris and Tokyo, Yamamoto is considered a master tailor and has won many awards for his avant-garde designs featuring Japanese design aesthetics.

ASSIGNMENT

Go to open-mic events or an author reading and pay attention to audience response. Is anyone looking at their phone? What kinds of things make the audience laugh?

10

Finding Your Ending



“The danger is writing something that just stops instead of something that ends.”

To successfully end an essay with weight or substance, you have to understand the difference between sentimentality and truth.

Sentimentality is manipulative and unsurprising. It’s the Hallmark card, the easy words that have always been used to signify certain emotions without actually moving someone into feeling them. Oscar Wilde said, “A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of emotion without paying for it.” In a similar vein, James Joyce said, “Sentimentality is unearned emotion.” Truth, on the other hand, convicts you to your core.

THE ART OF THE TRAGICOMEDY

When David started writing, he wanted to make his reader laugh. He learned how to do that well. Then he wanted to do more—he wanted to suffuse comedy with tragedy. When sorrow is attached to humor, an essay has more gravitas and is more memorable. The sadness can’t be forced or formulaic, but it’s important to always look for a way to move people, to add meaning, with more than laughter. David found inspiration for this in his own work by watching *Whoopi Goldberg: Direct From Broadway* (1985). Goldberg created monologues and stories that made the audience laugh before turning to something surprisingly painful or startling or tragic. You’ll notice that David has become a master of this as well: He can make you laugh and cry all within the confines of the same 12 pages (consider essays like “Now We Are Five,” about his sister Tiffany’s suicide, or “Why Aren’t You Laughing,” about his mother’s alcoholism).

Read the ending to David's essay "The Spirit World." He achieves a weighted end beautifully by revealing a story about something that happened with his sister Tiffany, the last time he saw her before she committed suicide. He stopped worrying about what people might think of him for writing this and stayed vulnerable and honest, even when it seemed risky. This is gut-wrenching truthfulness, not sentimentality, and it is what you must be brave enough to strive for in your own work.



It seems there was a perfectly good explanation for all the butterflies in our Sussex House the previous winter. From what I'd read since Amy brought it up, they flew in through our windows in early autumn. Then passed into a kind of hibernation. Hugh and I were away until right before Christmas and when we returned and cranked up the heat the butterflies, mainly tortoise shells, dozens and dozens of them awoke, wrongly believing that spring had arrived. They were on all the second floor windows, batting against the panes, desperate to get out.

As symbols go, they're a bit too sweet. Right for Lisa, but all wrong for Tiffany, who'd have been better represented by something more dynamic. Crows, maybe. Two big ones flew down the chimney of my office that winter and tore the place apart, systematically overturning and then shitting on everything I cared about.

What, I wondered, placing the cucumbers back over my eyes, would my symbol be?

The last time I saw my sister Tiffany was at the stage door at Symphony Hall in Boston. I had just finished a show and was getting ready to sign books when I heard her say, "David. David. It's me."

We hadn't spoken in four years at that point and I was shocked by her appearance. Tiffany always looked like my mother when she was young; now she looked like my mother when she was old. Though at the time, she couldn't have been more than 45. "It's me, Tiffany." She held up a paper bag with the Starbucks logo on it. Her shoes looked like she'd found them in a trash can. "I have something for you."

There was a security guard holding the stage door open and I said to him, "Will you close that, please?" I had filled the house that night. I was in charge—Mr. Sedaris. "The door," I repeated. "I'd like for you to close it now."

And so the man did. He shut the door in my sister's face and I never saw her or spoke to her again. Not when she was evicted from her apartment, not when she was raped, not when she was hospitalized after her first suicide attempt. She was, I told myself, someone else's problem. I couldn't deal with her anymore.

"Well," the rest of my family said, "it was Tiffany. Don't be too hard on yourself. We all know how she can be."

Perhaps like the psychic, they were just telling me what I needed to hear, something to ease my conscience, and make me feel that underneath it all, I'm no different from anyone else. They've always done that for me, my family. It's what keeps me coming back.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Practice writing endings by giving yourself mini assignments, as David sometimes does: Write an ending that has the word *oh* in it; write an ending that repeats a single word three times; write an ending that ends with a line of dialogue; write an ending where the final line of your essay is the same as the very first line.
2. Choose a place where you lived at a time when you went through a lot in your life. This could be where you grew up, but it doesn't have to be. Use nostalgia and memory about a specific place to drive an essay with both humor and pain. See if you can attempt to weigh the end with a truth that comes as a bit of a shock after lighter moments earlier in the piece.

Conclusion

David believes that if he can do it, so can you. How lucky you are to write, to want to write, to be someone who lives a life thinking about writing.

So sit at your desk every day. Increase your time spent there. Read everything you can. Keep going. Know that if you put the time in, you'll grow as a writer.

CREDITS

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