

## Get Started Julia Tagliere

# How to write about family and friends without losing them

**B**EGINNING WRITERS are often told to “write about what you know.” That advice can be extended to “write about *whom* you know.” If you’re writing to have your mother-in-law canonized, sharing personal details about family or friends is not a problem. If your depictions are less than flattering, however, your personal life can quickly turn ugly.

As writers, we find inspiration in things and people around us, so it’s natural to include them in our writing. How can a writer balance the freedom of creative expression with the justified need for privacy on the part of family and friends? After all, your best friend did not invite you to her lost weekend in Vegas so that you could write a lurid account of it for your Web site. But as writers, we still need to be able to write with honesty and conviction about those things and people that, for good or evil, inspire us. So what’s a writer to do? Here’s how to keep the peace while staying true to your craft.

**Keep the lines of communication open.** Let people know what you’re writing and why. You don’t want friends and family to feel you’re mining them for material, but you don’t want to blindside them when your critique of their fashion sense, or lack thereof, makes the newspaper’s style section, either. If you’re comfortable doing so, share your work with them before publication. This can help avoid many problems; it can also spare your publisher from having to hire bomb-sniffing canines for your new security detail.

**Choose details carefully.** God (and your sister’s wrath) is in the details. If you feel a real person or event is critical

to your plot, applying liberal artistic camouflage will allow you to incorporate that material without being burned in effigy. When the average person on the street instantly recognizes which dysfunctional member of your family you’re portraying, you know you’ve been a little indiscreet with the details you’ve included.

**Do your homework.** There are at least two sides to every story, and when a story is published, many more start oozing out of the woodwork. Do your homework and check your facts. Be sure not to base your story on hearsay, gossip, or your boss’s Facebook page; in other words, be as honest and accurate as possible when relating factual events.

**Expect to be read.** There are literally thousands of forums today where writers can be published. Don’t assume that because you’re posting your article on an obscure Web site your work is not going to be read by the very person it’s most likely to hurt or enrage. All it takes is for one person in your subject’s circle to see it, and your family feud has suddenly gone viral.

**Be prepared to choose.** Ultimately, writing about people you know involves a complicated balancing act between your art and your relationships. You must weigh your need to write about someone against that someone’s need for privacy. Sometimes that means making a choice: being true to your art or saving a relationship. Are you willing to lose someone over what you’ve written? If the answer is no, reconsider publishing what you have written. However ...

**Arm yourself with the courage of your convictions.** If you still feel it’s important enough to write about, then stick to your guns. Write honestly about

what you mean to write, then stand by what you have written. The bottom line for any writer is that, inevitably, you’re going to write something that’s going to anger, offend or irritate someone. If you want people to read your work, you must develop sufficient thickness of skin to blunt the barbs that come with that exposure. As they say, if you can’t stand the heat ... step away from the keyboard.

Perhaps you already have a loving, supportive network of family and friends who know full well what horrible things you regularly write about them and *they love you anyway*. But in case you don’t, here’s my final piece of advice: Consider a pseudonym.

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## RESOURCES

- **Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life** by Anne Lamott. Lamott shares possible consequences of starting to think like a writer and see everything as “material.”
- **Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir**, edited by William Zinsser. These essays by Annie Dillard, Frank McCourt, Toni Morrison and others provide insight into how writers separate “fact from truth.”
- **Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing** by G. Thomas Couser. This scholarly book focuses on writers’ responsibilities when writing about other people’s lives.