

Craft a Micro Memoir That Sells

In September 2018, the *New York Times* Modern Love editors, Daniel Jones and Miya Lee, put out a call for 100-word essays to run in a series called Tiny Love Stories (TLS). The only requirements are that the essays are true and unpublished. I spoke with 13 freelance writers who have written Tiny Love Stories about how they successfully crafted their personal stories into publishable pieces. Here, they share their wisdom from the submission trenches.

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE SUBMISSIONS PROCESS

Although the column is called Tiny Love Stories, editor Miya Lee isn't interested solely in romantic relationships. Barbara Field wrote about her friendship with an 8-year-old neighbor in her NYC apartment building. Humorist Beth Levine had luck with a quirky piece about "a love story between two birds who nested in our microwave vent." Casey Mulligan Walsh told a heart-breaking tale about forgetting to wear her watch and its connection to her son's passing. She says, "I didn't have the bandwidth to make it an 800-word essay. Tiny Love

Stories zinged into my mind. It's a good venue for something that you can write in a tight format, but you don't want to spend all the work we know it takes to get a [full-length] essay to where it needs to be."

Estelle Erasmus, author of *Writing That Gets Noticed*, teaches a micro memoir class at New York University and has guided several students to selling Tiny Love Stories as well as publishing her own. Her best advice: "Take a look at them and how they start and progress. Each TLS usually has its own little narrative arc."

Erasmus has interviewed editor Miya Lee and shares, "You should include as many photographs as you can that are related to the story because that helps propel them to want your story if they think the photos are going to work with it." But don't stress if you don't have a high-quality image to send in with your story. Cindy Lamothe sent in a photo of herself as a child with her abuelita and older brother in Honduras that had a splotch on it, but the nostalgic photo was exactly right for her essay and ended up running in the Sunday print edition of the newspaper.

A few writers cited the importance of submitting your essay

via the TLS submission form and uploading images directly to be considered. Unsolicited submissions directly to the editor are unlikely to receive a response.

FINDING THE RIGHT IDEA

How did these writers know that a particular story would work well in 100 words? Anna Rollins, who has been published twice in TLS, recalls combing through 10–15 pages of her freewriting journal entries to pluck two ideas out. One was about her infant son wearing a skull-shaped helmet and another about her father and son's relationship after both were hospitalized for different health issues. "When I went back to those journal entries, I didn't feel like I had a full essay, but I had lines I loved. I also had a photo of [my son] wearing the helmet. I decided to take the lines I'd written in those journal entries and put them into the scene where the photo was taken," shares Rollins.

Debby Waldman turned a Facebook comment on a friend's post about mothers-in-law into a TLS. Waldman says, "My mother-in-law used to introduce me as, 'This is Debby, Dave's wife. She

didn't take his last name.' I thought, *Wow, that could be a Tiny Love Story.* For me, it was a linear process of thinking chronologically. Why did she call me by that name? The more I added to it, the more a story took shape. I was very conscious of keeping it under 100 words. I wound up having a little dialogue in there, which I think Miya also likes."

HALLMARKS OF A GREAT ESSAY

After reading through dozens of TLS, I noticed that whatever tone the piece struck—humorous, sentimental, observational—there was always an emotional resonance that came across. Abby Alten Schwartz wrote two compelling pieces about her father's funeral and her mother's cooking and agrees that writers should create a significant moment in their tiny tomes. She says, "There always has to be some essence you can boil your story down to, whether it's a moment of realization or a gut punch. Build it out from there."

Some writers were able to condense several events into 100 words by focusing on specific details. In Kim Kelly Stamp's essay, "A Dream, Long Deferred," Stamp denotes a passage of time through different decades. "The ages of things is a quick way to encapsulate a big portion of your life when you highlight a particular age." Her opening line—"I was 7 or 8 when I first felt attracted to other girls"—came from Lee's edits and helps land the reader smack dab in the center of Stamp's life. Yvonne Liu wrote about her adoption agency photo from China. "This was my life in 98 words. It was the first time I revealed publicly I was adopted. And so, every word had to have meaning. There had to

be a narrative arc and there was a surprise at the end," says Liu.

When writing about a vulnerable moment, one writer homed in on their personal actions. In "Not My Daughter," Lauren Rowello wrote about their reaction after someone asked if Lauren's wife was their daughter. "Without saying 'I'm extremely insecure now,' I spent time thinking about what actions I took after I heard those words." Rowello included this line, "Still, I examine my face for wrinkles, sag," to convey to readers their insecurities.

A few writers remarked that editor Miya Lee liked to see surprise endings. Field says, "I do think the endings are important, like a surprise or a twist." Bookends, like Alten Schwartz's essay about her father's funeral, also add a nice element. Lamothe shares, "I ended it with 'never mean goodbye,' but Miya added, 'but rather see you soon.' She has an incredible eye for seeing what you're trying to say."

If you include living people in your TLS, it's important to ask for their permission before the piece is published. Miya Lee accepted Field's essay about her friendship with a child but asked to be in touch with the child's mother to confirm all parties agreed to be in the story. Rebecca Morrison, who published two stories, says, "Miya wants to know that the person in your story is OK with this. She asks everyone, 'Do they know? Are they OK with the pictures? Have they read it?'"

GET FEEDBACK BEFORE SUBMITTING

During an in-person writing workshop, Liz Brown brainstormed a few ideas. In five minutes, she wrote a

piece about her parents getting married again after 27 years of divorce. Brown says, "I did it as a writing exercise when we were on a lunch break from this group called Upod. After I read it, everybody burst out laughing." Brown was surprised by the reaction. Journalist David Hochman, who founded Upod Academy to give freelancers a chance to live-pitch editors, recalls that moment: "Sometimes when you're close to a story, you can't see it really for what it is, but it resonates with other people who are hearing it for the first time. When you test out an idea with a group of people, who are writers themselves, you get reactions that can make a difference."

THE POWER OF YOUR ESSAY

While TLS is unpaid, a few writers saw benefits to publishing their micro memoir with *The Gray Lady*. Liu was featured in the "Modern Love" podcast and the TLS calendar as a result. "I have people from around the world who reached out to me to say, 'You're telling my story,'" says Liu.

Morrison wrote her TLS in about 10 minutes, based on an unpublished *Modern Love* essay she spent years working on: "I published the longer essay on the 'Today' show website, and that's when an agent reached out and signed me." **WD**

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