

Write What You Know

The Source

Usually attributed to Mark Twain or Hemingway, though the exact quote is elusive. The principle was sound: draw on emotional truth and authentic detail from your experience.

Hemingway's actual advice was more nuanced - he talked about writing truly from experience but transforming it. He wrote about war because he'd been to war, but he wasn't writing autobiography. His point was that authentic experience gives writing emotional credibility and concrete detail that pure invention often lacks.

The wisdom behind the advice: firsthand experience provides texture, detail, and emotional authenticity. A writer who's been in combat will know things about fear, adrenaline, and camaraderie that research can't fully capture. A writer who's raised children will know the particular exhaustion, tedium, and transcendence in ways that reading about parenting won't convey.

The Morph

This became: only write from direct personal experience. Which means science fiction is impossible. Historical fiction is impossible. Any imaginative leap is impossible.

The corruption mistakes emotional authenticity for biographical limitation. The morphing went like this:

1. "Draw on your emotional experience" becomes "write what you know"
2. "Write what you know" becomes "only write what you've personally experienced"
3. Writers start believing they can't write about anything they haven't lived through
4. Imagination gets dismissed as inauthentic

This leads to the absurd position that male writers can't write female characters, that writers without children can't write about parenthood, that writers who've never been to Mars can't write science fiction. It confuses emotional truth with literal biography.

The Reality

Ursula K. Le Guin never visited another planet. Tolkien never met an elf. Yet both wrote what they knew - human nature, power, corruption, hope - in invented worlds.

You know betrayal, loss, desire, fear - you can write those in any world. The emotional truth transfers even when the setting is invented. Mary Shelley never created life from dead tissue, but she knew something about grief, isolation, and the consequences of playing god. That emotional knowledge animates Frankenstein.

Other examples:

- Hilary Mantel wrote brilliantly about Tudor England through research and imaginative empathy
- Cormac McCarthy wrote *The Road* about post-apocalyptic survival - not from experience but from deep understanding of human resilience and love
- Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* by extrapolating from historical patterns, not personal experience of totalitarianism

What Works

Drawing from personal experience works when:

1. It provides authentic detail and texture impossible to fake
2. It gives emotional credibility to difficult subjects
3. It supplies concrete sensory detail from lived experience
4. It provides insider knowledge of specialized worlds (medicine, military, etc.)

Writing beyond personal experience works when:

1. Research provides sufficient authentic detail
2. Emotional truth transfers to imagined situations
3. Imagination and empathy fill gaps in experience
4. The writer understands human nature deeply enough to extrapolate

What Fails

Personal experience fails when:

1. Writers stay imprisoned in autobiography, never imagining beyond their own life
2. The raw experience isn't transformed or shaped into story
3. Writers assume personal experience automatically makes good fiction

Writing beyond experience fails when:

1. Research is thin and the writing lacks authentic detail
2. Characters in unfamiliar situations feel like puppets rather than people
3. The writer has no emotional anchor for the imagined situation
4. Stereotypes replace genuine understanding

The Actual Principle

Ground your writing in authentic emotional experience, whether drawn from life or imagined through empathy and research. Use personal experience where it provides unique texture and credibility. Use imagination and research to write beyond your biography. The key is emotional truth, not biographical limitation.

Or more simply: Write what you know emotionally, imagine everything else.

Why This Corruption Matters

This corruption is damaging because:

1. It imprisons writers in their own biography
2. It denies the fundamental imaginative power of fiction
3. It makes writers afraid to write beyond their literal experience
4. It confuses emotional authenticity with biographical fidelity
5. It would eliminate entire genres - SF, fantasy, historical fiction - if taken literally

The best fiction combines lived experience with imaginative reach. Writers who understand this create work that's both authentic and transcendent.