



Telling Life Stories

Movies about the lives of Ray Charles and Che Guevara illustrate what works (and what doesn't) when it comes to telling a life story.

Here's your writing assignment: tell the story of a woman who was born into poverty, worked her way through college, climbed the corporate ladder, amassed millions in personal wealth and has now decided to make a generous gift to your worthy organization. In short, tell a "donor story," and do it brilliantly with 800 words.

This daunting task of making a *life* story short isn't limited to donor stories. Perhaps you'll have to write about a journey from addiction to recovery, or from a chaotic life in the streets to the safety and promise of a permanent home. Whatever the particulars, you're still being asked to compress decades of experiences into a handful of paragraphs that somehow hang together as a story.

These pieces frequently show up in my workshops and online classes. They are rarely engaging and almost never generate an emotional response. In most cases the narrative is simply too hurried, too committed to covering *every* major turn in the subject's life to give any single moment real impact. In the end, the audience is left with the facts of a life but no feeling for the person at its center.



Even professional storytellers in Hollywood make this mistake. Consider "Ray," which won an Oscar for its star, Jamie Foxx, but was criticized for how it told the life story of Ray Charles. Typical of the criticism is this excerpt from Kim Morgan's review in the *LA Weekly*: "Ray flips through its cinematic pages with a breathless *and-then-this-happened* urgency, offering up little in the way of personality (or truth)."

Desson Thomson of *The Washington Post* went a step further, lumping in "Ray" with other Hollywood "biopics" that "unfold like an

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free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited

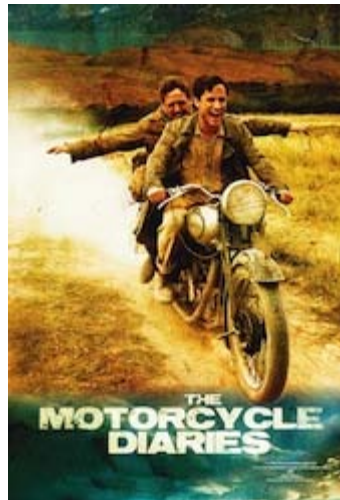
overextended highlights reel, and some part of you feels cheated about it. You don't feel as though you're getting the texture of that person's life, just the official stats and high points." Thomson could just as well be describing most life stories told in the public interest sector.

So what should a biographer on deadline do? Just as "Ray" represents an example of what *not* to do, I believe movies like "The Motorcycle Diaries" offer a better approach. Set in South America in 1952, "Diaries" tells the story of 23 year-old Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, who takes a four-month motorcycle trip before his last semester in medical school. What Ernesto sees and feels during this journey indelibly shapes the figure of history he will become: Che Guevara.

By choosing to focus on this one trip, the filmmakers are able to move in close, slow down, and give the audience a deeper feeling for their subject. Historians may argue that there other passages in Che's life that were also formative, but art is about making choices, and the creative team behind "The Motorcycle Diaries" made theirs so they could deliver a moving story.

Reviewing "Diaries" for *Film Threat* magazine, Don Lewis wrote, "There comes a time in every person's life when what they are meant to do is revealed to them. Be it becoming a plumber, filmmaker, baker or revolutionary, most everyone has this moment or sequence of events leading to their change into adulthood. Their destiny."

If you can find that moment for your subject, even an 800-word limit should provide enough room to bring that person to life on the page, conjure scenes an audience can enter, and evoke an emotional response. Otherwise, you could end up with another hurried highlight reel, and a subject who could best be summed up by the Ray Charles classic, "You Don't Know Me."

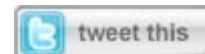


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Learn more about *The Four Connecting Points* in our online classes May 16th and 23rd.

Did you know there are four points of connection between you and the audience you'd like to reach? If you know what they are, you can plan any form of outreach to touch all four points, but if you don't, you may be giving your audience an opportunity to disconnect and walk away.

In our two-hour online class Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter, we'll identify The Four Connecting Points and show how three classic public interest campaigns used them to achieve remarkable results. In this process, we'll cover:



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- Message creation and delivery
- An easy-to-use template for campaign design

Classes will be held on May 16th and 23rd from 11a-12n PT each day (2-3p ET). Tuition is \$250 per student, and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more. To register online, click [here](#).

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