
Publishing Memoir & Personal Essay

A Practical Guide for Adult & Emerging Nonfiction Writers

How to prepare, place, and track your memoir and personal essays — plus a curated list of welcoming journals, contests, and tools for 2026.

Prepared by Silver Current Press

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Part One — How to Submit Your Memoir & Personal Essays

Submitting creative nonfiction is a craft of its own. The writing matters most, but editors also notice whether a writer follows guidelines, writes a clean cover letter, and behaves professionally. None of it is difficult — it simply rewards patience, honesty, and a little organization.

01

Before You Send

- Revise, then rest — read the finished essay aloud after a week.
- Make sure the piece earns its truth; reflection, not just retelling.
- Cut everything the essay can live without.
- Keep a master file and a status spreadsheet.

02

Choosing Where to Submit

- Read an issue first — fit matters more than prestige.
- Check the reading period before submitting.
- Mind the word-count limit (flash CNF, essay, long-form).
- Note the fee; many fine journals are free.

03

Formatting Your Essay

- Standard manuscript format: 12-pt serif, double-spaced.
- Header with your name, title, and page number.
- Title and word count on the first page.
- Send .docx unless a journal requests otherwise.

05

Simultaneous Subs & Etiquette

- Submit to several journals at once unless forbidden.
- Withdraw everywhere the moment a piece is accepted.
- Don't query before the stated response time.
- Send one essay per submission unless flash allows more.

06

Using Submittable

- Free for writers — one account tracks everything.

- Any fee shown belongs to the journal, not the platform.
- Follow each form's exact instructions.
- Withdraw from the dashboard when accepted elsewhere.

08

Handling Responses

- Expect rejection — it's about fit, not worth.
- Take a personal 'please send again' seriously.
- Read the contract; note rights and reprint terms.
- Submit steadily to build a publication record.

Writing the Cover Letter

A cover letter is short, warm, and professional — three or four sentences. It does not explain or defend the essay. A reliable template:

Dear Editors,

Please consider my personal essay, “[Title],” (about [word count] words) for publication in [Journal Name].

[One sentence of bio: recent publications, or simply that this would be among your first. If you have none, say so plainly — editors publish new writers every issue.]

Thank you for your time and for the work you do. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warmly,

[Your Name]

Do not: apologize, summarize the whole story, list every credit you have, or address editors by the wrong journal name. Always double-check you have the right journal in the greeting.

What Every New Nonfiction Writer Should Know

Rights & What Editors Actually Buy

When a journal accepts an essay, it does not own it forever. Most acquire **First Serial Rights** (often First North American Serial Rights) — the right to be the first to publish it. After publication, those rights return to you, and you keep the copyright throughout. You are then free to reprint the essay in a collection or memoir, or, once it counts as a reprint, submit it to venues that accept previously published work. Always read the acceptance note to confirm what rights are taken and when they revert.

Writing About Real People

Memoir draws on real lives, so a few habits protect you and the people in your pages. Write your truth, but know the difference between honest recollection and reckless claim. Many writers change names and identifying details, tell the people closest to the story when they can, and avoid stating as fact what is only suspicion. Editors will sometimes ask about this; a thoughtful answer marks you as a professional. When a piece could raise real legal or personal stakes, it is worth a careful read before you send it out.

“Published” Is Broader Than You Think

Nearly all journals want **unpublished** work, and many define “published” to include your personal blog, a public social-media post, an anthology, or a piece posted in an online workshop. If an essay has appeared anywhere public, treat it as a reprint and look specifically for journals that accept reprints. When in doubt, ask the editor before submitting.

Reading Fees — and the No-Fee Philosophy

Some journals charge a small fee (often \$2–\$3) to submit, usually to cover their submission platform. This is normal and not a scam. But you never need to pay to build a serious publication record: many respected journals are free, and many paying journals offer **fee waivers** on request. Reserve paid submissions and contest fees for venues you genuinely want.

Avoiding Vanity Presses & Scams

Legitimate journals and contests never ask you to *buy* your way into print.

“You’ve been selected!”

Unsolicited emails congratulating you and then asking you to buy an expensive anthology or “certificate.” Real acceptances don’t require a purchase.

Everyone wins

“Contests” that accept virtually everyone and profit by selling the anthology back to contributors. A real contest has genuine selection and named judges.

Rights grabs

Terms that claim *all* rights or ownership of your work in perpetuity. Legitimate journals take first or one-time rights, then return them.

High fees, no pay

Large submission or “editing” fees with no payment to writers and no track record. Check a venue’s reputation before paying anything.

When unsure, look a venue up on Poets & Writers, check whether respected writers have published there, and search Writer Beware for warnings.

Payment: What to Expect

Creative nonfiction pays a wide range. Many fine journals pay in contributor copies or a token amount; stronger markets pay anywhere from \$50 to several hundred dollars per essay, and a few pay more. Publishing for little or no pay is normal early on; the value is in readership, credits, and building toward a book.

Flash CNF, Essays, and the Path to a Memoir

Most nonfiction writers build in stages. Place **flash creative nonfiction** (often under 1,000 words) and **personal essays** in journals first. Over time those credits accumulate into an **essay collection** or strengthen a book proposal, and a book-length **memoir** is far easier to sell when editors and agents can see you already placing work. Every published essay is a brick in that foundation.

Patience & Persistence

Response times commonly run one to six months, and rejection is the norm even for accomplished writers — acceptance rates at good journals are often under five percent. A “no” usually means the essay didn’t fit that issue, not that it lacks worth. Keep a steady rhythm of submissions, celebrate personal notes from editors, and treat each rejection as one step closer to the right home for the piece.

Part Two — Beginner-Friendly Literary Journals

These journals publish memoir, personal essay, and creative nonfiction, and either welcome emerging writers explicitly or keep barriers low. Most are free or low-cost to submit to. Every venue was verified on its own website in July 2026 — always confirm current guidelines before submitting.

JOURNAL	WHAT THEY PUBLISH	FEE	READING PERIOD	PER SUB
Brevity	Flash creative nonfiction, 750 words or fewer	\$3 (via Submittable)	Approx. Sept 1 - May 1 (closed in summer)	One essay per submission (no simultaneous within Brevity)
River Teeth / Beautiful Things	Narrative CNF (no strict word limit); 'Beautiful Things' micro-essays <= 250 words	\$3	Sept 1 - Dec 1 and Jan 1 - April 1	One piece per submission
The Sun	Personal essays and memoir, up to 7,000 words; also free 'Readers Write' feature	\$2.50 online (free by mail); Readers Write is free	Year-round (rolling)	One prose piece per submission
Hippocampus Magazine	Personal essays / memoir up to 4,000 words; flash CNF up to 800 words	\$3 (fee-waiver fund available)	Fall: Sept 1 - Oct 31 (essays)/Nov 30 (flash); Spring: March 1 - April 30 (essays)/May 31 (flash)	One essay or one flash piece per submission
Under the Sun	Creative nonfiction up to 7,500 words	\$2 (free by email)	Sept 1 - Dec 1	One essay per submission
Fourth Genre	Creative nonfiction / essays up to 8,000 words	n.a. (general submissions; contest has separate fee)	Sept 1 - Nov 30 (general submissions)	One essay per submission
The Rumpus	Personal essays up to 5,000 words	No reading fee	Rotating/limited windows (approx. twice a year); check current status	One essay per submission
Sweet: A Literary Confection	Creative nonfiction essays up to 1,500 words	No fee	May 1 - June 30	One piece per submission

JOURNAL	WHAT THEY PUBLISH	FEE	READING PERIOD	PER SUB
Hunger Mountain	Prose up to 4,000 words, or up to 3 flash pieces (includes CNF)	n.a. (verify current fee at submission)	Opens in fall through approx. Dec 1	One prose piece or up to 3 flash per submission
Bending Genres	Creative nonfiction up to 1,500 words	n.a. (not confirmed on own site)	Year-round / rolling monthly windows	Up to a few pieces per submission (see current call)
Gulf Coast	Nonfiction up to 7,000 words (online exclusives up to 3,000 words)	\$3	Print: Sept 1 - March 1; Online: Jan 26 - Dec 20	One nonfiction piece per submission
Guernica	Nonfiction / memoir / essays, generally 2,000-7,000 words	No fee	Year-round (rolling)	One piece per submission
Longridge Review	Creative nonfiction on childhood / coming-of-age	\$3	Three reading periods per year (closed between windows)	One essay per submission
Under the Gum Tree	Creative nonfiction only, up to 2,000 words (flash under 750 words)	Has a fee (amount n.a.; includes a digital issue valued ~\$7.99)	Year-round (rolling)	One piece per submission
Complete Sentence	Single-sentence prose / memoir / lyric essay	No fee (email/form submission)	Year-round (rolling)	Multiple sentences may be submitted (see guidelines)
Citron Review	Flash creative nonfiction	No fee	Approx. Feb 1 - Dec 6 (quarterly windows)	One flash CNF piece per submission
Split Lip Magazine	Memoir under 2,000 words; flash CNF	Free in designated free months (Jan/Mar/May/Sept/Nov); paid 'Tip Jar' other months	Monthly (free vs. tip-jar months alternate)	One piece per submission; pays \$100 on publication
Hobart (HobartPulp)	Sports-themed fiction/nonfiction; 'Rejected Modern Love' essays	Free (email submissions)	Year-round (rolling; varies by feature)	One piece per submission

Flash-CNF markets and word limits are noted in the description. Several well-known CNF venues have closed recently (Creative Nonfiction magazine, Catapult, Entropy) and are deliberately not listed. Confirm the live status on each journal's own site before submitting.

Contests for Emerging Nonfiction Writers

Contests can bring larger prizes and visibility. Several below welcome emerging writers or unpublished work. Deadlines rotate annually; the dates shown reflect the 2026 cycle unless noted. One book-length prize is included and marked as such.

CONTEST	TYPE	FEE	PRIZE	DEADLINE / CYCLE
Ploughshares Emerging Writer's Contest (Nonfiction)	Personal essay / creative nonfiction	\$30 (includes subscription option)	\$2,000, publication, and a conversation with agency Aevitas Creative Management	March 31, 2026 (opens Feb 1)
Hippocampus 'We Love Short Shorts' Contest	Flash creative nonfiction (up to 250 words)	\$5	\$250 first prize (plus additional placements)	February 1 - 28 (annual)
Bellingham Review - Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction	Essay or flash nonfiction, up to 4,000 words	\$15 (US); \$30 international	\$1,000 and publication	March 15, 2026
Diana Woods Memorial Award in Creative Nonfiction (Lunch Ticket)	Creative nonfiction, up to 3,500 words	n.a. (verify at submission)	\$250 and publication	Two windows annually (approx. February and August)
Fourth Genre Steinberg Memorial Essay Prize	Essay / creative nonfiction, up to 6,000 words	\$20	\$1,000 and publication	Approx. April 15 (opens Jan 1; confirm exact date each cycle)
River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Book Prize (book-length)	Book-length literary nonfiction manuscript (memoir, essays, reportage), 35,000-85,000 words	\$27 (includes a one-year subscription)	\$1,000 honorarium and publication by University of New Mexico Press	October 31 (annual)
Narrative Prize (Nonfiction eligible)	Award (not a contest) for best work by a new/emerging writer; work of literary nonfiction eligible	n.a. (award drawn from work submitted through Narrative's regular/contest)	\$5,000	Entries considered through April 30 each year

CONTEST	TYPE	FEE	PRIZE	DEADLINE / CYCLE
		channels, which carry fees)		
Narrative Spring Story Contest (nonfiction accepted)	Short prose contest; short shorts, essays, memoirs, and literary nonfiction accepted	\$27 per entry	First \$2,500, Second \$1,000, Third \$500, up to ten finalists \$100 each	June 26, 2026
Bath Novella-in-Flash Award	Novella-in-flash, 6,000-18,000 words (each flash up to ~1,000 words). NOTE: framed as flash fiction/very short stories, NOT strictly CNF - suitable for hybrid/flash-memoir written as a novella-in-flash	n.a. (not stated on page; set when round opens)	GBP 300 winner; two runners-up GBP 100 each; all three published as individual novellas	Next round opens Summer 2026 (previous round closed Oct 31, 2025)

A few 2026 deadlines have passed or were still showing a prior cycle at verification — they illustrate the annual pattern; check each site for the next opening. The Bath Novella-in-Flash is framed as fiction but is included as a hybrid option for novella-in-flash memoir.

Submission-Tracking & Discovery Tools

Submittable — *Free for individual submitters (organizations pay for the platform)*

The most widely used online submission-management platform; writers create a free account to submit to and track submissions at hundreds of journals and contests.

Chill Subs — *Free account with most features; paid tiers: 'Better' \$10/month, 'Sub Club' \$10/month, 'Forever Workshop' \$10/month, 'Best' Bundle \$20/month*

A modern, writer-friendly database of literary magazines and presses with filters (fees, pay, response times, vibe), submission tracking, and author profiles.

The (Submission) Grinder — *Free (donation-based)*

A free market database and submission tracker (run by Diabolical Plots) covering fiction, nonfiction, and poetry markets with response-time statistics.

Duotrope — *\$5/month or \$50/year (16.7% savings annually); every subscription begins with a free trial*

An established subscription database of publications and literary agents with submission trackers, custom searches, deadline calendars, statistical reports, and interviews.

Poets & Writers - Literary Magazines & Grants/Awards databases — *Free*

A free, editorially vetted database of nearly 1,000 literary magazines plus a Grants & Awards / writing-contests database, with filters for open reading periods and unsolicited-submission policies.

On a budget? Submittable + Chill Subs (or the Submission Grinder) + Poets & Writers is a complete, no-cost toolkit.

Glossary of Submission Terms

Creative nonfiction (CNF). True stories told with the craft of fiction — memoir, personal essay, lyric essay, literary journalism.

Flash CNF. Very short creative nonfiction, usually under 1,000 words; 'micro' is often under 300.

Simultaneous submission. Sending the same essay to more than one journal at once. Standard practice, but withdraw immediately anywhere it is accepted.

First Serial Rights. The right to be the first to publish a piece. Reverts to you after publication; you keep the copyright.

Reprint. An essay published before (including on a blog or social media). Only certain journals accept reprints — check first.

Reading period. The window when a journal accepts submissions. Many open only a few months or weeks a year, or close at a monthly cap.

Standard manuscript format. 12-point serif, double-spaced, with a header carrying your name, title, and page number.

Cover letter. A brief, professional note accompanying your essay — not a place to summarize the whole story.

Contributor copies. Free copies of the issue your work appears in, often given in place of (or alongside) payment.

Lyric essay. A CNF form that borrows from poetry — fragmentation, image, and white space — over straightforward narrative.

Slush pile. The stack of unsolicited submissions editors read through. Yours starts here — that's normal.

Fee waiver. A free pass around a submission fee, offered by many journals on request or for writers facing financial barriers.

A Simple Starting Plan

If this feels like a lot, start here. This four-step rhythm will place you on a professional footing within a single afternoon.

- 1 Pick three free journals whose nonfiction you admire and whose reading period is open now.
 - 2 Polish one essay in standard manuscript format, making sure it reflects as well as recounts.
 - 3 Write one short cover letter using the template above, tailoring the journal name for each.
 - 4 Log each submission in a spreadsheet or free tracker, then set a reminder to submit again next month.
-

Essays live when they find readers. Send them out, keep good records, and let each "no" move you toward the right "yes."

FROM THE PUBLISHER

A Personal Note to You

First, let me say how glad I am that you are here, and how much your writing has come to mean to me. Whatever happens with any single submission, please know that I believe in you and in the work you are doing.

I want to tell you something before you begin, because I wish someone had told me plainly when I was starting out: this was hard for me too. For years I sent my work into the quiet and waited, and what came back, again and again, was *no*. The rejections arrived in bundles — some gentle, most simply silent — and every one of them asked whether I was willing to keep going. I decided that I was. Not because I felt sure of the work, but because I had come to believe that the writers who make it are rarely the most gifted in the room; they are the ones who keep sending, who let each *no* be a comma and never a period.

Memoir asks something extra of us: the courage to put our own lives on the page and then hand them to a stranger to judge. I know that vulnerability firsthand. One of the pieces closest to me is an essay called “Teaching at Fifty-Six,” written near the end of three decades of teaching — a reflection on why the work mattered, drawn from Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson, and Dickinson. It found its first home in *The Font: A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*, and has since been reprinted more than once. But it began exactly where your work begins now: as pages I was unsure anyone would want, sent out anyway.

What carried me through was not confidence — it was persistence, and the quiet discipline of returning to the desk: revise, submit, write down the date, begin the next piece, and send again. And I promise you this: the acceptances, when they finally came, did not cancel the rejections. They grew out of them. Every *no* was teaching me something, even when it didn’t feel that way.

I care very much that you get published — not someday, but truly, and not because publication is the only measure of a writer, but because your work deserves to be read, and because I know how much it means to hold that first acceptance in your hands. So I’ll ask of you the same thing I once had to ask of myself, and I’ll ask it gently: choose a piece you believe in, find two or three journals from the lists in this guide, and submit it today. Not tomorrow. Not when it feels perfect — it never will. Today. The waiting is part of the work, and you are more ready than you think.

And let me say this plainly, because I mean it: I think of you as my peers — fellow writers, not students beneath me. I respect every one of you. It has been one of the great joys of my life to witness your talent up close and to sit with you in conversation about writing and literature, and I have come away from those hours happier and richer for them. I am confident — genuinely, not politely — that you will be published if you persist.

One last thing. Other writers were generous with me when I was starting out, and that generosity is a debt I can only repay forward — so on the pages that follow, I've shared a little of my own work with you: what I believe about writing, and two introductions from books I'm still making. They are not offered as the best of anything, only as honest examples, one writer to another.

I'm rooting for you — always. Be gentle with yourself, keep going, and know that I am in your corner every step of the way.

— *James Mulhern, Silver Current Press*

A GIFT, ONE WRITER TO ANOTHER

An Artistic Creed

Over the years, so many writers generously shared their work with me — their drafts, their beliefs, their hard-won lessons — and I would not be where I am without that generosity. So let me share some of mine with you in return. I do not offer these because I think they are the best; I don't. I offer them simply as honest examples you can look at, learn from, and then set aside to write something that sounds like no one but you.

I write as a Transcendentalist — in sensibility and in spirit. I came to this not as a doctrine to be argued but as a way of seeing I could not put down. Emerson taught me to trust the inner light and to call the great current of things the Oversoul. Thoreau taught me to look long and closely at the near and the small until they open. Whitman taught me that a single life, honestly told, contains multitudes and belongs to everyone. I am in their debt, and I do not pretend otherwise.

I believe the sacred is not far off but here — in a kitchen, a sickroom, a stretch of shoreline, the face of someone loved and lost. I believe the soul is not sealed within us but joined, through the Oversoul, to every other soul that has been or will be. And I believe that nothing true is ever finished. The Oversoul repeats and refines what it has made, never completing it, and I take my instruction from that unhurried, unfinished work.

This is why I return, deliberately, to the same scenes, the same symbols, the same kinds of people. The repetitions in my work are purposeful — they are my way of pointing to the truth I hold. I am not repeating myself; I am practicing recurrence, gathering up the same enduring truths and setting them down again in new hands, new voices, new incarnations. What is laid down is taken up. Nothing we love is lost; like water, like breath, like light, it is only changed, only carried forward, only lived anew.

So I write from mercy rather than judgment, and I extend that mercy to every character I make. I treat each story as a small act of faith — a way of summoning what is unseen and holding it in the light a little longer. If my work has one purpose, it is this: to show that the ordinary is holy, that memory is a form of love, and that we are, all of us, one people — gathered, remade, and never truly parted.

— James F. Mulhern

FROM MY OWN DESK — WORKS IN PROGRESS

Two Sample Introductions

In the same generous spirit, here are two more of mine. Writing an introduction for your own work is harder than it looks. Please don't take these as the best examples; they are simply mine, offered humbly — and honestly, as works in progress. Both books are still being made as I write this, and I am still revising these very pages. I cross out, begin again, and doubt them, exactly as you will with yours. That is the work, not a sign of failing.

Introduction — *All We Ever Needed* (a story collection)

The stories in *All We Ever Needed* move through kitchens, classrooms, beaches, bookstores, apartments, and fading neighborhoods where love and damage rarely arrive one at a time. Again and again, people try to live inside family histories that have already marked them. Some are buoyed by memory, some haunted by it, and some use wit, cruelty, appetite, or make-believe to keep from being swallowed by what they know.

A few images recur by design. Water is the constant: a seawater cure sought on the Feast of the Assumption, a pond that has kept its drowned, a bath drawn for an aging mother, a fountain, a river, and at last a rain that leaves a man drenched to the bone. I have let it move through the book as more than weather. Water is the oldest sign of the spiritual life — the water of baptism, of ruin and renewal — and it runs beneath these ordinary lives as the possibility, never quite promised, of being made clean.

I take language to be a sacred inheritance and the act of naming to be a kind of devotion. These stories are my prayers, and my prayers are my stories; the recurrences in these pages are laid there in that spirit. What remains, after the jokes sour and the illusions fall away, is the question the collection keeps returning to: what, in the end, sustains us? The answers here are partial, unruly, and deeply human.

— *James Mulhern* (DRAFT · IN PROGRESS)

Foreword — *Mia Bambina and Other Stories*

There is a durable American lineage of fiction that begins not with spectacle but with a room, a family car, a parish, a school hallway, a kitchen table at which someone says the wrong thing and the air changes. One hears, at moments in these stories, the grave attentiveness of Andre Dubus, the domestic acuity of Alice McDermott, the religious pressure of Mary Gordon, the rueful comic steadiness of Richard Russo.

The five stories gathered in *Mia Bambina and Other Stories* move through Boston dormitories and beaches, old kitchens and classrooms, South Florida cafés and storefronts heavy with incense. Their geography is specific, but the territory is interior: the strange compromise by which people continue to live near shame, grief, lust, resentment, love. The sacred and the profane are not opposites here. They are neighbors. In certain families, they are sisters.

These are stories of mortality, memory, and moral compromise told without sentimentality. They ask how much harm can be done in the name of love, how much mercy can survive in a damaged person, and whether any ritual can prepare us for the final silence. The answer, mercifully, is not simplified. The stories look hard. They do not look away.

— *from the front matter of Mia Bambina and Other Stories* (DRAFT · IN PROGRESS)