

Tall Tails: How to Write About Your Cat*

Anne Kaier

Author of *Home with Henry: A Memoir*



Illustration © Carol Chu

* Works for Doggies, too.

You know you want to write about your cat. You know that's what your cat wants, too. When he or she walks toward you with tail up, you know what it means. It means: "have you been working on my story? I need you to work on my story. I need you to make me a star."

People everywhere love pet stories—and some people will pay for them. Your friends have probably told you how great your cat stories are. Now is the time to write them down.

Here's a simple, step by step guide to writing about your pet.

One: gather your material

You know your cat's ways. But your reader doesn't. So you have to make your cat into a fully developed character. Here are three techniques to help you accumulate material for a vivid portrait of your cat.

- Go through the photos you have and take new ones with your phone or camera. Note your cat's typical, funny poses, and activities. This can prompt your memory and give you great raw material.
- Do you talk to your cat? Most of us do. Jot down three conversations you have with him or her. Keep notes on your phone or in a little paper notebook you stick in your pocket. All the raw material for *Home with Henry: A Memoir* came from a journal I kept when I was trying to socialize him. My journal included a lot of scenes of me talking to Henry, who just looked at me sweetly.
- Observe your cat in his or her favorite spot for ten minutes every day for three days. Write down everything he or she does in that spot. At the end of that time, you'll probably have notes on characteristic gestures.

WRITING TIP

French novelist Gustave Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*) famously said: "a reader needs to hear the same detail mentioned—in different ways— three times before he believes it."

Two: do some exercises

Get warmed up and give yourself more material.

Touch exercise List moments in which you remember the touch of your cat. Examples: the downy hair on the back of her ear; the throbbing pulse of his purr as you scratch under his neck; the squishy feeling in a paper towel as you clean up her morning's hairball. Use these descriptions in your story.

"Personality" exercise Every cat has a personality. Maybe your cat's secret self was revealed the moment you first laid eyes on each other. Where did you meet? This scene may be the germ of a story itself. Or it may give you material to describe your pet to readers who haven't seen him or her. Jot down notes on the following:

- Where did you first see your cat? *Examples:* in a picture on the Internet. In a shelter window. On your back doorstep.
- What did you notice first? *Examples:* Her big yellow eyes. His tuxedo markings. The friendly way she came up to you and smelled your hand.
- What made you decide this was the cat for you or that you'd keep this cat?

WRITING TIP

Does your cat *really* speak English? While some literary animals speak in dialogue—think *Charlotte's Web*—it's notoriously hard to get talking cats to sound anything less than corny. Most writers prefer to let their cat's personality come across in actions alone.

Gestures exercise Write down five gestures your cat tends to make along with the emotion each gesture conveys. *Examples:* Sitting next to you and purring – contentment. Doing figure-eights around your legs – anxious to remind you he is there. Twitching her tail - irritation.

Share your list with your friends or family who see your cat often. Ask if they think this is a good list and what they might add to it.

Gesture

Emotion

- | | |
|----------|-------|
| 1. _____ | _____ |
| 2. _____ | _____ |
| 3. _____ | _____ |
| 4. _____ | _____ |
| 5. _____ | _____ |

Three: try out some prompts

Your goal is to write a rough draft, not a finished manuscript. Write whatever comes to mind. Don't worry about structuring the story or polishing your style at this stage.

Memorable events prompt Make a quick list of the five most memorable things your cat did with another human during the last month. Then circle the one that intrigues you the most and write about it. Example: After ignoring me all day, Coco came downstairs when my boyfriend came to dinner.

Elements prompt

"My cat is earth."

"My cat is air."

"My cat is fire."

"My cat is water."

Choose one statement and write about it.

Naughtiness prompt *Marley & Me* was a best seller about "the world's worst dog." Jot down five of the funniest, baddest things your cat has ever done. Does she do them all the time? Do you enjoy telling the stories to your friends and family?

Four: write some drafts

Look at the material you've gathered. Where are the possible stories? You are looking for something with a beginning, a middle, and an end. When you've focused on one, ask where the conflict is in that story. How does the cat interact with humans? What does the cat or the human want that they can't immediately have? How do they overcome obstacles to get what they want? How do the creature and the owner change?

Some writers prefer to write from an outline. One strategy is to sketch out the arc of your story's drama first. Then note which scenes best illustrate the stages in that drama. You will typically want to make the most of these scenes, dramatizing them fully. Less important parts of the story can be handled in a speedier summary.

Homer's Odyssey is a good example of the difference between scene and summary. Author Gwen Cooper adopted a blind, black kitten, called Homer. His joy in life and fearlessness helped her decide to take risks in her own life. In scenes that are critical to the story's arc, she moves in close and

dramatizes the action, using dialogue. *Example:* She decides to tell the man she loves about her feelings: “one Sunday morning in early October, I closed my eyes and leapt. That is to say, I called Laurence to tell him how I felt.

‘Listen,’ I said, “I have to tell you something, and it’s okay if you don’t feel the same way, but...” I paused, finding it difficult to know how to continue. Suddenly, I was too far in to back out, but I still had no idea where I’d land. ‘I think...I think I have feelings for you that are more than friendship. And I understand,’ I rushed on ‘if you don’t—’

‘Yes,’ Laurence interrupted. ‘I do. I always have.’

This scene is pivotal to the story’s action, so it gets the full treatment. She follows it with a briefer summary of her fears that Laurence wouldn’t like her cats and vice versa: “Deep down, ever since the day I first considered adopting Homer, I’d been waiting for the moment when a promising relationship would fall through because the man in question was unwilling to live with three cats.”

Get started on your outline

What scenes illustrate the beginning conflict? _____

What scenes illustrate how the plot thickens? _____

What scenes illustrate the story’s resolution? _____

WRITING TIP

Use the present tense for your first draft. This makes your story feel like it’s happening before your very eyes. Example: “Coco sits looking at me from her perch on the sofa. Her eyes narrow into skinny slits.” In the final drafts, you may decide to keep the story in the present tense, or you may decide to switch to the past tense—because it makes the truth of the story more believable.

Five: revise your drafts

Most successful writers rewrite many times, clarifying the conflicts, developing their stories, and polishing them.

Things to look for in your revision:

- **Scenes vs summary** Only the most important scenes need to be fully dramatized with a setup, development, and resolution. Otherwise you can make the narrative move along with summaries of the action.
- **Sensuous details** Have you used all the quirks and gestures you noted about your cat in your beginning exercises?
- **Vivid vocabulary** Fresh words and phrases will make your story memorable. Root out clichés and repeated words. Be specific. *Example:* note the difference between “Coco slept all afternoon” and “For twenty minutes, Coco slept with her right paw covering her wet black nose. Every now and then she snorted or whimpered in her sleep.”
- **Proofread** If you do, you’ll be a real pro. If you don’t, or if you rely on spellcheck, you’ll be a rank amateur.

WRITING TIP

Ask some people who do not know you well to read your story. Then ask them to point out what’s not clear. They can help you pinpoint characteristics of your pet—and yourself—that need to be developed.

Getting published

You may feel your stories are private and intimate. Just for you and your friends or family. On the other hand, you may want to send them out for publication. Here's how you can do it.

- **Locate likely venues** *The Writer's Market* lists magazines and publishers who are interested in animal-themed stories. In addition, keep a file of blogs and reviews of cat books you love. The magazines and publishers who brought them out may like your story too. Go to book readings in your town. If the reading includes an "open mic" when members of the audience get up in front of the crowd and read from their own stories, get up there and read! Editors often come to open mics looking for new material.
- **Read author's guidelines and follow them** Most magazines and publishers have a page of guidelines on their websites. These give information about word length limits, the kinds of stories a publisher is looking for (fiction, nonfiction, children's stories), as well as contact information.
- **Be sure you always have something out** Don't just send out one story at a time to one publisher and wait to hear from them. Make sure your story or stories are always out somewhere, preferably to several magazines, so you won't get discouraged if some editors send the story back before a smart publisher accepts it.

Great cat (and dog) stories

One of the best ways to get ideas and inspiration is to read first-rate stories about animals. Here are some of the best:

Cat Daddy, Jackson Galaxy
The Fur Person, May Sarton
The Cat, Colette
Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats,
T. S. Eliot
Dewey the Small Town Library Cat,
Vicki Myron
The Guest Cat, Takashi Hiraide
Homer's Odyssey: A Fearless Feline Tale,
Gwen Cooper
All My Patients are Under the Bed,
Dr. Louis J. Camuti
*Another Insane Devotion: On the Love of
Cats and Persons*, Peter Trachtenberg
My Dog Tulip, J. R. Ackerley
Dog Years, Mark Doty
Marley & Me, John Grogan
Pack of Two, Caroline Knapp
From Baghdad, With Love,
Lieutenant Jay Kopelman
White Fang, Jack London
Bashan and I, Thomas Mann
My Dog Skip, Willie Morris
Rascal, Sterling North

www.AnneKaier.com

Home with Henry: A Memoir is available
from Amazon and PS Books.

Scan here for free
bonus features on
Anne's website.

