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**WRITING GUIDELINES
(AS ORIGINALLY ASSIGNED BY THE ALLENDER CENTER)**

“Land the Plane” and Other Suggestions for Writing Your Stories

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Over the past several years, as I have commented on the stories sent in by [To Be Told] participants, I have found myself writing the same suggestions on nearly every story. If I had to sum it all up in one sentence, I’d say, “Be present” or “Show, don’t tell.” Too often we write our stories as a newspaper report instead of writing to better understand God and our own souls. We may write the sequence of events, but we avoid details and emotions. When we don’t fully engage with our stories, we keep a comfortable distance but rob ourselves of an opportunity for growth. As you write your story for your To Be Told group, keep the ideas below in mind. I also recommend that you read To Be Told (see checklist for assigned reading).

Land the Plane: We often tell our painful stories from a safe distance, say, 30,000 feet. We are in a plane, commenting on the terrain below. “There’s a mountain. There’s a river. It curves and makes a gorge and then tumbles over that cliff.” Will you land the plane and walk around on the ground? Identify the plants, look for animal tracks, smell the wet dirt, listen to the birds.

Mind the Gap: As you look over your story, look for gaps in time and for missing people. What have you skipped over? Did you include details for one part but use broad generalities to describe another part? Are there major characters who are conspicuously absent in your story? Be aware of how you write about the most painful parts of your story. You can also think of this cinematographically. Where do you look at your story through a wide-angle lens? Where do you do a close-up? Why do you zoom in some places and zoom out in others?

Use Your Senses: What do you feel? What do you see? What do you hear? Wise writers keep in mind the saying “Show, don’t tell.” Instead of telling the reader it was a beautiful day, show the reader by describing the sky, breeze, and scent in the air. Do the same thing as you write about emotions. Avoid words like angry or sad. Try writing about where you feel it in your body. What does grief feel like? Where in your torso do you feel anger? How does your face register shame?

Follow Strong Emotion: Where do you feel tears coming to your eyes as you write? Where do you feel disdain or disgust for yourself as a child? Where do you think, “I should have

known better” or “It was my fault”? Where do you feel the flame of anger? Write more about the emotion then, as you experienced it, and now, as you write. What did you do to survive? What vows did you make to avoid future harm?

Embrace Complexity: Are you the victim of all your stories? Was your mother always wonderful and your father abusive? Are you letting someone off the hook because he/she “did the best he/she could”? What was the impact of those people who seemed to be on the sidelines of the action in your story?