

ON NONFICTION

The art and craft of writing nonfiction.

BY AMANDA ANN GREGORY

Truth in Disguise

Strategies for concealing identities in nonfiction.

We write in an era of cancel culture and libel lawsuits. Merely changing the names of real people is no longer sufficient to protect them or ourselves. When I wrote my nonfiction book, *You Don't Need to Forgive: Trauma Recovery on Your Own Terms*, I had to disguise the identities of 30 therapy clients and family members. The stakes were high: One mistake could have ended my career as a psychotherapist and damaged my family relationships. Still, I refused to sacrifice the authenticity of my story. Instead, I used intentional and strategic methods of concealment. You can use similar tactics to protect others and yourself while preserving the truth.

WHY DISGUISE?

First, you must clarify why you're concealing identities in your story. Your reasons will determine the disguising methods you choose. A writer trying to avoid a lawsuit may take a different approach than one who promised a person anonymity.

Here are some common reasons nonfiction writers utilize concealment:

PROTECTING YOURSELF: Writers deserve to feel safe when sharing their work. Establishing and

maintaining your safety is a top priority, as you're less likely to write and publish when you feel physically, emotionally, or financially unsafe. Concealing identities can protect you from those who may cause you harm. A person might sue you for libel, claiming your words were false and damaged their reputation. Even without a lawsuit, revealing someone's identity could result in the loss of a job, a relationship, or finances. There is no shame in taking steps to protect yourself and to promote your feelings of safety.

PROTECTING OTHERS: The people you write about also deserve to feel safe. Writers have a history of refusing to reveal their sources, with some writers facing professional repercussions, fines, imprisonment, and even death. Including sensitive details in your stories could cause harm in ways you may not intend or foresee. For example, publishing a story about your neighbor's sexual activities could cause them to experience workplace discrimination, community rejection, and family conflict. Ask yourself, is exposing this person's identity worth the consequences they could face?

GUARDING TRUST: When someone shares their story with you,

they're trusting you. Guarding that trust is your responsibility as an ethical writer. If they ask you to conceal their identity, alter details, or omit parts of their story, be honest about whether you can honor their requests. Express transparency regarding your limitations. It's better to say, "I can't promise that" than to agree and fail to follow through.

EXPOSURE ISN'T NECESSARY: At times, divulging identities adds little or no value to a nonfiction story. Before including personal details, ask yourself: Does this information strengthen the narrative, distract the reader, or contribute nothing at all? If it doesn't advance the story, it's often best to cut it out or disguise it.

CONCEALMENT METHODS

Now that you've identified your reasons, you can choose specific strategies that protect privacy without compromising authenticity. Many writers use multiple methods to provide layers of protection.

ALTER DEMOGRAPHICS: Changing a person's name is one of the simplest methods you can use, but it's rarely enough. Consider shifting their appearance, gender, location, age, race, or sexuality. Be careful not to remove details that are critical to your story. For example,

if I'm writing a narrative describing the impact of anti-semitism on a community, I wouldn't change a character's Jewish identity. Instead, I might modify their age, gender, and appearance.

OMIT DETAILS: Sometimes, the best method is simply deleting unnecessary personal details altogether. Ask yourself: Does this identifying information enhance my story? If I were to cut it, is any value lost? If not, leave it out. By stripping away what's not needed, the authenticity of your story will stand out more clearly.

ADD RED HERRINGS: Fiction writers use red herrings to mislead their readers from guessing plot twists; you can use the same method to conceal identities. Sprinkling in minor details, such as a facial scar, a hobby, or a pet, can provide extra layers of camouflage. When choosing red herrings, be cautious not to distract the reader or distort the truth.

BLEND CHARACTERS: Composite characters are created by combining multiple real people into a single person. This method is commonly employed by professionals bound by ethics and codes of conduct, such as psychotherapists, physicians, and attorneys. For instance, suppose I were writing an article about how exercise can trigger panic attacks, and three of my clients experienced panic attacks while exercising. In that case, I might merge their stories into one character, preserving both authenticity and confidentiality.

EXTRA PROTECTION

You've used multiple concealment methods in your story, but you're still worried. What if, despite your best efforts, readers can still guess

who's who? What if your sources can identify themselves? Here are added safeguards to consider:

INCLUDE A DISCLAIMER: A clear, carefully written disclaimer can build transparency and trust with your readers. It not only demonstrates your commitment to telling the truth but also reassures readers that you respect the privacy of those whose stories you share.

Here is the disclaimer that I included at the beginning of my book:

The stories of the trauma survivors in this book are true. Still, to ensure anonymity, I have changed all names and identifying details. In addition, in several instances, the survivors described are composite stories created from the experiences of multiple survivors. These steps were taken to protect client confidentiality in accordance with both ethical and legal guidelines.

Notice how I identified the specific concealment strategies I used, as well as my intentions for doing so. By explaining my approach, I showed readers that I had nothing to hide, that the stories are authentic, and that confidentiality was my top priority. When writing your own disclaimer, be specific in clarifying your methods while keeping your language accessible.

ASK FOR PERMISSION: Ask the real person for permission to tell their story. You might request that they read a draft to ensure their anonymity. If they permit you or approve your manuscript, I recommend that you ask them to sign a legal document that protects you in case they change their mind after publication. Be aware that some people may want you to

share more personal details than you are comfortable with. Some of my therapy clients want me to share every detail about them, thinking this information will best help others, but that's rarely the case. Your sources might want to approve the final manuscript or dictate your writing, which may not be welcomed or possible. It's vital to establish clear expectations and boundaries with your sources.

CONSULT PROFESSIONALS: Seek professional feedback from a lawyer, editor, or consultant. They may suggest edits to your story or recommend that you secure additional documentation in the case of accidental disclosures. An outside perspective can be invaluable.

You don't need to sacrifice authenticity to protect the amazing people who make up your stories. Identity concealment in nonfiction is less about hiding and more about honoring your story and the people that inspire it. When you disguise identities well, you don't just protect yourself and others; you create the freedom to write boldly, knowing that you are delivering the authenticity your readers deserve without causing harm. **WD**

Amanda Ann Gregory is a psychotherapist renowned for her work in trauma recovery, notably as the author of *You Don't Need to Forgive*. She has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *National Geographic*, and her work has been published in *Psychology Today* and *Psychotherapy Networker*. She provides free resources on her website: AmandaAnnGregory.com.