

I remember when ...

by Naomi Glock

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Originally published as:

Glock, Naomi. 1985. "I remember when" *Notes on Literacy* 46:2–3. See also: [Glock 1985a](#) (in *Bibliography (Literacy)*)

[Topics: stories, writer training]

Have you been having trouble getting publishable stories in a particular language? Here is an idea that has worked well in several writer-training workshops in Suriname.

First, you make up a list of your own "I remember whens." Mine might include the following:

- I remember when a storm took the roof off our house.
- I remember when my grandmother died.
- I remember when a boa constrictor refused to leave our house.
- I remember when we had a little monkey.
- I remember when I got scared once in the middle of the night.
- I remember when I heard howler monkeys for the first time.
- I remember when the canoe I was in was lodged on a rock for two hours.

In making your list, be sure to include several items with which nationals can identify.

To get a group of writer trainees started, each one should have a sheet of writing paper and a pen before them. Explain that each of us has many stories inside our heads that we are not aware of. In order to prove it to them, read your list of "I remember whens." Read the list slowly and dreamily, pausing after each item to give time for the trainees to absorb the information and to let their own memories reach back to

(1985). *Notes on Literacy*, 46.

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similar events. When you finish, tell them that they are now to write their own lists. Each item is to be just one sentence beginning with "I remember when." The students should write at least 10 items.

When they have finished writing their lists, they should choose five items to read aloud to the group. Sharing their memories is usually a very enjoyable exercise.

The students then choose one of the items that they think they could develop into a story. This will be their assignment.

Later, after the trainee finishes writing out his experience, he tells the same experience on tape, keeping one particular person in mind as his audience (for example, a younger sister, an older brother, an uncle, and so forth). The student then transcribes his taped story. When he has finished transcribing, the written and oral stories should be compared, looking for the good points of each. Most people tell a story more interestingly than they write it. If this is so with a writer, have him notice what makes the oral story more interesting and encourage him to incorporate such improvements into the written story. (Ideophones, for example are often omitted in writing a story.)

The instructor and each writer can determine how many experiences on the list should be written. A writer does not need to continue using the tape recorder, once he has become aware that writing a story is a substitute for telling it, and that a story should be written just as interestingly as it is told. Some people easily write as well or better than they speak. Some new writers, however, write with such difficulty that their train of thought is interrupted as they try to determine how the words should be written. It is always preferable to have such writers tell the story first and then transcribe it.

Although the activities described here have proved especially valuable for use with a group of writers, they have been used on occasion to get a single individual started writing as well. Either way, it is not unusual to get material for several booklets from a single list of "I remember whens."