

Dos and Don'ts for Author Bios and Photos

When submitting a bio and photo consider what these tools do for the reader or audience: they give an introduction. They are your pitch that runs ahead of you.

A lot of bios run like a dry version of a CV. It's relevant to indicate experience but every bio is a list.

While accomplishments, awards and book titles are things to be proud of and demonstrate other people have found your art worthwhile, unless your titles are telling, the list alone doesn't say why your work appeals. If your title is "Blue Water" it will indicate less of what you're about and the genre than "The Zombie Survival Guide: Recorded Attacks".

A bio is a hook on why someone should pay attention. A bio should also key people in to what you're passionate about. Be as specific as possible: author also writes political satire and acrostics. Add a particular model of guitar or bicycle. Add something of favorite things. "Loves the way rain sounds coming thru white pine." It adds a flavour of personality, perhaps tying into the motivations for living.

Your bio is an art form onto itself. It could be something personal, distinctive, and unique. "Author lives with 2 cats" is not unique. "I have been writing since childhood" is not distinctive. Maybe your writing is all about the domestic and "lives in X town with husband and 2 kids" adds a down-to-earth human element. Think about what impact the sentence can have.

Each bio can be a custom job. You may add a factoid, or teaser of connection. For example, to be published in a journal out of particular college, tie into the local angle: "The author was first kissed while living just outside this college town", or "Author currently lives in this town which the writer first encountered stranded roadside in 1986".

Do you write humour but your bio is sombre? Have fun with it. You can do that without feeling exposed or oversharing or being too random. Some journals demand dry, bland and meek. If so they will tell you.

Even though it is called a bio, it is a pitch more than an autobiographical short. What aspect of yourself do you want out there? What effect do you

want? Your bio could plug future projects or your favorite charity. It could counterbalance the tone of your work or play it up. A poem about the prairies could be written in cowpoke theme. Hokey might be better than forgettable.

Each bio is a very small billboard ad. What key info to pique interest would you like to put on it?

And then there's photos.

A photo should be big enough to be useable to allow for print quality, publicity posters, re-sizing to various screens.

A photo should look like you. Ideally it should help the person coming to pick you out of a crowd. If the last good photo of you was taken 30 years ago, it may be time for an update. A professionally done portrait is best. There are hammy authoritative author poses or a simple head and shoulders, but flattering mug shot.

If you are going to do it yourself, here are some tips:

A posed portrait is often better than a candid so you are alert and at rest. Photos taken during reading tends to be of a stressed person mid-facial expression blurred in dark lighting.

You should be visible. It should be well-exposed not a grainy silhouette nor a large scene which you are incidentally in with the head the size of a pencil eraser.

A photo that frames the head and shoulders or upper half of the body is fine so long as your face is recognizable. Think of i.d. photos: no hats and their shadows, hair or sunglasses obscuring the face.

Use a non-cluttered background. Think of things in a photo like parts of writing. Are they adding a plot element, or distracting?

Do use a camera not a camera phone or webcam. The light from the screen tends to be blue and unless you were born blue... If you must use your webcam lift so it's not the unflattering from-under-the-chin perspective, and fill your screen with red or orange background to moderate the colour cast. The arm holding camera looks like shoddy 90s

Myspace. Cell phones tend to have harsh colors profiles and tend to be grainy and smaller scale.

Do: Be in natural light, ideally an overcast day outdoors or near a window. Don't interpret "by a window" to mean your back to it. Be 45 to 90 degrees or nearly facing out a window with the camera facing along the wall or into the room. This gives a soft even light without a dark side to the face. The cloudy day lighting also is kinder to wrinkles than overhead indoor light.

Don't use a flash: If its attached to the camera it shouldn't be used. It flattens the face not flatters. It blows out highlights, especially cheeks, foreheads and men's bald patches. All the curves make the shape and if they are all black or white, it's harder to make out the person. Photo-art images to seem like oil paintings are fine so long as you don't lose the recognizable-factor. If you want a more stylized portrait than a plain record of your bone structure without a hint of your personality, there are all kinds of skilled photographers who do that. For the price you get paid for some readings, you can get a portrait to use for years. (But not for 40 years.)

Most people don't like getting their picture taken but a good photographer can make you feel more comfortable and get good results.