

# Writing Tips from Ellen Cassedy

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Four ways to share your work in progress –  
without showing the manuscript



I once heard about a woman (a mother, of course) who wrote an entire novel in secret – in the bathtub. Every night she locked the bathroom door, immersed herself, and scribbled away in a damp notebook until the book was done. She didn't show her work to a soul, or even breathe a word about it, until she was completely finished.

That's not me, to put it mildly.

Many expert writers and teachers say it's best not to share a work in progress. Don't seek criticism or feedback, they say, until you've completed a first draft and given it at least a preliminary polish.

For me, that advice poses a problem. During the years I was writing my book, I had a fervent need to connect. The deeper I got into the project, the more I wanted to share. I wanted friends and family to know who I was, who I was becoming. And when the going got tough, I needed the boost of knowing people were looking forward to reading what I was working on.

But thinking back on the ways I found nourishment during the writing process, I see that among the most valuable were several that did not involve showing the manuscript at all. Here are four of them:

**Stuffed cabbage with friends.** My book is about a journey to the land of my Jewish ancestors. One Saturday night, I cooked up a big pan of stuffed cabbage – the iconic Lithuanian food of Lithuania, whether Jewish or non-Jewish – and invited several friends over to hear me talk about my work in progress. While feeding them, I was fed by their interest in what I was doing. (And, in preparation for the evening, I jotted down pages of notes – which became the spine of my story.)

**Writers' group.** My writers' group was a lifeline. What helped me most was not the line-by-line comments but the regular deadlines and the push to keep going. I still remember one member's comment, scribbled on the latest chunk

of my manuscript: “This is your sacred work.” The encouragement to commit myself as deeply as I could mattered more than anything else.

**A certain kind of class.** In a class at my local writers’ center, instead of sharing our manuscripts, everyone had to choose a title, design a cover and inside flap copy, and create a detailed table of contents. Very useful! In another class – this one on memoir writing – we were handed big pieces of butcher paper and told to make columns listing the main events of our family narratives alongside what was happening in the larger world during those years.

Again, the point was to share what we were doing without actually showing the work itself. It worked for me.

**Speak at a library.** I developed a talk about the project, with PowerPoint images, and delivered it at a library and a synagogue. Preparing the presentation helped me think hard about what I most wanted to say, and the questions from the audience helped me understand more clearly how to say it.

**When the first draft** – or was it the second, or the tenth? – was finally complete, I was ready for something different. At this stage I needed detailed feedback, from friends, fellow writers, and a variety of experts.

Then I got to work rewriting nearly every line.

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Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2012). To see all of her Writing Tips, visit her website at [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).