

THE WRITER

Two writers, one voice

Veteran partners share skills and one voice.

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By Ellen Scolnic and Joyce Eisenberg

I'm Ellen, the creative one. And I'm Joyce, the editor. We've been writing personal essays – together – for 10 years. Yes, this is an oxymoron. Personal means unique, individual, one's own, yet we often find ourselves writing about "our children" or "the time we burned our dinner."



How do we present our joint point of view without the reader assuming we're polygamists with five children between us? While we don't share husbands, we've shared paychecks, bylines and the microphone at our speaking engagements ever since we wrote the Dictionary of Jewish Words in 2001. We write, blog, tweet and post as one – but we really are two people.

We are professional partners. We're married to different men, but each of them thought we were talking about him when we wrote that "our husband" wanted to leave the wedding before dessert. Likewise, when we described our husband as the nicest man in the world, they both said, "Thanks, sweetie."

When we write together, we meld our points of view for the sake of the essay. So as not to embarrass a particular child, we disguise his or her identity. We use pronouns instead of names, add up ages, grade point averages and incomes, and divide by 5. Still, the kids recognize themselves and accuse us of exaggerating: "Everyone gets detention; it's not a big deal." And: "They gave archery ribbons to everyone. You don't have to brag about it."

We don't want to be outed by Oprah for faking our autobiography, so we've never totally invented a child. Our own give us plenty of material. But we have created an imaginary uncle for a holiday column about rude dinner guests.

Like a personal trainer, a writing partner provides motivation. On our own, we wouldn't make time to write, just like we wouldn't make time to lift weights. Together, we commit to writing once a week. We sit in front of one computer. Joyce types; Ellen talks.

As our writing date approaches, the wheels start turning. We scan the news, look at the calendar and examine what's going on in our lives for inspiration. We've written about our children's interests in "Different Paths to Diplomas," favorite foods in "The Great Knaidel Konundrum" and the rush to purchase presents for the winter holidays in "Calendar Confusion."

Sometimes our inspiration is mundane. Joyce reached for a coffee mug and realized that her mug collection was snapshot of her life – the Mother's Day cup with the faded photo of her toddlers, the college logo mug. When Ellen confirmed she was sentimental about her mug collection, too – the souvenir mug from the trip to Chicago, the one her son made at Paint-a-Pot – we knew we had enough material for a column.

Our writing skills are complementary. Ellen is imaginative; she may exaggerate to get a bigger laugh. Joyce likes to Google everything and finds out the facts. Joyce is wont to say, "Ellen, you are making that up. Those gourmet chocolates didn't cost \$39.99. We need to look it up."

We are a writer's workshop of two. While we write together, we check in: "Do you think that's funny?" "Is that the best word?" After years of working together, we don't hold back our opinions. We don't feel compelled to give positive feedback before we say, "That needs some work." No one's feelings get hurt when one of us points out, "That sentence doesn't make any sense."

In the time that we've been writing together, our children have gone from kindergarten to college, our phones have gone from our kitchen counters to our pockets and our hair now needs a touch-up every few weeks. Together, we've written 119 blog posts, dozens of op-ed essays, 751 tweets and 1,400 definitions of Jewish words, and we have spent hours and hours together driving to book talks. And we still look forward to writing together. We long ago got rid of our personal trainers because we thought we could exercise on our own. We know better than that when it comes to writing.