

# Argumentative essay on the nature of truth in how to tell a true war story

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Truth in fiction is often relative; the extent to which objective truth is embellished in favor of dramatic license or reflecting the emotional tenor of the speaker is important. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” Tim O’Brien tells various tales of his time in Vietnam from various perspectives and sources – it is equally a recounting of his own experiences and embellishment from an author looking to create an interesting story. O’Brien’s story is, in essence, about the nature of storytelling, demonstrating the ability for authors to dramatically change and determine the perception of events while providing no easy answers as to what is ‘true’.

The ability of emotion to dictate our reality and the perception of events is established in the story’s beginning: Rat Kiley writes a letter to his friend’s sister in order to express his gratitude for his friendship and courage, listing a number of stories spanning the man’s status as Rat’s “best friend in the world” (O’Brien 1). When the sister doesn’t write back, he immediately calls her a “dumb cooze” and ends the story. This sudden shift in mood based on his emotional perception of the situation (positive emotions turning to negative ones because of a lack of response or acknowledgement) demonstrates immediately our human frailties and vanity; we will embellish stories or change our perception of someone if we do not like their reception to our overtures.

These stories support O’Brien’s complex perspective on truth; he writes early on, “A true war story is never moral,” and this may cement the moral ambiguity of the tales in “How to Tell a True War Story” (O’Brien). The aforementioned sad ending to the opening story solidifies this perspective, as O’Brien undercuts the expected heartwarming ending we expect – the

love he felt for his friend being rewarded by acknowledgement by the sister. When that is denied, he takes his anger out on her. Soldiers are not moral creatures by virtue of what they have to do, and therefore “ true” war stories are intrinsically immoral. It’s often even difficult for the storyteller to tell what is real; “ in any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen” (O’Brien 2). In the Curt Lemon story, different perspectives see the story as a love story and a war story. By the end of it, however, the line between authorship and truth is blurred with the addition of context and reader response; with the woman who comes to Tim’s reading; she puts the fake 'true' war stories in perspective by finding the true emotions behind some of the stories.

## **Conclusion**

Tim O’Brien’s “ How to Tell a True War Story” emphasizes the flexible nature of truth and reality when it comes to fiction and memory. O’Brien emphasizes and values embellishment throughout his tale, thus making the real ‘ truth’ of war very difficult to find: “ A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (O’Brien 9). This is proven through the shifting emotions and misplaced details soldiers like Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon (and even O’Brien himself) place in their stories; even though the details might be off, their effect is just as real as if it had really happened. The constantly shifting nature of reality in these stories is done without ever invalidating any of the words actually written, and implies a plurality of truths that O’Brien establishes as the essence of storytelling.