

The Essay and Creative Nonfiction

Just about anyone who goes through high school in America gets some practice in basic forms of the **essay**—expository, descriptive, persuasive, and so forth. The tradition of the essay is that it is based in fact, and that the reader has a right to expect that the facts presented will be accurate and truthful.

But the word *essay* itself comes from the French for *try*, and “A Try” captures the modest and partial nature of the form. Anything in the world is potential subject matter, and anything you say about it is an attempt to be accurate, to be interesting, to offer a perspective.

Any or all forms of the essay may be enlivened and made more meaningful through attention to imagery, voice, character, setting, and scene—the elements of imaginative writing. Such essays may be called **literary nonfiction** or **creative nonfiction**, terms to describe the kinds of essays that may begin with a personal experience or the merely factual, but which reach for greater range and resonance.

Writer-editor Lee Gutkind sees creative nonfiction as allowing the writer “to employ the diligence of a reporter, the shifting voices and viewpoints of a novelist, the refined wordplay of a poet, and the analytical modes of the essayist,” and he sees as a requirement that the essays should “have purpose and meaning beyond the experiences related.”

In one sense, the rules for meaning-making are more relaxed in the essay form than in poetry, fiction, or drama, in that you may tell as well as show; you may say in so many words what the significance is for you. Sometimes the process of gathering information becomes part of the story. Sometimes an object of research leads to a personal discovery. Sometimes the essay begins in personal memory, but aspires to a truth about the human condition. In any of these cases the essay will move back and forth from the intellectual to the emotional, and from the specific to the general.

Creative nonfiction is capacious, malleable, forthright, and forgiving. Unlike the conventional academic essay all students are expected to write in freshman composition, creative nonfiction does not need to follow the standard thesis–topic–sentence–conclusion outline. Instead, it can easily borrow from any form you choose: story, monologue, lesson, list, rondel, collage. The trick is to find the right shape for the idea you have to present. At the end of this chapter are two essays that represent two extremes of possible form. “Margot’s Diary” is a meditative recreation of a document that does not exist; “Jack Culberg, 79” is an **oral history** entirely in the recorded words of its subject. Each focuses on an actual person; neither intrudes the author into the story; yet in each the imaginative mark of the author is evident—in the former through artful but honest invention, in the latter through artful inquiry and arrangement.

TRY THIS 8.1

At some point in your school life you were asked to write an essay that made you angry or anxious. (You needed the grade? You hated the subject? You didn't have time? You were in love?) As an exercise in showing yourself the difference between that school essay and creative nonfiction, write two pages about writing that essay. See it as a chance to tell the (personal, emotional, atmospheric, judgmental?) truths that had no place in the essay you were assigned.

Memoir and the Personal Essay

Two familiar and attractive essay forms, differing more in emphasis than in kind, are memoir and the personal essay. A **memoir** is a story retrieved from the writer's memory, with the writer as protagonist—the *I* remembering and commenting on the events described in the essay. Memoir tends to place the emphasis on the story, and the “point” is likely to emerge, as it does in fiction, largely from the events and characters themselves, rather than through the author's speculation or reflection.

Example: In the essay “Sundays,” from his memoir *What I Can't Bear Losing*, poet Gerald Stern describes his boyhood in Pittsburgh in a Jewish neighborhood surrounded by Calvinist Christians. The emphasis is on the pattern of his Sundays: his parents' quarrels, his walks with his father, later his long walks alone through the hills of the city, the concerts of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, the ethnic clubs, an early romance. But as he recalls these days he paints a resonant picture of the ethnic, religious, and economic demarcations of the city. His overt analyses are few and light, but he evokes by implication the tensions underlying a divided society.

The **personal essay** also usually has its origin in something that has happened in the writer's life, but it may be something that happened yesterday afternoon, or it may represent an area of interest deliberately explored, and it is likely to give rise to reflection or intellectual exploration.

Example: I took a photograph out of an old frame to put in a picture of my new husband and stepdaughter. Because the frame was constructed in an amazingly solid way, I thought about the man whose photo I was displacing; his assumptions about permanence; how we use frames to try to capture and hang onto moments, memories, families, selves that are in fact always in flux; how we frame our cities with roads, our shoreline with resorts, our dead with coffins—marking our territory, claiming possession. In this instance a very small task led me to write about the nature of impermanence and enclosure.

Both memoir and personal essay grow out of some degree of autobiographical experience and are usually (though there are exceptions) written in the first person. The distinction between them is not always clear, although it may be said that the memoir sets up a dialogue between the writer and his/her past,

while the emphasis of the personal essay is likely to be a relationship, implied or sought, between the writer and the reader. Philip Lopate, in the brilliant introduction to his anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, dissects the tone in terms of its intimacy, its "drive toward candor and self-exposure," the conversational dynamic and the struggle for honesty.

The personal essay is a form that allows maximum mobility from the small, the daily, the domestic, to the universal and significant. Essayist Philip Gerard says, "The subject has to carry itself and also be an elegant vehicle for larger meanings." What makes it "creative" is that though you may take the subject matter of research or journalism, there is "an apparent subject and a deeper subject. The apparent subject... is only part of what we are interested in."

Example: Whereas you might write a newspaper article about the Little Miss Blue Crab Festival of Franklin County, naming the contestants, the organizers, and the judges, describing the contest, announcing the winner—if you undertook this same subject matter as a piece of creative nonfiction, your main focus would not be the event itself but the revelation of something essential about the nature of beauty contests, or children in competition, or the character of the fishing village, or coastal society, or rural festivals. In a first-person essay, the focus might be on how you personally fit or don't fit into this milieu, what memories of your own childhood it calls up, how it relates to your experience of competition in general, or other structures in your life and, by extension, life in general. You would have "distance on it," a perspective that embraces not just the immediate event but its place in a human, social, historical, even cosmic context. Because creative nonfiction has this deeper (or wider, or more universal, or significant) subject, it won't necessarily date in the manner of yesterday's newspaper.

TRY THIS 8.2

Begin with the conventional notion of titling an essay:

On _____.

- Make a list of at least six titles that represent things you might like to write about, things that interest you and that you feel confident you know something about. These may be either abstractions or specifics, *On Liberty* or *On Uncle Ernie's Saddle*.
- Then make a list of six subjects you do *not* want to write about, and wouldn't show to anybody if you did. (*On _____*.)
- Make a list of six titles in which the preposition "on" could be a pun: *On Speed*, *On the 'Net*, *On My Feet*.
- Make a list of six titles dealing with subjects about which you know "nothing at all." For me such a list might include: *On Brain Surgery*, *On Refrigerator Repair*, *On Tasmania*.

If you choose to write an essay from the first list, you are embarking on an honorable enterprise. If you choose from the second list, you are very courageous. If you choose

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(Try This 8.2 continued)

from list three, you'll probably have a good time—and remember that such an essay should deal with both aspects of the pun: **On My Feet** should deal with toenails, calluses, pain, or podiatry, and also with courage or persistence. The last list offers the wildest ride and may turn up something original, comic (Dave Barry makes a living in this territory), or unexpectedly true. Remember that your intent is not to deceive: signal or confess your ignorance when appropriate. Any of the four lists may, like focused freewrites, unlock subject matter that you didn't know you had in you.

Techniques of Creative Nonfiction

Memory has its own story to tell.

Tim O'Brien

Creative nonfiction tells a true story. How does it tell a story? (I'll deal with the "true" part below.)

Every writerly technique that has been discussed in these pages can be used in the essay form, and just as a character will be most richly drawn when **presented** by more than one **method**, so a variety of techniques will enrich the **texture** of nonfiction. As an **essayist** you may (and should) employ image, metaphor, voice, dialogue, point of view, character, setting, scene, conflict, human connection—and you are also free to speak your mind directly, to "tell" what you mean and what matters. The success of your essay may very well depend on whether you achieve a balance between the imaginative and the reflective. Often, the story and its drama (the showing) will fill most of the sentences—that is what keeps a reader reading—and the startling or revelatory or thoughtful nature of your insight about the story (the telling) will usually occupy less space.

Image and Voice

When writing academic research essays, you generally try for an authoritative, abstract, and impersonal voice: "Howard Dilettante was born of humble parentage. ..." or "The next four centuries were characterized by international strife. ..." But creative nonfiction calls for a conversational tone, a personal "take," and it is largely through your choice of concrete detail that you will carry the reader into the confidence of this persona.

The park is hardly a block away, where lighted ball diamonds come into view on ducking through branches. There, too, is a fenced acre for unleashed dogs, a half dozen tennis courts with yellow balls flying and, close by, a game of summertime hoops under the lights, a scrambling, squeaking, stampede of sweat and bodies on green tarmac.

"Hoop Sex," Theodore Weesner

Here Weesner introduces us to a persona at the same time as he declares the topic of summer night sports. The author is somebody who ducks through branches, who notices dogs and flying balls, who knows basketball as "hoops," and who is comfortable with, excited by, sweat and scramble. The same scene would come to us in a different choice of imagery from the pen of a horticulturalist or a reminiscing mother.

TRY THIS 8.3

Tell your life story in three incidents involving hair.

Scene

Like a story, creative nonfiction needs scenes. If you are working from a remembered period of your life, it may present itself as summary, and summary will have its place in your essay; but when you get to what mattered—what changed you, what moves us—it will need the immediacy of detailed action, of discovery and decision.

Just down from the mountains, early August. Lugging my youngest child from the car, I noticed that his perfectly relaxed body was getting heavier every year. When I undressed his slack limbs, he woke up enough to mumble, "I like my own bed," then fell back down, all the way down, into sleep. The sensation of his weight was still in my arms as I shut the door.

"Images," Robert Hass

Notice that Hass begins with a brief summary (or long shot) of the situation, then moves at once into the sensual apprehension of the action, the boy's body relaxed, heavy, slack, while the father takes care of him.

TRY THIS 8.4

Pick the five photographs that you would want to illustrate your life so far. Choose one of them to write about.

Character

Like a story, creative nonfiction depends on character, and the creation of character depends on both detail and dialogue. Dialogue is tricky because the memory does its own editing, but you can re-create a voice from memory no less than from imagination. Write, remembering as truly as you can, then test in your mind whether the other person involved would agree: *What we said was like this.*

Whatever looks I had were hidden behind thick cat-eyed glasses and a hearing aid that was strapped to my body like a dog halter. My hallucinatory visions would sometimes lift me up and carry me through the air. When I told my mother that I was afraid of the sky, she considered it a reasonable fear, even though she said, "Well, the sky isn't something I could ever be afraid of."

"Falling in Love Again," Terry Galloway

TRY THIS 8.5

Write about the loss of a friendship you have experienced, whether by anger, change, death, moving away—whatever reason. Use the skills you have to create the characters of both yourself and the friend you lost. Speculate on what this loss teaches you about yourself, or about your life, or about life.

Setting

Like a story, creative nonfiction needs the context and texture of setting. Frequently an encounter with setting is the point and purpose of the piece, whether that encounter is with an exotic foreign country or your own backyard. If you're stuck for a way to begin, you might remember the long shot–middle shot–close-up pattern.

It's past eleven on a Friday night in the spring of 1955. Here comes a kid down the length of Eighteenth Street in the Midwood section of Flatbush, in Brooklyn, New York. He passes the kept lawns and tidy hedges under big leafy sycamores and maples. The middle class is asleep, and most of the houses attached to the lawns are dark, though an occasional window pulses with blue-gray television light. Streetlamps shine benignly, and Mars is red in the sky. The kid is on his way home from the weekly meeting of Troop 8, Boy Scouts of America. ...

"For the Love of a Princess of Mars," Frederick Busch

Interpretation

Unlike a story, creative nonfiction involves a balance of dramatization and overt reflection. This doesn't mean that the balance needs to be the same in all essays. On the contrary, a memoir that leaves us with a vivid image of an aging relative or a revelation of an error in judgment may be absolutely appropriate, whereas a piece on a walk in the woods may need half its space to analyze and elucidate the discoveries you have made. Sometimes an essay will convey its personal intensity precisely through the force of its abstractions.

I have had with my friend Wes Jackson a number of useful conversations about the necessity of getting out of movements—even movements that have seemed necessary and dear to us—when they have lapsed into

self-righteousness and self-betrayal, as movements seem almost invariably to do. People in movements too readily learn to deny to others the rights and privileges they demand for themselves. They too easily become unable to mean their own language, as when a "peace movement" becomes violent.

"In Distrust of Movements," Wendell Berry

One part of the purpose of an essay will always be to inform or teach, either by presenting new knowledge or by combining old facts in a new way. Often the essay seduces the reader with a personal note into an educational enterprise. The nature essayist Barry Lopez demonstrates the technique again and again; he places himself in relation to the landscape, and later in the piece slips in the history, archeology, or biology. So a typical essay will begin, "I am standing at the margin of the sea ice called the floe edge at the mouth of Admiralty Inlet. ..." or "We left our camp on Pingok Island one morning knowing a storm was moving in from the Southwest. ..." Later in each piece, more factual or speculative paragraphs begin, "Three million colonial seabirds, mostly northern fulmars, kittiwakes, and guillemots, nest and feed here in the summer," and, "Desire for wealth, for spiritual or emotional ecstasy, for recognition—strains of all three are found in nearly every arctic expedition." Lopez immediately involves the reader in the human drama, but he also wants to teach us what he knows. He exhibits the range of the personal essay: involvement and intellectual enlargement, both operating at full stretch. He wants to have and to offer both the experience and the knowledge.

Research

If your essay asks for research, it may be very different, and vastly more inclusive, than what you usually mean by research. Taking a walk in your old neighborhood or getting on a surfboard for the first time, phoning or e-mailing friends and family members, recording an interview, reading old letters including your own, digging among photographs or mementos or recipes—any of these may be exactly what you need to research a memoir. If your subject takes you into areas you need to know more about, you may spend as much time in interview and legwork as on the Internet or in the library.

When it comes to the writing, an essay may be researched and still be "personal," either by making the research (including interview, observation, and detective work) part of the essay, or by allowing the reader to share the emotions you as writer experienced in the process. How does it *feel* to watch a kidney operation? What emotions pass among the athletes in the locker room? How did your interview of Aunt Lena change your view of your family?

TRY THIS 8.6

Write a personal essay about a building you care about. Choose one of which you have strong memories, then research the place itself. This research might, if it's a house or school in your hometown, consist of calling people to interview them. If it's a church or municipal building of some sort, it might be archival or library research. You will know what's appropriate. How does your memory of the place contrast with, or how is it qualified by, what you have learned? Is there an idea to be mined in the difference between them?

Although the personal essay offers an insight into the writer's life and thought, that doesn't necessarily mean that it must be written in the first person. It may be that the story you have to tell or the drama you have witnessed can be best conveyed (as in a short story) by focusing on that experience, implying rather than spelling out how it has moved you. George Plimpton wrote sports stories in the first person because his point was to expose the emotions of an amateur among the pros; whereas Roger Angell writes occasionally in the first person, and sometimes in the collective "we," but most often in the third person, focusing on the players but putting on their stories the stamp of his style. If in doubt, try a few paragraphs in first and then in third person; fool around with the perspective of fly-on-the-wall and with myself-as-participant. Usually the material will reveal its own best slant, and the experiment may help you find out what you have to say.

Transitions and Focus

Transitions are particularly important in creative nonfiction because of the needed rhythm back and forth between scene and summary, abstraction and detail. We expect a degree of direction and interpretation that in fiction would be called **authorial intrusion**. An essayist is allowed and encouraged to employ intrusion to a degree, and we expect and ask for the generalization that says, in effect: *This is what I think. I find it useful, when I find myself getting a little wound up or mixed up in the writing, to type in "What's my point?" and try to answer the question right then.* The question can come out later. Often the answer can, in some form or other, stay. Even if you end up cutting it, it may help you find your way.

In the past, when writing a critical or research essay, you've been told to pick a confined and specific subject and explore it thoroughly. The same advice holds for creative nonfiction. Don't try to write about "my family," which will overwhelm you with vagaries and contradictions, just as if your subject were "Shakespeare." Write about one afternoon when things changed. Focus on one kid in the fifth grade who didn't fit in. Write about your first encounter with language, oysters, God, hypocrisy, race, or betrayal. **Creative nonfiction tells a story, and like a story it will describe a journey and a**

change; it will be written in a scene or scenes; it will characterize through detail and dialogue. The difference is not only that it is based on the facts as your research or your memory can dredge them up, but that you may interpret it for us as you go along or at the end or both: *This is what I learned, this is how I changed, this is how I relate my experience to the experience of the world, and of my readers.* *the goal*