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## Research in Creative Nonfiction

By school training, most of us consider research something we do when asked to write a research paper not a creative nonfiction essay. Therefore the idea that “doing research” is a natural part of any writing – including fiction – seems alien at first. But research, like observation, interview, and memory is simply a fourth source of information for the nonfiction writer. We do it not because we’re supposed to but because it will help answer questions that interest us.

The purpose of doing research in creative nonfiction differs in some ways from our motives in academic writing. As you know, in academic writing we turn to research to (1) help us identify questions worthy of investigation in a discipline and (2) provide a context of what has already been said about whatever question we choose. Creative writers aren’t particularly interested in adding to scholarly knowledge. We’re mostly interested in the questions that arise from ordinary life. Our motives in turning to books, articles, the Web, and so on usually included the following:

1. **Provide background.** I’m interested in writing an essay about the engineering project that reversed the flow of the Chicago River in the last century. I begin by simply reading up on it. Nonfiction writers are generalists, and this kind of hungry reading of whatever interests at the moment is very important.
2. **Answer a specific question.** Frequently we are in the midst of writing a piece and we need facts. Exactly how many people live in Highland Park, Illinois? How much gold was pulled out of Bogus Basin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? The Web is an amazing resource for writers on these specific questions; it has made this kind of research infinitely easier.

**JUNEAU, Alaska Jan 29, 2007 (AP)**— About 10,000 Juneau residents briefly lost power after a bald eagle lunging a deer head crashed into transmission lines.

"You have to live in Alaska to have this kind of outage scenario," said Gayle Wood, an Alaska Electric Light & Power spokeswoman. "This is the story of the overly ambitious eagle who evidently found a deer head in the landfill."

The bird, weighed down by the deer head, apparently failed to clear the transmission lines, she said. A repair crew found the eagle dead, the deer head nearby.

The power was out for less than 45 minutes Sunday.

3. **Assist with revision.** Research is a revision strategy. The best way to break free of a draft that has a white-knuckled grip on you is to find a research angle that will open it up to rewriting. Not long ago, I was working on an essay on ice skating. It occurred to me that it might be interesting to find out when ice skating began and how they did it. This led me to a wonderful anecdote – the new lead in my next draft – about the 16 year-old Dutch patron saint of ice skating who broke through the

4. **Get at the truth.** We’ve already talked about the importance of truth-telling in nonfiction, and sometimes taking time to find out exactly what year the solar eclipse happened and whether it was a total eclipse as you remembered, or whether the car could have been a Metropolitan, all of these things turn out to strangely matter. Research can help you see things as they *really* were and this always helps you get to the truth of things.

When you do research, don't feel obligated to use it. Sometimes simply knowing background on your subject will be enough. But if you do decide to include some of what you discovered, find seamless ways to incorporate the material. What you don't want to do is make your nonfiction essay or article read like a research paper. What are some of the ways to embed fact in prose?

- *Attach it to the backbone of narrative.* Research looks like research when it involves long exposition that is a clear break with the story the writer is telling. It's far more effective to attach factual material to the narrative like any other detail.
- *Focus on surprising information.* Facts are simply another kind of detail, and the best details help the writer and reader to see things freshly. It is surprising, for example, that a house fly preens itself with its own puke.
- *Exploit comparisons.* Similes can make even the most arcane fact come to life, as can analogies. A hummingbird, for example, has a "W-shaped tongue, licking nectar like a cat (only faster)."
- *Find your own way of saying things.* Skilled nonfiction writers take possession of factual information, and colonize it with their own voices.
- *Use someone else's voice.* One way to communicate information is to interview someone who knows something and allow them, through quotation and attribution, to speak it for you.
- *Work the common ground.* One way to make factual information interesting is to look for opportunities to connect what you know to the reader's own experiences and observations. You can illuminate a world the reader thinks he or she knows well.

### **Writers to Study**

John McPhee (nearly anything, but *Coming into the Country*, and *Survival of the Birch Bark Canoe*)

Diane Ackerman, *Natural History of Love*, or *Natural History of the Senses*

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*

Richard Conniff, *Spineless Wonders*

Tracy Kidder, *House*

Lewis Thomas, *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Symphony*, or *The Fragile Species*

Susan Orlean, *The Orchid Thief*

Barry Lopez

David Quammen