

INTRODUCTION



The Form and Theory of Creative Nonfiction

You already have spent your lifetime telling “true” stories, slapped together with the adhesive of two words: *And then*. “So the neighbor saw us parked on the street for about a half hour, and then called the cops. And then they looked under the seat of the truck, and they saw the open bottle of Bud. And then I offered to do a breath test, but the officer saw that I wasn’t drunk. He could tell I was being honest, and then he brought me home. Sorry about the handcuffs; he said it was state law.” The simplest (and sometimes the best) nonfiction stories are made this way, telling what happened from beginning to end, relying on the organizing power of chronology. But there are many other ways of telling a true story, and some of these begin in the middle—not at the end. Some linger on moments that would normally be just the flash of a highway sign while the teller speeds to his destination. Some stories compress or expand time—a single moment, maybe even five minutes, becomes an entire story that is as long as one that covers 30 years.

Crafting Truth is a book about why nonfiction writers might make decisions like these. It’s a study of how writers’ motives in telling stories lead them to shape one kind of narrative rather than another, particularly in the genres called “creative nonfiction.” Of course, nonfiction genres run the gamut from writing we do in the workplace—memos and reports—to deeply personal explorations of sex abuse. Creative nonfiction is a subset of this large family, and this book focuses on the three most popular forms: essay, memoir, and literary journalism. Why these three? While they certainly differ, as you’ll see, essays, memoirs, and literary journalism are all concerned with storytelling, and to a greater or lesser extent they are genres that draw from the same well as other imaginative literature. It’s easy to confuse Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* with a novel and a Lia Purpura essay with a poem. Both use the familiar devices of narrative storytelling: scene, character, dialogue, point of view, and often exquisite language. But creative nonfiction forms fundamentally differ from novels and poems in two ways: They don’t just show but they tell, too, and the stories are “true.”

On Missing the Target

It turns out that the best way to begin a story about telling true stories is at the beginning. Why might writers turn to an essay rather than a short story, or a memoir rather than a novel? A place to begin understanding this is to return to the title of one of George Orwell's famous essays, "Why I Write." Our interest here isn't Orwell, but another essayist, Joan Didion, who borrowed Orwell's title for a piece exploring the same theme. "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking," wrote Didion, "what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." Self-discovery is a motive many other writers share, most famously expressed by the novelist E. M. Forster when he said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" To do this, however, they must accept something that apprentice writers rarely do: allow the work to defy intention. "Writers value the gun that does *not* hit the target at which it is aimed," wrote Pulitzer Prize-winning essayist Donald Murray.

This is quite an extraordinary idea, particularly for those of us who have been school writers most of our lives. The academic essay is most often an exercise in avoiding accidents: Decide on a thesis and use it to muscle the material into obedience; ignore what conflicts with what one already thinks; and march without digression toward a predetermined conclusion. There is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach. In school, the efficiency of knowing what ducks you will shoot, and in what order, makes a great deal of rhetorical sense. But creative nonfiction offers writers a different kind of invitation—the opportunity for surprise, discoveries that frequently occur when the writing takes wing in unexpected directions. You expect it to fly south and it flies east instead. Your job, simply, is to follow the writing to where it leads.

This motive—to discover what you didn't know you knew—might just as easily explain why a fiction writer or poet sits down to compose. What distinguishes the nonfiction writer's aims? For one thing, it's a great deal more personal. Nancy Mairs writes about suicide, rape, and her struggles with multiple sclerosis. While her intention is certainly to inform and enlighten, Mairs's motives as an essayist are drawn from a deeper well: "I have always had to tell myself the story of myself in order to sense a self at all." The narrator of nonfiction does not masquerade in the guise of someone else. While we might speculate about the relationship between author and narrator in a short story, in an essay there is no doubt. It is Nancy Mairs speaking when she confesses in her essay "Touching by Accident" that she considered killing herself with gas rather than Elavil but worried that the fumes might harm her cat, *Bête Noire*. Even though she rarely mentions herself, it is Joan Didion who is narrating the story of Lucille Miller burning her husband to death in a Volkswagen in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream." While the narrator may be, as Phillip Lopate put it, an "I-character," someone who operates in a nonfiction narrative much as a character would in any story,

there is no doubt that the slender “I” through which we see is the author whose name we know, who actually lives (or lived) somewhere and breathed this air.

The Collapse of the Narrator

It is this difference—the elimination of the usual gaps between the author of a story and its teller—that most distinguishes nonfiction from its cousins, fiction and poetry. The implications of this are significant. While all creative writers may celebrate surprise in their work, they may not be as intensely interested as creative nonfiction writers are in what *they* think or feel. E. B. White called the personal essay “the last resort of the egoist.” Creative nonfiction, and the essay in particular, is a personal exploration in which the writer often lifts the curtain on the process of coming to know and makes it part of the story. The writer becomes a subject. While this can happen in other imaginative literature, creative nonfiction narratives are often balanced on the fulcrum of the author’s self-knowledge.

This is not meant to suggest that all creative nonfiction writers choose the first person to tell their stories. Telling a nonfiction story in the third person is a question of craft: Where do writers want to direct their readers’ gazes—on the narrator or the subject? Writers like Tracy Kidder, whose many works of nonfiction include *House* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Soul of a New Machine*, noted that when he was young, he felt he had “a moral obligation to write in the first person” to confront the assumption that journalism could be objective. He realized later that he was much more likely to write honestly about subjects other than himself. Yet even in Kidder’s work, his subjects and his readers know who is narrating. We immediately see through the illusion of omniscience in a way we might not in a novel. Because it’s a work of nonfiction, readers easily imagine Kidder as an observer-participant in a scene, actively looking into the material at hand for the story he is telling.

The collapse of the customary gap between narrator and author also means that we read nonfiction narratives differently. We hold them to different standards. While we might tolerate unreliable narrators in fiction, we often tighten the restraints on nonfiction narrators. We want to like them despite their flaws. We must like them enough to want to know what they think and how they feel. We are drawn—or not—to the writers’ quality of mind. We must also believe that nonfiction narrators will take us somewhere interesting. Creative nonfiction, like much writing, must ultimately answer a very simple question: *So what?* This is a particularly urgent question for essayists who dare to write about themselves. Why should anyone care that Scott Russell Sanders inherited a hammer from his father, the triggering subject of his much-anthologized essay “The Inheritance of Tools”? While readers might indulge ambiguity of purpose in a short story or poem,

nonfiction narrators are expected to make explicit promises about the significance of their stories and to keep that promise. When they don't, we might find the work uninteresting, or worse, solipsistic.

Telling It Straight

Most of all, we expect nonfiction narrators to tell us the truth. "There is one thing the essayist cannot do," wrote White, "he cannot indulge himself in deceit or concealment, for he will be found out in no time." When we read a work of nonfiction, we expect that the events that are described actually happened and that the writers' responses to these events are honest. Few issues related to writing nonfiction have gotten more public attention than this. Even Oprah Winfrey weighed in on the topic when a few years ago, after recommending James Frey's "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces*, to her book club, she learned that some of his story was fictionalized. In a nationally televised confrontation with the author, Oprah said she felt "duped" and "betrayed" by Frey. Another best-selling memoir, *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, was the subject of a lawsuit by a family who claimed the author's published account of his time with them was riddled with "fabrications" and "embellishments."

Burroughs's reaction to the allegations is telling. "This is my story," he told *Vanity Fair* magazine. "It's not my mother's story and it's not the family's story, and they may remember things differently and they may choose to not remember certain things, but I will never forget what happened to me, ever, and I have the scars from it and I wanted to rip those scars off of me." Memoirists and essayists agree on this: Memory is a fickle thing. All of us, writers or not, have the experience of telling a story in the presence of others who were involved and being told that it didn't happen that way at all. We remember some things and forget others. We tell stories with our own slants. But if the truth of what actually happened can be known, is the nonfiction writer obligated to get it right? For the journalist, the answer is simple. Accuracy is essential. But what about for the essayist or memoirist?

In "On Keeping a Notebook," Joan Didion wrote that she no longer worries about the distinction between "what happened and what merely might have happened," because the point of keeping a notebook is to remember "how it felt to be me." The same might be said of essays and memoirs; writers in these genres are certainly interested in getting at the *emotional truth* of things, a deeply subjective and deeply personal perspective of things remembered that may transform them into scenes few others who were there might recognize. But what distinguishes nonfiction from fiction is that characters in a nonfiction narrative, as Daniel Lehman observed, live both "inside and outside the story." They are not inventions but are (or were) real people. Sometimes these characters disagree with the telling, and even worse, are deeply wounded by what was said.

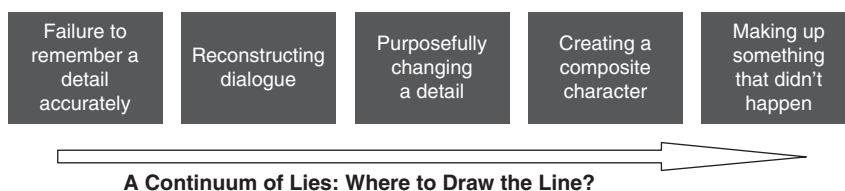


Figure 1 Richard Hugo advises young poets that “the words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words. This may mean violating the facts. . . . You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything.” Nonfiction obviously has a different relationship to reality. But what is it? What kinds of invention are acceptable and which are not? Imagine a continuum of lies, each more potentially egregious than the next. Where might you draw the line?

Yet creative nonfiction writers must have more latitude than the journalist, if for no other reason than the vagaries of memory. It is truly difficult, if not impossible, for instance, for a writer to accurately reconstruct dialogue from a conversation that took place 30 years ago unless she took notes; and most of us did not. Therefore, we might imagine a continuum of lies, some acceptable and others not, ranging from not remembering exactly to making up events that never occurred (see Figure 1). Ethically speaking, where should the creative nonfiction writer draw the line? For Tracy Kidder, whose work tends toward literary journalism, even if the characters in a story don’t know or don’t care whether it’s truthfully told, the writer knows, and fabrications subvert the work. “I try to hew to what has begun to seem like a narrow definition of nonfiction. . . . I’m afraid that if I started making things up in a story that purported to be about real events and people, I’d stop believing it myself. And I imagine that such a loss of conviction would infect every sentence and make each one unbelievable.”

The ethics of truth-telling for the creative nonfiction writer presents this dilemma: *Which is the writer’s most important obligation—to the reality of what happened or to telling a good story?* The novelist isn’t troubled by this at all. Reality is in the service of imagination, and both are enlisted to tell a good story—and it’s the story that matters. Creative nonfiction writers, on the other hand, begin with reality and are bound to find a story to tell within it. To knowingly fabricate what happened not only betrays the reader’s trust, as Kidder reminds us; it also puts the writer’s search for the truth of things at risk. All literature is arguably about trying to get to the truth of things. The writer’s method of inquiry into truth is essentially inductive, looking closely at the particular and finding unexpected meaning in it. For Scott Russell Sanders it is a singular day when he hits his thumb with his father’s hammer, and this ordinary event propels him into a meditation on the “cloud of knowing” that the hickory-handled tool contains. All creative writers deal in

such telling details, but nonfiction writers must find them in the stuff of daily life, both moments remembered and moments observed. To knowingly invent such details—to make up the hammer—is to knowingly mislead the writer, as well as the reader.

Taking the Reflective Turn

The storyteller's art is to find a pattern in these telling details. All creative writers actively look for such patterns, trying to discover how the particulars might stand in for larger ideas about the way things are. The conventional advice to fiction writers is to avoid hammering home these discoveries to readers—to “show, don't tell”—and let the story speak for itself, however ambiguously. But nonfiction writers are much more committed to saying what they think, to both show *and* tell. “The essay is distinguished from the short story,” said Scott Russell Sanders, “not by the presence or absence of literary devices, not by tone of theme or subject, but by the writer's stance toward the material. In composing an essay about what it was like to grow up on [a] military base, I *meant* something quite different from what I mean when concocting a story.” This is one of the ironies of writing creative nonfiction: While writers often allow the work to initially defy intention, once it is discovered, nonfiction writers are determined that readers understand the meanings they dislodged in the telling of their stories.

Though nonfiction works vary in how much writers explain what they mean, reflection is an essential part of most creative nonfiction, particularly the essay and the memoir. Frequently, this is an account of not only what happened but what *happens*, much like the two narrative strands in the television program *The Wonder Years*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and, if a dead narrator counts, *Desperate Housewives*. Whether this narrator is looking back or simply looking at more recent experiences, he brings understanding to an event that wasn't available at the time. In *The Wonder Years*, for instance, we experienced not only eighth-grader Kevin's awkward encounters with Winnie Cooper, the dark haired girl across the street, but also the reflections on the meanings of those experiences in the narrating voice of an adult Kevin. The personal essayist, in particular, is interested in this question: *What do I understand about this now that I didn't understand then?* These insights might constitute a narrative of thought in an essay that runs alongside the story of what happened. These reflections may be hinted at, expressed in a line, or examined in paragraphs of exposition, but they are rarely missing entirely from a work of creative nonfiction.

In the hands of an inexperienced writer, this reflection can be clumsy, and exposition in any story, including nonfiction, is often viewed suspiciously. Why is it necessary for writers to say what they think? Let the story speak for itself! In its least-appealing form, reflection is the paragraph at the end of a narrative that begins, “And now as I look back on this, I understand

that true friends are hard to find.” More often the turns to reflect might seem like unearned insight, added like a pinch of paprika to a soup because it helps finish off the look of the dish. In an essay or memoir, retrospection is not merely an ingredient in the narrative. It’s what drives the process. The narrative is in the service of this groping toward some fresh understanding about the meanings of experience. It is in the reflective turns that the motives for writing memoirs or essays are satisfied—to enjoy the pleasures of discovering what you didn’t know you knew.

It is helpful to imagine, Phillip Lopate has told us, that there are really two narrators in an essay or memoir—the “I-character” to whom things happened and the “intelligent narrator” who brings understandings about the significance of what happened that the “I-character” did not have then. As in the *The Wonder Years*, the intelligent narrator must be present throughout the work, not just at the end. In addition to the usual narrative pattern—this happened and then this happened—the arc away from the story to reflect on its significance represents another kind of narrative movement characteristic of nonfiction. We become as interested in this narrative of thought as we do in the events that unfold in the story, particularly if these insights are tethered tightly to the writer’s experiences or observations. The essayist may even create the illusion that these thoughts seem to arise simultaneously with the telling itself (see the excerpt from Andre Dubus, on page 54).

Appreciating the essay and memoir has much to do with enjoying the pleasures of the writer’s mind, following his or her often-meandering trails of thought through the story. “A personal essay is like the human voice talking,” wrote Edward Hoagland, “its order, the mind’s natural flow, instead of a systemized outline of ideas. Though more wayward or informal than an article or treatise, somewhere it contains a point which is its real center, even if the point couldn’t be uttered in fewer words than the essayist has used.” Reflection in an essay and memoir is a kind of messenger pigeon, sent by the writer to deliver the work’s questions, ideas, tentative meanings; it rarely flies far from the story below or it risks drifting into abstraction and away from the writer’s experience, which is the source of meaning.

Building It Scene by Scene

Literary journalism—a term that might describe not only Tracy Kidder’s work but Truman Capote’s “nonfiction novel,” *In Cold Blood*, as well as similar books by Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Jane Kramer, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Joe McGinniss—is a category of creative nonfiction that most resembles fiction. As Tracy Kidder observed earlier, literary journalists may not write in the first person, choosing narrators other than themselves and deflecting readers’ gazes away from their personal reflections, which they may avoid entirely. One of these writers, Tom Wolfe, explained

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that the third-person point of view in which the writer “penetrates the thoughts of another person” is possible in nonfiction only through interview, but it is a perspective that is less limiting than first person and more likely to keep readers focused on the story.

Third-person point of view, Wolfe has told us, is one of four techniques the journalist borrows from literary realism. These techniques include what he calls “status details,” or particulars that stand in for someone’s social status or aspirations, as well as dialogue, which Wolfe believes best defines character. But the most fundamental of these devices is “scene-by-scene construction,” the literary technique that is common to most forms of creative nonfiction, including essay and memoir. Scene can be understood as the most basic ingredient in nonfiction narrative, and it is a writer’s skill at observing or remembering what exactly happened with a density of detail that often distinguishes the novice from the professional. To do this well requires a faith in the power of the particular. It is the kind of faith that all creative writers share—a recognition that even the most ordinary things can say more than they say. But for nonfiction writers, skillful rendering of scenes also demands an accountant’s instinct for collecting and inventorying details.

Fiction writers, enjoying the luxury of invention, can mine their imaginations for material with which to craft a scene. Or if they draw on experience, they are not bound by time, borrowing here and there from multiple events to compose a single scene. The nonfiction writer, on the other hand, is constrained by the reality of what actually happened. What this means, practically speaking, is that the memoirist must attempt to reconstruct things—the color of the father’s fedora, the brand of cigarette in his mouth, and the smell of his deerskin leather gloves—or the literary journalist must take copious notes, taking virtually no detail for granted. Who knows what materials might be needed to later craft the scene? “Writers,” Henry James once said, “are people on whom nothing is lost,” and this is especially true of the nonfiction writer who is charged, usually after the fact, with truthfully recreating reality.

The scene in nonfiction may in some ways closely resemble the scene in the short story or novel. It is frequently framed by time and place—something happened somewhere and then it was over—and is observed from a consistent perspective. In the essay and memoir, this is most often from the point of view of the narrator/writer, or in literary journalism, another character. In any scene, something happens. This may or may not be dramatic in the conventional sense, but it must always be relevant, either carrying some symbolic weight or providing background that will later carry some charge of meaning. Scenes in all imaginative literature also are rendered with great particularity, frequently drawing on all of the senses, though they may also include summaries or digressions; sometimes scenes might be interrupted only to be resumed later. Though fictional narrators rarely comment on the meaning of

what happened in a scene, the essayist often does, and it is this reflection—which may be a line or paragraphs of exposition—that often distinguishes scenes in nonfiction from those in other genres.

For example, in Andre Dubus's lovely essay about his boyhood dreams of playing professional baseball, "Under the Lights," he crafted a scene in which Harry Strohm, the owner-manager of the local semiprofessional baseball team, joins Dubus's family for dinner after a game. After the meal, Dubus's father tells Harry that young Andre "wants to be a ballplayer." Remembering that Strohm had recently watched him mishandle a ground ball in a baseball clinic, Dubus was afraid of what the older man would say. "Harry turned his bright eyes on me," wrote Dubus, "and into the secret self, or selves, I believe I hid from everyone, especially my parents, and most of all, my father. . . ."

[A]mid the aroma of coffee and tobacco smoke at the table at Poorboy's, when he gazed at me with those eyes like embedded gems, brilliant and ancient, I saw in them myself that morning, bound by the strings of my fear. . . . Harry Strohm said nothing at the table; or if he did, I heard it as nothing. Perhaps he said quietly: That's good. . . .

I was wrong, and I did not know I was wrong until this very moment, as I write this. When Harry looked at me across the table, he was not looking at my body and into my soul and deciding I would never be a ballplayer, he was not focusing on my trifling error on that long day of the clinic. He was looking at my young hope and seeing his own that propelled him into and kept him in this vocation, this game he had played nearly all of his life.

While this scene contains many of the elements one might find in a work of fiction, it departs most noticeably when Dubus writes, "I did not know I was wrong until this very moment, as I write this." This begins a shift into retrospection that is more characteristic of the essay than the short story. While some essays present scenes without commentary on their meaning (and some fictional narrators in short stories or novels reflect like essayists), it is more common that scenes in nonfiction are anchored firmly to explicit expressions about their significance. For the essayist and memoirist, the choice to craft a scene is not just to maintain the forward movement of the narrative; it is also an opportunity to mine the moment for meaning, to use it to satisfy the writer's hunger for self-discovery.

Creating Tension

For writers, this hunger to discover arises from a tension between what they think they know and what the writing is beginning to reveal, and these are the surprises that keep writers writing. This is also a tension that keeps readers reading. It is common knowledge that well-told stories demand some kind of narrative or dramatic tension, and this tension is created

through the sense that there are opposing forces at work. The simple question, “what is going to happen next,” is triggered by the tension between what readers know and what they want to know, and this is the most familiar source of dramatic tension in storytelling. But since much creative nonfiction relies as much on exposition as it does on narrative, dramatic tension may simply not be enough. If not handled skillfully, manipulating a narrative in nonfiction to deliberately withhold information from readers, particularly when it implies that writers somehow don’t know what’s going to happen when it’s obvious they really do know, can seem like a clever trick or a transparent device to make a story more interesting. Fortunately, nonfiction writers have other options to create tension.

Ultimately the work has to answer a simple question: *So what?* Or as Philip Gerard suggested, creative nonfiction must, directly or indirectly, make this clear: *What is at stake here?* Why might this story matter to the reader? What is at stake for the writer or the characters? Is there a larger truth that will somehow matter? Since much nonfiction, especially the personal essay, deals with experiences that are often quite ordinary—a visit to a summer lake, losing one’s hat, watching a fight—the burden of these questions is particularly heavy. Tension is how the work tries to answer them. Fundamentally, every essay, memoir, or piece of literary journalism must seem purposeful. Readers must feel that writers are steering them

STRUCTURE AND TENSION

The effectiveness of the design of a nonfiction piece has a great deal to do with whether it has sufficient tension to keep a reader reading. There is a range of strategies for introducing tension into writing through structure. Here are some of them:

- *Withholding information.* This is a risky one. Whenever we deliberately don’t say what readers expect us to say, writers risk seeming overtly manipulative. The worst example of this is what John McPhee calls the “blind lead”—the beginning that withholds information and promises something dramatic later “blaring a great fanfare of trumpets and then a mouse comes out of its hole.” But when it’s artfully done, carefully holding off a reader by parceling out information can work to introduce tension.
- *Manipulating time.* The best place to begin a story may not be the beginning. Writers have power over time that they don’t have in life. This power can be used to create tension by structuring past and present in ways that raise pressing questions. Why did that happen? What’s the full story? What do these different moments have in common?
- *Juxtaposition.* The placement of ideas, moments,

toward some destination, or those readers will stop pedaling and get off the bike. After all, reading involves some work. Usually, purpose is signaled early in the work—the first few paragraphs of a short essay, the first page or two in a longer one, or perhaps a chapter in a memoir. This destination must seem appealing, and tension is key.

Introducing tension in creative nonfiction is an exercise in defying readers' expectations. This can be accomplished in four ways: through dramatic tension (the most familiar kind), emotional tension, thematic tension, and, finally, the tension introduced through language.

- Dramatic tension, mentioned earlier, exploits readers' expectations about what will happen. *Will the story unfold in ways I expect?*
- Emotional tension arises from the gap between what readers' expect that writers should feel in a situation and what they report they really do feel. He was *glad* that his father was dead?
- Because so much creative nonfiction deals explicitly with ideas, the narrative of thought provides movement that conventional stories often lack, and this can provide thematic tension. Writers might offer an idea or a way of seeing the subject that is at odds with the way readers usually see it. For example, in "No Wonder They Call Me a Bitch," Ann Hodgman decides to take the claims of dog food companies seriously and find out whether Gravy Train really does make "thick, rich, real beef gravy." She spends a week eating it and other brands that make similar human rather than canine culinary appeals—something most of us would not consider doing to test the claims on a bag of dog food. Hodgman's funny essay is also a serious critique of such advertising pitches. Thematic tension might also arise when a writer juxtaposes two ideas that seem in opposition, and readers wonder how the apparent contradictions might be reconciled.
- Finally, we may be drawn to language. Writers might have a way of saying things that surprise us, that imply a narrator with whom we are willing to spend some time. The great stylists—Norman Mailer, Joan

or information in proximity to each other can create tension, particularly when such an arrangement raises questions about their relationship. What could this scene possibly have to do with this one? Aren't these feelings contradictory?

- *Questions.* Writers often arrange material that raises questions in the reader's mind. But these may also be explicit. When the writer pauses to pose a question that arises from the material, she may do so to point directly to the tension that drives the piece or dictates its arrangement. These questions must, however, be well placed.

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Didion, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Hunter Thompson, and others—often exploit this tension, creating personas in their work that we might find appealing or repugnant or simply interesting. For example, here is the opening of Thompson’s *Hell’s Angels*:

California, Labor Day weekend . . . early, with ocean fog still in the streets, outlaw motorcyclists wearing chains, shades and greasy Levi’s roll out from damp garages, all-night diners and cast-off one-night pads in Frisco, Hollywood, Berdoo and East Oakland, heading for the Monterey peninsula, north of Big Sur . . . The Menace is loose again, the Hell’s Angels, the hundred-carat headline, running fast and loud on the early morning freeway, low in the saddle, nobody smiles, jamming crazy through traffic and ninety miles an hour down the center strip, missing by inches . . . like Genghis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with a fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can and up your daughter’s leg with no quarter asked and none given . . .

Thompson’s voice here throws sparks, not only because he is writing about a group of irreverent, dangerous outlaws but also because he seems to share the irreverence. The language is electric—the bikers roll out, run “fast and loud,” jam “crazy” through traffic, “flat out through the eye of a beer can”—and sometimes a little shocking—“fiery anus” and “up your daughter’s leg.” We are going on a ride not just with the motorcycle gang but Thompson himself, and the language beckons us to go along.

Casting a Wide Net

When I was ten, I attended summer camp in northern Wisconsin, a few weeks in July that happened to coincide with a total solar eclipse. The year, I believe, was 1963, a few months before John Kennedy was slain in Dallas. I remembered the eclipse vividly, particularly the way that the shadows of the leaves on the tent canvas took on the curve of the eclipsing sun. For a few moments, it was a world of bent light before the darkness. In memory, and later in an essay about that time, this event took on symbolic significance. But was it 1963? And is it possible that I observed a partial eclipse, that the darkness wasn’t as sudden and as black as I remembered it? It is the journalist’s obligation to check such things, but depending on the essayist’s position on truth-telling, the veracity of an account of an event that occurred almost 50 years ago may not demand research. What happened, or what *might* have happened, Joan Didion reminds us, may not be as important as “how it felt to be me.”

But there are benefits to such research. I discovered, for example, that there was a total solar eclipse on July 20, 1963, that it lasted 1 minute and 39 seconds, and that it wasn’t quite a complete eclipse in northern Wisconsin. Why does this information matter? The commitment to

describe with some exactness where it was, what it looked like, how it smelled, how it felt, and what it was called is based on the belief that this is the kind of information that is mostly likely to get at the emotional reality of what happened. Novice essayists sometimes worry that this might detract from the universal qualities of the work, thinking that readers will see the particulars of the writer's experience as relevant only to the writer. Actually, the opposite is true. As E. B. White said, "If you want to write about mankind, write about a man." We are much more likely to recognize the universal in the particular and to find relevance in the concrete experiences of others. Fiction writers know this well, but they are also less committed than nonfiction writers to communicate certain meanings to readers. The trick is *how much* to explain. Tell too much and the narrative is overwhelmed by exposition, or tell too little and the story lacks weight.

The solution to this in any creative genre is to put one's faith in the power of the particular to provide the backbone for ideas. Most often, we think of these particulars as sensory details, and frequently these are the building blocks of scenes. But nonfiction writers should cast a wide net for material, and experience is just one source of concrete information. Research is another. Perhaps the school research paper is to blame, but frequently apprentice creative writers see research—reading and interviews—as irrelevant to crafting stories. Yet, especially in nonfiction, research is a rich vein of material since stories are built from the data of real life, and these stories might include historical events with which readers are familiar. Literary journalists know this, of course, but research can also be useful in memoirs and essays. Most importantly, listening to the voices of others helps writers think more deeply about the questions or ideas they're exploring in their work. This can lead writers in surprising directions. For instance, I once worked on an essay that explored how frequently told stories can, like photographs, harden memory in ways that resist new ways of seeing, a project that later inspired me to research autobiographical memory," a new area of psychology scholarship. This, in turn, led to much richer and insightful reflection on my own impulse to tell certain stories about myself in certain ways.

There is a less obvious value to mining particulars from research. Knowing that the solar eclipse I remembered from summer camp happened on July 20, 1963, and lasted for 1 minute and 39 seconds, helps bring it all back. That the darkness seemed to last longer in memory, and that it was blacker, helps me to understand more about how it felt that summer, and it provides new handholds for pulling myself deeper into the experiences I want to explore. Because they write about what is uncertain or even confusing, essayists look to particulars such as these to seize as they grope their way toward understanding.

Creative nonfiction writers who use research extensively in their work may do it for other reasons. John McPhee, writing *Survival of the Birch Bark*

Canoe, spent substantial time interviewing builder Henri Vaillancourt and reading up on historical construction methods. Susan Orlean, in *The Orchid Thief*, settled in for a few months with horticulturalist John Laroche and researched the natural history of Florida's Loxahatchee swamp. This research is an essential part of the stories these writers tell, and sometimes it is research that leads them to their subjects in the first place. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was inspired, for example, by a newspaper article (see page 126) the author happened to read about the murder of the Clutter family in a small town in Kansas. Similarly, Orlean's work on orchids was triggered by a piece in a Florida newspaper.

The craft of using research in creative nonfiction is deciding, like any other source of information, whether the information is relevant to the story. Does it provide essential background? Might it help in constructing a scene? Can it be used as a springboard for thought? Integrating research into a memoir, essay, or work of literary journalism presents another dilemma: What effect will it have on the forward motion of the narrative? Exposition in a story is like a sea anchor to a sailboat in a stiff wind—it doesn't stop movement completely, but it can slow things down considerably. Nonfiction writers solve this problem in a number of ways. They may deeply embed fact within the narrative, perhaps in a scene. They may, as John McPhee often does, use characters as a vehicle for exposition, allowing them to explain things through dialogue. Skilled writers also colonize what easily could be dry information with their own voices, finding their own way of saying things. Or they might use surprising comparisons. For instance, Richard Conniff tells us that the movement of a housefly's wings is twice as fast as a hummingbird's, and the insect's eyesight is so acute that the moving frames of a movie would need to be ten times faster for a housefly for it to see anything but jerky images. Finally, facts are simply another kind of detail, and some of the qualities that make sensory detail shimmer in a story are the qualities that make facts memorable, too. One of these is surprise. Who would have guessed, for example, that a housefly spends 29.7 percent of its time throwing up its meal and blowing bubbles in its puke?

Writing With (and Against) Tradition

Definitions of literature have for so long focused exclusively on poetry, fiction, and drama that it's easy to forget that nonfiction preceded the novel and that the essay may have given birth to the short story. Of the many early published works of nonfiction—the treatise, the tract, the letter—it is the personal essay that may be said to have parented modern forms of creative nonfiction. In 1571, the French nobleman Michel de Montaigne retired to his chateau in Bordeaux following a legal career and spent his days in a book-filled tower writing what he called “essais.” Carved

in a wooden beam above his head was his motto, of sorts—*Que sais-je?*—or “What do I know?” It was Montaigne’s mission to explore not only this question but a related one: What kind of knowing matters most to a person, worldly knowledge or self-knowledge, received knowledge from the ancients or the knowledge that comes with paying close attention to the present? “...I hold that truth is none the wiser for being old,” Montaigne wrote. “I often say it is pure foolishness that makes us run after foreign and bookish examples. The present is just as fertile in them as the time of Homer and Plato.”

Montaigne’s *essais*, which has its origins in the French verb *essayer*—to try, to attempt—upended the literary conventions of the time. Montaigne’s essays were written in vernacular French rather than Latin (the language of the noble class); they refused to simply parrot what others, particularly ancient authorities, believed to be true; and they placed the author at the center of the work. “I want to appear in my simple, natural, everyday dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray” Montaigne wrote to introduce *The Essays of Montaigne*, which was first published in 1580. Self-discovery was his motive, as was the belief that it is in the stuff of ordinary life that we can find the truth about ourselves, and in turn, about humankind. These are, of course, exactly the motives of contemporary essayists, and it is the Montaignian tradition that helps explain what drives Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, or Scott Sanders to the writing desk with its blank page or blank screen. “What do I know?” they ask themselves, as Montaigne did 400 years earlier.

Literary journalism also inherits much from the early essay. Some of the earliest forms of journalism were essays that coincided with the eighteenth-century rise of periodicals in England, published to entertain a growing middle class readership. But more recent events in the United States, particularly the pioneering work of *New Yorker* writers like Joseph Mitchell and the publication of Capote’s spellbinding *In Cold Blood*, inspired what Tom Wolfe in the 1960s called “The New Journalism,” a movement that led directly to a revolution in conventions. The New Journalism or, alternatively, literary journalism borrowed directly from the fiction writer’s toolbox and attempted to tell stories in much the same way, exploiting character, scene, dialogue, and point of view. To a greater or lesser extent, these works focus on a subject other than the author. A famous exception would be Norman Mailer’s account of the antiwar protests in 1967 at the Pentagon, *Armies of the Night* (see page 132), a story that gives us Mailer—in the guise of the Novelist, the Participant, the Historian, the Existentialist—as a central character.

The tradition of literary journalism, then, is rooted much more in the practices of reporting than memoir and essay. Therefore, literary journalists, like Kidder, Wolfe, or McPhee, are much more likely to be dogmatic on issues of truth-telling, insisting on accuracy whenever possible. “The nonfiction writer is communicating with the reader about real people in

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real places,” said McPhee. “So if those people talk, you say what those people said. You don’t say what the writer decides they said.” This kind of accuracy is only possible through immersion—what McPhee once called the “stone-kicking school” of journalism—in which writers spend enough time with their subjects to be able to confidently construct scenes, dialogue, and, in some cases, third-person point of view. Tracy Kidder, for example, spent eight months hanging out with engineers at a computer company to write *The Soul of a New Machine*. Capote spent a year in Holcomb, Kansas, collecting material for *In Cold Blood*. Imagine what kind of reporting was involved, for example, when Kidder crafted this scene with computer engineer Tom West for the book *The Soul of New Machine*:

One Holiday morning in 1978, Tom West traveled to a city that was situated, he would later say guardedly, “somewhere in America.” He entered a building as though he belonged there, strolled down a hallway, and let himself quietly into a windowless room. Just inside the door, he stopped.

The floor was torn up; a shallow trench filled with fat power cables traversed it. Along the far wall, at the end of the trench, enclosed in three large, cream-colored steel cabinets, stood a VAX 11/780, the most important of a new class of computers called “32-bit superminis.” To West’s surprise, one of the cabinets was open and a man with tools was standing in front of it. A technician, still installing the machine, West figured.

Here Kidder achieves what many thought was possible only in fiction—third-person point of view—and it is the kind of innovation that wooed novelists like Wolfe and Capote to nonfiction. Literary journalism was not, Capote concluded, a form that he might resort to when his imagination failed but rather a form that might have the same narrative power as a novel, except the story is true. What the “nonfiction novel” demanded, however, were things Capote thought most writers, and especially journalists, were unwilling or unable to do—transcribe pages and pages of verbatim interview, risk offending people who appear in the book, and especially “empathize with characters outside [a writer’s] usual imaginative range.” He was convinced that only skilled novelists were capable of pulling it off. However, “narrative reportage,” as Capote called it, is now ubiquitous. *The New Yorker* and similar magazines routinely publish it, and *In Cold Blood* has plenty of company.

Using Crafting Truth

How to Read for Craft

Literature courses prepare us for a particular kind of reading that is certainly useful to creative writers. The critical essay, a typical assignment in a literature class, is a piece that argues for a particular take on the meaning

of a work, or perhaps how it might be understood as seen through the eyes of other critics or theorists. Writing a critical essay demands close and thoughtful reading, and it's especially important because literary criticism focuses on *ideas*—what notions about the world a story or poem might be trying to communicate. It's too easy to forget that what makes stories compelling is not just that they are entertaining but that their authors have an intellectual interest in what it means to be human.

However, reading for craft is more concerned with *how* a text communicates its meanings than *what* those meanings might be. It is the kind of reading that an engineer, encountering the Brooklyn Bridge or a Roman aqueduct for the first time, might give: “The thing is beautiful but how does it work?” Aesthetics do matter—we have to recognize and name what is moving in a piece of writing—but when we read for craft this is the starting point that leads to questions about the design of the story, the use of language, research methods, and narrative techniques. Following is a list of the kinds of questions creative nonfiction writers might ask if they wished to explore how an essay, memoir, or article works.

Analyzing the Story

- How is the narrative crafted to introduce tension?
- Why might the author have chosen a particular beginning or end?
- What is the relationship between narrative and exposition, showing and telling?
- What are the elements of a well-conceived scene?
- How is effective dialogue made?
- How is character constructed? Is this different in fiction?
- What literary devices—symbolism, metaphor, allusion, and so on—are used and to what effect?
- In what ways is the story in the service of ideas?
- What is the work's narrative point of view, and how does this influence the story?

Speculating About the Method

- What interview or research techniques might have this required?
- What can we infer about the writer's ethical stances toward truth-telling?
- How was the subject matter chosen and why?
- What does the author say about his or her methods for interviews, and how is this reflected in the work?

Analyzing the Style

- What are the patterns of sentences in a paragraph, and how do they work together?

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- How are words or phrases placed to give them emphasis?
- What are the effects of certain word choices?
- What is the tone and how is this established?
- How are line spaces, italics, and other visual elements used?
- What is the ethos of the writer, and how does it influence readers' experience of the work?
- How is the prose style distinguished from similar works or other writers?

Theorizing About Genre

- How might the work reflect—or resist—certain traditions of the memoir, the essay, or literary journalism?
- What are the rhetorical qualities of the work? In what ways is it influenced by purpose, audience, or situation?
- Can the work be situated in a particular time or in response to a cultural or historical event, and how might these affect writers' approaches to telling their stories?
- How might writers in other genres, like fiction and poetry, approach the same material differently?
- How are the questions that writers ask about their subjects related to genre?

Reading excerpts rather than entire works has limitations for analysis of craft. For one thing, if you're not familiar with the rest of the piece, it's difficult to say much about how a passage might contribute to it thematically. You might also be tempted to generalize about a writer's approach based on the reading of three paragraphs. To say, for instance, that Truman Capote's work has a cinematic quality after reading a single scene of *In Cold Blood* would be a stretch. The best you could say is that *this scene* has a cinematic quality. Finally, in the absence of the text that surrounds the excerpt, you are forced to work with what I've provided. While I've labored over choosing the richest material, it's impossible to know whether I've always chosen the best. Despite these drawbacks, *Crafting Truth* is dedicated to the idea that working closely with short passages from a wide range of writers and nonfiction genres will be enormously useful for inexperienced and experienced writers alike. It is the kind of study that is most likely to provide insights into a variety of nonfiction techniques in the shortest possible time. A brief anthology in the back of the book introduces longer, often complete works by additional writers. These provide great opportunities to apply what you're learning to more than fragments.

While there is pleasure in simply reading these exquisite excerpts, serious students of creative nonfiction can learn a great deal more by *writing* about what moves them and how that might arise from the architecture of

the passage. The brevity of the excerpts makes multiple readings easy. Consider following up each reading with five to seven minutes of fastwriting in your journal or notebook (see “A Method for Exploring Your Ideas in a Notebook” at right). Simply follow your thoughts in writing, no matter how meandering and awkward and even unintelligent they might be. You have to give yourself permission to write badly if this is to be useful.

The time you spend working things out in your journal or notebook will pay off. Fifteen minutes of “bad” writing about an excerpt will often lead to surprising discoveries you probably wouldn’t have found if the writing hadn’t led you to them. This is also material you can use to shape a more composed and coherent response to the excerpts if you’re in a writing course that requires them. In addition, every excerpt in *Crafting Truth* is accompanied by questions that should help prompt some of this journal work or help focus your responses to the reading. And, finally, this is a book devoted

not just to writing about writing but getting the most important work started: crafting your own memoirs, essays, or articles. In the “Practicing the Craft” sections after each excerpt I suggest preliminary journal work, which, while inspired by a particular excerpt, is often focused on generating material that may develop into your own work of creative nonfiction. Even if it doesn’t, remember that every minute you spend with your butt in the chair writing, following the words wherever they lead, is always far better than merely thinking about writing.

Some successful writers say that the act of creation is a mystery that cannot be analyzed. If this is so, then the study of craft is a waste of time. It is true that the best thing you can do to improve your work is the simplest—to simply write—but what happens when you do is really not very mysterious, though it is often rich with surprise. When they work, writers constantly make choices, choosing this word rather than that one,

A METHOD FOR EXPLORING YOUR IDEAS IN A NOTEBOOK

1. Give each excerpt at least three readings, and write quickly and openly in your journal for five to seven minutes after every reading.
2. After the first reading, fastwrite a narrative of thought, beginning with the phrase “The first thing I noticed when I read this was.... And then.... And then....”
3. After the second reading, use this phrase as an opening prompt: “What I’m beginning to notice now that I didn’t notice at first is.... And also.... And also....”
4. After the third reading, copy a line or passage from the excerpt, and then below focus your fastwrite on why you chose the line or passage, how it might help you understand the writer’s techniques, or what you notice.

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shifting to dialogue rather than continuing exposition, doing research rather than staring off into space. The more aware you are of the multiple choices you might make, the more control you will have over the possibilities of your story. *Crafting Truth*, I hope, will help with this. Creative writing has as much to do with the heart as the head, and knowing what might be the right choice for a piece is something only you can know in your lonely encounters with the page. In those moments it will not be these voices you hear, but your own.