

Writing Across Genres

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Benefits of writing creative nonfiction:

- Fact-based (requires experience and/or primary research and evidence)
- Requires examining the details/specifics of subject matter or what happened, if event-based
 - The more specifics, the easier it is to dig deeper
 - Details breed details. The senses trigger memory
- Subject matter or what happened offers a starting point, which can alleviate blank-page syndrome

Benefits of writing fiction:

- Moves beyond facts into larger thematic truths
 - Stories can be more persuasive than data
- Moves beyond information into visceral/felt experience
 - Not the fact that it is raining, but the feeling of being rained upon (EL Doctorow)
- We can take on roles and perspectives not our own
 - The freedom of inhabiting lives unlike your own
 - Shift perspective, and you shift the shape of the story you're telling

Creative nonfiction uses the techniques of fiction or poetry to bring a work of truth more vividly to life.

- A personal essay about war from the POV of a foot soldier includes details that convey what a mission feels like.
- In "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Martin Luther King, Jr. uses repetition, a poetic device.

Types of creative nonfiction:

Memoir is a narrative formed by someone's life experience, which unfolds primarily through scene, a fictional technique.

- Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* relates only the period in her life when she was romantically involved with Jack Kerouac.

Personal essay filters its subject matter, themes, or ideas through personal experience. The writer will have a central point, but will support that point with anecdotes drawn from life rather than using facts or data (or in addition to using facts and data).

- Joan Didion, a Sacramento native, wrote "Goodbye to All That." The premise was how even a city as large as New York can come to seem too small. She used her life experiences in the city to support this premise. However, the point of her essay was the subject matter, outgrowing a once beloved place.

In **narrative nonfiction**, a larger, connecting story is woven together with a subject's facts and data.

- Susan Orlean's *The Library Book* weaves information and anecdotes about the 1985 fire at the Los Angeles Central Library, her personal love for libraries, and the development of public libraries in general and the Los Angeles Public Library System in particular.

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Open Prose Workshop begins **September 25th**.

Submit fiction or CNF for feedback two times. Write in one or both genres. Deepen your knowledge of craft/writing. Share space with other writers.

Three Revision Questions for Creative Nonfiction:

1. **Have you made the personal universal?**

This is the "so what?" question. Have you considered why your personal experience is relevant to readers who don't know you? Readers of CNF don't read to learn about your life per se, but how your life is relevant to them. Give some thought to how your personal experience serves a larger purpose or context.

2. **Have you established a persona for the piece?**

A persona sheds light upon who the writer is and connects this with her subject matter. Do you feel overburdened, yet smile and say yes anyway? It's not necessary for the reader to know everything about you, only the parts of you that are most relevant to the piece you are shaping.

3. **Have you taken emotional risks or allowed yourself to be vulnerable?**

CNF can't be the job interview version of your life, where even your flaws are dynamic attributes in disguise. Readers want to see mistakes, good choices gone wrong, bad timing, and the providence to turn it all into some new possibility or unforeseen outcome.

Three Revision Questions for Fiction:

1. **What is this story about?**

You may start with a specific character, Jane, in a specific circumstance, she has broken up with her boyfriend. This may have the makings of a story, but until Jane has a desire (reconnection or recovery) and takes some action (calling the ex or moving to a new city), it's not a story. Your first draft may be a description of her sadness. Sometimes it takes several drafts to discover what you want Jane to do about it.

2. **Are you writing in scene?**

Scenes show readers the lives of your characters, their desires and obstacles. Not that Jane is sad, but the moment when Jane's boyfriend breaks the news that the relationship is over. Is he gentle or cold? How does she react?

3. **Why these characters at this time and place?**

Have you written the right scenes to reveal what's at stake for the characters? For example, if your story is about Jane wanting to reunite with her boyfriend, then the boyfriend needs a real, live presence in the story. If the scenes you've written don't include moments where they are in the same room, speaking together, chances are you need to explore new scenes for your story to blossom.