

CREATIVE NONFICTION

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“All writing is autobiography; everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it.” – J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* (1994)

Creative nonfiction is an umbrella term for a genre that includes, among other sub genres, literary memoir, personal essays, personal letters, travel writing, nature writing, narrative journalism, cultural criticism and hybrid forms that blend prose, poetry and essay. Many of the techniques and ingredients that go into making literary fiction also apply to creative nonfiction.

Here, we are going to look at four creative nonfiction subgenres: short memoir, the personal essay, narrative journalism, and a hybrid form that blends prose and poetry.

The Short Memoir

A good literary memoir should bring the reader into your world. A short memoir, much like a short story will make an incision in time. Consider a pivotal moment in your own existence that changed you or your view of the world. The change may have been subtle but perhaps it was important and life-changing for you.

Take some time out to reflect on that incident in your life. Consider the world as you knew it then. Engage the senses. If your memoir is from childhood, it is important to note that children mostly evaluate their environment through sight, touch, taste, smell, sound and movement. Include as much sensory detail in your first draft as you can.

To get started, listen to Joe Brainard reading an [excerpt from his memoir *I Remember*](#). Note the incantatory effect of the repetition of the words “I remember”. This anaphora technique (repeating a word or phrase at the beginning of each sentence or clause), can be effective for remembering your own past.

After listening, take ten minutes out to write your own series of sentences, starting with “I remember”. Do not overthink or worry about chronology – just write. Be as specific as you possibly can. Try to remember objects, music, people, room interiors, streets, buildings, seasons, weather, brand names, food, etc., that you associate with that time. Engage all five senses. Concrete detail is critical if you want to convince the reader of your experience. The universal appeal is always in the fine detail.

Listen to and read “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid. Technically, “Girl” is a single sentence short story (650 words), but it blurs the lines between fact and fiction as it is based on Kincaid’s fraught relationship with her mother. Listen [here](#). Read [here](#).

As Brainard does, Kincaid also uses an anaphora technique to tell her story. Note the mother’s voice with its instructions and idiosyncrasies, and how the repetition – “this is how” and “don’t” – creates rhythm and lulls the reader.

After listening to “Girl”, write a list of instructions or sayings you recall from someone in your past. Let their voice come through and perhaps let your own voice interrupt.

Finally, here is [a short extract from *Lit*](#), Mary Karr’s third memoir. Note the attention to concrete and sensory detail in this piece and how this brings you into her world.

The Personal Essay

A personal essay can be written on any subject or theme – lobsters, the body, parenting, the mating habits of butterflies, public transport, ice cream – nothing is off limits. But no matter what the subject, do keep it personal if you want to connect with the reader on an emotional level. The reader is not just interested in mere facts but will want to know your unique spin on the matter.

In his essay, written soon after 9/11, and published weeks after the event in *Rolling Stone* magazine, David Foster Wallace gives a personal account of how he reacted as he watched events unfold and how he coped the following day. Structurally, the essay is broken up into four sections. Each section has a title: “Synecdoche”, “Wednesday”, “Aerial and Ground Views”, and “Tuesday”. It is in the final section, “Tuesday”, that Foster Wallace finds himself “sitting with clots of dried shampoo in my hair watching the act unfolding”.

When reading, note how he plays with time and place. He tells you what happened on the Wednesday before recounting the events of the previous day. Read [here](#).

Think about how you reacted in the past, when faced with a big life event. The event may have been something that impacted you personally, or it may have been an external occurrence that indirectly affected you.

As in the Foster Wallace essay, consider time and sketch an outline. Think about setting. Think about sensory detail. Do you remember what you saw, heard, tasted, smelled, or any tactile detail? Use your own voice. The good personal essay relies on self-examination. While it isn’t always easy to expose our vulnerabilities, it is important to acknowledge them. Experiment with chronology. Link events in a way that gives your story strongest impact.

In this beautifully-crafted personal essay, [“I Hoped To God That I’d Just Die In The Night And Get It Over With”](#), Caragh Maxwell discusses her relationship with her own body. Note the conversational tone and how she bravely lays bare her vulnerabilities.

In this essay, [“Frankenstein’s Mother”](#), Darcey Steinke reflects on her strained maternal relationship and draws parallels between her childhood fear of monsters and her perception of her mother.

Narrative Journalism

As with the personal essay, narrative journalism is a way of immersing the reader in hard, cold facts in an intimate and conversational way. The reporter is not as detached as a traditional journalist might be. As a narrative journalist, you will make room for your feelings, along with the details of your life.

On the birth of his son Daniel, Fergal Keane the BBC's then South African correspondent wrote "[Letter to Daniel](#)". This moving event in Keane's life threw new light on his world view as a journalist, and here he reflects on memories of children he encountered in war-torn Eritrea, Angola, Afghanistan and Rwanda. He also reflects on his own lineage.

When writing a narrative journalism piece, consider your place in the wider world. Place yourself in the story – your presence should enrich and add credibility to the narrative. If you are reporting on an event, imagine how you might feel in that situation. Are there parallels with your own life? Make notes or voice-record your own thoughts if you are in the midst of an unfolding situation. Read widely and seek out quality work from narrative journalists.

In her investigative story "[Nickel and Dimed: On \(Not\) Getting By in America](#)", Barbara Ehrenreich examines the effects of the American Welfare Reform Act of 1996. In her fifties, Barbara went undercover as a low wage worker, recording her personal perspective on issues that affected a variety of people.

What makes this story engaging and entertaining is Ehrenreich's honesty, acerbic wit and astute observations of her co-workers. When reading, note how Ehrenreich lays bare her feelings, especially her fears – "I am terrified, at the beginning, of being unmasked, for what I am: a middle-class journalist..." – and how the use of the present tense gives her narrative a sense of immediacy. If your investigative story takes shape over time, keep a journal. Write regularly as the narrative unfolds. Your phone is a handy way to record thoughts and feelings.

Hybrid Forms: Prose Poetry Essay

In a letter to Sylvia Beach outlining his intentions for *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce maintained that: "One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wide-awake language, cut-and-dry grammar and go-ahead plot."

The use of poetic techniques such as rhythm, cadence, distillation, fragmentation and repetition can help a writer access the irrational and ephemeral experience. If you find yourself stuck relaying an emotional moment, break the rules and experiment. Play around with form and structure.

Your story may be layered with many parallel threads that don't logically connect to one other, as in Anne Carson's prose poetry essay "[The Glass Essay](#)". In this soulful essay in the form of a poem, Carson weaves a visit to her mother, a failed love affair, her passion for Emily Brontë and her father's dementia into a work of art. Note how she skilfully and playfully controls all of these aspects without resorting to melodrama. Consider how the recurring glass motif binds the separate strands. Is there an object or motif that you could weave through your story?

Carson, in an [interview](#) with *Publisher Weekly* (March, 2010), claimed:

I just really have no idea what I'm writing most of the time [...] I still feel most at home making things into blocks of prose; there are all these kinds of fun available in poetic forms, and I experiment with them from time to time, but I never feel very adept at any of that.

If you are experimenting with a complex narrative, you might consider a more artful approach; think in terms of composition and form. If you are dealing with multiple characters or a braided narrative (with more than one narrative thread), as Carson is, ask yourself if a fragmented structure might better suit the narrative? Let the form arise from the content.

The Divine Ordinary Detail

Whatever the subgenre, don't discount the divine ordinary detail of your existence. Often this is where the truth and beauty of your life can be located.

In the infamous 'madeleine moment' in Marcel Proust's *The Way by Swann's* (the first book of the seven-volume collection, *In Search of Lost Time*), the simple act of eating a tea-soaked madeleine, triggered a torrent of memory. The involuntary memory invoked by the taste of the little, tea-soaked, shell-shaped sponge cake was a stimulus for the recall of years of Proust's emotional and autobiographical memory.

I carried to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had let soften a piece of madeleine. But at that very instant when the mouthful of tea mixed with cake-crumbs touched my palette, I quivered, attentive to the extraordinary thing that was happening in me.

And later in the chapter:

And suddenly the memory appeared. That taste was the taste of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because that day I did not go out before it was time for Mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my Aunt Léonie would give me after dipping it in her infusion of tea or lime-blossom. The sight of that madeleine had not recalled anything to me before I tasted it;...

Be open to letting the ordinary everyday sensations stimulate your senses: the smell of a flower or perfume; the taste of an orange or a biscuit; the sound of a lawnmower or an airplane; the sensation of sun on your skin; the sight of moon or stars on a clear night.

Finally, when you have a draft of your work, you might ask yourself:

- Does your opening seduce the reader?
- Are you present in your story?
- Is there a balance between show and tell?
- Is there a strong narrative arc?
- Have you presented events in a way that creates the greatest impact?
- Have you considered the senses?

Whether you are a participant or an observer in your creative nonfiction writing, **your presence** is what will ultimately illuminate the facts. Let the reader know what it feels like to be alive and find gold in the smallest detail.

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