

The ‘Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Creative Nonfiction, But Were Too Naïve or Uninformed to Ask’ Workshop Simulation

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Scene 1: sucking them in

I usually begin this workshop by telling students I am not going to define creative nonfiction for them. No one asks a poet to define poetry or a novelist to provide a meaning of fiction, because art defines itself. Rules and regulations are for journalists and government officials – not writers.

Creative nonfiction demands what the name implies: that a writer find an interesting and compelling way – a creative approach – to communicating information and teaching readers something they don’t necessarily want or need to know.

It is easy to write for an audience geared to a particular subject; for example, animal lovers or people who live in the country will be interested in an essay about a farm veterinarian. But how to attract readers with little interest in animals, medicine, or rural life? That’s the challenge. You do so by telling a story – a true story about real people – that captures their attention and engages their imagination. Along the way, readers learn a great deal about whatever it is the writer is trying to teach them – in this particular case, the problems and challenges of a working farm veterinarian. But you have enticed them with story, not with an informational pay-off. That is what I say in my real workshops. I can hear it now, as I write.

‘That’s creative nonfiction in a nutshell’, I say. The story is the ‘creative’ part and the information (also called ‘the teaching element’) is the ‘nonfiction’ part. I do not mean ‘story’ here in the generic sense the way in which reporters often rely on the term, as in ‘I have to write my story’ or ‘Did you see the story in today’s paper?’ I mean ‘story’ with a beginning, middle and ending. I mean story with drama, suspense, and conflict – a story that compels a reader to say, ‘I couldn’t put it down’.

At this point, I inform my students that the workshop is over. I have told them everything they ever needed or wanted to know – and I begin to pack up my papers.

Scene 2: the yellow test

My students may think I am a bit of a fool at this point, but since they are not asking for their money back – yet – here’s what I say next: ‘OK, you get the story idea here. The building blocks of creative nonfiction are scenes, or little stories, that are pieced together in such

a way that they tell a larger story'. I make a big point of this 'building block' concept, and repeat it over and over again so they will not forget.

As my students discover, the concept of writing in scenes is easier to digest – intellectually – than to practise. Journalists, especially, have trouble 'seeing' a story or a series of stories because their work is often so formulaic. So, we move on to the 'yellow test'.

'Get yourself a highlighter', I say, 'and go to the books or magazines you like to read. Look for the writers you appreciate and respect'. I name a few very prominent creative nonfiction writers, like Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, and Annie Dillard. 'Read them carefully and with your marker, yellow-in the scenes or little stories. Guess what? Anywhere from 50–70 per cent of the text will glare back at you in yellow'.

Scene 3: what's a scene?

Creative nonfiction allows – in fact, encourages – the writer to use basic literary techniques once previously and primarily employed by the fiction writer rather than the journalist. By 'literary techniques' I mean the obvious stuff, like description. What do the characters and places about which you are writing look like? Make material come alive visually by evoking specificity of detail to provide three-dimensional texture.

'There's specific details and what we call "intimate details"', I say. By 'intimate' I don't mean sex and drugs and rock-and-roll, but stuff that your readers won't necessarily or easily imagine. There's the old story about Gay Talese's classic profile of Frank Sinatra, published in the mid-1960s in *Esquire Magazine*. Talese was prohibited from interviewing Sinatra when he arrived in California because 'Old Blue Eyes' had a cold and wasn't in the mood to chat with anyone. Talese followed Sinatra around and interviewed his entire entourage – from bodyguards to PR flaks. He eventually happened upon a little old blue-haired lady who carried around a hatbox and shadowed Sinatra virtually anywhere he went. This woman, he discovered, was Sinatra's wig lady. She tended to his toupees. This was an intimate detail – something a reader would not easily imagine. Not only was the existence of a full-time wig lady a telling detail about Sinatra, but it also enhanced Talese's credibility by reflecting a level of awareness and intimacy about his subject that was deeper and more thorough than other writers' Sinatra efforts. Description with specificity and intimacy of detail is an anchoring element of a good scene.

So is dialogue. In creative nonfiction, characters are sometimes interviewed and quoted – this is often a necessity – but people more often than not talk with one another. Dialogue increases the pace of the essay and helps make the characters more human and accessible. Sometimes interviews can be made to simulate a conversation between writer and subject. Rather than a Q and A experience with a table and a tape recorder dividing the two 'adversaries'.

And while use of the first person 'I' is not a requirement of creative nonfiction, it is not (as it is in traditional journalism) anathema. In creative nonfiction the narrative determines the writer's point of view and presence. The idea always is to make the narrative seem natural; there's no reason to strain to keep yourself out of the story if you are part of it – or in the story if you are not.

Scene 4: don't hold back

You are free to say what you think about the people you meet. Creative nonfiction encourages, though it certainly does not require, subjectivity. The writer's particular orientation,

should he or she choose to share it, adds an eye-opening three-dimensional element to what might normally be a more conventional, hesitant observation.

Under certain circumstances, writers can also see their world through the eyes of the people about whom they are writing. This technique, used frequently by fiction writers, is called inner-point-of-view. Inner-point-of-view helps establish a direct link between reader and the story, without a writer in the middle as an interpreter or filter.

'So you've got dialogue, description and detail, inner-point-of-view, personal voice – what else?' I ask.

Invariably, in these workshops students eventually say, 'Action'.

'This is a good word,' I answer. But action is not enough – you don't want action without some sort of resolution. Something has to happen. Something big and memorable. The action can also be small, as long as there is a happening – a beginning and end.

At this point, I raise the Magic Marker I have been using to write down the anchoring elements of a scene on a whiteboard and wave it in the air, saying, 'The professor lifts the Magic Marker in the air. That's the beginning of a scene. If he drops it, well then, something happens. And even if he doesn't drop it – but only threatens to drop it – that's also a happening'. An action is initiated. Tension is established – and suspense is created, if only for a few seconds. ('Will the professor throw the Magic Marker? At whom? Will he put it down and walk away?') The reader will usually stick around to see the end if he or she is intrigued in the beginning.

Scene 5: the nonfiction part

And speaking of the beginning, I next take my students back to the way my presentation started, by reminding them about what creative nonfiction is all about – style and substance.

'The story is the style part', I say, 'and it acts as a receptacle for the information or reportage you are doing. So what you try to do is embed or include information about your subject inside the scenes you write, and then you also embed information between the scenes you write. So it is kind of like a TV show. First there's a story, and the audience is hooked by what's happened. Then, when you know you have them in the palm of your hands, you give them a commercial. You tell them what you want them to know about your subject. Then, when you think they might be getting bored, you continue the story until they're hooked again. Any time you get the chance, you also put information into the story itself. It is kind of like a dance: Story, information inside the story, information between the stories, then more story'.

Scene 6: frame and focus

I now ask students to notice the different ways in which the scenes are rendered. A scene can be recreated with dialogue, description, and other literary techniques, or it could be straight monologue with the subject simply telling a story. Another scene could be a combination of quotation and paraphrasing by the writer. Remember that scenes can also be stories told to you, so when you interview your subjects, keep in mind that you are not doing a Q-and-A. Ask questions which will lead into stories – get them to set the scene, supply characterisation and description. Talk to them and squeeze out the details. Let them do the writing for you. Good writing begins with good material. Digging out the details is the writer's responsibility and the ultimate challenge.

Each scene should have a beginning and an end. Something happens. Some scenes contain information, some scenes don't. But in between those scenes that don't should be blocks of information.

'OK?' I ask. 'Does everybody understand? The building blocks are scenes. The scenes aren't scenes unless they have a beginning and an end. Something has to happen. Information – the reporting – is embedded in the scenes and between the scenes. That's the rhythm and that's the dance, whether it is an essay or book chapter or even the entire book. OK?' I repeat.

'Yes', they say.

'Are you ready to go home?' I ask, even louder.

'Yes', they yell.

'No', I tell them. 'You haven't learned the "F" words. Creative nonfiction won't work until you can use the "F" words'.

Now they are really interested. The 'F' word gets their attention. But I am about to disappoint them. 'How is this essay framed?' I ask.

'Framed?' they say.

'Good creative nonfiction is put together in a series of scenes or stories – moving pictures', I explain. 'But you can't just throw eight stories together and assume they will fit. There must be an order – a "structure" to it. And in the story-oriented genre of creative nonfiction, even the structure or the frame must be shaped like a story'.

'Frames are almost always timelines', I say. A day in the life, a year in the life – even a minute in the life of a person, place or thing.

Tracy Kidder, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is famous for his 'year in the life of' books, which include stories about nursing homes and elementary schools. One of his early books, *House*, begins with the moment a husband and wife decide to build a new house for their growing family. We meet the architect, the contractor, carpenters, electricians – everyone having anything to do with the conception and construction of the house. In the interim, we learn vividly about the complications, challenges and frustrations of home building from these many different perspectives. The book ends when the family moves into their new house. Thus the frame begins with a dream and ends with the fulfilment of that dream. That's the frame. Every essay has a frame.

'Sounds kind of boring', a student says. 'Every essay put together in a chronology'.

'It *would* be boring if every essay ever written had a "this happened first, this happened last" chronology', I agree, 'but that's not the case. A writer can manipulate time – can start in the middle or even at the very end – and backtrack before working back to the beginning. How many people saw the movie *Forrest Gump*?' Everybody in the room raises a hand. I always use *Forrest Gump* as an example because it has been so eminently popular. 'Where does it start?'

'On a bus stop bench'.

'Yes, Forrest is sitting on a bus stop bench, and he turns to a stranger sitting beside him and starts to tell his life story. We are immediately carried back to his birth and his mom's story. In a little while, we are back at the bus stop bench. Forrest turns in the other direction and he is talking to another stranger – and continuing his story. This happens at least a half-dozen times. It takes half the movie before we work our way back to the present and learn why Forrest is waiting for a bus'.

Writers often move back and forth in time. You can even start at the end and then go back all the way to the beginning to explain how and why your story ended in that particular way. James Baldwin's classic, *Notes of a Native Son*, starts with his father's funeral

procession and ends when the procession arrives at the cemetery – twenty minutes later. But it takes Baldwin 15,000 words of background and flashback to get there.

Baldwin's essay was long, but he had a lot to say about racism, poverty, fatherhood and being black in America. And indeed, having a message – saying something to a reader – is very much part of the reason creative nonfiction is going through such an explosion of popularity. This leads to the second creative nonfiction 'F' word: 'focus'. In order for creative nonfiction to be creative nonfiction, it must be framed *and* focused. We get focus when phrases and ideas recur throughout the scenes.

Focus is the second way in which the scenes must be organised. The first 'F' – frame – means organising by time and shape, and the second 'F' – focus – means organising by meaning and content. In order for the scenes to fit together, they must reflect the same or similar focuses.

'And when you put it all together', I tell my students, 'You get creative nonfiction: story and information, style and substance, frame and focus. That's all there is to it'.

It's like this essay, this workshop simulation. I have provided a lot of information about the genre and the classic structure of the creative nonfiction essay. But I have also shaped the presentation in order to make the information more compelling and accessible to the widest possible reading audience. If this works – I mean, if you find this engaging and are still reading – then I have done my job; I have written a compelling and informative chapter for a textbook, and I have had fun in the process. And that's what this genre is all about – engaging the reader, as well as the writer in the writing and reading experience.

References

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