

Chapter Two

Types of Creative Writing

Generally speaking Creative Writing is classified into two broad categories:

1. Creative non-fiction
2. Fiction

1. Creative Non-fiction

Creative nonfiction merges the boundaries between literary art (fiction, poetry) and research nonfiction (statistical, fact-filled, run of the mill journalism). It is writing composed of the real, or of facts, that employs the same literary devices as fiction such as setting, voice/tone, character development, etc. This makes it different (more “creative”) than standard nonfiction writing. Creative non-fiction should:

- (1) Include accurate and well-researched information,
- (2) Hold the interest of the reader, and
- (3) Potentially blur the realms of fact and fiction in a pleasing, literary style (while remaining grounded in fact).

In the end, creative non-fiction can be as experimental as fiction—it just needs to be based in the real.

Content of creative non-fiction:

It's important to clarify that the content of creative non-fiction does not necessarily have to come from the life or the experience of the writer. Say, for instance, the writer is using techniques from literary journalism to create a portrait of a person interviewed. The writer may choose to write a portrait of the interviewee through an omniscient perspective, meaning the writer wouldn't be in the piece at all.

On the other hand, non-fiction writers often choose to write about topics or people close to them (including themselves). As long as the piece deals with something real, or something based on the real, the writer is allowed to take the piece in any direction he or she wishes.

In creative non-fiction, writers attempt to observe, record, and thus shape a moment from real life. Writers thus extract meaning through factual details—they combine the fact of detail with the literary extrapolation necessary in rendering meaning from an observed scene.

At the same time, successful creative non-fiction attempts to overlay fact with traditional conceptions of dramatic structure. While rendering meaning from an observed scene, a piece should suggest a beginning, middle and end that clearly conveys the conflict and the characters, and pushes the action toward some sort of closure.

In effect, creative non-fiction attempts to project a dramatic, literary framework upon everyday existence, rendering it enjoyable, enlightening and potentially meaningful.

While writing creative non-fiction, writers should dwell on sensory details and "show. A piece should never just tell the reader something or summarize—this is what research nonfiction does.

Types of creative non-fiction writing:

Due to the fact that creative non-fiction is an ever-evolving genre of writing, it is difficult to define set types:

1. The Personal Essay:

A piece of writing, usually in the first person, that focuses on a topic or a personal Experience that strongly affects the reader vis-à-vis its apparent emotional impact on the narrator. It can be narrative or non-narrative—it can tell a story in a traditional way or improvise a new way for doing so. Ultimately, it should always be based on true, personal experience.

The personal essay is one of the most popular forms of creative non-fiction writing found in English classes, especially in high school but also, to a certain degree and in a more complex way, college. This kind of writing allows you to explore a topic

through the lens of your own, personal experiences, reflections, ideas, and reactions. It can be one of the most powerful kinds of writing you get to do, both in its direct connection to you, the writer, allowing you to engage with material in class at a very personal, complex, and meaningful level, and also in the amount of latitude that you as a writer are afforded in terms of style, technique, and form. The following are some tips and strategies to help you think as you write and revise a personal essay, or prepare to write this kind of assignment for the first time (the topic of the essay will always vary—we are focused on the genre as a whole here). Personal essay writers should consider the following points:

a. Focus. In some ways, the personal essay is similar to memoir and many of the same techniques can be used effectively. It differs in that an essay is focused on one specific topic (and here, it will be explored through your own experiences) whereas the memoir has the capability to trace or illuminate several themes, topics, and ideas via the author's life (or part(s) of that life) that he/she describes (and how he/she describes it).

b. Organization.

Not to be confused with form (see below). Your essay, like other essays, should have some kind of coherent organization to it. This is not to say that you must use thesis style (in fact, we are confident that powerful personal essays follow that organization scheme less than 5% of the time). No matter how you choose to organize (and what form you use), be sure that your paragraphs and ideas flow from one to the next, connected by a common theme (trying to tackle the topic on which you are writing). It can be scattered or fragmented (if that is a stylistic/form choice you make), but the entire paper should have a relationship, even if it only becomes clear at the end. This allows the reader to follow your experience.

c. Form. One of the best parts of this kind of writing is the power given to you as the writer.

There is no form, no formula, no tried and true method that you must use to be effective. In fact, to copy something that somebody else has done is not only rather boring, but also defeats the purpose of this being a personal essay. Choose a form and style that suits you and is fitting for the experience that you are describing. Try to think of the form as a part of the writing itself, not just a framework for it: the form should actually enhance and make more poignant what it is you are taking about. Push the boundaries, but don't go too far—you are still writing an essay (and be sure that you follow any specific requirements outlined by your professor).

d. Diction/Language. Like form, in the personal essay (and creative writing generally, perhaps even, to some extent, writing in general) the way in which you say something can “mean” just as much as the form into which you place what it is you are saying. Use language to enhance what you are writing about and not just as a means to say it. Here is where you can get really creative and appropriately use linguistic “play” to explore your topic and your own relation to it in new and complex ways.

Choosing at Topic and Approach

When beginning a personal essay, you should choose a significant event in your life. This can be almost anything, but something about it should matter to you. Many personal essays hinge around a sad experience, but joy is just as strong an emotion, if not more so. As always in creative writing, you should consider why you are writing this piece: what can writing about this experience teach others? What can you learn from revisiting the memory? In a personal essay, the importance of the word “personal” is not to be undervalued. Whatever you choose to write about must be important to you, hinge around your experience, and have some impact on you.

When writing a personal essay, it is important to remember that the main character is you. This is challenging for a lot of people who are used to expressing

themselves through a character or through poetry. Personal essays demand more vulnerability than either of these forms. In a personal essay, the writer should never be afraid of the word “I” in fact, it should be used as often as possible. In most situations where you find yourself straying into the first person plural (“we”) or even the third person, using such vague language as “one could” or “one would,” you will almost always find the writing becomes stronger if you replace the subject with “I.” Most of the time, drifting into vague language is a sign that you are trying to convey a message you find “too” personal and are afraid of expressing. However, it is this vulnerability that fuels the personal essay. You cannot learn from the experience unless you are honest with yourself, and readers will not be able to understand why this experience is significant if you hide yourself from view. Your character in the story can only develop if you claim the story as your own.

Revising Tips

While one of the most common kinds of creative non-fiction writing (at least in an academic setting), the personal essay is probably one of the harder assignments to revise. After all, how do you “fix” a paper that is composed of very personal ideas? A personal essay is not like a formal analytical essay-- it doesn't need an explicit thesis-driven format. Therefore, revising a personal essay can be complicated, especially when you feel as though you don't want to tamper with personal thoughts. However, a personal essay often needs someone to tamper with it in order to make it a complete piece. Below we have listed several steps that may be useful when revising or giving feedback on a personal essay (either your own or someone else's).

i. Voice/Tone: The voice and tone are important in the personal essay because they reflect the attitude the writer is trying to get across. Is the mood happy? Sad? Is it serious? Are we placed inside the writer's head? These are all important questions

to ask in order to realize the effect/the emotion the writer wants the piece to convey. Ask yourself (or the writer): Is the writer's voice consistent throughout the piece? Does it reflect the tone of the piece? Does the piece incorporate some experimental ideas? It is not necessary to have a personal essay be “experimental,” but it does need to be unique to the writer (hence the name). Some experimental ideas include: playing with the sentence structure by juxtaposing short sentences with longer, complicated sentences ... playing with word usage by including repetition or alliteration ... or playing with form by including other voices, dialogue, and points of views.

ii. Showing v. Telling: Details and imagery can only help a personal essay; they help to develop a story by making it more real to the reader. A personal essay doesn't necessarily need scenes, but it does need a well formed focus or point and imagery can help to establish that.

Character Development: If the personal essay has characters, make sure they're developed clearly and that the relationships between the characters are developed. Dialogue between characters not only helps the reader to understand the relationships, it helps the reader to understand the individual characters and their actions. Imagery also helps with this and ties back into showing v. telling; by describing a character through details (of their actions or their appearance), we better understand a character.

Original Language: Everything in a piece of creative writing is subject to scrutiny, including word choice. Therefore it's helpful to look closely at language. Is the writing fresh?

Are there any obvious clichés that detract from the piece?

iii. Form: How a piece of creative non-fiction writing is put together is extremely important. The form not only needs to be organized well, it also speaks to the piece as a whole. Good questions to ask: Why is it organized in this way? How does this

reflect your (or the writer's) experience? It's also helpful to discuss different form techniques such as flashbacks, stream of consciousness, or different scenes that piece together a writer's main idea.

iv. Fiction/Poetry Techniques: Since creative non-fiction writing is such a hybrid and multifaceted genre, it's often helpful to use/borrow techniques from fiction or poetry. Scenes, dialogue, narrative structure, setting, and an emphasis on language are all important aspects of creative non-fiction as well.

2. The Memoir:

A memoir is a longer piece of creative non-fiction that delves deep into a writer's personal experience. It typically uses multiple scenes/stories as a way of examining a writer's life (or an important moment in a writer's life). It is usually, but not necessarily, narrative. Memoirs are an often overlooked subdivision of creative writing, and more specifically, creative non-fiction. They have the potential to be incredibly interesting, richly developed, beautifully moving pieces that can sometimes be confused with autobiography. Generally, autobiographies are the life story or history of a person's life written by that person. Though memoirs share some similarities with autobiographies, such as first person narration, they are more than a recounting of one's life events in chronological order. Instead, they can be descriptions of one single event or moment in one's life, rather than that life in its entirety, and tend to be written in a less structured or formal manner. Memoirs have the capacity to be funny, profound, moving, cynical, etc., and may even have resemblances to fiction in their creativity. Memoirs can focus on one specific event, place, person, etc. or they can be expanded to encompass a broader range of events, snapshots, or memories in the author's experience.

Here are some basic things you should know about writing a memoir:

Memoirs can be about nearly anything in your personal experience/life that is significant enough for you to want to retell it, or it can simply be a snapshot of a moment or a description of a person, place, or thing in your life.

Choose a topic that you care about, for this will make your piece more descriptive, emotional, and creative. Even though it is about YOUR life, if you care about your topic then so will the reader.

Seek a deeper or underlying theme within the simple description of an event etc. that the reader can connect to. Use a lot of description and imagery, if you can, to make the reader feel like they know the topic intimately.

There is no specific form or style that it is necessary for a memoir to have **USE YOUR OWN UNIQUE VOICE!**

Do not confuse memoirs with autobiography; they are NOT the same thing (as noted above).

You may want to find some memoirs in the library or online in order to get a feel for the variety out there and some of the ways you might want to go about writing yours. A few examples,

- ☐ My Family and Other Animals by Gerald Durrell
- ☐ Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir by Lauren Slater
- ☐ Angela's Ashes, 'Tis, and Teacher Man by Frank McCourt
- ☐ The Dog Who Wouldn't Be by Farley Mowat.

Though these are longer books, memoirs can make the form of shorter, more "snapshot" like pieces as well. A memoir does not have to be a long, all-inclusive cataloguing of your life that could be overwhelming, boring, and read more like a formal autobiography---choose a specific focus. Take creative license.

A memoir, though based on and rooted in truth and fact, does not have to be 100% straight laced non-fiction. Take a new perspective, get creative, and find a way to

make your piece more interesting, fresh, thought-provoking etc. In other words, just because this is non-fiction, that

DOES NOT have to make it boring, dry, straight-forward, and humorless.

Though there is some controversy over what can and cannot be called memoir, Lauren Slater's book *lying* is a good example of how creative you can get with this Genre. Hers is specifically labeled a metaphorical memoir in order to avoid this Controversy (though it has followed her anyway), and so perhaps saying something to that effect is a way of avoiding complaints of false advertising and fraud. Though you should not claim something to be true that is not, you can choose what you want to leave out of or include in your memoir. You can make it read like fiction, and you can make conscious decisions to surround your work with ambiguity that questions the nature of truth vs. fact (as Slater does). It may sound complicated, but really is quite basic: don't make claims your piece is something it's not, don't outright lie and then say it's fact, but choose your material carefully and you can do many more things with memoirs than you might at first think (see the limits of the real in creative nonfiction above).

□ finally, have fun with it! Enjoy it! Memoirs can be very emotionality releasing, fun to play around with, and can reward not only the reader but also you, the writer. Test your limits and try different ways of writing—it's all about self-exploration and discovery.

3. Literary Journalism:

Literary journalism uses the techniques of journalism (such as interviews and reviews) in order to look outside of the straight forward, objective world that journalism creates. It uses literary practices to capture the scene/setting of the assignment or the persona of the person being interviewed. It can often be narrative or heavily imagistic. Another important aspect of literary journalism is that it often stretches the idea of "objective facts" in order to better reflect real life and real

people. In other words, while journalism is about being completely objective, literary journalism says that people can't be objective because they already have their own subjective views about the world. Therefore, by taking the "objectiveness" out of the journalistic process, the writer is being more truthful.

4. The Lyric Essay:

The lyric essay is similar to the personal essay in that it also deals with a topic that affects the reader. However, the lyric essay relies heavily on descriptions and imagery. Lyrical suggests something poetic, musical, or flowing (in a sense). This type of piece uses a very lyrical, heavily descriptive, flowing tone in order to tell a story.

2. Fiction

Fiction writing allows human creativity to run limitless, creating stories that probe every facet of life and the human experience. This very openness, however, is what can make it seem so challenging—even if you know what you want to write about, how do you begin? Below you will find some suggestions on writing short stories, as well as revising your work, that can hopefully guide you along the way.

➤ Writing a Short Story

Writing a short story is different from writing a research paper or persuasive essay and many beginning writers can be daunted by the task. Luckily, writing a short story isn't nearly as difficult as it may seem at first and by remembering some basic tricks you can be well on your way.

What Should I Write About?

Don't try to make the story too far-fetched. Some of the best stories have seemingly mundane settings and plots. The best stories are believable. It will be the characters that truly shape the story.

If you can't think of anything, take a story from your own life. Countless professional authors advocate writing from life. Everyone has told a story aloud. Take that story and expand it.

Feel free to change it around as much as you like-it doesn't have to stick to the exact history of what happened.

The most important thing to remember is that while you are writing it is ok to change something. Feel free to completely change the story if you get a great idea. Sometimes spontaneous ideas are the best.

Keeping that in mind, decide on a point of view. The most common are singular first person and third person. First person uses a narrator who leads the story by saying "I didn't have enough money" as opposed to third person, which follows a character around by saying "Bob didn't have enough money." They both have pros and cons; first person is more personal with a specific character, but third person is more inclusive and lets the reader know what's going on beyond one character.

Figure out where the story is going to take place. Short stories generally stick to one setting since not much time passes (don't have a line that reads "three days later, for example), so make sure the setting makes sense. The characters should be there for a reason.

So You've Started to Write...:

Remember that you have already done one of the hardest parts; actually writing can be the easier part of the process.

Don't introduce too many characters you will have to account for and develop later on. Small characters can often be combined for simplicity's sake.

Keeping a story "simple" and interesting can be difficult, especially if you are writing from life. There is a tendency to include everything that happened, but in reality not every scene is important. If the scene doesn't drive the plot, don't include it. By the same token, include plenty of metaphors and imagery to enhance

the "point" of the story. What are you trying to say in the story? What do the ' characters learn in the end? Why is this particular story worthy of being told? Whatever answers those questions can be considered the "point." If you don't have a "point" right away, don't worry. Often authors don't find what they are trying to say until they have finished writing, and sometimes they change the ending to convey a different message. Try to enhance the point by using details and imagery without adding pointless scenes, but if you don't have a point at first don't worry--it will come to you.

“Done”? What now?

Read over your story.

Does the story have a beginning, middle, and end? Something should have been set up, happen, and then be over. If not, try revising your story.

Do the characters (or the reader) learn anything? If not, there is no point to your story. There isn't anything that makes it worth telling. Something really interesting could have happened but if doesn't affect the characters then it isn't a really interesting story. Readers connect best with the characters, not necessarily what happens to them.

Check out some of our other suggestions for revising fiction below.

Remember, there are no “rules” to writing (most of the time). Feel free to break any of these if it makes the story better. These are just guidelines, but they should help if you are struggling. Also, remember to revise. The first draft isn't always the best; most first drafts can be improved upon.

One last tip: READ READ READ. Read other authors for inspiration by looking critically at how they are deploying technique. The best writers are also pretty active and critical readers.

Revising Fiction

Some basic questions to get yourself (re)thinking:

Is every scene necessary? Are you repeating yourself? Are you missing a scene?

List for yourself what your scenes are about. Not just what the action is but what the scene means and how it furthers the story. Remember that a scene moves a story through the use of action, character change and development, and the passage of time. Very rarely do you find a scene that does nothing for the story, no matter how small that something might be.

Have you chosen the right point of view? Is the POV best for viewing conflict? Is it the most interesting and intense (i.e. most appropriate for the story you are telling)? Try to think your character's(s') POV out as far as you can, as it can dictate what becomes possible later on...and there may be a part of a character that reveals itself to you via exploring a new POV.

Ask yourself about plot—are the scenes and the revelations within scenes arranged to best effect, for intensity and for cause and effect.

Consider the action or actions that drive your story. Make sure that for every action there is a reaction. This will help keep your story moving. Consider all the reactions to an action and then decide what will give the best effect (and what is plausible to the extent that you are striving for at least some realism/believability).

Look at your characters—are they differentiated enough? Are they individuals? Are there too many for a short story? Is there a character that might have more to say and might make the story stand out if he/she is developed? Is it difficult for the central character to get what he/she wants, or is it too easy? The better you know and understand your characters, the more powerful they become in your writing.

Look at your settings—are they evocative enough, are they part of the story or are they just there as fill-ins?

Does your first paragraph hook your reader? Avoid introductory kinds of things.

Look at the last paragraph. Why did you choose to end there?

Have faith in your story: recaps are not usually necessary.

Save your drafts and never be afraid to try something, even if it does not end up working out.

➤ Poetry

What Makes a Good Poem?

"The theater of any poem is a collection of decisions about space and time - how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of the someone who comes along to read them?" *Adrienne Rich*

This is a question that has been asked since poetry came into existence. It is a hard question to tackle, and the best way to approach it is by consulting poets.

According to Louis Zukofsky, an important American poet, "The test of poetry is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound, and intellect." Poetry should combine these three aspects.

a. Sight: This refers to the layout of the poem on the page. Poetry is not just about the use of words. Although the words are of great importance, the use of space is equally important.

Frank Bidart is a poet who is noted for his use of the page, as well as his interesting use of capitalization and punctuation. His decisions, no matter how odd, are intentional and contribute to the power of his poetry. The layout of a poem is something a writer should keep in mind while composing.

b. Sound:

Sound refers to the relationships that form between words within your writing. This does not mean that it is necessary to use alliteration or onomatopoeia (unless it is appropriate). It means that as a poem is being composed, the writer should be aware of these relationships. Words will fight against one another, or they will

embrace each other, stringing together to form beautiful lines and sentences. A writer can “hold an image within the line by sound...” A writer can make the decision to allow their words to clash. The writer can decide the way in which a reader will move through the lines. Sound not only refers to words, but also to rhythm. The rhythm of a poem will become apparent when it is read aloud.

c. Intellect:

A writer must be able to present information effectively. The challenge with poetry is figuring out the best way to present the information that needs to be conveyed. Poetry has the ability to suggest meanings that go above and beyond what the poem actually says. This can be done through the use of sight and sound as suggested above. Intellect will allow a poet to contemplate abstract ideas, and convey them through the use of language. Poetry is “an exchange of electrical currents through language.” Controlling the currents and placing them on the page in an effective way will create a good poem.

Steps to write poem

- Know Your Goal
- Avoid Clichés
- Avoid Sentimentality
- Use Images
- Use Metaphor and Simile
- Use Concrete Words Instead of Abstract Words
- Communicate Theme
- Subvert the Ordinary
- Rhyme with Extreme Caution
- Revise, Revise, Revise