

Segue

Writing  Writing

CREATING NONFICTION

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Stories are volatile things, especially when they're ours. In the introductory fiction courses I've taught, the majority of pieces submitted are poorly disguised confessions, rants, or the most recent details of a struggling relationship (unless they're the thirty-two page science fiction piece that will never be revised on the principle of the writer's misunderstood genius). When I suggest revisions or approaches that might guide the student to write a short story rather than document a journal entry or transcribe of a weak conversation, I face a stubborn, unyielding writer who, in her eyes, won't allow her story to be fictionalized. How dare I suggest she develop setting and character when she has merely chronicled a rough weekend? *Create your character*, I insist. To her, this is a superfluous act. The "character" is clear in her mind; after all, he's the guy off the page and in her Biology lab. He's a concrete incarnation, not some abstract creation. And forget plot. It happened the way it happened, how is she supposed to consider sublimated desire when she doesn't *remember* the painting on the wall above the restaurant booth? *But that's how it happened* has become the perfunctory response that incites groans and spurs ostracism in graduate seminars, but in the relatively forgiving introductory group, it has the ability to inspire empathy and awe. And in that case, it's us and against them, and it's clear that we just don't get it.

If I change the course title to creative nonfiction and read the same story, I encounter a different struggle, one that involves getting the writer to address the "so what?" factor. This absence in beginning nonfiction pieces derives from the writer's lack of relationship with her story. *This happened to me*, she believes, is enough. A good friend of mine is a fiction writer, and he calls the "so what" factor in fiction "why now?" In other words, why does the story need to be told now, and I can take that back over to the creative nonfiction side and answer that here, it's about "only now." Only now have I had enough distance and time to truly know the experience's significance, and even if I don't, I know the significance of that unknowing as well. I'm sure that he and I could go back and forth forever borrowing from each other's genre with a few modifications, as both genres surely demand the same devices.

In nonfiction, the fictional character becomes the persona or the portrait, and literary truth becomes literal. The essayist must create an empathetic bond with her reader, unlike the fiction writer

who is free to keep his main character distant and aloof and yet still establish a connection with the reader. In addition, memory plays a key part, whether that memory is clear or fragmented. Yet one of the most imperative qualities in effective essays, especially the personal essay and the memoir, is the persona's degree of vulnerability. In other words, we're all guilty of something, and if a writer is not willing to face her own culpability, the essay can read as false, or even worse, didactic. A good way to approach nonfiction is to consider: *We're all in this together*. Beyond that, I emphasize the following elements to beginning essayists so that they may, indeed, create nonfiction.

Vulnerability

At the end of each first class session, I read one of my own essays. Part of this derives from studying Peter Elbow, when as a beginning composition instructor, I learned that one of the most effective ways to teach writing is to present yourself as a writer. Yet after teaching each semester, I received feedback that proved a different impact on creative nonfiction students. I often remind them that I was raised in a family that didn't talk about things, which is one of the reasons I am a writer. It's the only way I have to communicate all that was never said or all I was not allowed to say. Therefore, I dismantle the secrets in my family, and I explore my own longings and losses. From what an overwhelming number of students have said, my essay, on that first day, offers them a release to write whatever they want to write. "When I heard what you wrote about, I felt this big sigh of relief," I've heard more than one say, "because I knew I could write anything in here." Thus, in sharing a personal essay with a humble, faulted persona, I establish a classroom environment that allows them to do the same.

When they begin to write their own essays, it's clear that some of them are holding back from their content, not saying what I can tell they want to. *Write it or don't write it*, I tell them. You're either ready to look at this or you're not, and if you're not ready to let yourself go with the content, if you can't present a vulnerability that the personal essay demands, write something else. Many times we can't get to the essay because we don't know quite how we want to present it, and for those times, we shift our attention to a different topic. Yet there are times when a writer cannot write about a certain experience, and it works within the essay. I had a female student write about the time she ran away from home at the age of thirteen and lived in a field for a couple of months, sneaking into the restroom of a gas station to use the sink and bathroom and making money by offering house or yard work for those living in neighboring homes. Eventually, she found a couple willing to give her chores each day and a couch to sleep on at night. Here she felt, for the first time in her life, safe and welcome. One night, both the man and woman raped her. She pretended to fall asleep before running out and returning to her black garbage bag blanket in the field. After several drafts, I asked her if she wanted to open up her home life more in the essay in order to allow her reader to feel her fear in the house, pull us into the horror. "I am not ready to write about what happened to me before the age of 13," she announced in my office, so I backed off. Still, while the reader never knows what causes her to run away and leave her siblings behind, it works for the essay. A reader can make certain assumptions, interpolate a story given adequate details, and a writer can create vulnerability by virtue of what she is unwilling to uncover for the reader.

If an essay does not already come equipped with vulnerability, as in the essay of that female student, a writer must be willing to forge one. And we do this by revealing a weakness, admitting a fault, facing up to our own failures. It's difficult for most people to verbalize the ways in which they disappoint themselves and others. The personal essay and the memoir demand that it be written down, perhaps even read aloud to others. The genre, I tell my students, is not for everyone. If you're not comfortable with looking closely at where you have gone wrong or at least trying to find out why, you're not going to be a good essayist.

Persona

In writing essays, you have to be more loyal to the art than the experience that created that art. A good place to start is by choosing an appropriate persona. It's not enough to be an "I." As I ask my students, *Who are you for this piece?* Because I believe that is the relationship between the persona and the essay. An essay demands a certain persona to achieve what it sets out to do. One of the ways I introduce the idea of persona is by making a list on the board of each of my varying personas, including ones like professor, mother, smoker, runner, writer, lover, seventies music aficionado. Invariably, a student will say, "Do you smoke?" My answer helps them understand the *what an essay needs* portion of persona choice. I have an essay in which a younger me is wild and free in the middle of Texas. I explain that I smoked back then, so I smoke in the essay. I am no longer that young woman, but she is a part of me, one of my personas.

We're not creating a character, we're choosing which part, or incarnation, of our identity best suits the work. For example, even though I'm a writer and it's obvious I'm a writer by the fact that readers have my essays in their hands, I don't always mention that fact in my work. Some essays need it, others don't. Most students are familiar with Billy Collins's poetry enough to know that in some of his poetry, the speaker is a poet. In others, he's a man who forgot a book and has to go back to the house to get it. Also, I have essays that never mention my daughter or the fact that I'm a mother, a fact that is inextricably linked in my life, but not necessarily to my work. With all of my personas on the board, I offer students some hypothetical essay topics and ask them to identify the characteristics of the persona for the essay. For example, if I write an essay about the year I spent trying to get my husband to come back, do I need to have a PhD? Probably not, especially since much of my behavior had nothing to do with my intellect. The key here is to deconstruct identity, to get students to look at it as a construct of varying personas. Who do they choose to be at any moment and why? Because it's necessary, appropriate, or expected for the situation. The same applies to the essay.

Writing about Others

A visiting writer once led my class in an exercise in which she asked students to look at obituaries she had brought in and to discuss what was missing. While the exercise proved fascinating, a kind of *CSI* approach to the obituary, I couldn't help thinking it would prove more beneficial to the

fiction writer who often struggles with creating the nuances of a character, with knowing a character beyond the details one might find in the obituary column. However, I did think of how obituaries can offer a tip for the essayist as well, and it has to do with how we write about others. One rarely finds an obituary with the Truth, capital T. *Madge Perkins suffered from silence and a penchant for hard liquor. She preferred watching Wheel of Fortune to conversing with her family, and she never put anything but blue sheets on her bed.* On the contrary, by focusing on the empirical details, this degree, that award, this ambassadorship, and redacting that which cannot be quantified, obits would have everyone believe that all the deceased were once upstanding citizens who had unshakingly devoted families and a zest for life. You never read about the manic-depressive who left his kids or the grandfather who gambled away the farm, unless it's the sectioned biography of a writer in a literary anthology, which is perhaps why developing critical readers insist that writers, and writers alone, are messed-up individuals. We're lucky we have more than obituaries in prose. It's important to create portraits that are as complex and fascinating as human behavior. Not one of us is all good or all bad; nor are most of us consistent except in our lack of consistency.

I once had a student write an essay about the task of writing her own father's obituary when she was twenty-five. What makes the essay poignant and real, personal and yet universal, is that she wrote about the way her father put on her mother's black tights to play ballet with her when she was four *and* the way he ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on the night he told her he was checking himself into a rehabilitation facility. He would be in and out of them for the rest of his life, but never in their home again. She redeems him while also showing the pain he caused her, but in the end, every reader knows what has been lost, and that's because she allowed us in, let us to feel the way she did about him and about what happened. This point is imperative in writing about others: the writer must show us what has been lost or taken, given or surrendered. Another student of mine wrote about her abusive boyfriend, but her portrayal left him seeming like a controlling, manipulative jerk and only a jerk, leaving the workshop group with questions such as "Why would you even date a guy like this?" and "Why did you stick around for that?" She had a feeling these questions would present themselves, and she had already began anticipating responses. And this is what every writer must do: separate from the essay enough to predict the questions that any reader would have and start to formulate answers, the keys to effective revising. Many of those answers have to do with creating that entire panoramic of another human being, not just the persona the writer is writing for or against. Conflict doesn't just apply to the negative aspects of a relationship or experience; we can be as easily conflicted by the positive in the right (or wrong) situation.

Details

A student of mine wrote about a boy she had a crush on in high school, a dark-haired, gangly boy named Ricky Newman, who had a locker next to hers and kept a supply of red hots on the top shelf, which left him with cinnamon breath and stained fingertips. I didn't know until reading that essay that her red hair was dyed, an admittance she claimed was probably still tied to Ricky's love of redheads and red hots. When her workshop session began, the students dove, not into her essay, but into their own high school crushes, the lockers they had made circuitous trips to pass more than once

on their way to algebra. Even I couldn't resist, joining the group to tell the writer how she had invoked my own Ricky Newman, but mine loved sour balls and I kept the locker we shared stocked from my candy store job. I couldn't help indulging the students in a few more stories, and then I asked the group what it was that had inspired this collective high school reunion. "It was the red hots." "The name." "The fingertips." Each student had a different answer, but the consensus was the same: the details. The more specific you are, the more you evoke your readers' own details, which allows them to identify, to enter the essay. While many novice writers will claim that leaving an image or a person vague allows each reader to paint his own picture, we know this to have the opposite effect. A blank canvas won't stop a viewer for too long; in fact, it might incite a struggle to figure out what is there instead of making a connection with the painting. We don't have to own it to recognize it as ours. Details and colors and red hots can pull a reader close enough so that the writer can whisper, *Let me show you more.*

Though details derive from memory, what we don't remember can be as poignant and significant, depending on the story we wish to tell. *I don't remember the color of my grandmother's dress* can be just as evocative as the exact position of the chair in her living room. But choose wisely and don't rely on one or another for too long. Also, the use of *I remember* can show a relationship to memory and to the place and time but try deleting it to see if the memory can stand on its own. Finally, it's not enough to just include a memory in an essay, a writer must know why it's there. And convey this in the text.

Narrative

One of the choices a writer must make in writing a personal essay, particularly a memoir, involves whether the experience is happening or it happened, whether it will be told in the past or present, but a story has to be there. To that end, a writer must consider whether the effects of the narrative would best be captured by an immediate or a distant point of view. For example, the writer chooses: *I am sitting on a green chair in the backyard of a longtime friend*, a sentence that places the reader in the backyard and foregrounds the event. Such an approach not only allows for immediacy, but perhaps a framing story for the piece. Or, the writer chooses: *Last November, I sat in the backyard of a longtime friend*, in order to emphasize reflection. That choice made, the story, regardless of when it occurred, offers a narrative from which the significance will emerge. We can't read significance only, and wonder where it came from. A writer convinces with narrative—sometimes the true message is in the story itself.

In beginning composition classes, we often ask students to write topical essays, in which seventy five percent is devoted to summary and the remaining quarter to analysis or evaluation, as of, say, an article. Due to this imbedded relationship between story and significance, most writers will go for that approach immediately, often encapsulating a situation in a two-sentence Aesopian manner. However, working analysis, evaluation, and observation into the story, taking a step back from the narrative for a moment is tough work. I say, try taking the ending and starting there. Or I'll have students find an epigraph that they think captures the significance of the piece—as they look, they have to keep in mind what it is they want their readers to get at and what they don't. In the end, though,

balancing significance and story in a way that allows each of them to hold their position on the page without distraction is tenuous.

Structure

Chronology, though intuitive, is not always the way to go. What is privileged in the essay? How can the first sentence encapsulate all that follows it? When addressing form and content, it's important to emphasize how one must reflect the other. So, if you're writing about a fragmented set of memories, why not write them in fragments on the page? Portions, not sentences. The student who wrote about writing her father's obituary came to me with an early draft in which one memory followed another without transition, thus creating a series of non sequiturs. The collage is never the way to go, especially when it involves a poster board and some magazines, but I digress. Even when recounting memories, a necessarily fragmented process, our essays still require a shape in which to fit the larger picture. For this writer, I suggested recreating in the essay the writing process she went through so that it feels as if we are sitting at the desk struggling, as she did, to find the words. Then, add the actual obituary to the end of the essay in italics, as a means of completing the process.

There's a poetry exercise in which you separate lines into individual pieces, sometimes cutting into the lines themselves and piecing the poem back together. I've found this particularly helpful in showing students how to discover and play with structure. By cutting essays into clear paragraphs that don't begin or end with any explicit ties to what precedes or follows each one and having another student (or two) arrange the pieces allows the writer to see the possibilities of organization, privilege, and (lack of) resolution.

One more example: A student wants to write about family photos, about going through boxes and realizing what's missing. *What's the important thing you want reader to see?* I asked her. Without hesitation, she said, *The photographs. Then just describe the photographs and trust that your reader will see what's missing.* You don't want to distract your readers from the core of your piece by decorating it with some contrived framework that draws attention to itself. Get out of the way and allow photos to speak their thousand words. In the same way, trust your reader to recognize overall significance, but feel free to stop along the way and point something out to them, just as you would in a car on a road trip along the highway.

Metaphor

While many beginning writers are not ready to consider incorporating metaphor into their essays, it is important to insist that they not allow for the unintentional mixing of metaphors in their pieces and that they spend time reading critically to understand how established writers employ them. One of the ways in which I get them started is by having students read Bernard Cooper's "Almost like Language" from his book, *Truth Serum*. After spending time with it, I have students get into a circle and pair up. I instruct them to skim the essay for any direct or indirect references to language. After giving

them fifteen minutes for this search, I ask each pair to report their findings while every student transcribes a list. Students are astounded by all of the examples of language in the essay. In the piece, Cooper uses language as a metaphor for the barrier between himself and a friend from his youth. In other words, it's a *we spoke different languages* kind of essay, but Cooper infuses the piece with at least a page-length list of words or phrases and even conversations about words or language with such subtlety you will miss it if you're not actively reading, which is a skill most students are just beginning to develop. During the exercise, I also encourage students to search for more examples or at least ones that everyone else has missed. The point of this is to see how a metaphor may be coyly embedded, not subject to first-read detection. The metaphor stands in for something else, yes, but it doesn't block our view. Finally, close reading can also be helpful in deconstructing the writing process and offerings students the opportunity to build levels of complexity levels in later drafts or future essays. One last key I leave them with: Let the metaphor emerge from the essay, don't impose one on it. Such brute force will overpower the depth of feeling that gives an essay its impact.

Universality

Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* is a novel about a serial killer turned necrophiliac who keeps his victims/lovers in the cave where he lives. From the beginning, McCarthy asks us to identify with Lester Ballard and even pity him through each page. One of the ways in which the author achieves such a seemingly insurmountable feat involves universality. Beyond the obvious allusion of universality in the title, McCarthy focuses on issues of isolation, loneliness, and alienation, emotions we can all identify with even if we haven't created our very own mausoleum beneath the living room. Audience is important in helping the writer know not only what information to include, but what universal element to convey. I once had a student write about his time in prison to an audience who had never been jailed. This writer struggled to connect with readers who had never even gotten a speeding ticket. Most of the universality in an essay goes back to vulnerability, in saying to your reader, I, too, have felt this way. And for him, fear and isolation resonated well with others. Or take the student who wrote about the lingerie his wife received at bridal showers and threw away because she didn't think it was appropriate. He retrieved the contraband and kept it hidden in a box in his closet in hopes that she'd feel compelled one evening to let loose. Many students, in reading that essay, shook their heads at the wife's repression, yet all could identify with the way the writer held on to hope, beyond all odds, that she would change her mind. Still, some essays we just don't care about because we have no place to enter the essay, no means of identification or recognition. Connect with the people you want to reach or that you know you can connect with. Don't worry about the rest.

When a student wrote about being raped at the age of twelve by her cousin, her workshop group grew visibly reticent from across the room. I usually stay out of workshops unless the group needs a new direction or an essay affords me an opportunity to make a point that will help all of the writers, but here, I purposefully broke in to remind them they were responding to the writing, not the content and to the writer, not the victim sitting before them. Besides, I insisted, the writer hadn't written rape in any innovative or intriguing way. If an essay doesn't bring a new voice or approach to its subject matter, don't write it. If you write the essay as a surface catharsis, a confession, or for

attention, the significance is yours only. What makes an essay move beyond the telling is when a reader, with or without a similar experience, can recognize a humanistic truth emerging from its words.

Final Thoughts

When a student comes into my office and shares an experience, I ask myself: How can I help this person write this? Not solve the implicit problems, not simply recount it, not cry about it—but write it. Always as teachers that's what we're doing—giving writers the tools they need to *write* their stories, not merely rehash them. After all, telling the story is never enough.

Jill L. Talbot is the co-editor of *The Art of Friction: Where (Non) Fictions Come Together* (University of Texas Press 2008). Her first memoir, *Loaded: On Women and Addiction*, will be published by Seal Press in 2007. She has also published in *Under the Sun*, *Cimarron Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, and *It's All Good*, (Manic D Press).