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# Writing Creative Nonfiction

Course Guidebook

Professor Tilar J. Mazzeo  
Colby College



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## Tilar J. Mazzeo, Ph.D.

Clara C. Piper Professor of English  
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Professor Tilar J. Mazzeo is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Widow Clicquot: The Story of a Champagne Empire and the Woman Who Ruled It*, the story of the first international businesswoman in history, and *The Secret of Chanel No. 5: The Intimate History of the World's Most Famous Perfume*. *The Widow Clicquot* won the 2008 Gourmand Award for the best book of wine literature published in the United States.

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Professor Mazzeo divides her time between coastal Maine and the California wine country. ■

# Table of Contents

---

## INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography .....	i
Course Scope .....	1

## LECTURE GUIDES

### LECTURE 1

Welcome to Creative Nonfiction .....	3
--------------------------------------	---

### LECTURE 2

Finding the Story .....	10
-------------------------	----

### LECTURE 3

Honoring the Nonfiction Contract .....	16
--	----

### LECTURE 4

Writing Great Beginnings.....	22
-------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 5

Show, Don't Tell .....	28
------------------------	----

### LECTURE 6

Launching a Narrative Arc .....	34
---------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 7

Cliffhangers and Page Turners.....	40
------------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 8

Building Dramatic Sentences .....	46
-----------------------------------	----

### LECTURE 9

Rhetorical Devices and Emotional Impact.....	52
--	----

### LECTURE 10

Putting It All Together.....	59
------------------------------	----

# Table of Contents

---

<b>LECTURE 11</b>	
Revealing Character in Words and Actions .....	66
<b>LECTURE 12</b>	
Creating Compelling Characters .....	71
<b>LECTURE 13</b>	
Character Psychology .....	78
<b>LECTURE 14</b>	
Getting Inside the Heads of Your Characters .....	83
<b>LECTURE 15</b>	
Using Narrative Perspective .....	89
<b>LECTURE 16</b>	
Shaping Your Voice .....	95
<b>LECTURE 17</b>	
Writing the Gutter—How to Not Tell a Story .....	100
<b>LECTURE 18</b>	
Dialogue Strategies in Creative Nonfiction .....	108
<b>LECTURE 19</b>	
Researching Creative Nonfiction .....	117
<b>LECTURE 20</b>	
How to Not Have People Hate You.....	126
<b>LECTURE 21</b>	
Revising Your Work .....	132
<b>LECTURE 22</b>	
Building Your Audience .....	138
<b>LECTURE 23</b>	
Getting Published .....	143

# Table of Contents

---

## **LECTURE 24**

Being a Writer.....	148
---------------------	-----

## **SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL**

Glossary .....	153
Bibliography.....	159

# Writing Creative Nonfiction

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## Scope:

**H**ave you ever wished that you could capture a vivid memory or experience in words? Do you dream of writing about a historical or cultural figure who fascinated you? Is there a family history you have always wanted to share, or one of your life's adventures that you have always said to yourself would make a wonderful story? Have you ever wanted to launch a new career as a writer or wanted to explore writing as a private passion? Writing well is not only useful, but it helps us preserve our life experiences as they truly occurred or as we felt them. It lets us share stories in ways that others find compelling. Creative nonfiction can open whole new windows on the way you and your readers experience history—maybe *your* history.

This course will help you write effectively about the things that matter to you, and it will introduce you to the exciting and quickly growing field of creative nonfiction—the art of bringing all the traditional strategies of fictional storytelling to narrating real-life events. In this course, you will learn how to craft powerful memoirs and family histories, how to write a biography of a fascinating figure, the history of an inspiring moment, or a work of riveting travel writing.

This course takes you from the beginning to the end of the process of writing creative nonfiction: from finding your story and crafting great beginnings to finding an audience for your book and working through the revision process. It offers firsthand advice from a bestselling author on breaking into the world of publishing and plenty of hands-on exercises for anyone simply interested in learning how to write more powerfully about his or her personal experiences.

Along the way, you will also learn about how to write chapters that are page-turners, how to develop gripping characters, and how to find the right structure for your story. You will learn how to develop the research skills to support your writing and how to write about the lives of people

you know in ways that will not make them uncomfortable. You will learn how to use cliffhanger endings that keep your readers on the edge of their seats, how to keep your reader imaginatively engaged in factual history, and how to avoid common pitfalls like mixed metaphors, purple prose, and stock characters. You will also learn about the ethics of writing about true experiences, biographies, and autobiographies and how to avoid—unlike some recent controversial authors—breaking what writers and editors call the nonfiction contract.

In this course, you will practice new writing strategies that will help you master the art of storytelling so you can tell the stories of your experience and of the world around you from new perspectives, with panache. You will learn how to revise and edit your own work with new insight and confidence, how to find a community of fellow writers, and the secrets of the seven habits that professional writers cultivate to keep on writing and to manage writer's block.

Your professor—an award-winning, *New York Times* best-selling author—will guide you through the genres of personal creative nonfiction writing that both interested amateurs and professionals can enjoy, including the memoir, cultural history, travel writing, personal essays, and biography. Lectures offer practical advice on selecting and organizing ideas, establishing the goals and themes of your work, and publishing finished products.

Your professor uses memorable examples from well-known authors and specifically tailored craft exercises to help you learn the secrets of great writing from personal experience. You will learn highly effective research techniques to help you pursue your personal interests in prose, as well as how to craft the nonfiction story you have always wanted to tell—beautifully. With the right instructor, writing creative nonfiction is a skill everyone can master and enjoy. ■



# Welcome to Creative Nonfiction

## Lecture 1

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**T**o write great creative nonfiction, a writer must tell a fact-based story in an imaginative way—not as easy a task as it sounds! Nonfiction writers must be dedicated to preserving the truth of their stories—the who, what, why, where, when, and how. The creativity enters through the use of perspective, which, like a camera lens, allows the writer to focus the reader’s attention and engage his or her imagination.

### The Elements of a Great (True) Story

- You have always wanted to write: Perhaps you have bought a book completing your novel in 90 days or breaking into publishing. Perhaps you have taken a creative writing class. Maybe you have a half-completed project in a desk drawer. Maybe you have started a family history, a biography, or a memoir.
- If you have ever wanted to write about a true event or your personal experience but wanted to do it with panache, then you have been thinking about writing **creative nonfiction**. To write creative nonfiction, you need to learn great storytelling.
- Great storytelling requires a strong central character, gripping dialogue, and a fabulous beginning. It needs paragraph after paragraph that keeps a reader wanting more, leading to a satisfying ending.
- There are tricks of the trade—things that published writers learn from struggling with the same challenges all writers face over and over, as well as from talking to each other about their struggles. And it is important to note, what works for a great nonfiction story works just as well for a great fictional story, too.

## What Is Creative Nonfiction?

- Imagine you are trying to tell a story. That story will be about a main character, and it will take place in a setting, just as a play consists of an actor who performs on a stage.
- Because this story is nonfiction, it will consist primarily of facts. You will have facts about the setting—the “where” and “when” of the story. You will have facts about the main character—usually a “who,” but possibly a “what.”
- Based on just those few facts, you can write an opening paragraph. That paragraph should show the reader the who, where, and when, but in a way that raises as many questions as it answers to engage the reader’s imagination.
- Opening paragraphs tease the reader by using the facts as they exist in the real world but delivering them from a certain perspective, or **point of view**, to make the reader start wondering about the character.
- The wonderful thing about creative nonfiction is that from the same facts, we can tell hundreds of different stories. Everyone has a different perspective; simply changing the focus on the imaginary lens changes the story.
- Learning to write creative nonfiction well is all about learning how to find your voice and your perspective on any story you want to write.

## One Story—Two Perspectives

- Here is an example of how two versions of a single nonfiction story can be simultaneously true to the facts and yet completely different. In the first version, Professor Mazzeo enters The Great Courses studio, told with an air of mystery.

The room was silent. As she walked to the oak podium, the carpet muffled the sound of her footsteps. Beyond the windows, there was only blue, and she remembered her own days as an undergraduate, days when she sat, pen in



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**The same scene can look very different when considered from different perspectives. The Great Courses set looks like a warm, cozy place...**

hand, far at the back of a room, filled with excitement. Now, she cleared her mind of the other things occupying her mind, things she couldn't tell anyone in this room about, things that shaped her own unwritten story. The problem that obsessed her receded to the end of a long and distant tunnel, and what she needed to do now was the only thing that came into focus. "Welcome to Writing Creative Nonfiction," she said. "I'm Tilar Mazzeo, and together we'll be exploring what it means to write a great story."

- Here is that same scene again, only this time, we consider the experience with a tone of tension and worry, as Professor Mazzeo lets us know what problem so obsesses her.

The studio was oddly silent. She could see only the legs of the cameramen, hunched over the cameras, with their empty glass camera eyes staring back at her like space aliens. As she walked across the stage to the oak podium, the carpet muffled the sound of her footsteps, and the spotlight blinded



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...but from the professors' point of view, it is bright, high-tech, and even a bit intimidating the first time they deliver a lecture.

her for a moment. Beyond the false windows, there was only a blue panel, meant to suggest the sky, and she remembered her own days as an undergraduate. Her shoes hurt, and she wished she had chosen another pair this morning. But of course she couldn't say that. She put that to the back of her mind. "Welcome to Writing Creative Nonfiction," she said. "I'm Tilar Mazzeo, and together we'll be exploring what it means to write a great story."

- By shifting what facts you know, you see the character in a different context, and by changing that context, the way the story develops in the reader's mind changes. Notice, however, that in both cases, every piece of information was a fact.

## The Importance of Facts

- Fiction, by definition, is a written work that is based on the writer's imagination. Fiction does not have to be true. Nonfiction, therefore, is the opposite. It is writing that is true to facts and history.
- On any given day, you might encounter many types of nonfiction: You might read the news in the morning; read a popular autobiography on your lunch break; and review e-mails, memos, and meeting minutes throughout your day at work.
- These are very different kinds of writing, but all of them are what we used to call, in a general way, good journalism—a “who, what, why, where, when, and how,” fact-based approach to writing.
- Traditionally, university creative writing departments have been the place to learn fiction and poetry writing. Today, many schools are offering programs in creative nonfiction as well. It is the fastest growing part of the creative writing world—and the fastest growing part of the market for books too.
- Creative nonfiction gets a bit tricky because the “creative” part means the writer is using the techniques of fictional storytelling. Unless the writer has warned you, the reader, that he or she is indulging in some creativity, you have the right to assume everything in the story is true—and the right to get angry if it is not.
- Nonfiction writers have a sort of contract with readers: We are not allowed to make anything up. We must be rigorous reporters of lived experience. Our impulses must be documentary.
- Despite this, the opportunities for creativity in nonfiction writing are immense. When writing is done at the highest level of craftsmanship—when the way of telling the story is just as important as the story itself—we often call that literature.

- All the strategies for telling a great story are the same, whether you are writing a novel or a work of nonfiction: You must set a vivid scene that lets your reader see every detail. The difference is that details are historically accurate.

### **Mr. A and Ms. B—A Writing Exercise**

- Here is your first writing exercise in creative nonfiction. First, read the following minutes of a conversation between two people—Mr. A and Ms. B:

Mr. A expressed the desire to be given the envelope on the table immediately. “This is my history,” he stated. Ms. B denied the request. Ms. B stated that his past actions were the source of her reluctance. Mr. A argued that his past actions had been misunderstood. Ms. B responded: “You are a big jerk!”

- The setting is an office. The characters sit on opposite sides of a long table, and there is another woman sitting at the end of the table, along with lots of empty chairs. There are fluorescent lights flickering.
- With so few facts, the real meaning of this scene is still up for debate, so here are some more: Mr. A and Ms. B are a couple. The other woman is a mediator. The envelope contains photos of their lives together. And once, years ago, Mr. A used their wedding photos as kindling for the fireplace by accident.
- The homework assignment is this: Using these and the other facts about the couple given in the lecture, write a paragraph describing what you see in that room. Tell a good story, but only using the facts. No making things up!

## Important Terms

**creative nonfiction:** The art of bringing all the strategies of storytelling to the narration of factual events.

**point of view:** The perspective from which a story is told; may be first (*I/we*), second (*you*), or third person (*he/she/it/they*).

## Suggested Reading

Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact*.

Ueland, *If You Want to Write*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are your goals as a writer? What projects are you interested in exploring?
2. What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

# Finding the Story

## Lecture 2

**A** story is not merely a series of events; it is a series of events with a compelling sense of momentum that carries the reader toward the conclusion. We call this momentum the narrative arc, and writers achieve it by having strong characters who experience challenges and conflicts and undergo changes as a result. In creative nonfiction writing, choosing the right character and the right conflict is an essential part of starting your story.

### Choosing Your Characters

- Writers need to think about how to keep a narrative in motion. Some of the engines that move a narrative forward include subtext, stakes, tension, character conflict, scene, setting, good beginnings, and satisfying endings. Achieving any of these often requires revision.
- Returning to the exercise from the last lecture, were you able to find any of these narrative engines in the information you had? What did the minutes leave out that might have been helpful?
- Let us return to that same couple, but this time, we visit them at their first meeting, on a blind date. The first line of the minutes are as follows:

12:05 p.m., Café Voisin. Present: girl, wearing heels, red lipstick, cute; guy, out of breath, foreign accent. Introductions. Girl orders double vodka. Guy orders espresso. Guy: “Sorry to be late, I was just....”

- What are the missing pieces of information in these minutes? We might wonder why the man is out of breath, or why the woman is drinking at noon, or why the date is so early in the day. Because we already know how this relationship works out, we are already looking for signs of impending doom, too.



- All of these questions are about character. We are looking for their investments and motivations. We can see the possibility of tension and miscommunication on the horizon. Once we start to see things on the horizon, we are thinking about **narrative arc**—where this story is going, what its forward momentum is.
- Another important question is what happened before this scene. One of the things we will talk a lot about later in the course is how something interesting has already happened before any really great story’s beginning.

### **Teasing Out the Details**

- If we were fiction writers, rewriting this story would be simple, because we could fill in the missing facts. In creative nonfiction, however, we cannot invent everything.
- If you already write fiction, you may be feeling hemmed in by the weight of fact. However, there is more than enough for a story in our scenario. Creative nonfiction stories also offer something fiction cannot: the power of true human experience.
- To keep the nonfiction contract with the reader, you will need to gather as many details as possible, because details are at the heart of character. In this case, facts can include nonverbal cues and logical inferences drawn from what we find in front of us.
- Think about the woman’s red lipstick and the high heels, for example: What can you infer about her hopes or expectations for this meeting? How would you be confident in describing her, knowing nothing else about her? The same kinds of facts—such as his words, his accent, his observable demeanor—tell us about the man’s character as well.
- Once you have tried revising these minutes to create a narrative scene, as you did with the argument in the boardroom in the last lecture, double check that you did not invent anything. Make sure you did not give in to the “it makes a better story this way” impulse.

## Focusing the Lens

- When characters meet, something happens, but there is a difference between something happening and telling a good story. However, since you cannot change what happened in creative nonfiction, where does that leave you as a writer trying to craft a compelling narrative arc?
- You cannot invent dramatic moments, but you can choose the order in which you present the real moments to the reader and thus control the focus of the story.
  - If you begin the scene describing the woman's red lipstick, you invite the reader to think about romance and attraction.
  - If you begin with the phone conversation she had with her boss just before the man arrived—the one that drove her to order the vodka—you invite the reader to think about tension instead.

## The Three Keys to a Story

- How do you decide what makes an interesting story? A good story must have at least three things:
  - It needs a narrative arc. Something has to happen. A series of events filled with dramatic tension must keep the reader wanting to reach the conclusion, even if he or she already knows what happens—as, say, when you are writing about a famous historical event.
  - It needs **dramatic conflict**, or tension. Again, even if we know the outcome of a historical event, a story is dull unless the main character faces some opposition and struggles in reaching his or her goals.
  - It needs a character to experience these events and conflict and, ultimately, to undergo a transformation. A lot of the time, your stories will be about conflicts between two characters with different goals.

- The things that make a character interesting are the same things that make people interesting in real life: complexity, uniqueness, internal conflict, passion, ambition, strength, and weakness. We can love or hate these characters, but the writer’s job is to make us believe they are real and to make us care about what happens to them—even if we are hoping they meet a bad end.

### **The Liberation of Paris—A Writing Exercise**

- For our next exercise, we will use a photograph taken during the Liberation of Paris at the end of the Second World War that once appeared on the cover of *LIFE* magazine. In the foreground, a French soldier runs, a rifle in his hand, past some old-fashioned cars and a streetlamp that immediately evoke Paris in the 1940s. Behind a car, a man on his knees takes aim at some distant target. Crouched at his feet is another soldier, half hidden from view. High on a window ledge of the building behind them, a civilian man stands, looking into the distance. Below him on the street are two other people, looking in the same direction.



© Photo by Ralph Morse/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.

**Use this photograph from the Liberation of Paris during the Second World War as your jumping-off point for the writing exercise.**

- If you were the journalist reporting on the streets of Paris that day, where would you find the story in this image? Where are the narrative arc, conflict, and character?
- There are at least nine possible characters to work from: The running soldier, the two crouching soldiers, and the three watching civilians—they make six. The crouching soldier's target is the seventh.
- The last two are trickier: First, there is the photographer. Second, you have yourself, looking at this image not from the streets of Paris but from some distant vantage point. The author can always be, in creative nonfiction, one of the characters.
- Each character has a different set of motivations and stakes in the events that are unfolding; each one offers a different narrative arc that shapes the story.
- Of course, this image captures a single moment, and without knowing more, you cannot write an entire nonfiction story yet. You cannot make up more details than you have, but if you wanted to, you could research them. We will talk more about research in future lectures.
- As an exercise in learning how to craft and shape storytelling, however, looking at photographs and listening in on bits of conversation are ways to think about what is powerful and interesting in a situation.
- You can practice this same exercise now on your own. The best place to look is an old family album because you do not need to do research. You know the characters and the narrative possibilities. Look for a photograph that has great dramatic tension.

## Important Terms

**dramatic conflict:** Conflict, either internal or external, that characters experience that moves a narrative forward.

**narrative arc:** The idea that a story has a natural forward trajectory and that conflicts move toward complication and resolution.

## Suggested Reading

Fandel, *Picture Yourself Writing Nonfiction*.

Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Creative nonfiction is about telling true stories. Think about the kind of truth photographs tell. Do you think photographs are a more objective form of history than creative nonfiction? Why or why not?
2. Look around you. How do the people you see reveal hints of character in their dress and external appearances? What can you learn about creating character from this?

# Honoring the Nonfiction Contract

## Lecture 3

Part of writing nonfiction means making a commitment to telling the truth. That can leave the novice wondering where exactly there is room for creativity. By looking at examples of creativity from two memoirists—Maxine Hong Kingston, who did it the right way, and James Frey, who infamously did it the wrong way—we can begin to see the shape of the nonfiction contract the author makes with the reader.

### The Nonfiction Contract

- As your writing becomes more ambitious, you will likely want to take on larger and more complicated topics. That means you will need to do the kind of research that will let you put words into the mouths of your characters and maybe even write about their innermost feelings and motivations.
- This brings us back to the **nonfiction contract** and, in particular, the line between fact and interpretation. What do we do as writers when we really need to know something to move our story forward and we just cannot find it? How do we write about things beyond our experience and feel confident that we are doing it truthfully?
- One of the best ways to examine this issue is by looking at authors who got it wrong—who broke the nonfiction contract with their readers.
- Think about a moment in your life when you heard someone say something untrue or unfair about you. For most of us, the reaction is distress, pain, embarrassment, and anger.
- Because we write nonfiction, our characters are real people. If they are living people, we risk causing that same pain to others. Even if they are long dead, people may feel strongly about them or their reputations.

## Why “Creative Nonfiction”?

- Until a decade or so ago, the term “creative nonfiction” did not exist, but narrative historical writing did. The roots of creative nonfiction actually lie in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary journalism, the kind of work that someone like Ernest Hemingway wrote for a magazine like *Colliers*.
- Conventional, commercial journalism was cool, detached, and objective. It reported the facts and named names, but it did not try to bring the people in those stories to life as characters. Literary journalists like Hemingway and his colleagues—often struggling literary writers—took a different approach, reporting the news from a firsthand, personal perspective.
- These same techniques started appearing more and more, often in histories. In the 1970s especially, authors became interested in writing history from the perspectives of “average” people—people whose experiences were not covered in books about monarchs and presidents. Since the technique was being used outside journalism, the term “literary journalism” no longer fit.
- Another good reason for not using the term “literary journalism” any longer touches on ethical issues. For several decades now, television has been supplanting print journalism as the primary source of news, and more and more often, the television shows with the greatest number of viewers are those that blur the boundaries between reporting and satire or between journalism and commentary.
- Thus journalism does not always keep the nonfiction contract today, which is fine as long as the reader or viewer understands the nature of the bargain. Few viewers confuse satirical programming with factual reporting. In fact, getting the joke is part of the pleasure.
- The word “journalism” no longer automatically and reliably implies “I didn’t make anything up,” and it does not imply the same boundaries about commentary and interpretation.

- If writing creative nonfiction means having to walk such a fine line, why would an author want to write nonfiction instead of fiction? Because there is something powerful about reality. True stories teach us something about what it means to be human and what it means to struggle and triumph in life. True stories introduce us to amazing characters, characters who are all the more amazing for being real.
- Imagine you are writing a memoir about something terrible, criminal, or painful. As an author, you have an unquestionable right to write about your own experience. Yet people's perceptions of events change over the course of their lifetimes. You might think, "Why can't I decide what perception I want to have now? You know, the one that would make for a good story?"
- The answer is simple: You made a deal with your reader. If you want to alter your story, you do not have to call it nonfiction. You can write your life as a novel, and no one will make a peep about the changes you made.

### **The *Million Little Pieces* Scandal**

- The only reasons to call a novel a piece of nonfiction are either to trick your readers or—more likely—to increase sales. The publishing world—and a whole lot of readers—tend to see this as fraud.
- One of the biggest scandals in the history of creative nonfiction involved the 2003 "memoir" by James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*. He had tried to sell the manuscript as a novel, but it was rejected. When he billed it as a true story, it was published.
- The book tells the brutal story of his drug addiction and the people he met during his time in a rehab clinic. It was compelling human drama full of vivid characters, conflict, and tension.



- After Oprah Winfrey named it one of her Book Club selections, *A Million Little Pieces* became a national bestseller and made its author a great deal of money. His book was inspirational, especially for those struggling with addiction, and best of all, it was all true. Except, of course, it was not.
- Frey invented both character and narrative. The foundation of his work was always firmly in the world of fiction. When the press revealed the truth in 2006, Oprah Winfrey and many of Frey's readers were furious. There were lawsuits and refunds.
- Frey's excuse, found in the "Note to Readers" published in later editions of the book, tells us a lot about what writers know about storytelling: "I wanted the stories in the book to ebb and flow, to have dramatic arcs, to have the tension that all great stories require."

### **Doing It Right—*The Woman Warrior***

- The scandal raises some important questions about how writers of creative nonfiction manage telling stories when there are gaps in the information. The nonfiction contract does not mean the writer cannot speculate; it means you must be honest that that is what you are doing.
- You can even use what you do not know into a way to establish the author as a character. Memoirist Maxine Hong Kingston uses this technique in *The Woman Warrior*, a memoir of growing up in a Chinese American family.
- Hong Kingston's book returns again and again to the one thing she does not know about—and no one in her family will talk about—the story of her aunt, who committed suicide in China. It is a wonderful example of one way a writer can tell only what *can* be known.
- In her opening passage, Hong Kingston uses subtle word choices to acknowledge the limits of her information:

You must not tell anyone, my mother said, what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. ... She *may have* gone to the pigsty as a last act of responsibility: ... It was *probably* a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys. [Emphasis added.]

- Since this is a work of nonfiction, the author had the option to leave the story of her aunt out. But this is a book about family secrets and what they do to us, so the secret is critical.
- Instead, the author uses the story her mother told her about the secret as her book's opening. This accomplishes several goals: It makes the aunt a compelling character; it makes the author a character and her quest to discover the secret a motivation, and it places the notion of secrets front and center in the book.
- We hear this history from the perspective of the other family members. The details change, but in every case, Hong Kingston keeps the contract with her reader and alerts us with her word choice. This book, she tells us, is historically accurate *unless* I give you the cue that I am imagining something.



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**Hong Kingston's memoir recalls life in rural China—but not her own.**

### **The Liberation of Paris Revisited—A Writing Exercise**

- Before the next lecture, think back to that photograph of the Liberation of Paris and choose one of the characters. Write a brief sketch in which you develop the character of one of the figures in—or outside—the frame of the story, using all the techniques you have learned about so far while honoring the nonfiction contract.

## Important Term

**nonfiction contract:** The implied agreement between a reader and a writer that the author of creative nonfiction does not invent any facts in his or her storytelling.

## Suggested Reading

Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*.

Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*.

“James Frey and the Million Little Pieces Controversy.”

Krakauer, *Three Cups of Deceit*.

Mortenson, *Three Cups of Tea*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What does the creative nonfiction contract mean, and why is it important?
2. What do you think about the public controversies surrounding authors who have broken the creative nonfiction contract? Would you ask for your money back from a publisher if you were to learn that an author had knowingly presented fiction as fact?

# Writing Great Beginnings

## Lecture 4

**G**reat beginnings need exactly what great stories as a whole need: character, conflict, and narrative arc. By examining great beginnings in both fiction and nonfiction, you will find that these three characteristics are interrelated: Interesting characters are conflicted; characters with conflict have come from somewhere and are going somewhere. Learning to write beginnings well involves choosing the moment when conflict drives the character to act and presenting it so that the reader wants to know what follows.

### The Power of Secrets

- There are ways to keep the nonfiction contract with the reader and still leave room for speculation and interpretation. In fact, when there are things we cannot know about the past, it is sometimes our only option.
- One of the hardest parts of telling a story is beginning it. Once you commit to a beginning moment, from that moment certain things must follow. Any writer might find that daunting.
- It is actually pretty simple to find out whether you have a great beginning or not. Think back to Maxine Hong Kingston's example: "You must not tell anyone, my mother said, what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well."
- How do these sentences hook you? This particular story begins with a secret. Secrets are always tantalizing. Plus, the nature of the secret is highly dramatic, and human drama captures our attention as readers, too.
- In addition to the secret her family keeps from her, there is the secret Hong Kingston is (temporarily) keeping from us: Why did

her aunt kill herself, and why does the family say it as if she had never been born? Who is this family, anyway?

### **Character—What Makes One Interesting**

- Not every story can begin with a secret. But secrets are one example of what all great openings have. What a secret does is put two or more characters into some kind of conflict. Someone does not want someone else to know something.
- A secret also implies that something has happened before this story begins. It also implies where the story in part might be headed—the fight to keep or to learn the secret. That means what we have is a narrative arc, a story already in motion.
- In Lecture 2, we said every good story needs character, conflict, and narrative arc. A good opening needs to establish all three in the first few sentences, and a secret is one efficient way of doing that.
- There are many other ways to establish these elements in an opening, and it is a good idea to look for these in everything you read. We can look at a few examples from fiction as well.
- The opening line of C. S. Lewis’s 1950 children’s novel *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* reads, “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”
  - We have a character: a boy with an unfortunate name who *almost* deserves it. He must be a real challenge, but also sympathetic, or it would not be *almost*.
  - We have conflict: If Eustace were just rotten to the core, there would not be any tension to be resolved; the same applies if he were an angel. The fact that Eustace *almost* deserves such a terrible name makes things complicated.
  - We have narrative arc: Eustace has done something to *almost* deserve his name. Lewis has piqued our curiosity about that

and about whether he will be a better boy or a worse one by the story's end.

- Here is the opening sentence to Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, from 1963: "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York."
- The clause "I didn't know what I was doing in New York" tells us we have an internally conflicted character. The connection between her story and a pair of infamous spies suggests conflict in the external atmosphere. Even the word "queer"—not a word typically applied to "summer"—heightens this sense of discomfort.

### **Conflict—What Motivates Characters ... and Readers**

- What conclusions can we draw from these two examples? First of all, we seem to have established that the core of an interesting character is some sort of conflict—be it internal (with the self) or external (with other people). In fact, conflict, as we will see, is the key to telling an interesting story in general.
- Conflict can be presented straightforwardly or subtly. Sylvia Plath's narrator tells us outright that she does not know what she is doing. Eustace, on the other hand, may not even be aware of his own conflict, even though the narrator sees his mixed good and bad qualities.
- These two characters are complex characters. The opposite of a complex character is a stock character. These are characters whose qualities are fixed and static. They never change; they have no real life or personality. They are not the characters to begin your story with, not if you want the reader to be interested.
- What makes a character interesting is the thing that does not seem to fit or does not meet our expectations about who this person appears to be. Perhaps it is a character who does not know his own

motivations. Perhaps it is someone who is irritating yet somehow charming. Perhaps it is a character who is out of her depth.

### **Narrative Arc—Character in Motion**

- What does the term “narrative arc” really mean in practice? Narrative arc is when action implies consequences. Something happens, and the reader knows something else must inevitably follow from that event. If there is an action from which nothing follows—if there are no consequences—then there is no story.
- Let’s look at how character and conflict come together to create narrative arc by looking at the same story opening told two different ways:

**Example 1:** Mrs. Maas was named the executor of the will of a friend who was a real estate developer. The letter arrived in the mail. Rich people often have complicated business affairs so it ended up being a little bit of work. There was a summer party on the afternoon the letter arrived.

**Example 2:** One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary.

- In example one, we learn barely more than Mrs. Maas’s last name. In the second example—which comes from Thomas Pynchon’s novel *The Crying of Lot 49*—we have strange and symbolic names, a bit of suburban debauchery, and even some insight into both Inverarity’s and Oedipa’s personalities—his money troubles, her way with words. We know right off, this is going to be a strange story.

- How about conflict and narrative arc? In example one, there is very little. She is named executrix of a businessman's will, and it will be a bit of work. So what? Pynchon's beginning, on the other hand, is rife with conflict. Inverarity has almost certainly left his business affairs in a muddle, and Oedipa has lost a friend and gained a complicated job she did not ask for.

### The Three-Sentence Beginning—A Writing Exercise

- Now it is your turn to compose a great beginning for your story—whatever story you want to write. It is a very simple exercise, with just three steps.
  - Step one: Write a sentence where the reader wants to read the next sentence that is going to come after. In other words, write a sentence that has character, conflict, and narrative arc.
  - Step two: Write the sentence that comes after your first one. Make sure this one also leaves the reader wanting to read the next one.
  - Step three: write one more sentence after that.
- After you have written your three sentences, reread them and ask yourself the same questions we have been asking about good beginnings throughout this lecture. Do your sentences establish character, conflict, and narrative arc? If not, revise them until they do.
- If you are having trouble getting started, do not worry; that is normal. But it is important that you practice these skills. Here are some **story starters** to work with:
  - Think of a secret. It could be anything, mundane or important. Then, imagine you were not going to tell someone this secret but you wanted to drop a hint that there was a secret you are keeping from them. (Remember, when working with secrets, less is often more.)



- Imagine that two people are having a terrible phone conversation. It could be about absolutely anything, but it is an upsetting conversation. Now, imagine that you can only hear one side of it—the side of the person who is mostly doing the listening. Describe what you see and what he or she says and does.

## Important Term

**story starter:** The combination of character, conflict, and narrative that sets a story in motion—an essential element of a great beginning.

## Suggested Reading

Ensign, *Great Beginnings*.

Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

Plath, *The Bell Jar*.

Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Think about the memorable characters you've encountered in your reading life. Why does your favorite character stay in your mind so vividly? Does he or she have the kind of internal conflict we have been talking about?
2. Thinking back over this lesson, what would you say to someone who suggested that, if you can't find a good way to start your narrative, you could just skip that for the moment and come back to it later? Would that work as a strategy? Why or why not?

# Show, Don't Tell

## Lecture 5

**Y**ou may already be familiar with the adage to “show, not tell” in your writing, but what does that mean? The three key elements of showing are using the active voice (that is, avoiding *to be* and *-ing* verb constructions); making precise, vivid word choices; and mastering the art of the metaphor.

### Writing with Style—Active Verbs

- In your exercise for last time, you wrote three beginning sentences—sentences you tested to see if they created character, conflict, and narrative. Here is my example, which I kept light-hearted:

Big Stan positioned the wailing infant under his right arm like a football and silently considered that perhaps everything at the corner Burger King that morning had not gone precisely as planned.

- We have a character, Big Stan, who carries babies in unusual ways, and he has conflict—witness the crying baby and the plans gone awry. We also have narrative arc because whatever has gone wrong has already happened, and now Stan must deal with the consequences. If this sentence made you curious, then I did my job correctly.
- There is more to writing a great beginning than establishing character, conflict, and narrative arc. You also need to do it with style.
- Have you ever asked yourself why some writing is vivid and other writing leaves you cold? For all that we discuss *storytelling*, vivid writing is writing that shows, rather than tells. “Show, don’t tell,” is the mantra of creative writing teachers everywhere.

- The question is, how do we show when we write? Let's return to that sentence about Big Stan and look at two possible revisions. The first revision is telling and the second revision is showing.

**Revision 1:** The little crying baby was under the arm of Big Stan, who carried it with him like a football that morning when he opened the door of the Burger King and walked out into sunlight, thinking about how everything hadn't gone precisely as planned.

**Revision 2:** The door burst open as his shoulder struck it and, after a moment of shocked silence, the wail of the infant shattered the morning silence; as Big Stan positioned the squirming, shrieking bundle under his right arm like a wet football, he silently considered that perhaps everything there in the Burger King had not gone precisely as he had planned.

- If you look closely at these two sentences, the most important difference you will notice is the way the verbs are handled. Showing sentences use the active voice, and telling sentences use the passive voice, relying on what we might call “state of being” verbs.
- Let's compare three versions of one short sentence to see how this works. First, “The restaurant was being inundated by the sounds of street music.” This is a passive construction because something is happening to the restaurant. And it takes three words—was being inundated—to express a single action.
- The second version—“The sounds of street music were inundating the restaurant”—is no longer passive because the music is doing something, but this sentence still has an *-ing* verb, which is often a warning sign of telling.
- The easiest way to change this sentence into a showing sentence would be to write “The sound of street music inundated the restaurant.” Notice the verb is down to a single word.

## Precision and Concision

- Of course, there is more to showing than verbs. Let's take another sentence and take the process even further. Here is the original: "By the end of the disastrous middle-school performance, the young ballerinas were all limping across the stage, with sweaty hair covering their once eager faces."
- We know first to get rid of those passive verb constructions, so our first attempt might read like this: "By the end of the disastrous middle-school performance, the young ballerinas *went awkwardly* across the stage, their once-eager faces *covered* with sweaty hair." Better, but still a little flat.
- Part of showing involves vivid imagery for your reader, and that means using detail. We do this through careful word choice. *Went* and *covered*, among others in that sentence, are both pretty generic words.
- Another clue that you have chosen a weak or a generic verb is the impulse to modify with an adverb. The reason *went* needs to be described with *awkwardly* is because *went* is not vivid at all. Adverbs are often used to cover up a weak verb choice.
- Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* offers two guidelines to writing great prose: precision and concision. That means choosing the most precise words and using the fewest number of words possible.
- So how did our ballerinas cross the stage? Perhaps they limped, crawled, shuffled, or crept. Where else in the sentence can you get rid of vague terms?
- Here is my revision: "By the time the curtain fell over the sorry spectacle of the eighth-grade ballet recital, once-eager faces were plastered with sweaty hair and fourteen pairs of pink slippers limped across the stage."

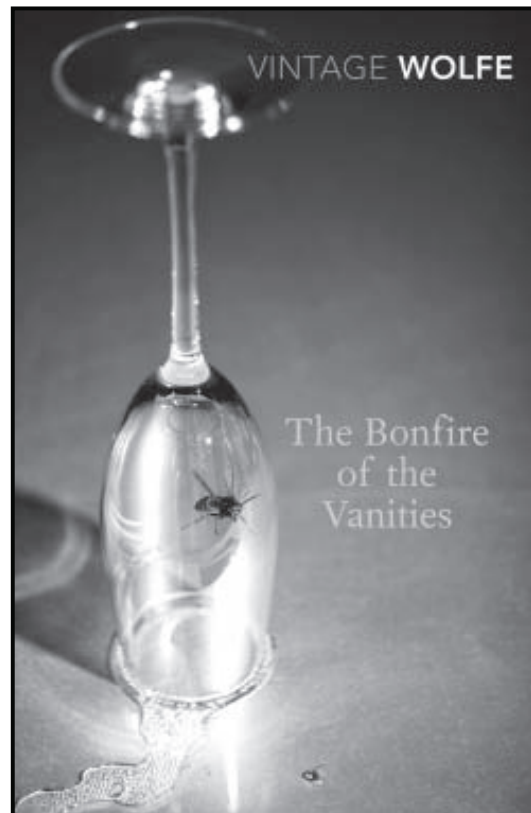
- Instead of just *end*, we have *the curtain fell*—something you can see. I could even say whether it is a red velvet curtain or a crooked homemade curtain if I wanted to take this further.
- Instead of *the young ballerinas went awkwardly*, now *fourteen pairs of pink slippers limped*. You can visualize their struggle, and you even know how many of them there were.
- Taking this one step further, let's examine some sentences from the *New York Times* best-selling account of Thomas Jefferson's passion for French wines, Benjamin Wallace's *The Billionaire's Vinegar*:

Now, as his horse-drawn carriage clattered along the post roads of France, he at last had a chance to see the most fabled vineyards in the world. ... He passed through rich farmland planted with corn, rye, and beans. As soon as he ferried west across the Garonne ... the picture changed. ... As he rolled through the district of Sauternes and entered Bordeaux, he looked out through the glass windows of his carriage and saw nothing but grapevines.

- Because this is a work of nonfiction, all of the details in this description are true, but notice how Wallace presents the details. He does not say, "Jefferson traveled by carriage through the French wine country." His word choice is specific.
- Notice, too, that these details are not only visual. The carriage *clattered* along the road, letting us hear what Jefferson experienced. Although we call it showing, we are not limited to visual details.
- Jefferson also *ferried* across the Garonne. Wallace uses a verb that also encompasses a noun, getting extra efficiency out of his word choice.

## Metaphors and Similes

- Wallace also makes particularly effective use of **metaphors**. Take two examples from this book: “The wail of the infant shattered the morning silence” and “Ocean-bound schooners heaped with barrels plied the broad waterway.”
- Cries do not literally shatter things, of course, but Wallace’s word choice implies a similarity between the auditory phenomenon to a physical one. In a sense, he puts two images in our heads at once. Similarly, he has schooners *ply* the river because the word evokes to us the twisting and twining of the strands of a rope.
- In addition to metaphors—these implied comparisons—writers can also use more direct comparisons called **similes**; these are comparisons that use “like” or “as.”
- There is a role for both similes and metaphors in good writing. The difference is that a simile separates the two images (*A is like B*), while a metaphor yokes them (*A is B*). In that sense, metaphors show and similes tell.
- Mixed metaphors are comparisons that do not make sense. Sometimes these are used on purpose for comic effect, as in Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire of the Vanities*: “All at once he was alone in this noisy hive with no place to roost.” But unless you are trying to be funny, steer clear of them.



© *The Bonfire of the Vanities* by Tom Wolfe published by Vintage. Cover image used by permission of the Random House Group Limited.

**Skilled writers like Tom Wolfe indulge in mixed metaphors for humorous effect.**

- You may also run into just plain bad metaphors, when a comparison seems forced. A writer should never use a metaphor just for the sake of using a metaphor; their purpose is give the reader a deeper or more vivid experience.

### **Show, Don't Tell—A Writing Exercise**

- Take a piece of writing you are already working on. See if you can find any telling errors and revise it to show more effectively. Alternatively, write a page or two of description—about anything you want—where you practice actively showing rather than telling.

### **Important Terms**

**metaphor:** An implied comparison that allows readers to see things in a new light.

**simile:** An explicit comparison using the words “like” or “as” that allows readers to see things in a new light.

### **Suggested Reading**

Strunk, White, and Angell, *The Elements of Style*.

Wallace, *The Billionaire's Vinegar*.

Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

### **Questions to Consider**

1. Do you think that our emphasis on showing rather than telling is part of the time-honored tradition of writing, going back centuries and across cultures, or do you think it has been influenced by the rise of mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? What books would you use to make the case for your position?
2. When might an author deliberately choose to tell rather than show? What are the effects of telling, and are there moments where a writer might want to use deliberately “weaker” narrative techniques?

# Launching a Narrative Arc

## Lecture 6

**W**e have seen how narrative arc applies to story beginnings, but to be a story and not just a group of events, a work of creative nonfiction must also have a narrative arc that carries the reader through the entire story. There are three broad categories of narrative arc: the linear narrative, the circular narrative, and the frame narrative. Each is appropriate for different kinds of stories, but the best choice is usually the simplest, most direct form of narrative that will get the job done.

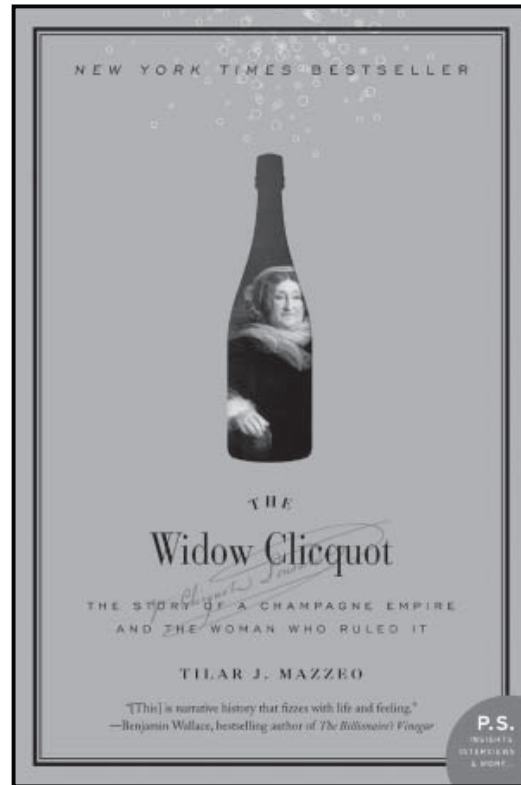
### Planning a Narrative Arc

- We have talked about how to set a story in motion, but what about that thorny problem of structuring the story as a whole? More writers may abandon their stories due to this problem than any other single issue.
- Plotting out the whole book's narrative arc can seem overwhelming to the most experienced authors, but if you understand a few basic principles, soon you will be able to plot stories with riveting dramatic tension. This will therefore be the focus of our next four lectures.
- Experienced writers will tell you that plotting a story in advance does not mean planning out every little detail before you set pen to paper or fingertips to keyboard. Sometimes stories and characters surprise us along the way, and the story takes on a life of its own. But you do need to ensure at the outset that you are telling a story and not simply listing a series of events and characters.
- Narrative structure is a craft problem that all writers have to negotiate. Certain narrative structures can only do certain things. Each structure has inherent advantages and disadvantages. Each creates expectations in a reader; the trick is finding the structure that will let you tell the story that is waiting to be told.



## Narrative Arc in *The Widow Clicquot*

- Fulfilling reader expectations is important: If you are reading a mystery novel, you expect to learn whodunit by the end. Or recall the ancient theater maxim that a comedy ends in marriage and a tragedy ends with a death. Readers get irritated when writers do not deliver on narrative promises.
- When I was writing *The Widow Clicquot*, I ran into a dilemma. I was writing a biography, and a biography—unless it is about a living person—usually ends with the subject’s death. Occasionally, they have experimental narrative structures; they may begin with the death, then proceed with a flashback, or events may be told out of order, but chronological order is the general rule.



© *The Widow Clicquot* by Tilar Mazzeo published by Harper Perennial. Cover image used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

***The Widow Clicquot* has two narrative arcs: the character’s biography and the author’s discovery of her subject.**

- There is a good reason for this: Experience creates character, and character is why we read biography. Therefore, if you are going to violate normal chronology, you need to have a very good reason for it.
- I had no compelling reason not to let the story unfold in historical time, from the beginning of Barbe Nicole Ponsardin’s life to the end. The problem I encountered, however, was that all of the interesting events of her life—her childhood during the French Revolution; her encounter with Napoleon; her creation of one of the world’s great champagnes—occurred in the first few decades of her life. She retired a very young woman and lived another 50-odd

years. Those years were peaceful and happy, but they did not make for a compelling story.

- Clearly a straightforward narrative structure would leave us short of a great ending. One option was to try to make those last 50 years interesting, but readers are too smart for that.
- Another was to introduce secondary characters and let their stories carry the second half of the book—essentially creating a collective biography. The trouble with this technique is that each character would need his or her own narrative arc, which would end with each of their deaths ... making the problem bigger, not smaller.
- In the end, I chose a third option. I introduced myself, the author, into the narrative as a secondary character. I told both the story of the Widow Clicquot's life and the story of my search to find out about her history. A big advantage of this approach was that I did not need to kill myself off at the end.
- Note that if I had not thought through my narrative arc before I started writing, I would have had a major problem halfway through the book, requiring a major revision.

### Choosing Your Narrative Arc

- Generally, the best narrative structure to use is the simplest and most direct one that will do the job. Unless you are setting out to be the next great experimental writer, less is more.
- A narrative structure must do at least two things at once: It has to give the writer the space to tell the story, and it has to meet the reader's expectations. In a good narrative arc, the actions have consequences and everything that happens somehow contributes to the story.
- So, how to find the right narrative structure that will accomplish this, when there are many different ways of telling a story? It helps to think of narrative structures in three broad categories:

- A **linear narrative** has a **protagonist** with some sort of conflict. That conflict might be internal, but usually it comes in the form of another character—the antagonist—who thwarts the desire of the protagonist. Linear narratives consist of rising action, a crisis point, falling action, and a denouement, or resolution. It is about the tension and release of narrative desire, and a satisfying ending is vital. *Romeo and Juliet*, like many romances, follows a linear narrative structure.
- The hero's journey, or the **quest narrative**, is a **circular narrative**. The protagonist sets out to accomplish, discover, or resolve something. The obstacles and people he or she encounters along the way give the story its dramatic tension. Sometimes there is a turning point where the protagonist changes—or the protagonist's perspective on the problem or goal changes; other times, the climax is just a final obstacle. But in the end, the protagonist returns to the original desire or problem and finds some kind of resolution to it. Circular narratives are ideal for telling character-based stories, like family memoirs or travel narratives. Homer's *Odyssey* and James Joyce's modern retelling, *Ulysses*, are examples of circular narratives.
- The **frame narrative**, sometimes known as the Russian doll narrative, emphasizes the perspective of the narrator by letting characters become storytellers. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a frame narrative told through letters, but the most famous example in literary history is *1001 Nights*—in which a princess, threatened with death at dawn by her tyrannical husband, tells a series of tales-within-tales each night, so he has no choice but to let her live to hear the outcome. As wonderful as her individual stories are, she, the narrator, is the character we fall in love with.

### **Recognizing Narrative Structures—A Reading Exercise**

- Before you move on to the next lecture, think back on your favorite books. Can you identify what kind of narrative structures they use?

Can you identify what effect the structure has on you as a reader?  
How would the story have to change if the author had chosen a different structure to tell that tale?

## Important Terms

**circular narrative:** A narrative structure where the end and the beginning meet and where the story focuses on the transformation of the character during the experience of the events in it.

**frame narrative:** A narrative structure in which the essential story is bracketed at the beginning and end by a second perspective on it.

**linear narrative:** A narrative structure where events follow on events to build to a climax and resolution and where the plot is emphasized over the character who experiences it.

**protagonist:** The main character of a narrative, whose conflict is central to the story.

**quest narrative:** A narrative structure in which the main character goes on a journey in search of knowledge, experience, or some concrete object.

## Suggested Reading

*Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights.*

Homer, *The Odyssey.*

Joyce, *Ulysses.*

Pollack, *Creative Nonfiction.*

Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet.*

Shelley, *Frankenstein.*

## Questions to Consider

1. If you were thinking about your life and memoirs, what narrative format do you think would be the most appropriate: circular, linear, or frame? Why?
2. One of the age-old truisms of journalism is “find the story.” Thinking about what you have learned about narrative arc in this lecture, what do you think this means? Is it useful advice?

# Cliffhangers and Page Turners

## Lecture 7

**T**he secret to writing satisfying chapters is the same as the secret to writing satisfying books: strong narrative arcs. A good chapter begins with a sense of character and conflict and ends by giving the reader a reason to read on. This reason may be a cliffhanger—something withheld or interrupted—or a powerful emotional moment.

### Chapters—Stories within a Story

- Many of the same rules that apply to the narrative arcs of books also apply to the narrative arcs of individual chapters. To write great chapters, we now need to deepen the way we think about structure and what writers call pacing.
- Have you ever stayed up too late reading a book? Every time you got to the end of a chapter and thought, *I should really turn off the light and get some sleep*, something happened that made you want to keep reading. The author achieved this with pacing, and it is not an easy thing to do.



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**How do you keep a reader reading well into the night? Chapter arcs!**

### Chapter Arcs—*The Da Vinci Code*

- One of the masters of pacing in contemporary fiction is Dan Brown. Let's look at how he manages the few chapters of *The Da Vinci Code*. The prologue opens thus:

Louvre Museum, Paris

10:46 P.M.

Renowned curator Jacques Saunière staggered through the vaulted archway of the museum's Grand Gallery. He lunged for the nearest painting he could see, a Carravagio. Grabbing the gilded frame, the seventy-three-year-old man heaved the masterpiece toward himself until it tore from the wall and Saunière collapsed backward in a heap beneath the canvas.

As he anticipated, a thundering iron gate fell nearby, barricading the entrance to the suite. The parquet floor shook. Far off, an alarm began to ring.

The curator lay a moment, gasping for breath, taking stock. *I am still alive.* He crawled out from under the canvas and scanned the cavernous space for someplace to hide.

A voice spoke, chillingly close. "Do not move."

On his hands and knees, the curator froze, turning his head slowly.

- From this brief introduction, the reader not only learns Saunière's age, occupation, and stature—admittedly, through telling—and quite a bit more through artful showing. We see his intelligence through his ability to act swiftly and effectively in a moment of crisis. We also know he is in mortal danger. Brown communicates all this through action.
- This passage also hints at Saunière's conflict: He is a curator—someone dedicated to protecting art—and yet his situation is so dire he pulls a priceless painting from the wall. Whatever is going on here, the stakes must be enormous.

- The reader expects to find out by the end of the prologue whether Saunière escapes his stalker or not. Brown fulfills this expectation, but he also goes further:

Jacques Saunière was the only remaining link, the sole guardian of one of the most powerful secrets ever kept.

Shivering, he pulled himself to his feet.

I must find some way. ...

He was trapped inside the Grand Gallery, and there existed only one person on earth to whom he could pass the torch. Saunière gazed up at the walls of his opulent prison. A collection of the world's most famous paintings seemed to smile down on him like old friends.

Wincing in pain, he summoned all of his faculties and strength. The desperate task before him, he knew, would require every remaining second of his life.

- We are told outright that Saunière has a secret; we are given hints of how that secret will be passed on to a new protagonist—just enough hints to tantalize—keeping the larger story moving forward. Those tantalizing hints are an instance of **foreshadowing**.
- This prologue also ends on a **cliffhanger**—a scene that is interrupted before its conclusion. This is another technique for building suspense and creating a page-turning pace.
- The prologue follows a circular narrative arc; it begins and ends with Saunière looking at paintings in the Louvre. It also begins with his thought *I am still alive* and ends with the final moments of his life, bringing that promise full circle as well.



## Stringing Chapters Together

- As the prologue ends, the reader knows Saunière's death will have consequences. After all, if Saunière's secret dies with him, there is no story to tell.
- The next chapter introduces us to the book's protagonist, Robert Langdon. The Paris police come to his hotel and tell him Saunière is dead, then show him a photograph of the body. But Brown does not show the reader the photograph:

When Langdon saw the photo, his entire body went rigid.

"This photo was taken less than an hour ago. Inside the Louvre."

As Langdon stared at the bizarre image, his initial revulsion and shock gave way to a sudden upwelling of anger. ... "I can't imagine who would do this to someone."

The agent looked grim. "You don't understand, Mr. Langdon. What you see in this photograph. ..." He paused. "Monsieur Saunière did that to himself."

- Brown uses the same pattern again: each chapter ends with a new cliffhanger, a new tease. Then the next chapter reestablishes a sense of place, character, and stakes. He uses this over and over again, throughout the entire novel.
- Perhaps Dan Brown's books are not subtle and literary. This is narrative at its most elemental—and most entertaining. That is the point of plot-driven, "popular" literature, as opposed to character-driven, "literary" works.
- To summarize, chapters—like books—contain complete narrative arcs. They tell a story that is part of a larger story; they begin with a conflict and end with either a resolution or a deepening of the conflict.

## Foreshadowing, Cliffhangers, and Beyond—A Writing Exercise

- Chapters exist as little stories in their own right because of the way the novel developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like television shows today, a lot of novels were first published serially—in this case, in magazines. Each installment had to be satisfying in itself, as well as being part of a larger story.
- Foreshadowing and cliffhangers are two methods writers developed for this serial form. However, they are not the only ways to end chapters. Writers have more subtle options as well.
- Functionally, a chapter must do three things: Bring an episode to a conclusion of some sort; promise of new consequences from these actions; and draw the reader deeper into the story.
- A chapter can bring an emotional sense of resolution, even if an incident does not wind down at the end of a chapter. Making your reader laugh, cry, frightened, angry—really, making a reader anything but bored—will help keep a reader engaged in the story.
- As an exercise, return to your three-sentence beginning you wrote back in lecture 5 and write the ending of that chapter. It can be a cliffhanger, a heart breaker, a comic turn, or anything you want. Whatever you choose, it needs to make the reader want to keep reading.

### Important Terms

**cliffhanger:** A strategy for building suspense and anticipation in a narrative by leaving the reader at a moment of crisis.

**foreshadowing:** A strategy for building suspense and anticipation in a narrative by giving the reader hints of things to come.

## Suggested Reading

Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*.

Glass, *Americans in Paris*.

Janzen, *Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*.

Marquez, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Is your own favorite book—whether fiction or nonfiction—a page turner, something that, once you pick it up, you have trouble putting down? Go read the first few chapters of your favorite book now. Do they have individual narrative arcs? Do they contain foreshadowing? Do they end on cliffhangers? Try not to get sucked into rereading the whole book!
2. *The Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction—and very imaginative fiction at that! What is the difference, if any, between applying these techniques to a work of fiction and applying them to a work of creative nonfiction, given the nonfiction contract you must keep?

# Building Dramatic Sentences

## Lecture 8

Standard English sentences come in four structural varieties: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Each of these has a different rhythm, and varying the types of sentences you use can give your writing emotional impact, whether by affecting pacing, creating character, or both. Varying sentence structure, along with careful word choice, can be the most powerful tool in a nonfiction writer's tool kit.

### Subject-Verb-Object and Inversion

- Not only does the content of a sentence affect a reader; the rhythm of a sentence can alter the reader's sense of **pacing** and tension. Learning which sentence forms to use and what effects they create begins with knowing the different types of sentences.
- In English, the normal word order for a sentence is subject-verb-object: "Joe hit the ball." Listen to what happens when you scramble that up: "Hit the ball Joe did." This word order sounds eccentric and old-fashioned (calling to mind, among other characters, Yoda from *Star Wars*).
- Inversion sounds old-fashioned because it reminds us of language that favors meter over form—that is, it reminds us of traditional poetry, where musicality was more important than sounding like natural speech. Inversion and playing tricks with word order is one of the simplest ways to change the tone of your writing and even establish character.

### Four Sentence Types

- There are four kinds of sentences in English: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences.
  - A simple sentence is one independent clause: "Joe hit the ball."

- A compound sentence is two independent clauses: “Joe hit the ball, and Martin caught it.”
- A complex sentence is one independent clause and one dependent clause: “Joe hit the ball, which sailed over the outfielders’ reaching arms.”
- A compound complex sentence is two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause: “Joe hit the ball, and Martin threw his arms into the air, straining to catch it as it sailed just past the tip of his glove.”
- Simple and compound sentences are **paratactic**. This means that each of the items in the clauses is given the same importance. Complex and compound complex sentences are **hypotactic**; some parts of the sentence are subordinate to the others.
- Paratactic structure makes a sentence sound simplistic. If you want to write in the voice of a character who is a child, for example, you can achieve that by using paratactic sentences and simple diction (or word choice), as in this example from *Winnie the Pooh*:

They came round the corner, and there was Eeyore’s house, looking comfy as anything.

“There you are,” said Piglet.

“Inside as well as outside,” said Pooh proudly.

Eeyore went inside ... and came out again.

“It’s a remarkable thing,” he said. “It is my house, and I built it where I said I did, so the wind must have blown it here. And the wind blew it right over the wood, and blew it down here, and here it is as good as ever. In fact, better in places.”

“Much better,” said Pooh and Piglet together.

“It just shows what can be done by taking a little trouble,” said Eeyore. “Do you see, Pooh? Do you see, Piglet? Brains first and then Hard Work. Look at it!! That’s the way to build a house,” said Eeyore proudly.

- Paratactic writing seems direct, spontaneous, and not necessarily disorganized but unorganized. If instead you want to sound (or want your character to sound) intellectual or literary, you would employ more hypotactic sentences.

### Sentence Variation

- In most writing, you will want to employ a mixture of paratactic and hypotactic sentences. This **sentence variation** allows you to control the tempo and intensity of your writing.
- The late M. F. K. Fisher used this to excellent effect in her essay “Once a Tramp, Always”—a confession of her passion for Macadamia nuts. Listen to how the tension builds and releases in this paragraph:

I have some of the same twinges of basic craving for those salty gnarled little nuts from Hawaii as the ones I keep ruthlessly at bay for the vulgar fried potatoes and the costly fish eggs. Just writing of my small steady passion for them makes my mouth water in a reassuringly controlled way, and I am glad there are dozens of jars of them in the local goodies shoppe, for me not to buy. I cannot remember when I first ate a Macadamia, but I was hooked from that moment. I think it was about thirty years ago. The Prince of Wales was said to have invested in a ranch in Hawaii which raised them in small quantities, so that the name stuck in my mind because he did, but I doubt that royal business cunning had much to do with my immediate delectation. The last time I ate one was about four months ago, in New York.

I surprised my *belle-soeur* and almost embarrassed myself by letting a small moan escape me when she put a bowl of them beside my chair; they were beautiful—so lumpy, Macadamian, salty, golden! And I ate one, to save face. One.



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**Appropriately crafted sentences can evoke high emotion about anything—even Macadamia nuts.**

- Although there is nothing explicit or inappropriate in this paragraph, the tempo is a parody of erotica, thanks to the rhythm of her sentences. The first six sentences are compound or simple—writing in neutral. The seventh sentence is complex, and then each sentence gets shorter and shorter, punctuated with a climactic one-word sentence: “One.”
- Fisher’s first six sentences set up a pattern of expectation. As a reader, you settle into the prose. Then, using sentence variation, Fisher breaks the pattern for dramatic (in this case, comically dramatic) effect.
- Fisher speeds up the end of her paragraph to create intensity; a writer could alternately slow down the end of a paragraph to create a dreamy effect. The possibilities of sentence variation are almost endless.
- Learning this skill is crucial for a nonfiction writer. Remember, you cannot invent any facts, but you can always play with your story’s pacing.

### **Creating Voice through Rhythm—A Writing Exercise**

- This exercise is tricky because you need to do several things at once: You need to write one great paragraph that is the exact opposite of the *Winnie the Pooh* paragraphs, namely, a paragraph in the voice of a professor ruminating on the meaning of life.

- You need to convey that this character is male, 80 years old, British, and highly educated without actually saying any of these things—in other words, by showing, not telling.
- Two of the skills we talked about in this lecture will be among the most powerful in your tool kit for accomplishing this: Sentence variation and word choice. A professor would speak in hypotactic sentences and sophisticated language. But you will also need to build his emotional distress to a climax in this paragraph.
- How does your paragraph compare to the one I wrote for the professor, shown below? This paragraph begins with long, hypotactic sentences and ends with short, simple ones, a bit like Fisher's Macadamia nut piece:

In our passage through the days of our lives, thoughts come to me, unbidden, and I cannot help but reflect on the challenges and complications attendant upon it. There have been so many years, so many days, so many long and sleepless nights, if I am truthful, when I have contemplated the futility of my grand work, my vast intellectual project, and nearly thrown myself upon the bosom of those waves as letter after letter from publisher, one fool after another, turned aside my tome and cast me into despair. The cruelty, cruelty of this wicked world of publishing, I rant, I rail, I spit upon the wretched men who bring a brother to this precipice; to be so reviled by such fools upon the face of this vast planet. No, it cannot be! Gasping my last, refuse it.

- Now try just the opposite. Write a paragraph in the voice of a shy teenage girl who has no date for her junior prom and is writing about it in her diary. Use sentence structure and sentence variation to create plenty of high-school drama and end with a climax.



- After you have written your paragraph, ask someone who is not taking this course to guess who the character in your paragraph is. If your listener guesses correctly, you will know you have done a great job.

## Important Terms

**hypotactic:** A sentence structure characterized by subordination.

**pacing:** The writer's ability to influence the reader's experience of a story's drama by speeding up or slowing down the narrative.

**paratactic:** Sentence structures characterized by a lack of subordination.

**sentence variation:** A strategy of mixing sentence types to influence the reader's experience of the narrative pacing, drama, and intensity; an element of strong writing.

## Suggested Reading

Fish, *How to Write a Sentence*.

Fisher, "Once a Tramp, Always."

Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*.

## Questions to Consider

1. We talked about sentence structure and word choice, but how important do you think grammar is in establishing character? Do you ever evaluate people based their grammatical quirks?
2. Have you ever read a piece where you felt the author overused any of these techniques—where the style distracted from, rather than added to, the substance? As a writer, how do you know when you have crossed the line?

# Rhetorical Devices and Emotional Impact

## Lecture 9

**S**entence variation works at the whole-paragraph level to create emotional impact. Rhetorical devices do this work at the level of sentences, clauses, phrases, words, and even individual sounds. Rhetorical devices can be broadly divided into structural devices and sound-based devices. Both types are aimed at fine-tuning the reader's experience.

### What Is Rhetoric?

- If you understood the last lesson, you're well on your way to writing stories that keep your reader hooked. These are techniques that you can use to end chapters, to control the tempo of your dialogue, and to reveal the emotional states of characters—all indirectly.
- The tools writers use to affect the reader indirectly are called rhetorical devices. These devices can be traced to the great orators of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. For this reason, they have Greek names.
- Keeping in mind that content is direct and rhetoric is indirect, let's return to a line from Fisher's *Once a Tramp, Always*. As she speeds up her paragraph by using sentence variation, she also uses another technique, called **asyndeton**.
- Asyndeton—meaning “without connectors”—is a device where a writer deliberately chooses to leave out the expected conjunctions. Fisher writes: “They were beautiful—so lumpy, Macadamian, salty, golden!” Not “salty and golden!” It creates a sense of urgency.
- The opposite of asyndeton is **polysyndeton**, or adding more conjunctions. The purpose of polysyndeton is also to create intensity and importance and drama—as I just did in that sentence.

- Look at the paragraph you wrote for the exercise in the previous lecture. Did you happen to use either polysyndeton or asyndeton without thinking about it? If not, can you see a place you could add one of these devices?
- Characters and narrators need unique voices, and rhetorical devices are key to creating them. Rhetorical devices work by creating reader expectations and then breaking or highlighting those expectations in different ways for emphasis.
- This is exactly what we learned to do with sentence structure in the previous lecture; the difference is that with rhetorical devices, you are doing it on the level of the word or phrase, rather than the entire sentence.
- There are basically two categories of rhetorical devices: Those that work on the level of structure, and those that work on the level of sound.

### **Structural Rhetorical Devices**

- Good writing uses **parallelism**. That means that we communicate similar ideas with similar structures.
- Here are two versions of a sentence, the first with faulty parallelism and the second with strong parallelism. Notice the verb forms:

**BAD:** The life of a pastry chef involves getting up early in the morning, working in a hot kitchen, and delicate procedures are used to make a great croissant.”

**GOOD:** The life of a pastry chef involves getting up early in the morning, working in a hot kitchen, and using delicate procedures to make a great croissant.

- Parallelism can be used in very dramatic ways. In fact, this is what made John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address one of the great political speeches in American history. Here is one of its most famous sentences:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

- When Kennedy says “not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need,” the repetition of “arms” is an example of **antimetabole**, when the word at the end of one clause is repeated at the beginning of the next clause. It creates a rousing emphasis and a call to action.
- The structure “not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are” is another type of repetition called **anaphora**, where the same word or phrase is repeated at the start of successive clauses. This is often used to create a sense of urgency and climax.
- Where Kennedy says “not as a call to battle, though embattled we are,” he is using a **polyptoton**, repetition of words with the same root. This is also an example of that poetic, elevated inversion we noted in Lecture 8.
- Notice how each of the four repetitious clauses are of the same relative length: “not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are.” This is called **isocolon**; it lulls a reader into a pattern of expectation, so that when you break it, it delivers a powerful rhetorical punch.
- The effective use of rhetoric, therefore, explains part of the power of the most famous sentence from Kennedy’s speech: “And so, my

fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” It contains both antimetabole and poetic inversion.

- Antithesis is parallelism taken to the opposite extreme, presenting contrasting ideas in similar structures to accentuate the contrast between them. Here is an example from John McCain, speaking at the 2008 Republican National Convention: “We were elected to change Washington, and we let Washington change us.”
- In **epanalepsis**, the writer repeats at the end of a clause the word or words used at the beginning. One of the best examples comes from Kennedy again, from an address to the United Nations in 1961: “Mankind must put an end to war—or war will put an end to mankind.” The effect is to contain a thought neatly, like a sound bite.
- **Epistrophe** is the opposite of anaphora; here, a word is repeated at the end of two or more clauses in a row. Once again, we turn to Kennedy, speaking at Wittenberg College in 1960: “For no government is better than the men who compose it, and I want the best, and we need the best, and we deserve the best.” It conveys closure and control. This particular example also includes polyptoton and isocolon.
- **Anadiplosis** means repeating the word at the end of a clause at the beginning of the next clause. Here is a famous biblical example: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is a rhetorical construction that lets the writer intensify and redefine an idea.

### Sound-Based Rhetorical Devices

- **Alliteration** is the repetition of any sound at the beginning of successive words. We usually think of this as a poetic device, but fiction and nonfiction writers can use it, too.
- **Consonance** is a pattern of consonant sounds being repeated, whether at the beginning of words—a type of alliteration—or

anywhere else in a word. The repetition of vowel sounds anywhere in a word is called **assonance**.

- Repeating sounds heightens their emotional effect. Some sounds sound harsh and grating—K, P, C. Some are soothing and quiet—M, S, O. Some are fast and vigorous—I, T, D. A writer’s choice and use of sound can shape how a reader responds to the writing.

### Using Rhetorical Devices—A Revision Exercise

- The number of rhetorical devices discussed in this lecture may seem overwhelming. You should not feel that you need to use all of them at once to be an effective writer, and you do not need to memorize their names by any means. The chart below should help you to learn them as you go.
- To get yourself started, return to the paragraph you wrote at the end of the previous lecture, and try revising it by adding one or two of these rhetorical devices.
- You might also want to start keeping a notebook with a page for each kind of rhetorical device where you can collect examples from your own reading and maybe your own writing, too.

Figure of Speech	Description	Example
<b>alliteration</b>	The repetition of the same sound at the beginning of successive words.	The soul selects her own society.
<b>anadiplosis</b>	The repetition of the final word of one clause at the beginning of the next clause.	For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime.
<b>anaphora</b>	The repetition of the same phrase at the beginning of two or more successive clauses.	With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right.

Figure of Speech	Description	Example
<b>antimetabole</b>	The repetition of phrases in successive clauses in which the order in the first clause is reversed in the second clause.	I know what I like, and I like what I know.
<b>antithesis</b>	The expression of opposing ideas in parallel grammatical structures or clauses.	Many are called, but few are chosen.
<b>assonance</b>	The repetition of the same vowel sound in successive words.	The cool blue moon.
<b>asyndeton</b>	Omitting normally used conjunctions.	He's a genius, a wild man, a star.
<b>consonance</b>	The repetition of the same consonant sound in successive words.	He struck a streak of rotten luck.
<b>epanalepsis</b>	The repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning and end of the same clause or sentence.	Nothing comes of nothing.
<b>epistrophe</b>	The repetition of the same word or group of words at the end of successive clauses.	When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child.
<b>inversion</b>	Reversing the normal subject-verb-object order of expression in English.	Blessed are the pure in heart.
<b>isocolon</b>	Successive clauses of a similar length.	I came, I saw, I conquered.
<b>metaphor</b>	An implied comparison that allows readers to see things in a new light.	Life is a voyage into the unknown.
<b>metonymy</b>	A kind of metaphor in which one object is described by reference to another object somehow associated with it.	"Suits" to mean "executives": "There go the suits."
<b>parallelism</b>	Expressing parallel or antithetical ideas in similar sentence structures.	Government of the people, by the people, for the people.
<b>polyptoton</b>	Repetition of words of the same root in successive clauses or sentences.	Not as a call to battle, though embattled we are.

Figure of Speech	Description	Example
<b>polysyndeton</b>	Using more conjunctions than one would normally expect.	Neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow.
<b>simile</b>	An explicit comparison using the words “like” or “as” that allows readers to see things in a new light.	My love is like a red, red rose.
<b>synecdoche</b>	A kind of metaphor in which the part of an object represents the whole.	All hands on deck!

### Suggested Reading

Corbett and Connors, *Style and Statement*.

Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.

### Questions to Consider

1. How do you think the sounds, rhythms, and musicality of language affect us? Can you find examples of how rhetoric subtly communicates and persuades in your daily experience?
2. Apart from rhetorical devices and sentence variation, what other strategies have you learned for building excitement in your writing?



# Putting It All Together

## Lecture 10

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**N**ow that you have an entire tool kit full of craft skills, it is time to put them all to work at once. In this lecture, we will use some badly written prose as a springboard for thinking about how to write—and revise—well. Sometimes, that means recognizing that a story must be revised in its entirety, starting with the narrative arc.

### The World's Worst Narrative?

- The past few lessons have focused mostly on the “how” of writing instead of the “what”—the form rather than the content. Great writing is about matching form and content. Without form—without craft—even the best story will fall flat.
- Before we turn our attention to content for the second half of this course, let’s take moment to see how well you have really mastered the skills of craft. In this lecture, you will have a chance to test yourself on everything we have covered so far by learning what bad writing can teach us about how to write better.
- One of the most important lessons we have learned is that **revision** is part of any writer’s process—even the most experienced professional writer. Therefore, you are going to get a chance to practice some revision on what I think might be the world’s worst short narrative, a mystery story I wrote that breaks all the rules we have spent the course learning:

The Airbus plane had an engine that was whining like a broken washing machine, and our flight had taken off from Boston four hours ago. Sodas were being brought to people by the flight attendant, and she was grumpy, which probably wasn’t too surprising, since it was long, boring flight. I was going to Oakland, and since my husband was

diabetic I noticed when the man and the woman in front of me in the seats started talking about her blood sugar.

They were probably in their 60s, and they both seemed confused. I think she was confused because of her blood sugar, and I benignly assumed that he was just not sure about her new medical condition. So I watched them for a while, blundering around like they didn't know what to do, and then I leaned forward in my seat.

“Is your wife diabetic?”

“Yes, she is,” he told me.

“Oh.”

Then after a minute, I said to the man, “Hey, you know I think she's got low blood sugar.” He was pulling out a needle to give her an injection of insulin, and what I was telling him was that this wasn't a good idea. If she had low blood sugar and he gave her more insulin then that could kill her. So I tried to give him a hint.

“Mind your own business,” he snapped at me.

That was pretty rude, I thought. And then he gave her a shot of insulin. Ten minutes later, she passed out. I wasn't sure what to do. I was trying to decide whether to tell the flight attendants, but it wasn't really my business, and anyhow eventually he pushed the call button.

The announcement came on the loudspeaker: “Is there a doctor on board?” And there was. So they put the lady on the floor and gave her CPR. I'd never seen anyone get CPR before, and it was awful. You could hear her ribs cracking, and her feet kept jumping up and hitting the floor again, ker-thunk. And did you know that your mother was right:

you should always wear cute underwear? Because this poor lady, in order to get a pulse in her leg they had to cut her pant legs open, and she had yellow old-lady underwear on. I am sure she would have been embarrassed if she knew we all saw it there on the plane.

They gave her CPR for 40 minutes, then we had an emergency landing in Denver. They never told us if she died or not, but obviously she must have because if you give someone CPR for 40 minutes without her recovering that's a really bad sign. I thought to myself: "How sad for that poor man, he will have to live with the idea that he killed his wife by accident for the rest of his life."

When I told my husband the story, he said to me, "Do you think it's possible he killed her on purpose, and you witnessed a murder?" It would be the perfect murder, if you think about it. But I guess we'll never know.

- This *could* be a great little story—full of tension, drama, character, and suspense. But it is not working effectively. We need to tell it differently. Take a few moments and jot down the suggestions that come to mind immediately before going on.

### **Fixing a Bad Beginning**

- We know a great beginning should launch a narrative arc by presenting us with character and tension. Like all good writing, it should show rather than tell. How does this beginning stand up?
  - The first sentence—"The Airbus plane had an engine that was whining like a broken washing machine, and our flight had taken off from Boston four hours ago."—describes a humdrum moment on a plane with no character or tension by using a broken metaphor.
  - The second sentence—"Sodas were being brought to people by the flight attendant, and she was grumpy, which probably

wasn't too surprising, since it was long, boring flight."—is almost as nondescript, with little character and no tension, and it throws in the sin of passive voice. So far, almost every detail we have read is unnecessary to the story's conflict.

- Sentence three—"I was going to Oakland, and since my husband was diabetic I noticed when the man and the woman in front of me in the seats started talking about her blood sugar."—gives us some plot-relevant information about our narrator, but it is not vivid characterization, and she is not personally invested in the action.
- What we have here is the beginning of a story in search of character, in search of tension, in search of narrative arc—and written in a resolutely passive, abstract, and telling kind of language, with the occasional bad metaphor thrown in to make it all more confusing and ineffective.
- The second paragraph also consists of three sentences. Note that two are basic compound sentences, and the third adds a dependent clause, but not a well-constructed one. The phrase "blundering around like they didn't know what to do" is redundant: blundering around *means* acting like you don't know what to do. This is just wordy writing.
- These sentences are also rife with telling phrases like "They seemed confused." Showing would be giving readers a picture of what they were doing that shows their confusion.
- The dialogue—"Is your wife diabetic?" "Yes, she is," he told me. "Oh."—is also flat. If this is nonfiction, we are stuck with the words as spoken, but you can use more interesting dialogue tags to convey how the words were said: "Is your wife diabetic," I asked, my voice wavering.



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**Revisions can mean everything from changing a single word to changing the entire framework of your story.**

- If we were to look at this entire story, we would want to ask the same questions at each step: Are there wordy passages? Passive, telling constructions? Missed opportunities to build character? Events that do not have any consequences? Lackluster dialogue?

### **From the Ground Up—A Revision Exercise**

- Sometimes, the most important revisions are not the little ones. Sometimes you need to reimagine the entire frame of your story.
- Where is the real story in this incident? What is the proper shape of its narrative arc? This story does not have to start with a character sitting on a plane. It could start with the character’s husband asking her, “Do you think you saw a murder?” It could start with the moment the man injects his wife with insulin. It could start with the tense dialogue. It could be told from another character’s perspective—maybe even the alleged murderer’s. We could even shorten the story’s time frame to the 10 minutes between the injection and the wife passing out.

- All great writers revise—sometimes radically. Because writing is hard work, we all get invested in the sentences we have put down on paper. But hanging onto sentences, paragraphs, or even chapters that are not the right ones for the story is not the way to write a fabulous narrative.
- A narrative arc is something like a path that guides us through a labyrinth. There are moments when a writer might make the wrong turn. The real wisdom lies in quickly recognizing that we need to go back and try a different direction.
- Settle in to do a revision of my story, and as you do so, see if you can bring everything you have learned so far into action. Start by thinking about the big picture.
- You have complete freedom to revise and retell this story. For the moment, do not worry about the nonfiction contract.

### Important Term

**revision:** The process of reworking a piece of writing to strengthen the finished product.

### Suggested Reading

Miller and Paola, *Tell It Slant*.

Perl and Schwartz, *Writing True*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Think about how you would prioritize the various skills we have discussed in this lecture. As you set out to work on a writing project, what are the three most important things to pay attention to?

2. At the start of this course, I asked you to think about your strengths and weaknesses as a writer. Now, as we approach the mid-point, have you discovered strengths you did not know you had? Have you discovered skills you particularly want to work on going forward?

# Revealing Character in Words and Actions

## Lecture 11

**S**ometimes, character attributes make sense, and it is the detail that fits to a T that will become a source of tension for the character. At other times, it is the quirky, unexpected detail that reveals a character's hidden conflicts. When writing creative nonfiction, an author must learn to sift out these details from among the many facts gathered during the research process, whether the subject reveals them through words or actions.

### Capturing Details of Character

- We have thus far examined the how of great writing; over the next few lectures, we will turn our focus onto the whats: character, dialogue, perspective, and scene.
- We have already talked about the formal aspects of character. Character is about tension and conflict. Sometimes characters are in conflict with each other—a protagonist and an antagonist. Sometimes characters are struggling against a situation instead. Sometimes characters are in conflict with themselves. What matters is that conflict reveals character.
- Many things reveal character. In your mind's eye, picture someone you know well, then make a list of things you know about this person. What makes him or her different from anyone else in the room?



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**Conflict, whether internal or external, helps you reveal your characters.**



- Review your list. What are the most interesting details you came up with? They are probably those details that seem unexpected or out of character, or they are the things that seem to perfectly capture the essence of character. Small details stand in for larger elements of character.
- These kinds of details are also about introducing tension into a story. Things that are out of character suggest that a person is more complicated than he or she appears—internal conflict. A detail that fits a character to a T creates narrative suspense; some element of the plot will force this person to act against character.

### **Where Do We Find the Details?**

- In creative nonfiction, discovering these kinds of details is particularly important precisely because we cannot invent things. The little details that tell the story of character are a large part of bringing a character to life.
- When I was writing *The Widow Clicquot*, one of my biggest challenges was how few personal details I could find about Barbe-Nicole Clicquot. Few letters by or about her have survived. What I did know was that a 27-year-old, upper-middle-class woman with a small child and no business experience, in an era when women did not have careers, convinced her father-in-law to loan her the equivalent of a million dollars and to let her rebuild and run her husband's failed wine business.
- This information alone told me a lot about Madame Clicquot and her father in law. She must have been an amazing woman, and he must have been astute to recognize this and do the unthinkable.

### **Three Character Sketches**

- You can find some of the most fabulous efforts at character sketches in the modern world in dating advertisements. When a person writes one, he or she is essentially inviting a reader into a narrative about a romance. Let's start with this example:

SWEET LADY, mother and now grandmother. Interesting and interested in the world. Scientist, birdwatcher, intrigued by beautiful art and smart people. Still loves fast cars. Active mind. Decent soul. Hopes to meet accomplished, responsible, sensitive, hopelessly handsome man for good laughs and much merriment.

- Not only does this ad contain lots of detail and some interesting internal tensions (a speed-demon granny?), it makes you wonder who will respond to this ad. When you can start projecting a story out from a character description, that is good writing.
- Let's try another personal ad:

ECCENTRIC EUROPEAN ADVENTURER, 72, former revolutionary, award-winning artist, trim, brilliant, lives part-time in Africa, part-time in France, married, seeks permanent mistress or second wife in complete agreement with first. Requirements: 30–40, sensual, talented, open-minded.

- There is a lot to digest here! This character could be the protagonist of a very interesting story. And the word choice is important, too: What kind of person has “requirements” in a mate? And what sort of woman in her 30s would respond to this?
- Here is one last example, which is quite different:

Sexy lady needs one decent guy: witty, responsible, available. So we can dream about all the things we once believed in and make love again like teenagers. In my mind, I will be young and beautiful. If you close your eyes, you will be too. We will dream together and you will read children's stories and *The Economist* to me. All night, we will touch fingers and dream of soaring. Me, late 40s. You, as young as you wish to be.

- This piece is quite sad and lyrical and tells us a lot about her internal conflict and motivations. Another thing that makes this advertisement particularly effective is its point of view: She uses *I* and *you* to create a sense of intimacy.

### Character and Point of View

- The **first-person** point of view lets readers get into the head of a character. This is the point of view of experience and internal perspective.
- The *I* voice in a story can be reliable or unreliable. The *I* can be someone we suspect is a liar, deluded, or an exaggerator. Likewise, the *I* voice can be omniscient; it can know everything that we know. Or it can be limited; we can know some things that the *I* does not get to see.
- The **third-person**—the *he*, *she*, or *they* perspective—seems all-knowing and objective. It is more distanced, cooler, and more detached. It has the advantage of making the character *in* the story more important than the character *telling* the story.
- Of the three personal ads above, the former revolutionary seems the most distanced in terms of our insight into the mind of the author. Notice, there is no *I* in there at all. There are hardly any verbs and no pronouns. It is possible that the gentleman did not write the ad himself; perhaps it was a third party—even his wife! This fact could change our narrative arc completely.
- Among the three ads, the aging lady lamenting her lost youth is the most intimate. Part of the reason is that the content is inherently more private, but it is also the use of the first-person perspective, both singular (*I*) and plural (*we*) and the **second person** (*you*). It is a point of view that invites the reader to think of himself or herself as part of the story.

### Personal Ads—A Writing Exercise

- It is time to try your hand at writing a personal advertisement for yourself—but yourself reimagined as a character. You can use any

voice that you like. Just remember, character is identity that implies action. Make this an advertisement for a fabulous character—the kind of person someone else wants to be in a story with.

### Important Terms

**first-person narrative:** A narrative that uses an *I* or *we* point of view.

**second-person narrative:** A narrative that uses the *you* point of view.

**third-person narrative:** A narrative that uses a *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they* point of view.

### Suggested Reading

Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*.

Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.

### Questions to Consider

1. You will sometimes hear people comment on the ways in which modern technology, abbreviated communication styles, and the speed of the Internet are making us a culture of careless writers. Do you think this is true? Which format do you think best reveals true character, in a book or in life: a well-polished letter or a hasty e-mail communication? Why?
2. Why do you think we are often more interested in characters who are unusual and even quirky than in characters who are average? What can you deduce about the art of storytelling from that?

# Creating Compelling Characters

## Lecture 12

A book's antagonist is the character who opposes the main character, or protagonist, but a protagonist may also be a negative character, someone who is unpleasant to be around in real life. Whether nice or nasty, a main character must be compelling to engage the reader and avoid becoming a stock character. Complexity and inner conflict are the keys to creating engaging characters.

### Antagonists versus Negative Characters

- In personal ads, we are all the heroes of our own tale, and what you wrote for the previous exercise was the character description for a protagonist—a main character whose experiences and struggles could shape the narrative arc of a story. In this lecture, we will explore the other characters in a narrative—minor characters and **antagonists**.
- It is important not to confuse an antagonist with a flawed protagonist. Sometimes a bad guy or gal—a **negative character**—can be the main character in a story. This is more common than you might think, from rogue cops to serial killers. A well-crafted negative character is one whose flaws we recognize and somehow find compelling.
- Among English professors, the ultimate example of the negative protagonist is Satan in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. While Satan is the ultimate bad guy in Christian culture, as a character, Satan is still incredibly compelling because he is complicated, internally conflicted, and multifaceted.



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***Paradise Lost's* Satan is the classic well-crafted negative character.**

- In comparison, Adam—who is solidly good, without any emotional complexity—comes off as a **stock character**. A stock character is a character whose identity can be reduced to a single attribute or two.

### The Flawed Protagonist and Richardson's *Clarissa*

- The longest novel in the English language—also one of the most brilliant—is the 18<sup>th</sup>-century epistolary novel *Clarissa*, by Samuel Richardson. The titular Clarissa is being forced by her family to marry a man she despises; Lord Lovelace offers to rescue her. When she flees with him, he imprisons and rapes her.
- All this happens in the first few hundred pages. For another thousand or so pages, the emotional implications of these events unfold. The reason for this narrative arc is that *Clarissa* is not a novel about plot; it is a novel about character.
- Clarissa is not the character who compels readers. She is not the protagonist. As the story goes on, Clarissa becomes more and more irritatingly pious. Her world is black and white, and her observations ignorant and trite, and she becomes a kind of stock character.
- Instead, Lovelace—who is by any standards a wretched and evil man—becomes so richly human and so tensely conflicted, that the reader begins to feel more and more sympathy for him. He is the emotional engine of the narrative.
- What we want to learn is how to craft characters who can compel readers like this—whether they are good guys or bad guys. We also want to know what the effect is of introducing a stock character into a narrative.
- Stock characters essentially do one thing: They turn readers off. While they can have important functions in a narrative, stock characters are risky choices and need to be used with care.

- One of the best uses of a stock character is as a means to reveal something about the main characters. For example, if your protagonist is going to experience a midlife crisis on page 200, having him pay a bit too much attention to the clichéd one-dimensional bombshell at the bar on page 5 foreshadows that event.
- The bombshell is a stock character because she does not matter as a character. She only serves to reveal something about the main character's internal conflict.

### **Developing Multifaceted Characters**

- In the previous lecture, you made a list of the attributes of a person you knew well. This time, think about the most interesting person you know and make a list of the things that make that person fascinating.
- When you review your list, certain items are likely to stand out. Interesting people are often interesting because they are unique, because they defy expectations, or because they rise above internal conflicts or external barriers.
- Fascinating people have depths. They have interior lives that are complicated and sometimes contradictory. They struggle with their own decisions. This is true of interesting characters, too.
- Interesting characters can be nasty or nice, generous or narcissistic. They can be brave or weak. They can be self-reflective or self-deluded. They do not have to be perfect people; they just have to be complicated human beings whose lives speak to the truth of human experience in some way.
- Writing about negative characters can be a challenging proposition. The reader needs to be able to relate to every non-stock character in the story, even the terrible ones. You do not want your negative characters to be pure and simply evil; such characters are stock characters.

- Negative characters, whether they are protagonists or antagonists, must have some kind of internal conflict or private motivation. That is not the same as saying monsters must be sympathetic. They do not have to be nice deep down inside, nor must they have redeeming characteristics. But readers must be able to understand why they are the way they are, even if they despise or fear them.
- As a rule of thumb, the more terrible and wicked a character is, the more important it is that the reader understands his or her complexity. Likewise, the more pure and angelic a character is, the more important it is that he or she has some internal conflict.
- In other words, the closer a character is to either one-dimensional extreme of good or evil, the more crucial it is to make that character complex and multifaceted.

### **The Life of Coco Chanel—A Prewriting Exercise**

- One of the difficulties of being a writer is that you know more than you can tell. Part of the pleasure of reading a story is watching it unfold. If the writer gives away everything in the beginning, then the narrative holds no suspense. Foreshadowing works because it lets readers guess what direction the story might take but leaves room for wonder and surprise.
- Professional writers often use prewriting exercises to develop characters precisely because knowing more than you tell is so important in crafting a great story. Many novelists develop character sketches for their main characters—brief life histories that might include where they were born, their middle names, their greatest childhood fear, their first jobs, the cars they drive, and so forth—even if none of it will ever make its way into the narrative. Other novelists will write the resume for their characters or answer a character questionnaire.
- If you are writing a novel, you are at liberty to make things up about a character. Nonfiction writers must search out telling details—or perhaps we should call them showing details—that



suggest something about our characters. To know which details are important, we need to make lists of everything we have to work with.

- In writing nonfiction, we start with research, and part of research is actively seeking out facts that will 1) move a narrative arc forward and/or 2) reveal complex character and internal conflicts.
- Below, you will find 12 facts from the life of Coco Chanel. Imagine you were writing a biography of her, starting with only this information, and try to answer the following two questions: What would be the best narrative arc to use—linear, circular, or frame? What do those facts tell us about her internal conflict and motivations?
  - She grew up in poverty in a strict convent in the southwest of France and was abandoned as a child by her peasant father.
  - She was an illegitimate child at a time when that was socially unacceptable.
  - She left the convent to become the mistress of a series of rich and fickle men.
  - The men that she fell in love with all refused to marry her because of her origins.
  - Those same men helped her get a start in the fashion industry, but she resented their trying to undermine her becoming an independent businesswoman.
  - She eventually did become a famous and rich designer, celebrated around the world.
  - When Chanel No. 5 perfume was invented, she finally agreed to bring some rich men into her business to help her.

- She resented those rich business partners, and the result was decades of lawsuits about money and respect.
- She complained about being taxed under French law as a spinster, even though she never married.
- She did terrible things in the process of these lawsuits, including using the laws of Nazi-occupied France against her partners, who were Jewish.
- In her final settlement with her last remaining male business partner after the war, he agreed to pay her taxes, to pay all her bills forever, anything she wanted.
- In the final settlement with her business partner Coco Chanel agreed to give up the rights to her name and let him take it.

### Important Terms

**antagonist:** The character who is in central conflict with the main character of a narrative.

**negative character:** A character—not necessarily the antagonist—with unpleasant or off-putting traits.

**stock character:** A character who represents a familiar type of person, rather than an individual.

### Suggested Reading

Faulkner, *Sanctuary*.

Richardson, *Clarissa*.

## Questions to Consider

1. If you had to define what makes for a great character in a book, what elements would you consider essential?
2. What would you do if you wanted to turn Coco Chanel into a stock character? What elements of her story would you need to omit to turn her into a stereotype?

# Character Psychology

## Lecture 13

**B**uilding a nonfiction character from researched facts involves not just knowing what a person said about him or herself or what was said about that person; you must also understand the inner life a person's behavior reveals and be able to present that to a reader through effective use of detail. Writers often use metonymy and synecdoche—two special types of metaphor—to achieve this effect, as well as making careful choices about direct and indirect discourse.

### Behavior as a Simile

- The exercise at the end of the previous lecture was about learning how to look at the facts you gather about another person reading them for the character they reveal. From that list of a dozen facts about Coco Chanel, it is obvious that she is a naturally complicated character.
- A linear narrative would be the easiest narrative structure in which to tell Coco Chanel's story. Plenty of things happen to keep the story in motion without any tricks of timing. This is also a case where actions reveal character, which is also a good fit for a linear, plot-driven narrative.
- On another level, this also happens to be a love story; it is about men hurting Coco Chanel, or Coco Chanel hurting them right back. Love stories are also well suited to linear narratives.
- As to Chanel's motives, why do you think in the end she agreed to give up her name in exchange for being economically cared for by one man? To me, writing her story, it suggested that she wanted an entrepreneurial marriage. All of her actions stemmed from her internal conflict about marriage and money.

- As a nonfiction writer, I cannot state as fact “Coco Chanel’s final business deal satisfied her longing to get married” unless somewhere Coco Chanel said so. What I can say is, “Coco Chanel’s final business deal *looked* a lot like an entrepreneurial marriage.” This distinction is crucial.
- I can say her earlier failed love affairs hurt her because Coco Chanel did say that in letters and in interviews. I can connect those facts to my interpretation of them to reveal her character and to move the story forward. Ultimately, what I am building is a simile: The business deal is *like* a marriage.

### **The Conscious versus the Unconscious**

- The actions of real human beings reveal not only our conscious desires but our unconscious ones. In a way, we all have an internal conflict between our conscious and unconscious wishes. One way to develop a multifaceted character, therefore, is to show how a character acts in ways that are both self-aware and not self-aware.
- In real life, we make associations between objects. We let something stand in for something it is not. We take a little piece of our experience and make it stand in for the whole. Sigmund Freud called this **displacement**.
- There are two main types of displacement. In **metonymy**, something associated with an object is used to represent it, as when someone wears a crucifix to show that they are Christian. In **synecdoche**, a part of something represents the whole, as when you call a business executive “a suit.”

### **Choosing Your Narrative Voice**

- A character is essentially a set of consistent attributes, qualities that stand in for their entire identities. We give our characters certain recognizable speech patterns—knowing that a reader can extrapolate from dialogue a whole wealth of things about class, education, and cultural background. We dress our characters in

certain ways, knowing that readers will make assumptions based on this information.

- We have talked a bit already about how word choice—diction—can reveal a lot about who a character is. That is the easy part of using dialogue and voice to create characters. The trick to speech synecdoche, in fact, is not learning how to do it; it is learning how to not overdo it. If dialogue becomes stereotypical, then we can accidentally create a stock character.
- The interesting—and harder—aspect of creating character through voice involves choosing point of view. The usual advice to new writers is, unless you have some compelling reason to choose the first or second person, the third person, *he/she/they* perspective is the safest bet. Why is this?
- The normal way to write a biography about George Washington is to say he did this and then he did that. However, writing in the third person is not as simple as it seems at first. There are more ways to write in the third person that you probably imagine.
- Sometimes the third person needs to draw in the first person—for example, when you want to quote George Washington’s own words
- Within any point of view, there are different modes we can use as writers: direct discourse, indirect discourse, and free indirect discourse. Each mode makes a different kind of truth claim. Each implies a different relationship to history and our ability to know it.
- **Direct discourse** is another name for direct quoted speech, for example:

George Washington’s mother was a woman he admired greatly.

“What did you think of your mother,” a friend asked George.

“I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her,” George said.

- The advantage of direct discourse is that it is, of course, very direct, but it is also neutral and objective to the point of distant. We do not get inside George’s head or build a sense of George’s inner self.
- **Indirect discourse** is information attributed to a character, but it is not placed in quotation marks. For example:



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George’s friend was impressed with the president’s admiration for his mother and asked him about it. George told him that he attributed all his success to the education in morality, scholarship, and athletics that he received from her.

**We cannot put words in the mouths of historical figures.**

- Here, we do not have the exact words that George used, but we know the substance of the exchange, and that substance is presented to us as a fact. Once again, it is cool, detached, and objective. It is the way we often write history when we know what happened in a general way but not specifically. The trouble is, indirect discourse is a bit clunky.
- In the next lecture, we will look at a third option, free indirect discourse. It’s one of the nonfiction writer’s most important storytelling tools.

### **Direct versus Indirect Discourse—A Writing Exercise**

- Let’s make sure you have mastered the distinction between direct discourse and indirect discourse. Write a paragraph or two in which you do two things: 1) develop a character—historical or

imaginary—who you reveal to the reader using either metonymy or synecdoche, and 2) write this paragraph using both indirect discourse and direct discourse.

## Important Terms

**direct discourse:** Quoted speech in a narrative that is attributed to a speaker.

**displacement:** A kind of metaphoric thinking in which one idea is substituted for another. *See metonymy.*

**indirect discourse:** Speech in a narrative that is attributed to a specific speaker but is not directly quoted.

**metonymy:** A kind of metaphor in which one object is described by reference to another object somehow associated with it.

**synecdoche:** A kind of metaphor in which a part of an object represents the whole.

## Suggested Reading

Fish, *How to Write a Sentence.*

Hood, *Creating Character Emotions.*

## Questions to Consider

1. What is speech synecdoche, and how does it help us to write effective dialogue?
2. If you listen to the conversations around you, what do you notice people use more commonly when quoting others, direct or indirect discourse? What does this tell you about the art of writing dialogue?



# Getting Inside the Heads of Your Characters

## Lecture 14

**F**ree indirect discourse is an invaluable tool in the creative nonfiction writer's tool kit. It allows the author to suggest how a character may have felt or thought based on a reasonable interpretation of the evidence, but without having to use the character's exact words, or what we might call "hard" evidence. It gently blurs the line between the author and the character in a way that does not violate the nonfiction contract.

### What Is Free Indirect Discourse?

- Direct discourse and indirect discourse have one thing in common: They attribute thoughts and expressions to a speaker, thinker, or character. **Free indirect discourse** is another third-person perspective that lets a writer bring in the first-person voice.
- Unlike direct discourse, free indirect discourse does not use quotation marks. In fact, it does not require the writer to attribute remarks at all. Because remarks can be unattributed, a writer is also free to use a bit more imaginative room—even in nonfiction.
- Free indirect discourse offers something very precious to nonfiction writers: Because the remarks are unattributed, they do not have to be based on historical facts. The remarks *could* be our own as authors. They could be interpretation. The writer can use this technique to get inside a character's head in a speculative manner without breaking the nonfiction contract.
- Let's look at the George Washington example again. If we rewrite it in free indirect discourse, we could say something like this:

George Washington was asked why he so much admired his mother. How could one explain what a mother gave a child? What words were there to encompass it? It was a beautiful thing. He knew that he owed everything to her education.

George told his friend that his mother was the reason for all his success in his life.

- The first and last sentences are simple indirect discourse, but in between, who is speaking? The discourse here is free *and* unattributed. Maybe it is the author or narrator asking a rhetorical question, or maybe it is George Washington thinking this to himself.
- The writer might be inviting the reader to think of this as the private thoughts of George Washington; after all, he probably *did* think something like this. But here is the critical distinction: the author does not say that George Washington had these thoughts.
- There is nothing here that is historically untrue. There has been no breach of the nonfiction contract. Writers can play with the ambiguity of free indirect discourse to help a reader imagine what is going on inside the character's head.

### Free Indirect Discourse in Fiction

- Jane Austen is widely regarded as the most accomplished practitioner of free indirect discourse in English literary history. She uses it to give readers a glimpse into the minds of her characters while maintaining the narrator's third-person point of view.
- Here is a famous example of free indirect discourse from *Northanger Abbey*—Austen's comic Gothic novel about a naïve young girl named Catherine who goes to stay at an ancient country estate. She begins to imagine ghosts and terrible crimes everywhere around her, based on her reading of trashy horror novels. She even begins



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**Jane Austen was one of the masters of free indirect discourse.**

to imagine that her host, General Tilney, murdered his late wife, Mrs. Tilney.

This apartment, to which she had given a date so ancient, a position so awful, proved to be one end of what the general's father had built. There were two other doors in the chamber, leading probably into dressing-closets; but she had no inclination to open either. Would the veil in which Mrs. Tilney had last walked, or the volume in which she had last read, remain to tell what nothing else was allowed to whisper? No: whatever might have been the general's crimes, he had certainly too much wit to let them sue for detection.

- We assume that these are Catherine's thoughts, since Catherine is the "she" being described in the third-person narration at the beginning of the paragraph. But Austen never actually says that Catherine is thinking these thoughts. It could be the narrator voicing these opinions.
- Another novelist who uses this technique beautifully is Virginia Woolf, in her book *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is the story of a middle-aged woman named Clarissa Dalloway preparing for a dinner party, thinking about her friends and neighbors and the complicated relationships among them. Here is a sample:

Times without number, Clarissa had visited Evelyn Whitbread in the nursing home. Was Evelyn sick again? Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh, intimating by a kind of pout or swell of his very well-covered manly extremely handsome upholstered body ... that his wife had some internal ailment, nothing serious, which as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify. Ah yes, she did of course; what a nuisance; and felt very sisterly and oddly conscious at the same time of her hat. Not the right hat for the early morning, was that it? For Hugh always made her feel, as he bustled on ... that she might be a girl of eighteen.

- There are no quotation marks here, although there is discourse. Some of it is attributed to Hugh; much of it is not. It could be Clarissa's thoughts, or it could be the narrator's.

### Claims of Fact versus Narrator Speculation

- If Clarissa Dalloway were a historical figure, what in this passage would we have to have researched sources for, and what claims could we make without sources while still keeping the nonfiction contract?
  - “Times without number, Clarissa had visited Evelyn Whitbread in the nursing home” is a claim of fact that would need to have historical evidence, such as letters, diary entries, the nursing home visitor book, and so forth.
  - “Was Evelyn sick again?” is free indirect discourse that does not require a source.
  - “Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh, intimating by a kind of pout or swell of his very well-covered manly extremely handsome upholstered body ... that his wife has some internal ailment, nothing serious, which as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify.” This needs several types of proof: First, that Hugh said Evelyn was ill in some way during this encounter, although not his exact words; second, that Clarissa thought Hugh was manly and extremely handsome; and finally, that either he tried to communicate a nonverbal message about his wife's health to Clarissa or that Clarissa thought he did. Again, this would require some sort of personal records kept by one or both parties.
- Obviously, writing creative nonfiction involves a huge amount of research. The writer needs an enormous amount of information about the smallest details because the more details the writer has, the more freedom he or she has to shape a story like a fiction writer within the boundaries of the nonfiction contract.

- Free indirect discourse allows a writer to float an idea. It is an invitation to the reader to attribute the thoughts of the writer to the thoughts of the character. The reader can accept or reject the invitation, but the writer has been truthful by not making claims of fact without evidence.

### Ten Facts—A Research Exercise and a Writing Exercise

- This exercise is aimed at developing creative ideas for researching your own creative nonfiction project. Imagine that you had to prove the “facts” in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Make a list of 10 places that you would go to start looking for this factual information to support this passage.
- Next, return to your own story idea and make a list of 10 facts that you could build a story on. Using those 10 facts, try writing a paragraph or two, using free indirect discourse to work at the boundaries of what you know to really get inside the head of your character.

### Important Term

**free indirect discourse:** Speech in a narrative that is not quoted and is not attributed to a specific speaker.

### Suggested Reading

Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

MacKay, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel*.

Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

### Questions to Consider

1. In this lesson, we are learning about the ways in which a writer can use the voice—and character—of a sometimes “invisible” narrator to shape the atmosphere of a story. If you are the narrator of your stories, what

kind of character would you like to be? How would you like readers to perceive you?

2. Many of the techniques we are studying in this course apply to fiction as well as nonfiction, but some help us meet particular challenges in nonfiction writing. Can you name two that are especially useful for creative nonfiction writers?

# Using Narrative Perspective

## Lecture 15

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Perspective, or point of view, is not as simple as choosing to write from in the first-person, third-person, or rarely used second-person voice. Not only does each of these choices have a dramatic effect on your reader's perceptions, each of these voices has different modes. Each mode, in turn, allows the real author to create an implied author who shapes the story in different ways by choosing what to reveal to the reader.

### Choosing First, Second, or Third Person

- Writers use the third person more often than any other perspective in storytelling. They can do all sorts of interesting and unique things with that perspective and can make it anything other than boring, but it is also as neutral a perspective as we have in English. It can seem objective, as though there is no narrator. But there is always a narrator.
- The most unusual narrative perspective is the second person—the *you* form, in which a story is told from the perspective of the reader. It implies the presence of an *I*, who might be also used (that would be mixed-perspective narrative) or who might remain only implied (a strict second-person narrative).
- By using the second person, the writer is inviting you to see yourself in this story. In fact, the writer is insisting on it. The reader is not an objective voyeur—someone who can watch the story from a safe distance—but someone who has also been made a character in a story.

### Who Is the Implied Author?

- All stories have an **implied author**, a perspective from which the story is told and a consciousness directing the narrative. Sometimes this implied author can look like the historical author—that is, the

person whose name is on the book—while sometimes they are clearly different.

- In fact, the implied author and the historical author are *never* precisely the same. Even when a writer says, “I am Tilar Mazzeo, and I am telling you this story,” there is a distance between me the person and me the narrator, because a narrator is also a character in the story.
- When you read a story about “John’s” life being in danger, it is a different experience from reading about “my” life or “your” life being in danger. The third person makes us think not about who the narrator is but about who the character is. The author’s identity is hard to grasp.
- Third-person writing seems like an objective statement of facts. It tricks us into believing that the author is invisible, irrelevant, or nonexistent. But even the most objective story has a narrative structure. Your experience is shaped by the writer’s choices from the moment you set eyes on the page.
- Having a strong implied author—as you do in a second-person narrative—is no more or less powerful than an invisible implied author. It is simply different.
- A first-person narrative has a strong implied author. The reader thinks, whoever this *I* is, he or she is telling us the story directly.
- The implied author is the person whose point of view is controlling the narrative perspective in that particular moment. It is not the same as the historical or “real” author—the person who is *really* controlling the entire narrative perspective.
- It is easier to understand the difference if you look at stories with more than one implied author.



- Boccaccio's *Decameron* is a Renaissance classic where a group of people at a house party in Italy during the bubonic plague take turns telling each other stories.
- A modern example comes from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in which four siblings each tell the story of their childhood from different perspectives.
- In both cases, there is an implied author controlling all of these perspectives, who is still different from the historical people Boccaccio and Faulkner.
- Readers are conditioned to assume that first-person narrators are implied authors. However, writers can work with layers of implied authors, each of whom knows more or less than the others.
- Implied authors are not the same as historical or “real” authors—even when we try to get you to believe that. Implied authors—even the invisible ones—are always characters in the story. They are developed according to the same rules of character you have already learned. They move narratives forward. They have motives and conflicts.
- If the *I* says “I, Tilar Mazzeo, am in a dark room, and the rising smell of gasoline is making my pulse begin to race,” I am creating the impression that the historical author and the first person narrator are the same.
- All I have actually done is create a character within my story who I want you to believe is me, the author. But it's not me. You are not getting the totality of my experience. I am not really in that room; I am actually typing at my computer. Even if this is a work of nonfiction, that experience is in my past, and I am re-creating it from a carefully constructed perspective.
- What you are getting is a limited part of a consciousness—a narrative perspective—that I want you to think is radically

nonfictional. Even though it is, like anything in creative nonfiction, a creative construction.

- Just because I do not break the nonfiction contract, that does not mean that I am not shaping your experience of this story by what I tell, what I do not tell, and how I tell it. That is the whole point of creative nonfiction.

### Third Person Modes

- Just as different structures silently emphasize different things in a story, so do different narrative perspectives. They also can create multiple levels of implied authors through controlling who knows what information.
- Writers have terms to describe what any particular narrator knows in a story. What a narrator knows is sometimes the same—and sometimes different—from what a reader knows at that same moment.
- Traditionally, we talk about three modes of the third-person perspective. Each creates a different kind of implied author—and a different kind of story.
  - The first is the **omniscient mode**. In this mode, we get to see the story from the perspective of both the character(s) and the implied author. We get direct reporting of events that are not part of the consciousness of any characters. It is omniscient because we have access to everything.
  - The second mode is the **objective mode**. In this mode, we get only the perspective of the implied author, who is more or less invisible to the reader even though it is entirely the implied author's perspective the reader is getting. Objective third-person narrative looks like straightforward factual reportage; the reader loses the interior perspective of the characters.

- The third mode is the **subjective mode**. In this mode, we are limited to the experiences of the characters in the narrative. We have no access to the implied author and no objective narration. We experience the lives of the characters more intimately, and the narrator is almost invisible—yet the implied author is, in fact, controlling our perspective much more forcefully.
- Each of these devices can be used powerfully in different circumstances. A subjective third-person narrative from the point of view of a serial killer, for example, can make an exceptionally frightening thriller. A third-person objective story is great for an old-fashioned country-house whodunit.
- A writer can also use all these perspectives in different combinations. A story does not have to have one perspective all the way through, although shifting perspectives is a high-level skill and something that beginning writers want to experiment with carefully.
- Both narrators and implied authors can be more or less reliable. People can tell us lies. They can withhold the truth or misdirect our attention. The unreliable narrator can be an effective tool, particularly in first-person narrative as the reader realizes, often slowly and dramatically, that the implied author is not to be trusted.

### **Choosing Your Mode—A Writing Exercise**

- For your assignment, write the end of a chapter—something with a real cliffhanger, without thinking too hard about how you are writing it. After you have written it, ask yourself, What perspective did I write this from? Why did I choose this? What were the advantages and limitations? Could I have chosen better?
- If you are feeling ambitious, rewrite that paragraph in whichever modes you did not use before. Try to use at least the first person and each of the third-person modes.

## Important Terms

**implied author:** The personality of the author that the reader gleans from the narrative, as distinct from the narrator's or point-of-view character's personality.

**objective mode:** A mode of writing that purports to report the facts unemotionally.

**omniscient mode:** A mode of writing in which the narrator is assumed to have complete knowledge of all events.

**subjective mode:** A mode of writing in which the narration is presumed to be filtered through the subjective opinions and experiences of a particular consciousness or character.

## Suggested Reading

Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

Raisley, *The Power of Point of View*.

## Questions to Consider

1. In the story you want to write, what kind of narrator do you want readers to perceive you to be? What new strategies have you learned that would let you shape that voice?
2. The second-person point of view is rarely used. What particular circumstances can you imagine in which it would be ideal? Why?

# Shaping Your Voice

## Lecture 16

Understanding the difference between the writer, or historical author, and the implied author gives you the freedom to shape the implied author into a character. That character should have conflicts and motivations that drive the story along, just like any other character. The implied author will also have a distinctive voice, and choosing the right voice is crucial for engaging your readers.

### Choosing a Voice

- Writers of creative nonfiction need to think especially carefully about narrative perspective. Think for a moment about the project you most hope to write some day, or the project you are already working on. What point of view do you imagine that story being told from, and why?
- If you want to write a memoir, the obvious choice would be first person; for a biography, some version of third person is more appropriate, but as we saw in the previous lecture, choosing third person requires you to make a series of other decisions.
- Just as you need to decide about your narrative arc before you get too far into your writing project, you need to decide on your perspective early on as well. The perspective a writer uses is part of the structure of a story.



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**Any story can be told from multiple perspectives. It is important to choose one carefully at the outset.**

- Whatever perspective you choose, you will have to negotiate one important question: Who is the implied author, and what is his or her role in the story? All stories have a consciousness that organizes them and that communicates with the reader. In essence, the implied author is another character.

### **The Narrator as Character**

- You will be able to use perspective and mode much more effectively if you think of the implied author as a character. What matters is that this implied author has a distinct and reliable set of traits and moves the narrative forward rather than hindering your storytelling. For this reason, we sometimes call the implied author the author-narrator.
- I used the technique of blending first-person and third-person narration, turning myself as author-narrator into a character, in *The Widow Clicquot*. I used the story of my quest to tell this story to bridge the gap in the historical evidence.
- I introduced my implied author as a first-person tour guide through history in the opening pages of the book. I needed this character to be someone the reader trusted and cared about right from the outset. I could not drop this character into what seemed like a normal historical biography without warning.
- I also could not simply use this *I* persona as a frame, at the beginning and the end. I needed this implied author to develop as a character all the way through the story and to show up regularly enough for the readers to be comfortable with her insights.
- Because I, as author-narrator, was a character, I needed tension and conflict, too, that drove what happened next in the story. In the end, I wove the circular quest narrative of Tilar Mazzeo's research throughout the linear biographical narrative of the Widow Clicquot.

## The Third-Person and Purple Prose

- Let's look at how altering the implied author's voice affects the reader's response through an example of a family history. We will see how the objective third-person perspective can have a real personality of his or her own without ever resorting to the first person to describe him or herself or being described by another character.
- The narrator in these examples is Mary, the great-great-granddaughter of Philippe the Pirate. Mary the writer's task is to develop Mary the implied author as a character in the story without description or direct self-revelation. Here is her first try:

In August of 1685, Philippe left France for the Windward Islands aboard a ship named *Providence*, and unknown to the captain of the vessel he was part of a gang of young men who had already decided to take control of the ship. There was a predetermined signal that the young men had agreed upon in Marseilles, involving a secret handshake at the first watch.

- This is a rather dull paragraph. The implied author is boring, if precise and neutral. In her next revision, Mary goes in the opposite direction:

In August of the year 1685, the venerable Philippe left the shores of France for the far-flung Windward Islands aboard a vessel named *Providence*, and unbeknownst to her captain, Philippe had conspired with some of his young compatriots to seize control of the schooner. There would be a secret handshake upon the first watch, a predetermined signal that the momentous moment of revolution was upon them.

- This implied author is considerably more pompous. Our invisible narrator is a bit more visible than we want her to be. Thus, as a writer, you can draw a reader into a story—or make a reader want to back away from it—all through subtle choices in perspective.

- In the second example, Mary has indulged in **purple prose**. This is what writers call prose that is ornate and overwritten. It is language that calls attention to itself as language. The reader sees a writer who is more interested in the writing than in the story.
- Sometimes, in great literature, purple prose can sweep a reader away with emotion and enthusiasm. In theory, it could serve a narrative function, especially if the writer is trying to be ironic or funny, but most of the time, purple prose does not do anything useful.
- Even an experienced writer can fall into prose that has a bit of a bluish tint from time to time. It is always a danger when writers try to use language to shape the rhetorical and emotional reactions of our readers. Like sentence variation, language is a tool that must be used carefully to be used well.
- The risk of purple prose is that an author overwrites a passage to the point of unintentional comedy. It's essentially the same thing as turning the implied author into a stock character. It means that you have created—probably unintentionally—an unreliable narrator. After all, what reader is going to rely on a narrator who cannot write good prose?
- The words we choose and the way we put those words together create the voice of the implied author. That voice does not have to be *your* voice. In fact, because it is a character construct, because it has to be the right voice for the particular story you want to tell, it will never be exactly your voice.
- Writers learn to write in many different voices, all of which are ours—and yet not ourselves. Writers inhabit the minds and lives and perspectives of other people—some real, some imaginary—to tell their stories and our stories at the same time.

### **Philippe the Pirate—A Writing Exercise**

- Rewrite the story of Philippe the Pirate from that imaginary family history in the voice of an implied author who is wry, witty, smart,



and funny. Have a friend read your revision. How does your friend describe the voice of your implied author? Does it match the person you wanted to portray? If not, try another revision.

### Important Term

**purple prose:** Writing that is overwrought or self-consciously written and calls attention to itself and away from the narrative; generally seen as negative.

### Suggested Reading

Mazzeo, “The Author as Character in Narrative Nonfiction.”

———, *The Widow Clicquot*.

### Questions to Consider

1. In the project you imagine writing, who will the implied author be? What role will that character play in your story?
2. What would a story without any implied author at all look like? What would you have to do to write one? Could you still have a story?

# Writing the Gutter—How to Not Tell a Story

## Lecture 17

**S**ometimes, the parts of a story a writer chooses not to show the readers are as important as the parts he or she chooses to show. Using the metaphor of the gutter—the spaces between the panels of a comic strip—as our guide, we will look at how not giving readers every detail of a story makes them more active participants in storytelling by engaging their imaginations.

### Pregnant Pauses

- Up until now, we have been talking about the ways a writer can hone descriptions to make them work most effectively—how to make what we say as effective as it can be. Counterintuitively, sometimes in writing not saying something is a storyteller’s most powerful tool.
- Silence has an important role to play in storytelling. It can create drama and suspense. Think about a writing mystery: If you give too many hints, the reader figures it out on page 15, ruining the fun.
- When I am trying to decide what to leave out of a story, I like to use the idea of the pregnant pause. This is a quiet moment that seems like a gestation, where the story promises something important is about to happen. In our daily interactions, a pregnant pause occurs when we ask an important question and the response is a telling silence, a delay, or a hesitation.
- We want to learn to use that kind of unspoken drama and tension in our writing, and we want to use it as a way of showing, not telling our stories.

### Writing the Gutter

- If any group of writers depends on showing as a way of telling a story, it would be graphic novelists. These writers compose what

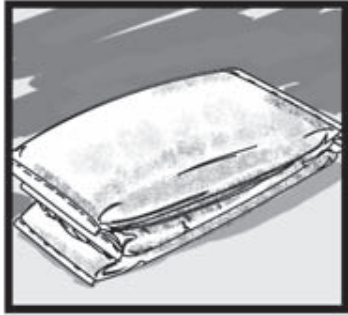


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**Writing the Gutter.** Notice how much of the story is “missing” in the spaces between the panels of a comic strip. This is no barrier to the reader; in fact, it can be an asset. The space asks the reader to engage his or her imagination.

many of us still think of as comics—the illustrated stories of our childhoods and the newspaper funnies—but today these stories have grown up, and graphic novels are a serious adult literary genre.

- In a graphic novel or comic strip, there is a series of panels with a line or a space between each. Space is limited; there simply is no room for part of the story, only a few images and a line or two of dialogue with each. A graphic novelist must master the art of the implied narrative.
- The space between two panels is what graphic artists call the gutter. We are going to borrow the idea of the gutter as a metaphor for our own work. What happens in the gutter—in the spaces between the panels—are the parts of the story that the author does not tell but that the reader fills in with his or her own imagination. Thus, writing two moments of a story can imply an entire narrative.



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**Part of the power of the sentences in *The Woman Warrior* is how like a snapshot—or comic panel—each sentence is. Each moment stands on its own, a vivid individual image in the reader’s mind.**

- The gutter is part of any good storytelling. The gutter is about silence—about how to tell a story by not telling certain parts of it. Writers do not need to illustrate every event in a sequence. In fact, telling us too much makes a story less interesting. The best writers show what the reader needs to know and demand the reader’s participation.

### Writing the Gutter in *The Woman Warrior*

- Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* uses the gutter to great effect in its opening passages. As we saw earlier, the memoir opens with Hong Kingston’s mother telling the story of the night her aunt drowned herself. Notice what the mother does and does not say:

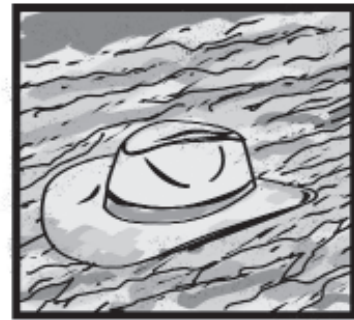
On the night the baby was to be born the villagers raided our house. The villagers broke in the front and the back doors at the same time, even though we had not locked the doors against them. Their knives dripped with the blood of

our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her. We stood together in the middle of our house, in the family hall with the pictures and tables of the ancestors around us, and looked straight ahead. ... We swept up the rice and sewed it back up into sacks....Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night...I found her and the baby plugging up the family well.

- With these powerful images, Hong Kingston is obviously showing, using vivid language and a lot of action. But this passage is also effective because of how she uses the gutter. It is a series of individual images, rather than a string of continuous action, each of which could stand like a panel in a graphic novel.
- The spaces in between are what allow Hong Kingston to tell a moving story with such economy. The spaces in between leave things to the readers' imagination. As our minds move from the gory and active image of the chicken swung in a bloody arc to the family standing motionless among the pictures, we cannot help but think "What must they have felt?"

### **How Wide Is the Gutter?**

- How much information should a writer leave out? Imagine three frames on a piece of paper. In the first frame, a man and a woman stand by a river, and the woman asks coyly, "Do you like my hat?" The second frame shows the man responding, "I hate how you're always thinking about your clothes." The third frame shows the hat floating down the river.
- What would make this story use the gutter more effectively? The story here is not about the hat itself; it is about the tension in between these two characters. If we only had the first frame with the question and the final frame of the floating hat, we would know everything we needed to know, and we would be drawn in by imagining the connection between the two moments.



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**The gutter in this comic is wide, but could it be wider? Is the second panel necessary to tell the story?**

- The first thing to remember is that if you are telling a dramatic story, you need to think about not overnarrating. The gutter works because it gives the reader two pieces of information and trusts him or her to transform them into a single storyline. Engaging the reader's imagination makes the reader an active participant rather than a passive recipient.
- As a writer, consider what is essential for a reader to know. Our instinct is to tell the reader everything, but if we tell everything, there is no room for the reader's imagination. The writer's craft is in giving what is essential and using the silence of the gutter to connect the dots of the narrative.
- It is all about balancing precision and concision: marrying the most vivid way of telling a story with an economy of language. It is about trusting our readers enough to let them have a role in the story we are telling.

### **Writing the Gutter as a Style Choice**

- You might argue that people did not write the gutter 100 years ago. After all, comics—and film, which also uses this technique—were not part of the way people encountered great stories, and to some extent that is true.

- Writing styles change with time, and today what we value the most is writing that balances precision—using the right words to capture an image, character, or tension—and concision—using the most efficient language possible. That was not what readers of, say, the 19<sup>th</sup> century valued most, but you will certainly find examples of writing the gutter in the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels.

### **Ways to Write the Gutter**

- There are many ways the gutter can work into great writing. Several examples can be found in the diaries of H el ene Berr, a young Jewish woman who lived in Paris during the Second World War. Berr tells her story with silence as well as words. Here is one dramatic example:

On Boulevard de la Gare, there are currently two hundred people, men and women, living together in one room, with one sink between them. There is no privacy at all; men and women are being stripped of modesty with exquisite refinement. That's where Monsieur Kohn is. . . . They are all suffering, it's just that for people who are intensely sensitive like M. Kohn it must be even worse. Went to Neuilly, waste of time. To Saint-Denis at 11:30. Wept after dinner.

- What Berr is expressing in those final sentences is that she and her family went looking for their friends and did not find them. This is a bit more subtle than the Hong Kingston example, but by not saying what she saw at Neuilly and Saint-Denis, telling us only that she wept, she invites us to imagine.
- In another example, Berr writes:

At Boulevard de la Gare there are aisles for every sort of thing, furniture, sewing kits, haberdashery, jewelry. Entirely made up of things stolen from the dwellings of people who have been taken and deported, which are packed and crated by the internees themselves. The crates are sent to Germany right away.

- The image of the street, filled with luxuries, is juxtaposed with the image of the internees packing crates and the third image of the crates on trains to Germany. What is not shown is the internees' pain at packing. We are also, perhaps, imagining what else (or rather, who else) these trains are used to transport.
- Joan Didion's essay "Goodbye to All That" contains a particularly subtle example. It is the story of how, as a young woman, she moved to New York City from California and how she finally decided to go home. She writes:

All I ever did to that apartment was hang fifty yards of yellow theatrical silk across the bedroom windows, because I had some idea that the gold light would make me feel better, but I did not bother to weight the curtains correctly and all that summer the long panels of transparent golden silk would blow out the windows and get tangled and drenched in afternoon thunderstorms. That was the year, my twenty-eighth?, when I was discovering that not all of the promises would be kept, that some things are in fact irrevocable and that it had counted after all, every evasion and ever procrastination, every word, all of it.

- In this image of the bare apartment with the single gold curtain, getting wet in the thunderstorms, the gold fabric is a metaphor for the golden sunlight of California, but in the last sentence, the reader is invited to make a connection between that image and the emotional fallout of her time in New York. As readers, we must struggle with meaning, just as she struggled with this time in her life.

### **Thinking in Panels—An Imagination Exercise**

- If you are working on a project right now, can you begin to imagine a key moment as a series of graphic scenes? What does the reader have to know in this scene, and what could remain implied?



## Important Term

**writing the gutter:** Using juxtaposition and untold aspects of a story to heighten a reader's drama and interest.

## Suggested Reading

Berr, *The Journal of Hélène Berr*.

Didion, "Goodbye to All That."

Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Can you think of a time when you told a story, and leaving information out was part of what made that tale effective?
2. Do you think your favorite films or television shows use the gutter, or are films and books fundamentally different in their strategies?

# Dialogue Strategies in Creative Nonfiction

## Lecture 18

**D**ialogue writing presents a particular challenge to a creative nonfiction writer. Not only must it adhere to the nonfiction contract and therefore be based in thorough research; it also must either reveal character or move the narrative forward—preferably both at once. Good dialogue is, above all, constructed. It does not mirror real-life speech but distills the speaker’s meaning and enhances the reader’s understanding.

### The Challenge of Dialogue

- The nonfiction contract means we cannot make up anything, including the words we put in the mouths of our characters. We must stick to the words they said or wrote themselves. Writing dialogue in creative nonfiction requires a deft touch—and superb research skills.
- It is perfectly possible to write a great story without dialogue, but nothing builds character and connects a reader to a persona, especially a historical one, like hearing the character’s own words and thoughts, whether in dialogue or interior monologue.
- Depending on your subject, you may have many or few research sources to work with. If you are writing, say, the biography of a modern public figure, you will have a greater variety at your disposal.
  - You could start with letters from, to, or about the person.
  - You could look at memoirs written by people he or she met.
  - You look at the person’s own diary or journals, if any.
  - There might be speeches contained in public records or quotes in newspapers.



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**Dialogue in creative nonfiction must be based in fact and must serve to move the story forward or develop character—preferably both.**

- If the figure is modern enough, there might even be tape or video recordings, a particular bonus because it enables you to describe the figure’s tone of voice.
- There are other strategies for researching less famous subjects. You can at least research the words of other people who lived at the same time and in the same places to set the scene and move the narrative forward, even if you cannot use what your subject said.

### **The Purpose of Dialogue in a Story**

- Understanding what makes good dialogue in general requires understanding the purpose of dialogue in narrative, what makes it work, and what makes it fall flat.

- Like any element in storytelling, dialogue needs to do one of two things—and ideally do both at once. It needs to reveal character and move the narrative forward.
  - In daily life, what a person says and how he or she responds to a situation tells us a great deal about who they are, their intentions, their hesitations, their prejudices and convictions—in short, their character.
  - In a story, dialogue also has to be part of a context, namely the context of the narrative. It needs to show how a character responds to the conflict that is driving the story, whether that conflict is internal or external.
- What people say, just as much as what they do, can set actions into motion and can show us the consequences of actions already underway. So dialogue either has to intensify a scene or unravel an action to be really effective.
- Therefore, rule number one of writing dialogue is that it is not simply conversation; it is a way of using conversation to drive narrative action, intensify conflict, or establish character—all of which will have consequences. If you cannot say what function your dialogue serves in your story, chances are it is not working. Revise it, or cut it.

### Writing Dialogue Well

- Although dialogue should be more than merely interesting, it should still be interesting. Boring dialogue that has a narrative objective is not great dialogue either. Interesting dialogue is, above all, constructed. It does not sound the way people really talk.
- Believe it or not, the way people really talk is generally pretty uninteresting, full of *ums* and *uhs*, pointless digressions, and repetition. Good dialogue leaves out the parts of a conversation that do not have a function.

- You can leave things out of your researched dialogue as long as you punctuate it properly. If you want to leave something out of a direct quote, just replace the missing material with the three-dot punctuation mark known as an ellipsis.
- You cannot take out something that changes the meaning of the quotation fundamentally. For example, you cannot replace every *not* in a sentence with an ellipsis and still be playing by the nonfiction contract rules. But otherwise, you have broad leeway.
- Therefore, rule number two of writing good dialogue is that it should not sound fake, but sounding real and sounding encyclopedic are not the same thing. Less is generally more.
- You may also correct grammar mistakes, and you should resist the temptation to emphasize regional accents or foreign words in your researched quotes. If someone has a regional accent, find a way to signal identity through description and move on.
- Making a big deal out of these features in conversation can quickly become overblown and comic unless you do it very delicately. It is akin to the problem of purple prose: It is dialogue that calls attention to itself as dialogue, rather than letting the reader focus on what the character is revealing.
- One other mistake writers often make is using dialogue as a way to have characters explain things directly to the reader. The point of dialogue is that two characters are directly engaged with each other. They should focus on each other—not on serving as extra narrators.
- For this same reason, you should use dialogue tags (*he said*, *she said*, and so forth) sparingly. Sometimes, usually at the start of dialogue, they need to be there to orient the reader. But in general, a reader should be able to follow a conversation without any difficulty; tags should only be used to smooth the process as necessary.

## The Ethics of Dialogue

- What happens when you are writing a memoir and want to include a conversation that really happened, but you only have your memory of it? This is one of the trickiest situations for anyone writing a memoir and one of the places where the risks of getting it historically wrong are the most complicated.
- Temporarily setting aside the legal and interpersonal issues writers of creative nonfiction face, let's address the ethical and craft issues. The ethical issue—how this squares with the nonfiction contract—is pretty straightforward.
- If you think you might write a book, the first thing to do is start keeping notes on your conversations. Keep a daily journal. Keep your e-mails, letters, and other materials. Therefore, when the time comes, you will not have to rely on your memory.
- If you have not kept good notes and you want to use a conversation you only have in your memory, the ethical rule in nonfiction is that as long as you are reporting your experience as accurately as possible, then you are on safe ground in terms of the nonfiction contract.
- Most smart writers who are relying on memory will add a note to the beginning of their manuscript that simply states that fact and alerts the reader if there have been any changes made to the order of events or the context of the conversation.

## Dialogue That Does Not Work and Dialogue That Does

- Here is a sample of dialogue that is not working. See if you can figure out why and how you would fix it.

John came into the room and slung his briefcase in the corner. All he could see were the dishes everywhere. The kitchen was a disaster. For crying out loud, why was it always like this when he came home from a hard day of work anyhow?

“Janet,” he said harshly. “What’s goin’ on.”

“What’s going on?” she said.

“Yes, what’s goin’ on,” he said.

“I’m. . . .”

“I don’t care watcha doing,” he said. “I’m tired of this. You’re always doin’ this.”

“I . . . .” Janet tried to say.

“No,” John interrupted, “I told you last time, when we were in the mountains in Colorado, the time your motha’ was there and we argued about the children, and you were havin’ fits cuz you thought I was flirting with that waitress, I told you then that if the house wuz always a mess I’d pack my bags and leave you.”

“Yes,” Janet said, “I remember that trip, and that argument is still a problem in our relationship, because you were flirting with that stupid waitress and you know it. But get your bag you awful man, I’m sick of this! I was cooking you a happy anniversary cake!”

And then, as the door slammed, John suddenly remembered.

- Among the problems here, it goes on too long before we get to the conflict, the slang calls attention to itself instead of to John’s character, big chunks of dialogue are just backstory, every line has a mostly unnecessary tag, and the whole piece does little to develop character or move the narrative forward.
- Contrast the example above with the following excerpt from Ernest Hemingway’s memoir of Paris, *A Moveable Feast*. In this scene,

writer Ford Madox Ford has just “cut” another writer, Hilaire Belloc, and is bragging about it.

“A gentleman, Ford explained, “will always cut a cad.”

I took a quick drink of the brandy.

“Would he cut a bounder?” I asked.

“It would be impossible for a gentleman to have known a bounder.”

“Then you can only cut someone you have known on terms of equality?” I pursued.

“Naturally.” ...

“It’s very complicated,” I said. “Am I a gentleman?”

“Absolutely not,” Ford said.

“Then why are you drinking with me?”

“I’m drinking with you as a promising young writer. As a fellow writer, in fact.”

“Good of you,” I said.

“You might be considered a gentleman in Italy,” Ford said magnanimously.

- Here, Hemingway deftly established Ford’s character, and established himself as a witty tease and a sarcastic and confident speaker. The tags are brief, and best of all, the speakers are speaking to each other, not to us.



## Constructing Dialogue—A Writing Exercise

- Here are two short letters. Your job is to take the historical “facts” revealed herein and transform them into a scene with dialogue for a nonfiction book project.

**Letter one:** Dear Eugene, it was such a pleasure to have met you at the dinner party last night at Mark’s house, and thanks for giving me your business card. And for writing your message on it. ... I knew from the moment we sat down over cocktails that you and I would end up seeing each other again. Did you know it too? I still remember that moment over dinner where you looked at me and asked if I liked the art of Cezanne. And of course I told you that it was my very favorite. And you said that only a wide heart could appreciate his still-life painting, and in that moment I fell in love with you. It’s a foolish thing to say, but, yes, of course I’ll meet you! Until soon, with a kiss, Charlotte.

**Letter two [e-mail]:** Hey Mark, what a party! As always the food was great and thanks a million for the invite. Only in New York City. I mean, is it me, or were Charlotte and Eugene engaged in some serious romantic tension? All that art talk. Gag. But Mark, didn’t he come there with his girlfriend?! Did I miss something? Julia just sat there like a lump on a log, so I assume she didn’t much care, but then you know after she did keep winking at me, and I loved that moment in the middle of that inane Cezanne conversation that just went on forever—I love Cezanne, no, I love him more, only the gentle spirits can appreciate Cezanne, look at those blue apples. I’ll never forget Charlotte saying that: look at those blue apples. Hah hah. I don’t think it was about apples somehow. But I loved that moment where Julia just looked at Eugene and said “Art is stupid.” And the table went silent. Hey, like I said, a truly memorable dinner party!

## Suggested Reading

Card, *Elements of Fiction Writing*.

Chiarella, *Writing Dialogue*.

Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Where in your life could an eager historian find evidence that would help to describe you as a character? What can you do to preserve that kind of material?
2. We all reveal ourselves through dialogue and speech. What do you think your speech reveals about you as a character?

# Researching Creative Nonfiction

## Lecture 19

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**M**astering the art of research is one of the most challenging, and yet the most important, tasks in becoming a creative nonfiction writer. First, one must understand how to find sources, both primary (firsthand, eyewitness, original) and secondary (interpreted). Then, one must learn how to evaluate these sources critically.

### **The Challenge of Research**

- It is research, above all, that the nonfiction writer has to master with real aplomb. Therefore, it is time to think about the kinds of places nonfiction writers find their materials, what to do when you get stuck during research, how to manage first-person interviews, and how to evaluate the reliability of sources.
- The kind of nonfiction book you can write depends critically on the kind of information you can find. If you want to write something new and groundbreaking, that means you have to find that information in the difficult places.
- Let's say you want to write a biography of Queen Elizabeth I. You cannot just go to the library and call up all the books on her—or rather, you can and even should at the beginning, because unless you know what else has been written, you will not know whether you have anything new to say.
- However, if you write your book by just cobbling together materials from books that have already been published, that will not make a great piece of creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction requires new and interesting material, a new perspective, or a new way of telling a great story. That means finding new research—either by chance or, if you are like most writers, by hard work.

## Where to Begin

- Whatever your topic, you are going to have to do research—even if you are writing a memoir. For most topics, you are going to start by calling up all the books at the library like the one you are imagining. You need to know what the competition is.
- Some of these books will become important secondary sources—emphasis on the word *secondary*. What a creative nonfiction writer needs is primary sources. Primary, or firsthand, sources are based on someone's direct experience or testimony. They are not someone else's interpretation or synthesis of information on a topic.
- Primary sources range from memoirs, letters, and oral histories to photographs, company records, interviews you conduct with eyewitnesses, and even your own experiences.
- Secondary sources are books and articles written by people who have done all the research, thought about it, and shaped it into a story. You are going to be writing a secondary source unless you are writing a memoir.
- There is nothing wrong with secondary sources, but if your book is just a regurgitation of the other secondary sources, then you are not doing anything creative as a creative nonfiction writer.
- One great place to start your research is with what you find at the end of any good secondary source: the bibliography. There you can not only read about other books related to your topic but also, for example, about private archives of unpublished materials, special collections in libraries and museums, memoirs, and even television specials on your topic. You can also go to the listed secondary sources and look at *their* bibliographies.



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**The Internet has been an enormous boon to nonfiction writers, allowing them to do huge amounts of preparation, organization, and research from home.**

### **Tracking Down Primary Sources**

- After you have made a list of all the primary materials you need to consult, then what comes next is the hardest part: tracking down those primary sources. Ultimately, you will use them as a way to find more primary sources, too.
- Your primary sources will likely be scattered far and wide, and in the end you may need to travel to see them, but that is not how you should start your research process. Before you visit any archives, you will need a clear idea of what materials you want to see, so you will need to do some preparatory work first.
- Most libraries and museums today have their catalogues online, where you can search for these materials. You can use as many related keywords as you can think up to find materials related to them as well.

- If you do need to see any materials in person, the catalogues will also give you each item's acquisition number, or call number. Before you visit the collection, you should contact its curator to explain who you are, what you want to see, and why you want to see it. In many cases, you will need permission to access the material, some of which will be fragile. There is also a chance that materials will be in special storage, in a conservation laboratory, or in a traveling exhibit when you want to visit.

### **From Source to Source**

- How do you use one set of primary materials to find more primary materials? Let's say, for example, that you are looking at a set of advertisements for the SPAM<sup>®</sup> brand\* from the 1950s kept at Harvard's library. Other university libraries might not have a SPAM<sup>®</sup> brand-specific collection, but they might have 1950s ad collections, or food ad collections, or archives related to the manufacturer of SPAM<sup>®</sup> products, Hormel Foods, and so forth.
- You might start with a quick Internet search on 1950s advertisement collections, and sure enough, you find another big collection at Duke University. Then you find that Duke has made their entire collection available online. You also learn, by way of Duke's website, that you can buy Hormel Foods ads cheaply online for your own collection. Sometimes a catalogue number for an advertisement will list the name of the advertising agency that created it, and someone at the agency can discuss their work with you. Perhaps the model or the photographer will grant an interview. All these little connections can add up to a research bonanza.
- This is why being a creative nonfiction writer is a lot like being a savvy investigative journalist—after all that is where creative nonfiction began.

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\*SPAM<sup>®</sup> is a registered trademark of Hormel Foods, LLC and used with permission.

## Evaluating Secondary Sources

- How do you know whether a secondary source is reliable? After all, especially on the Internet, anyone can post anything. This is why academia places such a value on peer-reviewed work. Very little that is published in popular trade books or on the Internet is peer reviewed. Writers need to make our own judgments about veracity.
- Sources with bibliographies tend to be more reliable for one simple reason: You can check up on the author easily. Of course, if the author refers to sources that themselves do not have bibliographies—or are otherwise unreliable—all bets are off.
- Materials from certain sources tend to be more reliable than others. Sources with academic or major institutional associations—places like research institutes, the government, museums, major news outlets—tend to be more reliable.
- This is not to say that writers associated with these places do not have biases. We need to recognize the difference between facts, which should be indisputable, and interpretation of the facts, which can be spun. Academic and major cultural institutions rarely make mistakes of fact, and when they do, they will generally acknowledge and correct them. Academic authors' careers depend on their credibility. If they are wrong about verifiable facts, they will not be credible for long.
- If your source does not come with academic authority but has a good bibliography, chances are you are on a solid track. If there is no bibliography—especially for short-form online sources—it might be reliable as long as it signals the source of its information and that source is credible.
- A website might say, for example, “This article is based on private interviews with the subject.” A reputable author, in this case, will give his or her e-mail address somewhere on that website so a curious historian can write and ask further questions.

- Some of the most interesting leads a writer may find may come from personal interviews. It is important to take good notes or record these conversations—but always get the interviewee’s permission.
- Oral histories are a critical piece of the historical record and great sources of primary material, and a good nonfiction writer always documents his or her sources—even if only privately and especially when he or she is writing about living people.
- One other thing to look for in evaluating sources: Does the writer seem to be objective, or is there a clear **bias** to the way the story is presented? There is an important distinction between bias and interpretation.
  - Bias is when a writer has a clear agenda and all the evidence presented supports a single opinion.
  - A more balanced interpretation will present counterexamples—instances when the evidence does not fit the frame. The moments when something does not fit are the moments character is most dramatically revealed, after all. Any good writer will embrace the chance to show that his or her story is complex.

### Recognizing Bias—A Research Exercise

- What would you say about this (imaginary) piece of historical information from the web as a source of information?

<https://www.elizabethstudies.myuni.edu>

E-mail [mary.oflannagn@myuni.edu](mailto:mary.oflannagn@myuni.edu)

How Elizabeth Became Queen

By Mary O’Flannagan



Elizabeth I had an unusually tortuous path to the crown. She was not yet three when her mother was beheaded at the order of her father, Henry VIII. At Henry's death, Elizabeth's sickly half-brother Edward ascended the throne (Jones, 257). Upon his death in 1553, he bequeathed the crown to Lady Jane Grey, cutting Elizabeth out of the succession. Edward's will was set aside, however, and Lady Jane Grey was executed, allowing Elizabeth's sister Mary to ascend the throne. As a devout Catholic, "Bloody Mary" persecuted the Protestants and imprisoned Elizabeth in the Tower of London (*Letters of Queen Elizabeth*, 17). Despite these difficulties, Elizabeth learned to craft her words and fashion her behavior to gain favor and secure her own well-being. When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth's patience and popularity paid off, and she became, at last, queen of England (Smith, 46; Newberry Library archives).

- At a quick glance, you know this source has a bibliography. We have the author's e-mail address, so you could ask further questions. Both her e-mail address and the website are .edu, meaning this information is probably part of O'Flannagan's academic work. None of this means O'Flannagan is necessarily right, but it does mean she has a professional stake in its accuracy.
- How does the following piece compare to O'Flannagan's?

<http://www.queenelizthevampire.com>

Family Tree Shows Queen Elizabeth Is Related to Dracula.  
By the Vampires are Real Historical Society.

Most people think of Vampires as a vast threat to civilization as we know it, if they even believe in Vampires. But Vampires are real, and guess what—Queen Elizabeth I is related to the lineage of one of the most famous vampires of all—Vlad the Impaler. This proves that they are living today.

Lineage charts make it clear that, to quote, “this 15<sup>th</sup> century murderous count has probably contributed his seeds to the royal family tree.”

Haven’t you wondered about why Queen Elizabeth wears all those big hats in public? Her bloodline has been diluted, but she’s obviously inherited the Vampire’s sensitivity to light. I just want to point out that there aren’t any mirrors in her publicity photos.

- The hints that this is unreliable material are unfortunately pretty common. The writer is anonymous and has a clear bias. There is no bibliography and no specific citations, even though there is a quotation. This author generalizes about sources but does not give you reference to any of them. The website address is a regular .com, which is not by itself a sign, but coupled with all these other hints, it confirms that that writer does not have any professional investment in his or her credibility.
- Now it is time to put your researching skills to the test. Imagine you were writing a book on Queen Elizabeth, as discussed in the lecture. Look online or at the library for five primary sources and three secondary sources on her. Then evaluate their reliability using the rules we have discussed. Which of those sources would you feel comfortable quoting in light of the nonfiction contract?

### Important Term

**bias:** The way the perspective of the storyteller or researcher can shape his or her attitude toward evidence.

### Suggested Reading

Bass, *The Associated Press Guide To Internet Research and Reporting*.

Mann, *The Oxford Guide to Library Research*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are the local research opportunities available to you in your area? Are any of them unique?
2. How do you evaluate Internet resources for reliability in other areas of your life? What makes for a reliable source of historical information?

# How to Not Have People Hate You

## Lecture 20

In the past decade, the places where we leave information about our lives has changed dramatically. With new kinds of public information about the private lives of millions of people available much more readily, our lives are richly documented—at least, for as long as these digital records last. For writers, this new digital world is either going to make things much easier or nigh on impossible. And these records raise new ethical questions as well.

### Personal Records in the Digital Age

- As we have been discussing writing about others' lives, have you had a moment where you thought to yourself, “Good heavens, I hope no one ever writes a biography of me!” Privacy is a hot topic today, not least because of the rise of the Internet and social media.
- Over the past decade, the places where we leave information about our lives has changed dramatically. Digital records can be searched much more easily and without our permission in many cases, and we leave behind different kinds of information than we used to.
- Whether we realize it or not, we are leaving for posterity—and for people in the present, too—a daily diary. In the past, that diary might only be seen by a handful of people. It was also the kind of thing that a creative nonfiction writer had to hope survived ... and could be located ... and that the owner of it, often a family member, would grant access to it ... and that it contained anything useful.
- For writers, this new digital world is either going to make things much easier or nigh on impossible. If, 20 or 30 years from now, I want to write your biography, the chances of my finding a photograph of you at some summer barbeque will be a snap—*if* all this digital information is stored long term. If it is not, if all the



**The new phenomenon of digital media offers researchers a wealth of data, but it also raises a host of ethical questions about privacy.**

relevant data is deleted over the next 30 years, there will be few or no hard copies to fall back on.

### **Respecting the Subject**

- As a person, I hope for deletion of all my private digital records. But as a writer, I want just the opposite for anyone I might wish to write about.
- How would you feel if I used a digital archive of all your e-mails, texts, and photographs to write your life story? You might object that this data would only offer a partial picture of your life, or that some of that information was too private for public eyes. You might even come to the conclusion that no story can represent the vastly nuanced complexity of a human life.
- Being a creative nonfiction writer brings with it an immense responsibility. These are real people whose lives you are using

to tell your story, people who surely deserve respect and to be represented accurately.

- Especially in memoir and autobiography, the line between our lives and the lives of the other people is not always clear. If your parents were abusive and you are writing a memoir of your childhood, whose story is that: yours, theirs, or both?
- You might feel it is simpler to invent characters for your narrative who had the same effect on you as the people in your real life and let the real people remain anonymous and private. But as a nonfiction writer, you cannot do this. You must not.
- One solution to the privacy dilemma is to invent a pen name. The challenge here is that authors today are brands of a sort, and readers want to know about their lives. Readers can and do seek out personal information about writers, especially online.
- If you do choose a pen name, remember that it does not exempt you from the nonfiction contract. Writing under a pseudonym may protect your privacy, but does not allow you to dodge your responsibility to the truth.

#### A Note about Libel

- I am not a lawyer, so in my cautious way here is a caveat: If you think you are writing something controversial, about living people especially, talk to a lawyer and get proper legal advice.
- If you write something untrue about another person, there is the possibility of being sued for **libel**. The creative nonfiction contract is not just an ethical deal we make with our readers. Breaking it can also put us into a legal bind.
- Defining libel is harder than you might think. In the United States, where libel is generally harder to prove than in many other places, it means that you wrote something untrue (or unverifiable as true) and that you did so maliciously.

- In some other countries—in much of Europe, especially—libel laws are much more liberal. In France, for example, there is a legal idea that people are entitled to their privacy. That means that even if you write something true, you could still be brought to court for libel if it is invasive.
- Smart writers, therefore, document their sources thoroughly. In the meantime, just write your book. When the time comes to publish it, you can let your **literary agent** or editor handle the legal complexities of your particular story.
- One of the invaluable things literary agents do is act as a creative nonfiction author's legal advisor. Agents let writers get on with the business of writing, which is all most of us really want to do anyhow.

### **The Memoirist's Worry**

- How does a memoirist write a book that will not hurt people's feelings and make their friends and loved ones furious? Sometimes it is hard to predict what someone will find hurtful, but there are several rules of thumb a writer can follow.
  - Comedy should be used with care. What you may mean as gentle, another may find harsh. When in doubt, leave it out.
  - Take care not to turn real people into stock characters. If a real person comes off as a single-note figure, you have a problem in your storytelling, not to mention a guaranteed hurtful situation. You are more likely to be forgiven for saying negative things if you also say positive things, if you mention strengths as well as weaknesses.
  - Beware of sharing early drafts with the people in your story. In a draft, you are more likely to say things you might take out later, but people's memories of the offending passages will not be erased.

- On the other hand, you should show the people in your book the final draft before you publish it. If you have gotten something terribly wrong or written something that will shock or hurt them, it is better that it come out when there is time to change things than when the book is on a shelf in the store.
- You can avoid some of these last-minute shocks by engaging the people in your book in your research process from the beginning. Instead of relying on your memories of Uncle Joe, ask your cousins about their father. You will get a fuller picture of your uncle and be able to share your vision of the character with them ahead of time.

### Character Sketch—A Writing Exercise

- Write a character sketch of someone you know in which he or she does or says something characteristic. Here is the catch: There must be something negative about the person in this character sketch.
- Once you have written it, read it again and ask yourself: Have I fallen into any of the pitfalls of writing character—not just stock characters and rash comedy mentioned in this lecture, anything we have talked about throughout the course?
- Finally, ask yourself, how would the subject of this character sketch react upon reading it? That is what it is going to feel like to write a memoir or the biography of a living person. It is a sensation at the heart of creative nonfiction.

### Important Terms

**libel:** The legal term for having written something untrue and malicious about another person.

**literary agent:** A person who acts as an intermediary between an author and a publisher and represents the author's interests legally.



## Suggested Reading

Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*.

Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*.

## Questions to Consider

1. Would you want your digital records and private e-mails recorded for posterity, or would you like to see them deleted? How might this change how history is written in the future?
2. Can you imagine writing under a pseudonym, or would that take all the fun out of writing? If you were to adopt a pen name, what would it be, and why?

# Revising Your Work

## Lecture 21

There are moments in our process when we might want to share our work with people other than our subjects. Three of the toughest questions any writer has to face are how to find good readers for work in progress, how to give and receive feedback usefully, and how to revise the work. A large part of understanding good feedback comes from recognizing poor feedback, and the best way to get good feedback is by being the sort of reader who gives good feedback to fellow writers.

### Why Writers Need Feedback

- We all get invested in our writing. Writers worked hard on their work. They put something of their hearts and souls and egos into it, and they know it is not perfect; if it were perfect, they would not be calling it a draft and looking for feedback. The draft stage is a vulnerable period for any writer.
- As painful as it may be, receiving feedback on a draft is a necessary part of every writer's process. Most of us get too close to the writing at some point to know exactly what needs to be done.
- The challenges of finding good feedback are many: How do you manage all these complicated feelings? How do you find good readers? How do you learn what advice is worth taking and what you should ignore? How do you know when you are ready to share your work—and when you are not?

### Choosing the Moment

- When you look at your writing, do you know what the problems are already and do you know how to fix them? If so, then you should fix them before sharing your work. The most valuable moment to share your work is when you know the problem but do not know the solution or when you cannot quite pinpoint the problem.

- Sometimes, writers seek feedback not because they are having problems but because we are frustrated with the hard work that writing involves and what we really want is encouragement. This is a completely natural impulse, but this is not a respectful use of someone's time. You are also likely to be disappointed; if you ask someone to read and give you criticism, they may say they love your work, but they will also give you the criticism you asked for.
- If what you really want is a pep talk, you should look for—or start up—a writers' support group. Get a group of hardworking writers together once a month for the explicit purpose of cheering each other on, sharing stories of triumph and disappointment. You can often find contact information for writers' support groups on bulletin boards in libraries, through book clubs, or in cafes. If you cannot find one in your area, you can put a notice up yourself.
- If you really do need and want constructive criticism, this is still difficult terrain for many writers. You know there are problems  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$ ; you must be prepared for a reader to identify problems  $a$  and  $m$ , too. You have to be genuinely open to receiving whatever criticism the reader offers and to revising your work, too. Otherwise, the process is futile.



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**Good feedback is essential for all writers, from beginners to seasoned professionals.**

- The result of good feedback is always going to be learning that you have more work to do. It is easy, even natural, to get defensive, but it is not productive. So here is the best way to set yourself up for success:

- First, do everything you can think to do on that piece of work, so it is in the best possible shape.
- Second, be honest with yourself about whether you are ready to hear criticism and do not ask for it until you are ready.
- Third, count on the fact that, after you get the feedback, you will need to invest time and energy in revising.
- If possible, time your feedback so it does not coincide with major life events, big work obligations, or other inevitable distractions. The time when most of us have the energy to undertake a big revision is when the reader's comments are fresh. If we have questions, it also helps if the reader still has our work clearly in mind.
- Professional etiquette is either to return the favor of a careful reading when asked or to buy your reader a nice dinner. A good reader will have spent hours on your work, and it is a big favor. Among writers, in fact, it is the biggest favor of all.

### **The Right Reader and the Right Feedback**

- There are better readers and worse readers, and sometimes even when we are ready to hear feedback, the criticism we get is not terribly useful. How do you tell the difference between good and less good feedback, and how can you increase your chances of getting the good stuff?
- The worst kind of feedback actually is the kind that says, "This is perfect! Don't change a thing!" It feels good for about 90 seconds, and you are getting it because the reader thinks you want a pep talk. But you already knew there were problems, so being told it is perfect is pretty useless.
- The second-worst kind of feedback is what writers and writing professors call unconstructive criticism. This kind of feedback has two flaws: First, it tends to criticize the writer, rather than the writing, and second, it tends to be vague and meaningless. The

hallmarks of such criticism are phrases like, “*Your* problem is ... ” and “This just didn’t interest me.”

- The personal nature of unconstructive criticism is unhelpful because it connects you and your work. What we all need to learn to do as writers is to separate our egos from our prose. Those two things have nothing to do with each other. Statements about broad sweeping problems with your work are pretty unhelpful because they do not help a writer think about ways to fix the problems.
- **Constructive criticism** talks about the work, not the person. It addresses specific problems and makes concrete suggestions about how to solve them. It also points out what is strong about the piece. Finally, it acknowledges how complicated fixing a problem is, because sometimes by fixing one problem, we create others.
- You will not get ideal criticism very often. Most of the time, you will get something between the extremes of unconstructive and ideal. But there are things you can do to increase your chances of getting good feedback, and part of that includes giving good feedback to your writing partners.
- One of the best ways to get useful feedback is to ask for it. Send a letter with your writing calling out the specific problems you see in the work, mentioning any solutions you have already tried, and asking for advice. You should also mention that you are open to hearing about other problems the reader might identify. Do not forget to thank the reader for his or her time, too!
- This kind of letter accomplishes three things: First, it says I am talking about my work as a piece of writing—not as part of my personal identity. Second, it says I have done some thoughtful work already; I am not wasting your time. Third, requests concrete ideas, thereby shaping the reader’s response. It looks professional and helps the reader focus his or her efforts.

## The Rules of Revision

- Once you have the feedback, it is time to get to work. Good feedback will make you feel energized and excited to get back to the project, because you will know that you have some tools to make your piece better.
- You should never feel obligated to take your readers' advice. Often, a reader's good suggestion will lead you to an even better one—one you might not have come upon if someone had not helped you to see your work differently.
- There are just two rules to the revision process:
  - First, be willing to change anything and everything. Be willing give it a try at least. Nothing in the world is harder for a writer than cutting whole pages—or whole chapters. But there are times when that is the best solution.
  - Second, always save a copy of your original. In fact, save copies of everything at every stage in the process. Save what you cut. Save your files before you made changes. Sometimes you were right the first time. Back up everything. Back up often.

## Giving Feedback—A Writing Exercise

- Try writing a wonderful feedback letter to yourself. You can use your current work in progress, or if you do not have one, use one of the exercises you wrote earlier in this course. (If you really do not have any work of your own, you may write something for a friend instead.)
- After writing your feedback, take an honest look at it. Is it objective, frank, and balanced? If so, maybe you are ready to ask someone to read your draft. That letter to yourself is the basis of a letter you can write to your reader, inviting the kind of response that you would find most useful.

## Important Term

**constructive criticism:** Criticism of a piece of writing that works to help the writer imagine improvements rather than putting down the writer and his or her abilities.

## Suggested Reading

Levine, *The Writing & Critique Group Survival Guide*.

Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What kind of feedback would you most like to receive on a piece of your writing?
2. What is your writing style? Do you write many drafts, or do you plod slowly through a single draft, revising each sentence carefully as you work? How will this affect your revision strategies?

# Building Your Audience

## Lecture 22

**B**elieve it or not, getting published in creative nonfiction does not begin with writing a book; it begins with writing a book proposal. Book proposals follow a strict formula that allows a writer to show off his or her skills, ideas, and research while simultaneously allowing an agent or editor to evaluate the sales potential of a work. Even if you are not ready to write your book, learning to write a proposal is an invaluable skill for a beginning nonfiction writer.

### Setting Realistic Expectations

- Now that you have learned how to write your work of creative nonfiction, the question that remains is, how do you get your work published? What you will learn quickly as a professional writer is that a good story counts for more than anything—more than connections, more than reputation, more than any other factor.
- That said, there are other elements at play, and some great stories never get published because the writer did not know how to pique the interest of readers in the beginning. A beginning writer needs to understand how the professional writing world is structured.
- One thing a new professional writer must have is realistic expectations. Most professional agents and editors will tell you that today, in a country as large as the United States, maybe a few hundred writers make a comfortable living from the art alone. The vast majority supplement their writing incomes in other ways.
- The most important thing is to define the reason you write and the idea of success. The essential measure of success is writing a great book. If you find someone else who reads your book and likes it well enough to publish it, then you have, by any measure, reached the top of the field in writing. Beyond this, anything else is extraordinary good fortune and huge talent.



## The Book Proposal

- Like any professional world, there are rules, traditions, and protocols in the world of publishing. You will need to learn to speak the language of your agent and editor.
- The good news is, if you are bound and determined to make a living at writing, creative nonfiction is one of the strongest literary markets out there.
- Also, unlike fiction writing, where a first-time writer has to finish a novel before he or she can attempt to sell it, you do not have to write the book before approaching an agent or editor. In fact, you probably should not!
- You still have to think through your narrative arc and characters, you still have to do your research and other preparatory work, and you still have to hone your writing skills so that you can do a great job on the manuscript and to meet your deadlines because you probably will not get a second chance at a book contract if you drop the ball on the first one. But when you know you have a great story and are ready to tell it, instead of writing the book, you need to write a **book proposal**.
- To write a proposal, you only need three things: You need a great story. You need to be ready to tell it. And you need to have an audience in mind. You need to be able to explain to an agent or a publisher why your book is going to sell at least enough copies to break even—and preferably make a profit.
- An audience should consist of more than your family, friends, and colleagues. There should be a group of people who will accept you as an expert on your chosen topic. This is what agents and editors call an **author platform**—your track record in an area that has enough people who are interested in it.



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**Giving public lectures on your specialty subject is a good way to develop a platform for your future nonfiction book.**

- You can develop a platform by giving lectures to local community groups on your subject, writing columns for a newspaper, or developing a following for your blog. If you have a business or client list already that is related to your topic, those customers or clients are also a potential audience.

### **What Goes into a Proposal?**

- These days, unless you are publishing with a small, local press, you need a literary agent. Acquiring an agent is actually the hardest part of the whole process because agents are paid only on commission. If they do not sell your book, they do not get paid. Therefore, an agent is only going to agree to represent a book that he or she thinks can really sell.
- Agents are essentially the gatekeepers of the publishing world, and a fabulous book proposal is the key to that gate. Writing a book proposal is also a fabulous way to test yourself on everything you have learned in this course.

- A book proposal must demonstrate your book’s narrative arc. It showcases your great beginning and develops captivating characters, all in your scintillating prose. In short, it is a virtuoso exercise in great writing. Writing a practice book proposal is a great exercise, even for a book you do not plan to write.
- A book proposal contains three parts and runs 30–50 pages, as follows.
  - A pitch and chapter summaries. The pitch is one or two pages where you describe the big picture of the story. It requires a great beginning that launches the narrative arc; quickly and powerfully sketched characters, and a series of actions that demonstrate complications and consequences. It should have tight pacing, good momentum, and—above all—great writing. Chapter summaries are exactly what they sound like. Together, they will show the narrative form of the book, demonstrating the ebb and flow of the story.
  - A sample chapter. This is usually the first chapter, which should be 4,500–6,000 words. This is where you pull out all the stops. You make it a great piece of storytelling so that readers end it just plain wanting to read more.
  - A market section. This is, for most writers, the most challenging section, where you discuss your platform and who you envision buying this book. It is where you say who you are, how you have established your expertise, and what kind of audience you have. You should also address who else, if anyone, has written a book on this topic and why your book is different. If your story is unique, tell the reader why now is the time to tell it.

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

- What if, as you begin to think about writing a book proposal, a whole book begins to look like a daunting place to start? Whether you are a beginning writer or an experienced writer looking to develop an author platform, starting out with smaller publications is a great idea. It is a way to hone your craft, get your work out there,

get some experience with editors, and start to think of yourself—no matter what you do for a day job—as a “real” writer.

- Writing is hard work. Every writer out there will tell you so. But like all good work, it is also a great pleasure, and that is what we want to have you learn to enjoy.

## Important Terms

**author platform:** The way in which the general public associates the name of the author with certain kinds of books or stories; also, the author’s expertise and credentials for writing on certain topics.

**book proposal:** A brief outline of a book that is sent to a publisher as part of the contract process.

## Suggested Reading

Eckstut and Sterry, *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published*.

Rabiner and Fortunato, *Thinking Like Your Editor*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What are your goals as a writer, and how does the market for books affect your goals?
2. What do you think about the change in our reading habits in today’s multimedia world? Do you think people will read paper books 20 years from now? Have new technologies changed your reading habits?

# Getting Published

## Lecture 23

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**M**any great creative nonfiction writers start their careers not with books but with shorter writing pieces. In this lecture, we discuss how to get your feet wet in the professional nonfiction writing world, with particular focus on travel writing, and how to write a feature article proposal much the way one writes a book proposal.

### Starting Small

- Starting your career in creative nonfiction by writing a book is a bit like learning how to climb a mountain by attempting to scale Mount Everest. Most successful professional writers start out smaller.
- There have never been so many great opportunities for breaking into publishing as there are today. There are local history societies, club newsletters, creative nonfiction journals, and writing contests. To find them, you only need to do a quick Internet search or check announcements in journals like *Creative Nonfiction* or *Poets & Writers*.
- Travel writing is a huge market with a lot of opportunities. Have you ever wished you could write about your vacation to share it with friends and family? Have you ever wished that one of your older relatives, who saw amazing things and went interesting places, had written down those stories? Those are all different kinds of travel writing.
- Thinking about what it takes to prepare to write a travel piece is also a wonderful way to practice the research preparation and narrative outlining that goes into creating any great work of creative nonfiction.

## A World of Opportunities

- On the publication side, there are travel-writing contests, hundreds of travel blogs and travel-related websites, and you can always start your own blog in a matter of minutes with a minimum of technological know-how. If you start writing a blog that other people are interested in reading, you will gain new fans—and that is also an important step toward establishing platform.
- If you are writing for family and friends on your blog, you probably will not need to do a lot of research in advance. But what if you ultimately want to write a feature article for *Travel and Leisure* or *National Geographic*? Before you write for those major magazines, you will have to have published other pieces of travel writing for smaller venues.
- In the publishing world, your previous writing credits are called clips; they are your credentials, proof that you can deliver good work. After you are published in a few small venues, you break into the next level by writing an amazing pitch letter to the editor of a magazine—or by writing an amazing travel book proposal to an agent.
- Most of the writing in commercial creative nonfiction is **under contract writing**—work where you do the research, pitch the idea in detail, lay out the narrative arc, and hopefully get a contract to go ahead and do the piece for payment before writing the entire piece.
- What does a pitch for an article look like, as opposed to a pitch for an entire book? It is usually in the form of a letter addressed to a specific editor by name. Grammar and proofreading count for a lot here. You must also target the type of story you want to write to how the magazine views itself—the kinds of articles that interest its readers.
- The best way to figure out if a magazine is a good fit for your idea is to read a couple of current issues. You need to figure out what the “classic” feature article for this magazine looks like—How long are

they? What voice are they written in? How do they hook the reader? Is there character? How do they develop narrative arc? What kinds of topics are they on?

- Once you can answer these questions, your letter should tell the editor your story and the source of your information in 100–150 words.

### **Writing the Feature Article Proposal**

- Imagine you were a single woman taking a trip to Marrakech, Morocco, for a spa vacation and wanted to pitch this subject as an article for *National Geographic*. The first thing to do would be to study the magazine's features. You will note that it does not generally focus on luxury travel—this is more of a *Travel & Leisure* subject.
- *National Geographic* is mostly interested in human culture, society, science, and history. The role of women in modern North African culture would be of interest. Perhaps this article can be about the history of women-only spas and the hamman—the Moroccan baths—and how modern culture—especially Western culture—is reshaping them.
- While there is often a personal element to stories for *National Geographic*, the author is rarely a character. These articles are usually told in the third person. You will probably want a linear narrative because you are going to describe changes in culture. And since a linear narrative is plot driven, you will need a strong set of dramatic events to structure the narrative arc.
- So, how do you pitch this plot-driven narrative about what is going to happen on a trip you have not taken yet? You will need to do a lot of research. That is where you will “find the story.” You will have to look for a set of facts that are interesting enough to suggest the possibility of a good story narrative, even before you buy a plane ticket.



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**There might be a dozen different interesting stories to be written on the hammams of Morocco, but which one is *your* story?**

- If you paused the lecture to do some quick research, you may have come up with some or all of the following possibilities: The hammam is historically associated with fertility, and women go to the baths as part of birth and marriage rituals, so one angle could be a story on wedding customs in Morocco. Another angle could be on the belief in the genii said to haunt baths in Marrakech and the rituals to protect against them. You could write a historical piece on how the idea of removing body hair was introduced to European culture by European women visiting the Moroccan hammam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- Whichever angle you choose, you need enough research to convince an editor that there is not just interesting information but an entire story in it—a story the readers will want to read. You need to make enough connections to sustain a story of the proposed length. Finally, you need to give the editor a confident sense that, even if the final story is something a bit different than what is proposed, you are a great storyteller and there is a great story waiting to be told.



## Pitching an Article—A Writing Exercise

- Imagine the travel piece that you would most like to write. Research it. Find the story. Find the characters. Find the narrative arc. Plan how you would complete your trip or your research.
- Once your plan is in place, write a 100-word pitch—maximum! Tell an editor the heart of this story you would tell. Craft those sentences. Build paragraph moment. Pull out all the stops. Show off everything you've learned in this course.

## Suggested Reading

George, *Lonely Planet Travel Writing*.

Mayle, *A Year in Provence*.

Powell, *Julie and Julia*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What trips have you taken that would make a great piece of travel writing? How would you pitch that idea to make it a great story? Where would you pitch it?
2. If you were going to start a blog—an online writing website with your work in progress—what topic would you choose? Would you be comfortable making your work public? Who would you want to be your audience?

# Being a Writer

## Lecture 24

**T**here is one thing that all writers have in common—they write. Sounds simple, but writing can be a challenging task for all sorts of reasons. This lecture will discuss how to overcome some of the most common challenges that keep writers from writing, such as the ever-daunting writers block and the modern menace of time management.

### Writers Write

- Think back for a moment over everything we have covered in the past 23 lectures, from narrative arc and finding the right kind of structure for your book to developing character, beginning and ending chapters, writing cliffhangers, using sentence variation and pacing, and writing effective metaphors.
- You already know everything you're going to need to write your first substantial work of creative nonfiction—except for one thing: Whether or not you have the self-discipline to do it.
- Here is one last secret all writers know: Writers are people who write. Teachers can teach people *how* to write, but you cannot be a great writer unless you write something to start with.
- Every writer—from beginners to seasoned pros—dreads writer's block. But what *is* writer's block really? Perhaps if we can figure out where it comes from, we can figure out how to conquer it.

### When Writer's Block...Isn't

- What are the things that prevent the words we want to write from making their way onto paper? Typically, writer's block occurs when writers worry so much that worrying is the only thing that is occupying the imagination. Life overtakes art, and you just cannot focus.

- The moment that I decided to write *The Widow Clicquot* was a moment of complete desperation. I was in a job that I really did not like, and I was afraid that I was trapped. I was living 1000 miles apart from my husband. I was coming up on a significant birthday without a lot of enthusiasm. And I decided that I was going to write the book I always wanted to write. I was going to commit to my writing. I turned back to my writing at a moment of crisis.
- That time I was lucky: The words came easily in crisis. But the next time—when I was writing my second book and dealing with my divorce—I was not so lucky. At the beginning of writing *The Secret of Chanel No. 5*, I spent a whole summer staring at a computer screen, unable to write a word that I did not delete by mid afternoon.
- The problem was not my writing. The problem was my life, but it did not feel that way at the time. The risk of linking writing and stress is that if we connect that turmoil to our identity as writers, we can create blocks that last long after the problem has been solved.
- When you experience writer’s block, make sure it is actually your writing that you are struggling with. If not, remember, you will write again when you are ready, when you are on the other side of the crisis.

### **Silencing Your Inner Doubts**

- Sometimes writer’s worry really is writer’s worry. That is the kind of writer’s block that you can do something about, because it really is all in your head.
- The trick to writing for the long haul, the trick to *being* a writer, is learning how to silence that little voice in the back of all of our heads that says, “You are not a good writer. This is a stupid book. Put that pen down and walk away from the table.” That little voice is the enemy of all writing.

- All of the famous writers I know are familiar with that little voice. If people who write amazing books that the world agrees are wonderful have that voice, then that voice does not know anything. Its judgment is completely uninformed.
- Sometimes, things are not working in your writing. Sometimes we do go a long way down dead ends and discover that we have to delete the words we sweated over. Sometimes, we are not doing our best work. But writer's worry mostly comes from getting frustrated and mixing up the difference between a paragraph that is stumping us and our ability to fix it.
- There are three concrete steps you can take to silence the voice and work your way out of writer's worry.
  - Keep writing. If the words will not come, sit for 15 minutes and make yourself write without stopping, even if all you write is "This is such a stupid exercise. I have nothing to say. I have writer's block. I can't believe I have to do this for 15 minutes." Sooner or later, you will find something better to say.
  - Set smaller goals. If you are consistently failing to meet your own expectations, you will only increase your worry. Be gentle on yourself. Even if you have to reduce your goal to one good sentence a day, that one good sentence will start to feel good and make you want to write another. Taking the pressure off will get the creative juices flowing.
  - Cultivate the seven habits of a writer, which you will find below. Writing is a habit that, if you let it, grows on you.
- Finding time to write is harder than it sounds in our busy modern lives. After you account for talent and imagination, writing really does come down to hard work and perseverance.

- In fact, the more you write, the more you submit your writing, the more rejections you will receive. What successful writers know is that when you get a rejection, you should not put that piece into a drawer and forget it. Revise it and send it out again.

### **The Seven Writers' Habits**

- What are the seven habits you can adopt to make space in your life for your writing?
  - Throw out the TV: Most of the writers I know do not own televisions, not because they do not enjoy them but because they are distractions. Let yourself be hungry for stories, so hungry that you write them yourself.
  - Find a time and a place to write. Make your writing space and writing time sacrosanct. It does not need to be anything so grand as a real office; it can be the corner table at the diner down the street, where you go at 5 am every day. But it must be yours, and it must be a priority.
  - Set concrete, realistic goals, and reward yourself for meeting them. To do this, you will need to figure out how you write best. Are you a quick first-drafter? Are you an outliner? Are you a slow plodder? Maybe your goal is a draft in three months, then plenty of time to revise. Maybe you want to write one perfect page per day. Do whatever works for you, but make sure it is doable. It is also important to reward yourself for meeting your goals.
  - Write like clockwork: I write six days a week. Does that sound crazy? Do you watch television six days a week? Do you drink coffee every morning? Those are all just habits. Writing can be the same.
  - Read more. Words are your tools, and you want to become more and more familiar with what they can do and how writers can use them.

- Keep a journal. This is not the same thing as a diary, although it can be that, too. A journal is just a centralized place to keep all your writing-related ideas: books you are interested in reading, bits of conversation you overhear, story ideas, to-do lists, and so forth.
- Make friends with other writers. Find or start a writing group. Take a course or find a retreat. Talking to other writers will help you think of yourself as a writer. People who think of themselves as writers are more likely to write.



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**There is only one rule:  
Writers write.**

- Feeling uncertain? Does writing your book seem like a daunting process? Of course it does! Writing is hard. But you are ready. There is just one thing left for you to do. Write!

### Suggested Reading

Hill, *Napoleon Hill's Keys to Success*.

Straw, *Unstuck*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Which of the seven writer's habits do you already have? Which habits can you imagine starting now?
2. Have you ever had writer's block? What do you think created it, and how did you get over it?

# Glossary

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**alliteration:** The repetition of the same sound at the beginning of successive words.

**anadiplosis:** The repetition of the word that ends one clause at the beginning of the next clause.

**anaphora:** The repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses.

**antagonist:** The character who is in central conflict with the main character of a narrative.

**antimetabole:** The repetition of phrases in successive clauses in which their order in the first clause is reversed in the second clause.

**antithesis:** The expression of opposing ideas in parallel grammatical structure or clauses.

**assonance:** The repetition of the same vowel sound in successive words.

**asyndeton:** The strategy of omitting normally used conjunctions in writing.

**author platform:** The way in which the general public associates the name of the author with certain kinds of books or stories; also, the author's expertise and credentials for writing on certain topics.

**bias:** The way the perspective of the storyteller or researcher can shape his or her attitude toward evidence.

**book proposal:** A brief outline of a book that is sent to a publisher as part of the contract process.

**circular narrative:** A narrative structure where the end and the beginning meet and where the story focuses on the transformation of the character during the experience of the events in it.

**cliffhanger:** A strategy for building suspense and anticipation in a narrative by leaving the reader at a moment of crisis.

**consonance:** The repetition of the same consonant sound in successive words.

**constructive criticism:** Criticism of a piece of writing that works to help the writer imagine improvements rather than putting down the writer and his or her abilities.

**creative nonfiction:** The art of bringing all the strategies of storytelling to the narration of factual events.

**direct discourse:** Quoted speech in a narrative that is attributed to a speaker.

**displacement:** A kind of metaphoric thinking in which one idea is substituted for another. *See metonymy.*

**dramatic conflict:** Conflict, either internal or external, that characters experience that moves a narrative forward.

**epanalepsis:** The repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning and end of the same clause or sentence.

**epistrophe:** The repetition of the same word or group of words at the end of successive clauses.

**first-person narrative:** A narrative that uses an *I* or *we* point of view.

**flashback:** The moment in a narrative where a character or narrative jumps back in time to an earlier moment in the story.

**foreshadowing:** A strategy for building suspense and anticipation in a narrative by giving the reader hints of things to come.



**frame narrative:** A narrative structure in which the essential story is bracketed at the beginning and end by a second perspective on it.

**free indirect discourse:** Speech in a narrative that is not quoted and is not attributed to a specific speaker.

**hypotactic:** A sentence structure characterized by subordination.

**implied author:** The personality of the author that the reader gleans from the narrative, as distinct from the narrator's or point-of-view character's personality.

**indirect discourse:** Speech in a narrative that is attributed to a specific speaker but is not directly quoted.

**inversion:** Reversing the normal subject-verb-object order of expression in English.

**isocolon:** Creating successive clauses of a similar length.

**libel:** The legal term for having written something untrue and malicious about another person.

**linear narrative:** A narrative structure where events follow on events to build to a climax and resolution and where the plot is emphasized over the character who experiences it.

**literary agent:** A person who acts as an intermediary between an author and a publisher and represents the author's interests legally.

**market:** The potential number of readers and book buyers interested in certain kinds of publications.

**metaphor:** An implied comparison that allows readers to see things in a new light.

**metonymy:** A kind of metaphor in which one object is described by reference to another object somehow associated with it. *See displacement.*

**minor character:** A character who plays a smaller role in a story or in developing the central conflict of the main character(s).

**mixed metaphor:** When the implied comparison of a metaphor is awkward, ineffective, or incongruous.

**multiple perspectives:** A narrative strategy that involves using more than one point of view in a story.

**narrative arc:** The idea that a story has a natural forward trajectory and that conflicts move toward complication and resolution.

**narrative voice:** The perspective through which a story is told.

**negative character:** A character—not necessarily the antagonist—with unpleasant or off-putting traits.

**nonfiction contract:** The implied agreement between a reader and a writer that the author of creative nonfiction does not invent any facts in his or her storytelling.

**objective mode:** A mode of writing that purports to report the facts unemotionally.

**omniscient mode:** A mode of writing in which the narrator is assumed to have complete knowledge of all events.

**pacing:** The writer's ability to influence the reader's experience of a story's drama by speeding up or slowing down the narrative.

**parallelism:** Expressing parallel or antithetical ideas in similar sentence structures to heighten the comparison or the contrast.

**paratactic:** Sentence structures characterized by a lack of subordination.

**pen name:** An assumed name, different from the author's real name.

**pitch:** A short proposal outlining the narrative of a magazine article or essay sent to an editor before a writing assignment is given.

**point of view:** The perspective from which a story is told; may be first (*I/we*), second (*you*), or third person (*he/she/it/they*).

**polyptoton:** The repetition of words of the same root in successive clauses or sentences.

**polysyndeton:** Using more conjunctions than one would normally expect in a clause or sentence.

**prewriting exercises:** Exercises authors use to prepare for a larger writing project.

**protagonist:** The main character of a narrative, whose conflict is central to the story.

**purple prose:** Writing that is overwrought or self-consciously written and calls attention to itself and away from the narrative; generally seen as negative.

**quest narrative:** A narrative structure in which the main character goes on a journey in search of knowledge, experience, or some concrete object.

**revision:** The process of reworking a piece of writing to strengthen the finished product.

**sample chapter:** Part of a book proposal in which the author includes a sample of the project being proposed to the publisher.

**second-person narrative:** A narrative that uses the *you* point of view.

**sentence variation:** A strategy of mixing sentence types to influence the reader’s experience of the narrative pacing, drama, and intensity; an element of strong writing.

**simile:** An explicit comparison using the words “like” or “as” that allows readers to see things in a new light. See *metaphor*.

**stock character:** A character who represents a familiar type of person, rather than an individual.

**story starter:** The combination of character, conflict, and narrative that sets a story in motion—an essential element of a great beginning.

**subjective mode:** A mode of writing in which the narration is presumed to be filtered through the subjective opinions and experiences of a particular consciousness or character.

**synecdoche:** A kind of metaphor in which a part of an object represents the whole.

**third-person narrative:** A narrative that uses a *he*, *she*, *it*, or *they* point of view.

**under-contract writing:** Writing of a book or essay that begins after the publisher or editor has agreed to publish the work; often involves an advance payment or an agreement to cover expenses.

**unreliable narrator:** A narrator who is revealed either to not have all the information or to not be entirely truthful in what he or she related to the reader.

**writing the gutter:** Using juxtaposition and untold aspects of a story to heighten a reader’s drama and interest.

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