

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Creative nonfiction tells a story using facts, but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy. Creative nonfiction doesn't just report facts, it delivers facts in ways that move the reader toward a deeper understanding of a topic. Creative nonfiction requires the skills of the storyteller and the research ability of the conscientious reporter. Writers of creative nonfiction must become instant authorities on the subject of their articles or books. They must not only understand the facts and report them using quotes by authorities, they must also see beyond them to discover their underlying meaning, and they must dramatize that meaning in an interesting, evocative, informative way—just as a good teacher does.

When you write nonfiction, you are, in effect, teaching the reader. Research into how we learn shows that we learn best when we are simultaneously entertained—when there is pleasure in the learning. Other research shows that our most lasting memories are those wrapped in emotional overtones. Creative nonfiction writers inform their readers by making the reading experience vivid, emotionally compelling, and enjoyable while sticking to the facts.

TELLING THE “WHOLE TRUTH”

Emotions inform our understanding all the time. So, to tell the whole truth about most situations that involve people (and most situations do), in the words of Tom Wolfe, we need to “excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally.”

The best nonfiction writers do not tell us how we should think about something, how we should feel about it, nor what emotions should be aroused. They simply present the concrete details. The reader's brain, to the extent it has experienced or known something about an exact or similar situation, will be “excited” and the old emotion reexperienced. This squares with what cognitive scientists believe happens in the brain when an experience is about to be stored in the memory. Apparently, various details about the experience are stored along with details of similar, associated, past experiences. When any detail is experienced in the future, the potential for the entire past experience (or experiences) to be recalled is there, including the emotions surrounding the earlier experience. Even the most conscientious and intelligent reader may soon forget the factual content of a piece if the material entered the brain with little emotion wrapped around it. Cognitive research indicates that humans remember best what enters the brain in an envelope of “emotion.” If it is true that facts and details are stored along with attendant emotions in a system of cross-files throughout the brain, we writers must recognize it

and use it to our advantage.

By “emotion,” cognitive scientists mean those feelings we might normally think of as emotions, but they also mean expressions that *imply* emotion—expressions like “terrifyingly hot,” rather than “200 degrees Celsius.” Unless the precise figure of 200 degrees Celsius (as distinct from 199 degrees Celsius) is significant for the intended reader, “terrifyingly hot” will have more emotional meaning and thus remain longer in the mind.

Too much academic writing ignores this fact, the fact that we humans have not evolved very far from our lower animal predecessors, and thus learn (remember) best any emotion-laden images. In their attempts at objectivity and precision, some of these nonfiction writers think they must avoid interpretive words like “terrifyingly.” After all, they reason, to whom is it terrifyingly hot? Not to the scientist, certainly. He or she doesn’t think of being terrified by the heat of the autoclave or the molten metal, but is concerned only with recording precisely the temperature observed. If the scientist then writes an article for people unfamiliar with the heat of molten metals, or a nonscientific audience, “terrifyingly hot” will make the point more quickly and even more memorably—the twin goals of such nonfiction writing.

To help a reader fully understand an experience we’re writing about, it’s necessary to stimulate as many associated memories as possible. Details not only conjure up old memories, they enable us to understand the new idea. We’ve all experienced the difficulty of communicating a new idea to someone of limited experience. By contrast, it’s easy to talk with someone with related past experiences, regardless of their possibly indirect relevance to the one now under discussion. Such a person can take a little something from each of a number of experiences and make them relevant to the present one. This also explains the strength of the metaphor. Of a metaphor, the reader says, in effect, “Oh, I understand...this is the same thing I saw (heard/felt/smelled/experienced) back then. It’s not exactly the same, but I can understand better now that I’ve been reminded of what this is like.”

FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Dr. Loren Eiseley wrote about anthropology and other sciences so that the well-educated nonspecialists could understand him. Like Dr. Lewis Thomas, the medical researcher, Eiseley wrote clearly and persuasively about sophisticated topics. These eminent scholars were able to go beyond so-called sophistication and come back to what I consider true sophistication—writing that’s clear, interesting, witty, and graceful. They usually wrote on serious topics which, in other hands, might put the reader to sleep. In the following excerpt from his book *The Night Country*, Eiseley writes about the elderly poor and ill who live in the railroad terminals of many major cities. He compares them to dying old brown wasps he’s observed in midwinter. Like them, these old folks prefer to die in the center of things, not somewhere in lonely isolation.

Now and then they sleep, their old gray heads resting with painful awkwardness on the backs of the benches. Also they are not at rest. For an hour they may sleep in the gasping exhaustion of the ill-nourished and aged who have to walk in the night. Then a policeman comes by on his rounds and nudges them upright. "You can't sleep here," he growls.

A strange ritual then begins. An old man is difficult to waken. After a muttered conversation the policeman presses a coin in his hand and passes fiercely along the benches prodding and gesturing toward the door. In his wake, like birds rising and settling behind the passage of a farmer through a cornfield, the men totter up, move a few paces and subside once more upon the benches.

One man, after a slight, apologetic lurch, does not move at all. Tubercularly thin, he sleeps on steadily. The policeman does not look back. To him, too, this has become a ritual. He will not have to notice it again officially for another hour. Once in a while one of the sleepers will not awake. Like the brown wasps, he will have had his wish to die in the great droning center of the hive rather than in some lonely room....

Perhaps the most important point to take from this particular image of group life is that Eiseley does not lecture us about the plight of these poor, feeble old folks. He simply paints for us a realistic (though impressionistic) picture of the policeman making his round, and the responses (and nonresponses) of those who huddle on those hard benches. Because he doesn't clutter up his writing with excess words, we can see the gray old heads tilted back against the hard benches, mouths forced open. Not that he supplied those open mouths—I did. As a reader, I brought to his simple, clear image something from my memories of seeing folks just like these in Grand Central Station. Had he put in many descriptive words, as some writers are prone to do, I wonder whether I'd have supplied that associated memory.

When too much description is presented the reader, he or she thinks, subconsciously, that it's all there—no other details are needed. Our brains enjoy filling in details—it's a primitive form of problem solving. Our brains are made to solve problems, and they'll do it when given the least encouragement. We can give that encouragement by providing a minimum of (carefully selected) information.

Have you ever noticed how attractive a photograph can be of a person's face seen through a rain-streaked, misty window? We like it because we get to create—we fill in the missing information about the face and experience joy in doing so.