

Creative Non-Fiction

Definition of genre

Creative non-fiction is a relatively recently recognized “genre” that involves writing from personal experience and/or reporting on other peoples’ experiences. The best creative non-fiction work usually involves conducting a considerable amount of research, most often “in the field,” involving oral history interviewing, participant observation, detective/sleuthing work, as well as jumping into new adventures. The range of possible topics is virtually unlimited, and this type of writing actually has a very long history. Creative nonfiction encompasses memoir writing, biography and autobiography, oral history, and inspired reportage on almost any subject. It involves writing about actual events in your own life and/or others’ lives, conveying your message through the use of literary techniques such as characterization, plot, setting, dialogue, narrative and personal reflection. As you analyze the elements of your writing, you might also find our guides to [Creative Writing](#) and [Poetry Explication](#) useful.

Questions to ask

- Has your professor assigned you a particular topic or theme to write about or provided specific guidelines, such as a model to emulate? If not, your biggest hurdle may be trying to decide just what you want to write about. What absorbing experiences constitute an ongoing theme in your life? (These experiences can range enormously: from involvement in historical preservation or marine biology, to a keen interest in surfing or ping-pong or watching violent movies.) The question is: what possible topic(s) could most engage you intellectually, experientially, emotionally?
- Do you have enough experience with the theme you’ve chosen to sustain a strong narrative? Can you bring these experiences to life with scenes, characters, dialogues, settings, visual descriptions, etc.? (Some subjects that interest you may be too abstract or purely intellectual to write about.)
- How much research, if any, will you need to do and how much time will it take? Will you need to travel and how much will it cost? (Has your professor asked you to do extensive research or simply to write from your own experience?)
- Have others written about your topic, or a similar topic, and if so, in what ways? Can their research or insights on the subject shed some light on what you want to say?
- What meaningful conclusions can you draw from your exploration of the topic you’ve chosen?

Actions to take

- Brainstorm about and list a wide range of possible topics that engage your passion and interest.
- Conduct free-writing exercises to determine which theme/topic engages you the most right now.
- Once you have settled on a theme, write down all the experiences, scenes and ideas that are pertinent to your topic.
- Write a rough draft that includes narration, personal reflection and broader concepts from other writers that relate to your theme. Complete it from beginning to end.
- Evaluate what you have written and determine whether you have covered your subject thoroughly and done it justice. Be willing to do further research, if necessary.
- Rewrite your rough draft, giving attention to your structure, your introduction and conclusion, your voice. Have you satisfied your potential reader on the subject you've chosen? Have you left your reader with a sense of resolution?
- Creative nonfiction doesn't necessarily look like a thesis-driven essay—its edges are softer, its language perhaps more inviting and (of course) creative—but it's still important to know where you're going and to make sure that each stage of the essay helps you to get there.

Helpful links

<http://www.creativenonfiction.org/>

A well-known journal on creative nonfiction.

<http://www.pitt.edu/~bdobler/readingnf.html>

Good definitions of creative nonfiction, with a long list of creative nonfiction classics.

<http://freelancesuccess.com/bittnerarticle.shtml>

“The Best Books in Creative Nonfiction.”

Helpful books

Gerard, Philip. *Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*. Cincinnati: Story Press, 1996.

Gutkind, Lee. *The Art of Creative Nonfiction*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997.