

Creative Writing – Nonfiction

The main difference between fiction and nonfiction is the basis of fact. Nonfiction is not necessarily 100% true (many memoirs seem to stretch the notion of being nonfiction) all the time, but nonfiction is differentiated from fiction in that it is based on a set of facts.

Anything from journalism to biography to self-help to essays can be nonfiction. There is such a wide range of possibilities of what nonfiction can be; as the name states, it is nearly everything that is “not fiction.”

Types of Nonfiction

Note: this is an incomplete list because there are just so many subgenres of nonfiction.

- Memoir
- Autobiography or Biography
- Essay
- History
- Journalism
- Letters
- Legal or Professional Documents

The list could go on. In terms of nonfiction being Creative Writing, the key is the creative part.

Getting Started

As with any other form or style of writing, reading examples first can always help. You can get tips on how to (and, often, how not to) do things. You can often use some of the conventions or forms or tricks in your own work.

The phrase “write what you know” takes on new meaning when you read more. The more you read, the more you know, not only about things in life but also about writing itself. All of the great authors of all time were very different but they all had one thing in common: they encountered new stories (most of them by reading) all the time. If you plan to write, you first must read.

Also, when you are writing a nonfiction story, keep in mind the fact that since it is based on actual events, sometimes these actual events involve other people. You need to be aware of how you paint someone you know in your nonfiction if you plan on publishing the piece or sharing it in any way. Something that you might find small and fun someone close to you might find embarrassing or even hurtful. Make sure you understand not only your audience but your cast of characters.

Finding the Right Story

Along with that, you need to come upon the right story. Depending on your assignment or intention, it needs to be something that can be both personal and universal. But it also needs to be something new or fresh; there is nothing worse than reading the same type of story over and over again.

The biggest thing that a piece of nonfiction needs to do is engage the reader in something much larger than the task at hand. For most people (as in not famous people) to write nonfiction, it needs to be more than a glorified journal or diary entry. There needs to be more at stake and more for the reader to identify with in order for it to work.

If you're writing a nonfiction piece about that time when your goldfish died, the heart of the story needs to be about much more than the goldfish dying. It needs to be about the relationship between people and their pets, the fleeting nature of life, the stages of guilt and loss, or the inevitability of death. The goldfish, like the Dude's rug in *The Big Lebowski*, really ties the room together, but just as the movie was not about a rug, the nonfiction piece shouldn't be simply about a goldfish. No matter how sweet and innocent and loving said goldfish might have been.

This is not to say that what happens to you (or has happened to you) doesn't matter; it does. What it is about, in terms of writing a nonfiction piece, is the fact that most people could care less about what has happened to you unless it *relates* to their own lives. The key to good nonfiction is the relationship between a seemingly meaningless event that happened to one person and how that event typifies something about life itself.

Make sure to check out our Creative Writing – Fiction piece for helpful tips. The two might be different in terms of content and styles, but there are very many similarities between the two: in the end, they are both styles of writing that are supposed to be creative.

If you have any questions or issues, feel free to stop by Auditorium Building room 105, and let us help you.