



Writing Your family History
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Session 1-Intro to Creative Nonfiction

Writing Exercise!

- The Child as Narrator: Using **present tense first person narration**, write the memory of an important childhood event (your first day at school, your first birthday celebration, your first death of a loved one, your first crush, etc.). Use only words and perceptions appropriate to a young child. Don't interpret or analyze, just report it as it occurred. If you forget a detail, don't get stuck, just make it up.
- No more than 2 paragraphs.



Discussion

“Like Mexicans” by Gary Soto

“Autobiographical Notes” by James Baldwin

“Total Eclipse” by Annie Dillard

Features of Good Creative Nonfiction

- Has both an apparent subject, and a deeper subject. Universality in specificity.
- Is timely- the apparent subject can be about anything, but the deeper subject must be topical and reflect the zeitgeist. It is your job to make the reader face our current culture/society in some way.
- Tells a good story. Use the techniques of fiction
- Is reflective. Choose a topic/story that has been on your mind for a while- something you've mulled over at various ages and seen from many angles.
- Takes seriously the craft of writing.

Helpful Short Form Genres


- **Personal Essay:** firsthand experience from the writer's life that endows an experience with universal meaning/appeal (intellectual, philosophical, Ekphrastic, etc.)
- **Travel Writing:** uses the story of an outward journey to talk about an interior transformation
- **Personality Profile:** a short biography, narrated in anecdotes & scenes, to make the reader feel an intimate connection with someone
- **Memoir:** a shared memory of people or events with meaning that applies to a modern audience

Research

- Interview- speak to people, if possible, who were there or who knew the people involved. Ask open-ended questions.
- Historical- TN State Archives, City Archives, Newspapers, online
- Old Maps- think of how the space (your setting) influenced events
- Walking the ground- go back to the setting, if possible, and just walk around, let the memories come to you. Notice how it feels different now, compared to how it felt then.
- Modern Research- Check pop culture blogs aimed at people in their 20s. What are they talking about? What story in your family past is useful to the conversation?

Writing Exercise 2!

- The Reminiscent Narrator: Go back to your first writing exercise, and retell that story from the vantage point of where you are today, using **past tense first person narration**. Inject it with adult vocabulary, insight, subtlety, comprehension, reflection. What did this event mean to you then? What didn't you know then that you know now? Change the way the incident is told without altering its content.
- No more than 1 page.



**What did we learn from doing both
short writing exercises?**

Freewriting & Homework for Thursday

- Decide what form/genre you want your family history piece to take, and which story you want to tell. Think about the modern relevance of your story. Do some research. Extra Credit: Get started freewriting.
- Readings: “Don’t Flinch” by Jack Smith, and “Telling a True Story,” by Philip Gerard