

CHAPTER 3

Form

If works of creative nonfiction were rambling series of disconnected musings, nobody would read them. At the same time, there is no structural template that must be followed: no formal introduction, three paragraphs, and conclusion. No thesis sentence. Yet there is a beginning and end, and in between a space to be filled. It's up to you to decide upon the design.

Beginnings and endings impose structure upon a work of art. The literary critic Edward Saïd wrote that a beginning comes from a “primordial need for certainty” from which we find coherence. All of us seek form in our experience; we all run on the clock and follow the seasons. An eternity, a life without end, is beyond our comprehension. Margaret Atwood has said that without the reality of mortality:

We'd become a different species—one living in eternal bliss, in the eyes of its proponents; sort of like—well, angels, or superhuman beings anyway. It would certainly mean an end to narrative. If life is endless, why tell stories? No more beginnings and middles, because there will be no more endings. No Shakespeare for us, or Dante, or, well, any art, really. It's all infested with mortality, and reeks of earthiness. Our new angel-selves will no longer need or understand our art. They might have other art, though it would be pretty bloodless.

We hope this chapter will give you ideas for shaping information and ideas, stories and facts, into pleasing, effective, maybe even surprising forms.

Elements of Form

On the face of it, talking about form should be easy. You characterize the parts of a piece of writing and the arrangement of those parts. Of course, generating those parts and settling on a satisfying proportion and order is trickier, and therein lies the art of creative nonfiction.

It's possible to sort the elements of creative nonfiction into two rough piles: "information" and "idea." The information pile would contain things like stories, facts, reports, descriptions, and so on: relatively concrete stuff, often observable. The idea pile would contain interpretations, reflections, analyses, and so on: relatively more abstract stuff, the thoughts the writer has generated. Here's a quick example from Steve Almond's "In the Belly of the Freak" (page 157), as he's getting ready to leave Sioux City, Iowa, and thinking on his decision not to fly or rent a car.

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But I was, instead, in a gravel lot, shivering alongside a group of passengers with duffel bags and battered plastic sacks. If you ever want to know what America really looks like—and I direct this chiefly toward the residents of the coastal cities who tend to write about America most frequently—I would suggest you abandon the airports. The only people in airports are rich people. Take a bus from Sioux City to Kansas City, via Omaha and Maryville.

The amount of information here is relatively slight. He describes the scene in the gravel lot. The rest is "idea," what he thinks of that scene and its broader implications.

What we're lumping together as "information" comes from many sources. One, obviously, is lived experience, preserved in memory. These don't have to be "big deal" experiences of momentous events; what writers do with an incident or memory is generally more important than the subject matter itself.

Another source of information is direct observation. Instead of recollecting past experiences, writers can create new ones by paying close attention to the immediate world around them, recording their impressions in a journal or blog or just on a napkin. They can also walk into situations with the express purpose of recording them, whether a Cinco de Mayo celebration, a gun show, a beauty pageant, a concert by a band they hate, a pet store. You know going in that you may write about it, and this will have an impact on what you notice and experience. As observations become more involved and sustained, you can draw upon interviews that you record through notes or after the fact. We discuss interviews at greater length in chapter 9.

Finally, there's information gained through reading. You obviously don't know or remember—or haven't experienced—everything, but fortunately for all of us, others have, at least in bits and pieces. All writers

do research in libraries and bookstores, in archives, and online—so much research that we've written about it in chapter 8.

Finding ideas is a more ambiguous, even mysterious process. A few questions may help you generate ideas about your amorphous subjects. Let's say you want to write about your mother. You don't know exactly what you want to write about her—there are so many stories to tell, so many things she's told you, so many things you've experienced with her. You might think about the stories that truly characterize her; which of these are the most dramatic and poignant and meaningful? Which are you willing to tell in public? What is driving you to want to show this? What do you want the reader to feel and think? What do you want to find out in the process of retelling the story? Why is this important? What does this mean? How is this like something else? What's the connection between this and that? What are the implications of what took place? How does it fit into the bigger scheme (outside of this one story)? Why should someone know about this? Most importantly, why should *you* know? How would someone in a different situation see this? What were and are the consequences? What is so vivid that you can't shake it? Are you sure the story will sustain you through the process of writing and revising this piece (because if you're bored, everyone else will be, too).

Sketch down all of the situations that come to mind, underlining the ones that in the act of jotting seem to carry the most power. Put them in one kind of order. Then put them in another. Remember that you can always change the order later. Take the situation or idea or vision that grips you the most. Start telling that story.

Beyond asking questions or sifting and sorting situations until the combinations stir ideas, read. Read things along lines similar to what you're doing and pay attention to the stories those writers choose to tell and how they tell them. What's the interplay of narrative and thought? Consider, too, all of the ideas, images, and incidents that the writer may *not* have included. (Of course, you can't really know, but use your imagination.) Why these particular choices? Try to get into the writer's head and feel the choices that were made, the situations that were chased. Notice where they stopped.

General Principles

Four main strategies organize most writings: logical, lyrical, spatial, and narrative. Creative nonfiction uses all four in various proportions and combinations, but narrative is often the most important, and that's where we'll focus most of our attention.

Logical (or propositional) works have skeletons of several statements that are usually designed to prove a main assertion. Once upon a time you were probably taught to write paragraphs with topic sentences followed by other sentences that provided evidence, illustration, or support. Such papers

often had this form: “There are three reasons to do X. The first is. . . . The second is. . . . The final is. . . . Because of reasons 1, 2, and 3, it is clear we should do X.” While this form is useful for some kinds of academic writing (but not nearly all), and while some creative nonfiction gets organized this way, straightforward thesis and support mostly doesn’t get creative nonfiction writers very far because it’s artificial and not “organic” to the subject matter or the writer’s voice. When a creative piece is organized around ideas, those ideas generally get embedded in stories, descriptions, and other information so that the skeleton is carefully concealed.

Lyrical writings, on the other hand, are organized to achieve aesthetic effects. Images, scenes, or ideas are joined to each other by association, as in a lyric poem. Those associations are rarely logical; in fact, creative nonfiction writers often use a striking juxtaposition of dissimilar materials to create a collage in which seeing “this” against “that” forms compelling connections. Such lyrical elements are part of many creative nonfiction works and occasionally the whole piece works lyrically. Take a look at Sharon Solwitz’s essay “Abracadabra” (page 671), which has several disconnected texts under such headings as “Dialogue between Two Halves of a Brain,” “Advice,” “This Is Not Making Me Happy,” “Jesse’s Hair: A History,” and so on. Given her subject matter, a child dying of cancer, and her aim to render what that experience was like, a logically tidy organization just isn’t going to do it. Here’s a sequence:

JESSE’S HAIR: A HISTORY

. . . At Dave’n Busters they played laser tag, and Jess so tired he could barely move, but he trained that fatigue into focus and got his man, every man, his score twice as high as the next closest. But the next game he lost, got wiped out by his laser-armed enemies, and the day after he was in the hospital with hemoglobin 7, half what it should have been, a wonder he could speak, let alone stand and shoot.

OH, JESSE

I want other people to miss him, to be affected, hurt, overwhelmed by the loss of him. Nick cries in his room, Meesouk’s grades have gone down, my friend Sheryl has upped her Zoloft. Good. Good, good, good.

ADVICE

You sound angry. You can write your anger.

I HATE

Grocery shopping, the process of selection that I used to love even in Jesse’s last days when I thought flax oil or raw organic garlic or taro root ground up and mixed with ginger would start the long process of restoring his health.

I hate buying clothes.

Spatial organization is apparent when writers follow the physical arrangement of things, as in a description that says, “To my left. . . . Ahead. . . . To my right. . . .” A tried and true structure might follow the writer on a walk or a trip, and the journey provides the line onto which they can hang stories, reflections, ideas, and so on. Writers also sometimes use the spatial formation of the map, not only because it is a handy organizing tool but because it serves simultaneously as a metaphor. While a map is directional and might in one sense appear to be linear, it can also branch into many areas from a single point, or can wind and meander like a river and dump into the big sea. Yet the very fact of the map’s existence provides reassurance that there is an order to things. Emily Hiestand’s “Maps,” on page 428, relies in part upon the use of the map to guide us through the sequences of a child’s life.

Graphic memoir and journalism put a new twist on spatial form because the layout of the page directs readers as they make their way through the work. For example, contrast the ways that the drawing styles in *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (page 656) and *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person* by Miriam Engelberg (page 368) influence how readers make their way through these works while still following the standard comics panel structure.

A spatial organization follows the traditional story arc, with a definitive beginning, middle, and end that lets readers feel that ideas and events lead to one another and everything comes to a satisfying conclusion. Sometimes the narrative is pushed forward by a sense of reportage: this happened, then this, and as a result this. More often, however, the creative nonfiction plots depend only partly on a literal report of events.

“Most creative nonfiction relies, almost inevitably, upon *narrative*.”

Most creative nonfiction relies, almost inevitably, upon *narrative*. Narrative is story. We’ve all been taught the basic story arc. Different theorists use different terms, but it usually comes down to something like this:

action → complication → climax → resolution/aftermath

Basically, something happens, the character (or narrator) is confronted, there’s a crisis point, things crumble or blossom, then all is resolved. This is the arc found in most novels and movies, and while there are moments of genre-busting, of scrambling the momentum, this, still, is what the reader expects. We can try to break this form, but in doing so we’re still working against standard expectations.

Creative nonfiction usually follows this same basic arc. The pace and build of dramatic tension, though, are often quite different from what you find in most fiction. Nonfiction is often more evenhanded and emotionally level in the development of the story; anything that seems highly emotive is often downplayed or treated with suspicion. The reader, though, reads on

for the same old reasons: it's nearly always because we want to know what happens next, in the case of events, or how it resolves, in the case of ideas.

Suzanne Keen wrote that people read stories not only to know what happens (and to whom), but to find the "answers to enigmas large and small." Essays delve into mysteries, less in an effort to "solve them" but to grasp them and to show the process of grasping. This is particularly true of creative nonfiction, which focuses as much on "what does it mean" as on "what happened." Readers ask such questions and confront such enigmas themselves, and they enter into this quest with the writer. The story of an essay, then, can often be understood as the story of how finally to make sense of information, ideas, and people, how to configure them into a whole.

Making sense, though, does not mean making it dull. Often, the pieces loop about, using imaginative structures that mix all of the four elements just mentioned. The writer may begin with a story, then include information or reflection that isn't directly part of it, then return to the story later. The writer may begin with reflection or ideas and only later tell about an incident. The writer may include several incidents, each of them a short story in itself, all organized into some longer frame. The piece should come together with a sense of cohesion and shape. In a way, it takes life as an independent being.

Beginnings

Although there's no perfect trick to help you start a piece, one bit of advice is consistent across genres: get the reader's attention and don't let go. Unlike the introduction of formulaic academic essays, you shouldn't lay out the template of your entire work. You needn't announce what is to come, but simply offer that first hint. The voice in that first paragraph is the one the reader will expect throughout; if you start out slowly and drily, the reader won't stay with you. Your voice shouldn't put people to sleep.

The beginning of a literary work arises from the piece's deeper meanings, emotions, and intentions, which may not be clear to you until after everything's written. For some writers, the beginning is the last thing they write. Others rewrite their beginnings over and over again before going forward. Some get it right the first time, maybe by running it through their heads before putting pen to paper. Everyone and every piece is different.

The beginning usually reveals the tone and style of the piece and hints at the subject and setting. It introduces the narrator (at least through the voice) and often one of the other people in the story. A setting that is emphasized in the beginning signals that the place itself is a kind of vital character. It may introduce a recurring metaphor or motif. A motif or metaphor may appear in the beginning, then repeat throughout the piece, much like the refrain of a song.

Works of contemporary creative nonfiction usually don't start at the chronological beginning and then progress linearly. (Older autobiographies plow from birth through death far more often than contemporary nonfiction.) Pieces travel through time, starting *in media res*—mid-scene and mid-thought and mid-act—snatching up past and present and tangling them.

Once the piece is finished and you read your beginning again, ask yourself: would you keep reading? If you wouldn't, then the true beginning lies deeper in the text. Beginnings in first drafts are often false starts; you write them to get yourself going, and they're as disposable as all of those wads of paper in your wastebasket.

Examples of Beginnings

The first beginning we'll look at is from the essay "A Picture of Us" by Robyn Moreno.

I'm not sure exactly whose idea it was to celebrate my mom's fifty-fifth birthday at Graceland. But somehow I found myself standing in front of Elvis's rather modest mansion with a candle in my hand, along with my family and the thousands of other lunatics who had come to pay homage to the King. After three hours of worship, I was fantasizing about peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches when my older sister, Nevia, snapped me out of my reverie. She asked me to take her picture with a suspiciously effeminate Elvis impersonator. Like a true king, he grabbed her by the waist and started serenading her with "Love Me Tender." Her squeals of delight caught the attention of my other two sisters, Yvette and Bianca, who ran up and joined in the fun. After the impromptu performances, they cheered and clapped loudly. "Elvis" bowed his head humbly and mumbled a "Thank you, thank you very much." As they huddled into a photogenic position, I realized this particular Elvis had breasts. Hmmmm. Either no one noticed or, more likely, no one cared. As I peered through the camera at the three girls and the lesbian Elvis, I saw the truth. No matter which road I travel, all paths lead me back to my crazy family.

Moreno packs a lot of cues into this; we find out that:

- there are five main characters, the narrator and the members of her family;
- the setting is Graceland, where her mother is having a party;
- the narrator likes peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches (as did Elvis, which says something about her, and probably also about her family);
- Mom's hung up on Elvis;
- her sisters are bold enough to join an Elvis impersonator and have the event documented with a photograph;
- the narrator has a sense of humor and likes quirky situations; and
- the narrator has affection for her "crazy" family.

It's clear that Moreno doesn't seem to be embarrassed by her relatives, and that "crazy" is probably not a bad thing. You can be fairly certain that this essay won't take the form of a tragic family exposé.

Some beginnings are fairly straightforward and gain strength from an apparently simple laying out of the facts:

On the night of 13 February 1992 two hundred armed Untouchables surrounded the high-caste village of Barra in the northern Indian state of Bihar. By the light of burning splints, the raiders roused all the men from their beds and marched them out into the fields. Then, one after another, they slit their throats with a rusty harvesting sickle.

This introduction, to William Dalrymple's book *The Age of Kali*, is gripping in part because it is horrible. Most readers will be curious about what has happened here. It is elegantly written, not a "just the facts" news account; the phrase "by the light of burning splints" is rather lovely, an appalling contrast to what then occurs. By reciting the full date, the author makes clear that this is a significant event, one recorded in historical accounts. The place is very specific (no general town, no vague "India"), another indication that this is a report with historical basis.

Another straightforward approach comes in Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

The first line lays out Douglass's birthplace in a way that echoes thousands of historical accounts. Yet it becomes clear that there is far more at stake here than a record of facts. He points out that slaves know "as little . . . as horses" of their own births, and that this is terribly deliberate. The list of the seasons, which for slaves were the planting and harvest cycles, is lyrical and all the harsher because of it. This introduction shows that no matter how straightforward a piece may appear, the levels

can be deep, and the reader can feel fairly certain that these complex levels will build throughout the book. We also get a sense of Douglass's will, intelligence, and directness, not only in the complexity of his language and thought but in the way he expresses his frustration and challenges the slavemaster.

The next beginning is from a more introspective and traditionally structured piece, Sven Birkerts's "Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man" (found on page 217). This essay explores the author's own lack of active political involvement. He isn't arguing that everyone should be apolitical; he is explaining the legitimacy of his own lack of action and defending the value of art as action. This piece begins with a conflict:

I have a friend who wants me to be more political. He doesn't specify, but I know what he means: He wants me to do things, take conspicuous stances, have a more engaged posture in the world. And he's right. That is, he must be right—otherwise why would I feel such a prickling of guilt whenever he brings the subject up? And these days he seems to bring it up all the time. When he does I naturally become defensive; I scramble toward the familiar silence of not being understood.

Birkerts begins with the story of a friend. He doesn't describe the friend, but you can easily imagine them facing one another, having a debate. It's clear that this essay won't be about the friend, though, because Birkerts doesn't linger on him or even give him a name; instead, the friend is a catalyst for the author's internal conflict. While there is no clear thesis statement, we get a sense that this will be a deeply personal perspective of a man grappling with questions of politics and philosophy. That this is a personal approach and not a traditional argument is clear by the emphasis on emotion and relationships. Birkerts tells us he feels defensive, and we suspect this essay will be the defense. He never says, "I will now tell you why being nonpolitical is a good thing." In fact, for all we know, he may come around to the friend's way of thinking. We read the essay, in part, to find out.

A strong literary beginning usually doesn't explicitly reveal the essay's intentions. Sometimes mysterious or beautiful can be enough. James Baldwin's rambling essay "Take Me to the Water" has a subtle start that in itself gives little indication of the subject of the piece. The intention is to evoke a sense of lovely ominousness:

"That is a good idea," I heard my mother say. She was staring at a wad of black velvet, which she held in her hand, and she carefully placed this bit of cloth in a closet. We can guess how old I must have been from the fact that for years afterward I thought that an "idea" was a piece of black velvet.

The beginning brings to mind a simple relationship: that of the link between "idea" and "black." In this way, it captures the essence of the essay, which is a disjointed series of experiences that begin with the personal loss of family and progress through the civil rights movement. It

also presents the sad image of Baldwin's mother, whom he is forced to leave at a young age. Ultimately, the beginning's power comes from this puzzling and rather melancholy velvet image.

Middles

Northrop Frye wrote that "when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in structure." Creative nonfiction writers are not historians, not journalists, and not simple chroniclers of events. The shape of their work is "poetic"—or, put another way, told in the shape of a story or a prose lyric. The plot is shaped less by information and more by the melding of information and imagination. Works of creative nonfiction, like fiction and poetry, nearly always feature a search for answers to questions both obvious and obscure. The tension comes from the leap into ambiguities. Along the way, the writer usually meets other people who are similarly struggling, and their struggles, too, add to the tension of the plot.

"The tension comes from the leap into ambiguities."

In an essay, the "dramatic" moments are not usually wildly dramatic; they are subtle and broad, and they tend to repeat and loop, with the many small moments of external and internal conflicts coming together to form a turning point, a moment of meaning, and a resolution that may or may not be satisfactory to the writer.

Events cannot be controlled in nonfiction—we're supposed to be telling the truth—but the timing and telling of the events can (and should) be controlled. The writer determines which conflicts are important and the extent to which they are lengthened and shortened in time. To say that the telling is strictly true is an obvious lie. Every telling of a story involves selective inclusion and exclusion, a pace and rhythm, an expanse and truncation of time. We emphasize some events by description, repetition, by simply lingering on them; we leave out others that would be irrelevant, slow, just plain boring. Most creative nonfiction writers give themselves latitude to manipulate the chronology to allow a dramatic build. In real life, a climber may have slipped two feet down the rock face within the first hour of his walk; in the written version (or filmed one), it's quite possible that the climber shows that slip happening five hours into the walk. (Are such changes in details ethical? We won't enter into that debate here—it would take far too long—but be assured that writers commonly make such changes.) They also flip the timing with the use of flashbacks and flashforwards, which we will discuss momentarily. What we choose to embellish and expand and what we ignore give an event its particular stamp and style.

Narrative theorists have carefully explored the difference between "events as they happened" and "events as they are put into a plot." Consider the difference between:

My girlfriend left me one night. The next day I walked to the coffee shop. The barista said, "Good morning." I said, "Not for me," and I walked away, leaving the coffee steaming on the counter. [Events as they happened]

and

"Not for me," I said, turning toward the door. The barista looked puzzled, a little worried, as I left behind the coffee I'd just bought. She had merely said, "Good morning." What she didn't know is that my girlfriend had left the night before. [Events put into a plot]

Both versions draw upon the same events. The first relates them in the order they happened. The second, by rearranging the time sequence, creates a sense of mystery. Admittedly, it's a fairly short-lived mystery, the reason for the narrator's response getting revealed in the fourth sentence. But imagine these events drawn out and expanded over a couple of pages, and you'll note quite different effects from the same materials. Peter Brooks calls plot the "shaping force" of the story that puts together and molds random events. While we usually don't think of nonfiction as having a "plot"—we've been taught since grade school that this is the realm of fiction—creative nonfiction writers inevitably create a pattern into which they place the events, people, and places in their lives. It's how we all think, how we create coherence from chaos.

All creative nonfiction, like fiction, has a turning point, a climax, a realization. This may or may not be the dramatic turning point of popular fiction, in which the hero is pushed off a building or decides to take sleeping pills; it may be a quiet realization about one's own life or the revelation of some intriguing information. Mikhail Bakhtin, a philosopher and literary theorist, called these turns the threshold, "the breaking point of a life, the moment of a crisis, the decision that changes a life (or the indecisiveness that fails to change a life)." They are moments of change for the narrator or the characters (or place-as-character), or both. Without these moments, the piece is static, unsatisfying for both the writer and the reader.

Along with compression and expansion, time can be manipulated using flashbacks and flashforwards. Nearly all essays exhibit this fluidity in moving from present to past. Flashbacks allow the narrator to travel backward, using full scenes or quick references to provide context about herself and the situation at hand. The following short flashback is informative, providing history about the practice of Western firefighting. In it, Kim Barnes describes the fate of those who fought a massive blaze seventy-five years earlier. (The full essay, "The Ashes of August," is on page 188.) While we may traditionally view a flashback as a device that illuminates a fictional character by explaining a previous experience, this factual event serves a similar function by illuminating the danger to a group of firefighters. Without this understanding, the contemporary crisis

would lack resonance; while it might be exciting, it would lose the sense of meaning that comes when we know that this has happened before and will happen again.

The Mann Gulch smoke jumpers were young and had dropped onto a terrain that may have seemed at the time less threatening than the densely wooded ridge in the distance. They were at a point where the tree-studded mountains broke open to grassy plains dried to amber. Perhaps they believed themselves safe amid the loose-rock slope and low-lying vegetation, but they were tragically mistaken. They had their tools—their shovels and Pulaskis—but what they did not have was knowledge of the ways of this fire and of how, within an hour, it would cross the gulch and push them screaming up the steep hill, crest at the top, and die there with them. Bunch grass, cheat grass, some immature pines mixed in with older growth—these were all that was needed to create the blowup that engulfed the men. Two of the three who survived did so by racing the fire to the ridge and winning; the third, the crew's foreman, saved himself by escape of another kind: instead of running, he stopped, struck a match, set fire to the grass at his feet, then stepped into the flames he had created. He lay face down on the still-smoking earth, covered his head with his hands, and waited for the main fire to catch and sweep over him. And it did.

Barnes then connects this past event with the blaze that threatens her home and her husband: “A steeply pitched basalt-strewn slope covered with dry grass and scattered patches of timber—the very terrain Bob was headed into. As I watched him pull away, I prayed that he would have the foreman's presence of mind should the fire overtake him.” This reminds us of the very real risk involved in her husband's job, and of the family members who have waited behind in every Western summer.

Flashforwards are often used when the essay is centered around a particular scene, with the narrator acknowledging that the piece is written in some “future” time—future in relation to the primary events. Flashforwards in creative nonfiction remind the reader that the narrator is a writer, working now; it is a reminder that the piece is true *to memory and experience* and that the scene at hand is not an exact photo rendition of the event as it happened.

Li-Young Lee's memoir *The Winged Seed* (a chapter of which appears on page 490) covers key periods of Lee's and his family's lives. Most of this chapter centers on a visit that the child Li-Young and his preacher father made to the home of an aged parishioner. Halfway through the piece, Lee travels back in time, first referring to one of his father's sermons in Hong Kong, then to the day his sister finds a leaflet of their father's ministry, then to the time that the photograph on the leaflet was taken, then to the testimony his father gives at a revival meeting. Finally, he proceeds to a point “many years later” and “five years after my father had died.” This future period, set long after all of the other scenes in the piece, is a flashforward, told long after the writer has become an adult.

By the time it appears, we have already experienced the fluidity of Lee's story, and are not confused or surprised.

Endings

Endings are tricky, even frustrating. How do you know when you've said all that needs to be said? How do you know when you've said too much? As usual, the best answer is to read widely and try to understand how that good ending may have come about.

The best endings arise organically, from what we instinctively sense is the proper moment to end. In all ways, literary endings are the opposite of the "in conclusion" paragraph that you were forced to write in high school. While you may have a sense of the general direction in which you're traveling, you may not know exactly where the path will end. For many writers, knowing the ending defeats the purpose—they write to find out. Others begin knowing how the story starts and how it concludes, and very little in between.

The right ending sometimes comes on the first draft; sometimes it comes after many adjustments or wholesale cuts. It's not unusual to pass the moment of the best ending; it's also not unusual to end too abruptly,

"Real life is not predictable, and writers have to be ready to adjust their plans."

without taking the piece to the most powerful conclusion. While it would be great to offer a formula that would tell you when you'll feel that right ending, there, of course, isn't one. Keep in mind that the ending should leave the reader with a strong statement or mood; it's what the reader carries

away. And don't be afraid to show your drafts to readers who will let you know what they think.

Most creative nonfiction uses endings to draw connections between the essay's ideas, rather than to conclude a series of statements. Sometimes a clear state of "conclusion" never comes because an event is still unfolding. Real life is not predictable, and writers have to be ready to adjust their plans. Because a straightforward conclusion may not be possible, creative nonfiction pieces usually end on notes of emotional or philosophical implication.

Examples of Endings

When Denis Johnson researched his essay "Run, Rudolph, Run" (see page 451) about the anti-abortion bomber Eric Rudolph, he didn't know if or when the killer would be captured. He was unable to interview Rudolph, because the man had disappeared into the Appalachian caves, and locals were largely unwilling to give him information. What Johnson does is absorb the town's atmosphere, making the piece a study not only of a murderer but of a place and a certain type of American. Johnson might have used the essay to take a stand on Rudolph's actions or his politics, but the piece isn't out to build a political statement. This is clear from both

the beginning and ending, which are unified by the metaphor and reality of the cave. The conclusion, at first, might seem to have little to do with the subject of the essay, since Rudolph's name is not even mentioned:

In 1914 Count Bégouën and his three sons discovered the Trois Frères Cave in the Pyrenees. A tunnel that can only be wriggled through ends in a massive chamber covered with Paleolithic 12,000-year-old images of the hunt, including a creature half-man, half-beast: a chamber used for initiating adolescent boys in a ritual of death and rebirth. Students of humankind have long seen the link between the cave and the womb. In 1956 the anthropologist Jean Gebser suggested in a piece called "Cave and Labyrinth": "The cave is a maternal, matriarchal aspect of the world. . . . To return to the cave, even in thought, is to regress from life into the state of being unborn."

A careful reading shows that Johnson is indeed talking about Rudolph's situation: death, rebirth—the need to return to a state of unknowing. In fact, these, more than Rudolph the killer, are the true subjects of this essay. The reference to the unborn reminds us of Rudolph's anti-abortion violence, and the reference to the maternal cave points to Rudolph's disrupted childhood and what he seeks. This is Johnson's commentary on the situation. The reader, however, must draw her own conclusions about just what Johnson means by this. This is another difference between creative nonfiction and an academic essay: in creative nonfiction, much can and should be left to the reader's understanding.

Creative essays often end on a philosophical note, relaying emotion with a focused meaning. In 1932, the German writer Walter Benjamin wrote a lyrical essay in praise of hashish. It is a deep look at an experience, culminating in a final declaration of joy:

The trance abated when I crossed the Cannebiere and at last turned the corner to have a final ice cream at the little Cafe des Cours Belsunace. It was not far from the first cafe of the evening, in which, suddenly, the amorous joy convinced me that the hashish had begun its work. And when I recall this state I should like to believe that hashish persuades nature to permit us—for less egoistic purposes—that squandering of our own existence that we know in love. For if, when we love, our existence runs through nature's fingers like golden coins that she cannot hold and lets fall to purchase new birth thereby, she now throws us, without hoping or expecting anything, in ample handfuls to existence.

The piece builds as the writer draws us through what he observes and feels and ends on a literal high note in praise of the ability to notice the minute and to transcend mundane worries and obsessions. Benjamin leaves us with a thought to reflect upon, rather than a final action or daydream.

Sometimes a work of creative nonfiction ends on an emotionally powerful, unsettled, inconclusive scene. It may be such a turning point that we have no way of knowing for certain what will happen next. Such an ending usually implies that profound disturbance lies ahead.

Such is true of Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis*, the story of a girl's childhood and young adolescence during the Iranian Revolution of 1980. The story begins with happy stability and culminates at a point of repression and disintegration. The book ends with a literal separation, as the young Marjane is forced to leave her family and homeland for life as an exile in a French boarding school. The final panel shows Marjane casting a last glance over her shoulder at her parents in the airport; her mother has fainted and is being carried in her father's arms; the caption says, "It would have been better to just go." While this is a logical conclusion, a natural place to stop, it is also jarring.

A different kind of ending punctuates Lillian Ross's classic essay about writer Ernest Hemingway, "How Do You Like It Now, Gentlemen?" A series of nearly constant scenes and dialogue build to leave the reader with a sharp and honest picture of that ordinary guy, Hemingway:

"Shooting gives me a good feeling. A lot of it is being together and friendly instead of feeling you are in some place where everybody hates you and wishes you ill. It is faster than baseball, and you are out on one strike."

The telephone rang, and Hemingway picked it up, listened, said a few words, and then turned to us and said that an outfit called Endorsements, Inc., had offered him four thousand dollars to pose as a Man of Distinction. "I told them I wouldn't drink the stuff for four thousand dollars," he said. "I told them I was a champagne man. Am trying to be a good guy, but it's a difficult trade. What you win in Boston, you lose in Chicago."

The ending has a bit of a "Huh?" quality, but so does the entire essay; this is part of its charm. The casual cadence of the dialogue goes far in humanizing the "great writer"—a writer who turned himself into a Hemingway knock-off. The ending obliquely reveals that Hemingway is trying to be true to himself, even as his fame conspires against that. He's feeling the pressure of being unable to please anyone. Nowhere in the essay does Lillian Ross directly say this; in fact, she is absent from the piece as a direct presence. Instead of using "I," Ross uses the common pronoun of the *New Yorker* magazine, the royal "we." It's clear, though, that Ross is a comfortable enough presence that Hemingway reveals himself, and she is enough of a straight shooter to describe him honestly, even brutally. And for the purposes of our discussion on endings, it shows that a snippet of well-chosen dialogue can reveal far more than two pages of well-constructed "conclusion."

Finally, even writing that we think of as technical, like popular science writing, can have a catchy ending. It needn't be dry and overstated to get its point across. Most commonly this is done through a close first-person point of view, with the writer turning the narrative to himself. Michael Pollan's book *The Botany of Desire* is a fascinating look at the ways that people and plants maintain a mutual relationship. To enforce the commonness of this relationship, Pollan chooses to discuss plants that are found in homes: apples, tulips, potatoes, and marijuana. The book is full of short histories, factual tidbits, and personal ruminations. The

author's presence, while not announced on every page, is always behind the language, keeping the discussion comfortable and wry. The ending comes as a short personal scene:

But I was still left with my bag of NewLeafs sitting there on the porch. And there they sat until Labor Day, when I got an invitation to a potluck supper at the town beach. Perfect! I signed up to make a potato salad. The day of the supper, I brought the bag of spuds into the kitchen and set a pot of water on the stove. But before the water even had a chance to boil, I was stricken by the obvious thought: Wouldn't I have to tell people at the picnic what they were eating? I had no reason to think the potatoes weren't perfectly safe, but if the idea of eating genetically modified food without knowing it gave me pause, I couldn't very well ask my neighbors to do so. (That would be rather more potluck than they were counting on.) So of course I'd have to tell them all about the NewLeafs—and then, no doubt, bring home a big bowl of untouched potato salad. For surely there'd be other potato salads at the potluck, and who, given the choice, was ever going to opt for the one with the biotech spuds? I suddenly understood with perfect clarity why Monsanto doesn't want to label its genetically modified food.

So I turned down the flame under the pot and went out to the garden to harvest a pile of ordinary spuds for my potato salad. The NewLeafs went back out in the limbo of my porch.

And so Pollan sums up the piece with a portrayal of the human/plant dance—while he has argued throughout the book that we are plants, and vice versa, he is hesitant to take a chance on the “advancement” of genetic modification. Ample weight is put on that single word “limbo,” thus summing up an entire political state of affairs.

Formal Options

At the beginning of this chapter, we noted that creative nonfiction has no consoling (or constricting) structural templates, and we stand by that. Writing these pieces involves far more art than science. Still, it can be useful to think of some structural options, and it can even be useful—in the sense that an artist's sketchbook is useful—to play around with some of these patterns with a given body of material.

1. Straightforward Story

Story beginning

Story middle

Story end

2. Manipulated Story

Story middle (first part)

Story beginning

Story middle (more)

Story end

3. Story and Idea (Reflection) I

Story beginning

Idea

Story middle

Idea

Story end

4. Story and Idea (Reflection) II

Idea

Story beginning

Story middle

Idea

Story end

5. Story, Information, and Idea

Information

Story middle

Information

Story beginning

Idea

Story end

6. Multiple Stories and Idea

Story 1 beginning

Story 2 beginning

Idea

Story 2 middle

Story 2 end

Idea

Story 1 middle

Story 2 end

Idea

7. Etc., Etc., Etc.

The permutations are endless; we've kept things simple just to be suggestive, though you can certainly play this game further. The point is that writers can endlessly arrange elements of creative nonfiction to achieve effects. You can deploy the narrative events of a story in different sequences, depending on the dramatic effect you want to create. You can interrupt stories with related—or even seemingly unrelated—information or with overtly reflective passages, shifting from “telling” to “thinking.” You can begin a piece in a heavily informational mode, then insert a story to change pace or create depth. You can put more than one story into a single work, perhaps telling all of A, then all of B (or C or even D), perhaps juxtaposing elements of these various stories.

In the end, a writer must enact Kenneth Burke's definition of form: the arousing and fulfillment of desires. How this happens depends on one's experiences and sensibilities, informed by reading and practice, developed by exploring the many options available to see what works best.

"A writer must enact Burke's definition of form: the arousing and fulfillment of desires."

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