Writing Creative Nonfiction: Structure

Creative nonfiction takes many different forms. Some is personal, reflecting on our experiences, while others are about ideas or events. Maybe you want to tell the story of a friend you knew in high school, and the journey of his failed metal band. You might tell us this story in chronological order, with the friend as a character. Or, you might tell the story in more of a journalistic style, using direct quotes from the interview you conducted with this friend via email. You might even want to focus on one small moment, rather than writing the entire saga. The possibilities are endless, each one with pros and cons in sharing the true pieces of a true story. Figuring out where to start can be hard, especially if you’re not sure what kind of creative nonfiction you are writing. Below are some visual examples of two key concepts.

Circling a Subject
Unlike academic papers, much of creative nonfiction don’t begin with a thesis and aim at a pre-determined bull’s-eye. Instead, many meander around their subject until arriving, often to the side of what was expected. One of the benefits of such a circling approach is that it can reflect the mind’s creative process. It also allows for a wider variety of perspectives—illuminating the subject from multiple angles.

Let’s say your subject is a friend’s grandmother. Perhaps you start off writing about what a character she was, the philosophical things she would say. Then, you start writing about how she looked. Her hair was always perfect. You think about other people her age, and their hairstyles. Then, you meander into how the last time you got your hair cut, you overheard a conversation between an elderly woman and a young, punk stylist, and you learned that this woman came in every week to get her hair curled just right. You begin to wonder, on the page, about the role of hair salons. While you may not have originally made the connection between your friend’s grandmother, and the important female-dominated space of hair salons, your essay is still “circling” around the original subject: your fascination with, and desire to understand, your friend’s grandmother. While a more academic essay might view such wonderings as disorganized or unfocused, creative nonfiction often values these connections. As long as you can create hints for your readers to follow your thought pattern, you may be able to tie a variety of topics together in an interesting way.

“Dipping into the Well”
Not only can creative nonfiction have horizontal movement through time, but it can also have vertical descent into meaning. You can “pause” the forward motion to dip into a thematic well. Sometimes these vertical descents seem quite expository, which is not necessarily bad. The essayist is free both to show and tell. What appears to be an odd tangent might actually be an essential descent into the well of meaning. Using the example above, pausing to wonder, “What role do hair salons play, anyway?” is an example of this concept.

In memoir, for example, “dipping into the well” might look like having a self-reflective moment. Imagine you are writing a memoir piece about the family story of your first word, “duck.” You re-create the scene of you in a stroller, pointing towards a pond and naming those quacking creatures for what they are. Then, you start a new paragraph that interrupts this chronological story to comment on the pressure for families today to capture their child’s first moments on video. Your own mother had no video, and you only know this story by it being told to you, over and over. Placing commentary allows you to guide your reader to new meanings and interpretations of the subject you are exploring, whether the subject is yourself, a cultural phenomenon, or even an abstract idea.

Visuals and explanations adapted from https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/picturing-personal-essay-visual-guide