



CHAPTER 4

Taking Shape

I work in what I call—accordion-style writing. The approach is write-write-write-expand-expand-expand-expand, and then when it is so expanded that it is bloated, cut it down to as little as I can and start over.

—DOROTHY ALLISON

One of the great strengths of creative nonfiction is its flexible, often experimental form. We can tell a story from beginning to end, or start in the middle, or begin in the present and flash back. We can write in present tense, or past tense, or shuttle back and forth in time. We can use multiple voices, mix genres, and add bits of poetry, news headlines, interior monologue, or excerpts from letters. All fall under the rubric of creative nonfiction, the word “creative” having as much to do with freedom of structure as with language.

The only “rule” we need to keep in mind is that, by the final draft, structure and meaning must complement each other. By that we mean:

- ✿ The beginning sets up a promise that intrigues.
- ✿ The middle develops that promise.
- ✿ The end satisfies without readers saying, “You already said that!”

How to make this happen changes from piece to piece. A short work may need nothing more than a quick listing or 10-minute freewriting to find its shape. A book-length project may need a drawer full of fragments and a chapter outline before the writer can begin. Here we will focus on short works.

Occasionally, the right shape appears in draft one, as in Penelope Scambly Schott’s lemonade essay (p. 22). Twenty minutes after she

started writing, there it was—except for a few days of tinkering. Sometimes only *part* of the shape appears early on, and we must discover the rest by writing more, as Patricia Hampl did in “Memory and Imagination” (pp. 323–332). A fragment about her first piano lesson, which she thought would be central to her memoir, evolved, after many drafts, into an essay about the role of memory in creative nonfiction.

Sometimes shape can precede content. We begin with the idea of writing from two perspectives in two alternating voices, for example, and *then* decide who is talking and why. Occasionally, as Annie Dillard points out in *The Writing Life*, the structure we think of as solid for several drafts becomes shaky and we worry: Will it hold?

Some of the walls are bearing walls: they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Other walls can go with impunity; you can hear the difference. Unfortunately, it is often a bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck.

Fortunately the courage for total demolition is not usually needed. Still, Dillard’s advice is worth remembering as a reminder of a key attitude that experienced writers assume and novices often do not: *Early drafts are not carved in stone*. Nothing is sacred. Everything can be renovated—or demolished and rebuilt; the only way to know what shape works best is to consider all the possibilities.

But first, you need a full draft to work with. “Full” means rich with ideas and images, shapeless or not, and “full” means a draft that moves toward a conclusion, no matter how clumsily. Push to reach an ending, even if it feels unsatisfying. You may have gaps in your narrative and write margin notes to yourself like “Find out” or “Fill in later”—after there’s been time to do research, interview, meditate, read, talk, and dream. But don’t stop writing. If you wait until “later,” especially on short pieces, you may get stuck perfecting a beginning you can’t use. You may even end up like the would-be writer in Camus’ *The Plague* who kept reworking the first line of his novel over and over again, for years. He wanted his imagined editor to be transfixed from the start, to say, “Hat’s off!” at every line. This would never happen because Camus’ writer hadn’t learned what Annie Dillard had: that the part you must jettison is often “the original key passage, the passage on which the rest was to hang, and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin.” Like scaffolding, the original opening is needed at first, but it can hide the true shape—until it is removed.

The Power of Rereading

Once you have a full draft, you will want to find its strengths, the parts that are most likely to remain, whatever the ultimate shape. A good way to begin is by rereading the draft to see what shape may be there—or half there. These techniques help in the search:

- ✿ *Star your favorite parts and look for connections:* Ask yourself what the starred sections have in common. Why are they so important to me?
- ✿ *Look for the narrative arc:* A narrative arc links the beginning of your piece to the end and reveals how thoughts, characters, and events have changed. To find it, ask yourself what the “I” of the piece has learned—and also ask: What have I, as the author looking back, learned since then?
- ✿ *Look beyond the first line:* Rarely is your first line the best beginning. Read down the draft to see where there might be a stronger opening. It helps to listen for a rhythm that grabs you. Often, opening lines are warm-up lines, the language flat until suddenly sentences begin to zing with a melody that leads to a voice that leads to what the piece is trying to be about—and its future shape.

Consider this opening with a clunky first line:

Anyone who espouses the idea that children are always having fun doesn't know very much about the many painful times they experience in childhood and how they deal with these traumas. When I was a child, I would tell my friends that my parents were imaginary, especially my Dad.

Listen for the shift in voice. The first line might work for a textbook discussion of children's hardships, but it's the next line—about a child who tells everyone that her parents, especially her father, are imaginary—that is a promising opening for creative nonfiction.

- ✿ *Try Scissors:* Writer/teacher Pamela Painter has her students write on only one side of a piece of paper. Then she asks them to bring scissors and tape to class. They cut up their drafts wherever a new thought or scene appears and rearrange the pieces. This is a great way to think imaginatively about alternative ways of organizing and also to see what

needs developing (a skinny but compelling two-liner) and what needs cutting (an irrelevant paragraph or two). This technique is used even by the greats. According to Richard Howarth in the *John McPhee Reader*, Pulitzer prize-winning author John McPhee cuts his notes into a thousand scraps to find order and promising new shapes.

✧ *Finish the line, “I want to tell you that...” and then write three titles.* After a draft you need to figure out what your piece is about. What’s at stake here? There may be many possibilities but one needs to become dominant while others become subordinate—or get saved for another piece. Writing titles and finishing the line “I want to tell you that...” can help you decide. Be specific, especially in your titles. “A Childhood Memory” or “Reflections” won’t provide much focus, but a title like “Lion in the Attic” will keep you (and your readers) asking what the beast is doing up there.

✧ *Look for repetitions that can be used as organizing devices:* Alice Walker organizes “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self” (pp. 169–175) by using the date and her age to shape key moments in her narrative:

It is a bright summer day in 1947....
It is Easter Sunday, 1950....
I am eight years old and a tomboy....
I am fourteen and baby-sitting for my brother Bill....
I am twenty-seven, and my baby daughter is almost three....

Repeating a key element, an age, and a phrase helps readers orient themselves and provides a unifying structure that keeps the piece on track. You can see it again in Susan Allen Toth’s “Going to the Movies” (pp. 269–271). Each of the four sections of her essay begins with a line about going to the movies—and sets up four kinds of dates:

Aaron takes *me* only to art films....
Bob takes me only to movies that he thinks have a redeeming social conscience....
Sam likes movies that are entertaining....
I go to some movies by myself....

Scene, Summary, and Reflection

Whatever the outer shape, the same three building blocks of creative nonfiction are used for the inside: scene, summary, and reflection.

Scene makes characters come alive on the page, using dialogue and description to zoom in like a camera on key moments in the story. It's a great way to dramatize what is crucial and often makes a good opening. Gloria Anzaldúa introduces her essay on language and dialect, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," by placing herself in the dentist's chair. The scene foreshadows, through humor and metaphor, the larger theme of silencing to come:

"We're going to have to control your tongue," the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a mother lode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of stench when I gasp. "I can't cap that tooth yet, you're still draining," he says.

"We're going to have to do something about your tongue." I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

—*Borderlands/La Frontera*

Scenes also create moods. In "Chapels" (pp. 275–281), Pico Iyer captures the cacophony on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan:

Giant figures are talking and strutting and singing on enormous screens above me, and someone is chattering away on the mini-screen in the cab from which I just stepped. Nine people at this street corner are shouting into thin air, wearing wires around their chins and jabbing at screens in their hands.

In the next paragraph, the scene shifts to St. Patrick's Cathedral, juxtaposing the street noise with quiet:

Candles are flickering here and there.... Figures are on their knees, heads bowed...[L]ight is flooding through the great blue window.... I notice everything around me: the worn stones, the little crosses, the hymnbooks, the upturned faces; then I sit down, close my eyes—and step out of time, into everything that stretches beyond it.

For Iyer, unlike Anzaldúa in the dentist's chair, silence is not a trap but a refuge. The joy of reading lies in believing them both.

Summary fills in the back-story, spelling out what happened before, after, and in between scenes. We learn the history of people and events and gain insight into cultural and political contexts. The trick is to summarize gracefully so the reader isn't overwhelmed by information. Here is Iyer, once again, summarizing his childhood:

I grew up in chapels, at school in England. For all the years of my growing up, we had to go to chapel every morning and to say prayers in a smaller room every evening. Chapel became everything we longed to flee; it was where we made faces at one another, doodled in our hymnbooks, sniggered at each other every time we sang about "the bosom of the Lord" or the "breast" of a green hill.

Iyer places this back-story midway through the essay, reminding us that summary need not be up front—*before* the narrative begins. Rather it can be woven in, here and there, as appropriate.

Reflection is the writer's interpretation of events, people, and the world of ideas. Iyer's next line is, "All we wanted was open space, mobility, freedom—the California of the soul." It begins a reflection on those childhood days that continues to deepen as he realizes "that no movement made sense unless it had a changelessness beneath it; that all our explorations were only as rich as the still place we brought them back to."

Reflections also capture the struggle to figure something out. They can come as certainties or as questions, as when Stephen Dunn wonders, in question form, why men in the locker room boast about their sexual exploits with women:

What did it all mean? That men, more often than not, in a fundamental way prefer other men? Or was it all about power, an old story, success with women as a kind of badge, an accoutrement of power? Was the young man saying to the rest of us, "I'm powerful"? I thought so for a while, but then I thought that he seemed to be saying something different.

—"Locker Room Talk" (pp. 365–366)

What's key about reflection is that it must add something new to the story, something not obvious to readers, so that they say, "Oh, I didn't think of that."

These three building blocks—scene, summary, and reflection—are not necessarily used in equal amounts. If we are writing about events over time, we need more summary than when writing about

a single moment. A meditation on friendship will be more reflective than a series of scenes about friendship. The first will tell more; the second, show more. Sometimes, it's a matter of style. Writers tend to be partial to showing *or* telling, but good writers use both. And both can work if the voice is confident and moves comfortably from scene to summary to reflection, as needed.

A Word About Riffs

In jazz, riffs allow musicians to take off from the main melody and return. In writing, riffs allow writers to add scenes, summaries, or reflections and then to return to the main story line. Patricia Hampl once said, “You can describe taking a sip of your coffee and riff about who knows what for three paragraphs, or three pages, before returning that coffee cup to its saucer.”

Jerald Walker describes how he and his brothers, as kids, imitated Michael Jackson and the Jackson Five; he then riffs to give some historical background:

Though my siblings and I were only having fun, just messing around, for Michael this was serious business, this was work—like performing was work for James Brown, the man whose style he already mastered, like performing was work for Smokey Robinson, the man whose soul he had already cloned. The fact that Michael was less than half their age was part of his appeal, because implicit in his youth was the promise of more, the hope that there'd be years and then decades of watching his legend unfold. But for now it was still 1969, a blustery December evening, bringing to a close a blustery American decade, assassinations and race riots at our heels, and the Walker Six, dumbstruck to see a black family on TV, was bantering over who should sing lead.

—“Before Grief” (pp. 271–274)

Riffs work well to add dialogue, scene, and reflection. When a key moment goes by too fast, riff with a scene of dialogue. When more back-story is needed about a character, place, or event, riff with summary. When you are short on reflection, riff with a few reactions to what is happening. *Tip:* To riff without worry about messing up a text, try using bold font on the computer. It makes the additions feel temporary until later when you reread and decide

what to keep and cut in order to make the new lines fit smoothly into the existing text.

A Repertoire of Forms

Finding the best shape for a particular work means having a repertoire of forms to draw on. The one familiar from childhood is the chronological story that moves in a straight line from beginning to end. “Once upon a time” stories usually rely on this structure, but there are so many other forms to draw upon. Stories may begin in the middle, like *The Odyssey*, and move back and forth in time. They may be organized episodically with segments or vignettes as are most TV narrative series.

What follows are eight useful structures for writing creative nonfiction. It’s worth trying all of them for, as in sports, the more shots we master, the better our game.

Chronological

Moves from beginning to end in a straight narrative line, usually with a rising action, climax, and resolution. It is good for stories with a surprise, a twist of plot, and an emphasis on suspense; it usually requires solid amounts of scene, summary, and reflection to work well. See Earley’s “*Somehow Form a Family*” and Orwell’s “*A Hanging*,” among others.

Segmented

Uses ways other than time to organize reality: by free association, by theme, or by juxtaposition of disparate thoughts. It uses white space or asterisks between segments to signal shifts from one segment to another. Sometimes, subheadings and fonts change as well. See Legler’s “*Moments of Being*,” Walker’s “*Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self*,” and Selzer’s “*Four Appointments with a Discus Thrower*,” among others.

Framed

Starts in the present, flashes back to the past, and returns to the present. It’s good for connecting who you are with who you were—and showing how the past lingers in your life. See White’s “*Once More to the Lake*” and McClanahan’s “*Book Marks*,” among others.

Compare and Contrast

Compares events, people, and ideas either by (1) weaving back and forth fluidly or (2) setting up a comparison, discussing one and then the other before a final summing up. *See Toth's "Going to the Movies" and Walker's "Before Grief," among others.*

Epistolary

Tells a story through a series of letters by one or more writers over time. Two favorites of ours are Simone de Beauvoir's *Letters to Sartre*, discovered after her death and published posthumously, and *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*, which are "love" letters between poet James Wright and novelist Leslie Marmon Silko, who only met twice: once at a writer's conference and once in a hospital as Wright lay dying of cancer.

Lyric Essay

Combines the essay with the lyric poem. It leaps from thought to thought by imagery, valuing juxtaposition over a linear story. Full sentences give way to fragments, often musical, with meaning carried as much by sound as by definition. Facts are subordinate to subjective truths. It is impressionistic, meditative, and often short. *See Kitchen's "Only the Dance," among others.*

Multiple Perspectives

Depicts one event from different points of view. A car accident could be described by both those involved and those who observed. A marriage or a divorce could be seen from three perspectives: husband, wife, and kids. Tension, power, and insight come through juxtaposition of these different views, sometimes within one narrative and sometimes in segmented form. *See Butcher's "Still Things" and Cantu's "Tino & Papi," among others.*

Multi-Genre

Uses poems, letters, interior monologues, drawings, and the "stuff" of daily living to tell a story. Also called collage or mosaic, the juxtaposition of different shapes becomes the organizing strategy. A good example is *Nox*, a memoir by the poet Anne Carson that uses letters, photographs, and poetry to create a collage that pays homage to her deceased brother.

More on the Segmented Essay

One night over dinner, a writer friend talked with frustration about how to handle the many fragments of a family story. Should she tell it chronologically, beginning with her great-grandfather? Or organize her stories by the countries she lived in? Or by the letters that she and her family wrote, which were now in shoeboxes in her attic?

“You won’t know,” we advised, “until you start experimenting with different shapes to see what happens.” Maybe chronology will work, but chances are her memoir is ripe for a segmented essay—which for many has become the form of choice in creative nonfiction. It provides nonlinear ways of perceiving reality, not bound by a straight sequence from beginning to end. In today’s world, the segmented form is all around us, presenting us with simultaneous action. Instant replays of sports events coexist with real-time plays. TV dramas with multiple story lines are told side by side. No wonder writers and readers are comfortable with a literary form that gains power by juxtaposition.

Here are some reasons to write a segmented essay:

- ✿ Your plot moves too slowly to be chronological. As essayist Robert Root points out, “No one is proposing to cash in on a natural disaster film called ‘Glacier’!”
- ✿ You have too much detail to organize chronologically. A trip is a great example. If you start on day one of a three-week adventure, covering morning to night, chances are you will lose your audience by lunch on day two—if you are a *good* storyteller. Otherwise, it will be by lunch on day one!
- ✿ You want to capture your mind at work. The mind thinks by free association: something your mother says reminds you of your grandmother’s cookie jar, and that makes you think about going on the South Beach Diet, which makes you think of the red dress you wore on your first date. These free associations, once arranged and shaped, reveal a character struggling to figure out the world independent of a specific time and place.
- ✿ You want to explore multiple perspectives, capturing the same experience from different angles so that the reader gets a more differentiated and complex picture.
- ✿ You want to put your personal story in a cultural context. In “Under the Influence,” Sanders includes segments about

alcoholism in the United States to place his personal experience on a larger social canvas (pp. 223–234).

- ✿ You want to compare experiences of then and now as Cantú does, looking at two photos of her brothers taken years apart in “Tino & Papi” (pp. 369–370).
- ✿ You want to examine relationships, not events, as do “Under the Influence,” Sanders and “Going to the Movies,” Toth (pp. 223–234 and pp. 269–271, respectively).

Tips for Writing Segmented Essays

Whatever your reason for using a segmented essay, you need to help readers locate where they are in each segment, who is speaking, and when. Here are some tips for avoiding confusion:

- ✿ Use white space or asterisks between segments or other icons. (Mary Clearman Blew, when writing about rivers, used fishhooks.)
- ✿ Use clear markers to let readers know what is going on. Susan Toth, for example, uses Roman numerals to set off her segments—I, II, III—for each trip to the movies. Other markers that signal a shift: the repetition of a line or word; a recurring object, action, or scene; the use of dates or place names; a recurring sound or smell or linguistic rhythm; a shifting of tenses—past, present, or future; a shifting of voices—child/adult or angry/sad.
- ✿ Beware of using the segmented form as an excuse for not knowing what your essay is about. It’s easy NOT to ask, “Why are all these segments in one essay?” but if you don’t, your reader will, followed by “Why should I care about this?” Each segment must add something new emotionally and dramatically.

Ways In ...

1. In “Never Thirteen,” Lee Martin uses scene, summary, and reflection masterfully—and often. Read his essay (pp. 175–185) and see if you can identify how he shifts among these three building blocks of creative nonfiction.

2. Examine your notebook entries to see how often you use scene, summary, and reflection. Label as you read and then tally the score. Whichever you least use—scene, summary, or reflection—is the one worth trying. If there are no scenes, find a place to add one—with a few lines of dialogue. If there is no back-story, find a place to add a few lines of summary about character or place. If the entry is all action and summary, find a place to add a few lines that reflect on that action. Read your addition, plus what comes before and after *out loud*. Listen for rough edges that need smoothing.
3. Write a new beginning for an existing entry, using a scene with dialogue as Gloria Anzaldúa does. Or try ending an entry with a scene.
4. Turn one of your drafts into a letter written to yourself or to one of the people you are writing about. Try creating a series of letters between you and someone you know well.
5. Take a work-in-progress and duplicate it on one side only, so you can cut it up where each new thought begins. Lay all the sections out on a desk or floor. Reshuffle your original order by asking yourself: Where else might this piece begin? Where might it end? How might the middle change? Also, look at the size of each section, noticing which sections are fat, which are thin, which would benefit from more detail, which seem superfluous. Take away, add, and reshuffle accordingly, and when satisfied with your changes, tape together your new shape.
6. Choose an activity that has affected you over time (learning to play an instrument or a sport, moving, dieting, dealing with loss or illness). Create a series of vignettes that capture key moments, leaving a space between them. Each vignette should show, more than tell, how this activity has had an impact on you.
7. Use juxtaposition to compare something in your life now to something in your past. Write one segment in first-person present and the other in first-person past, as Lisa Chavez does in “Independence Day” (pp. 186–192). Make at least two shifts. For example, write about learning how to swim and becoming a lifeguard; or dating versus having a steady relationship; or being a redhead, a blond, and a brunette. Make sure your voice matches your age and mood.
8. Explore the same event from different perspectives. Your aim is to let your characters have their say in their respective voices,

so that readers learn as much about their personalities—and social dynamics—as about the event.

9. Look at a home video, thumb through a family album, listen to a song, read a poem, etc. In your writing, move back and forth between the stimulus—be it visual (a video or photos) or verbal (poem, letter, song)—and your thoughts, so readers can see your connections. See Rebecca McClanahan's "Book Marks" (pp. 242–255) to see how she converses with a book.