



CHAPTER 5

Finding Voice

It is the still small voice that the soul heeds; not the deafening blasts....

—WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

One of the strengths of creative nonfiction is its person-to-person feeling, as if writer and reader were friends. It happens when the writer sounds genuine and trustworthy, thanks to a mix of words, rhythms, and attitude called *voice*. Voice conveys personality—someone to believe in, or not; someone who mysteriously charms, or not. When the voice is strong, there's a sense of a real person behind the words, not the anonymous monotone of, say, medical reports and car manuals. The latter may convey important information, but anyone could have written it. *Who* doesn't matter.

In creative nonfiction, “who” does matter. Voice counts as much as information, because it's the world *through one writer's eyes* that engages us. Voice also helps writers sort out their relationship to the material: Am I sad, happy, angry, or bemused by this subject? And voice makes readers decide: Do I care enough to read on?

Of course, “*All good writing is about voice,*” Joyce Carol Oates reminds us. In creative nonfiction, we argue, voice matters even more because the author and the “I” narrating the story are one and the same. Fiction writers can say, “That character is not really me!” Journalists and scholars can say, “This writing isn't *about* me!” But creative nonfiction writers take full responsibility for the “I.” “That's me on the page all right!”—and readers either lean forward or lean away. *Who* is saying it and *what* is being said rise and fall together as a team.

It's no wonder, then, that if you ask creative nonfiction writers how their work is going, you'll hear a delighted, “I found the right

voice!” or a dull, “Not so good. I can’t find the voice....” They know that when the voice is off—too whiny, stodgy, pompous, self-indulgent, self-serving, or just annoying—the piece isn’t working yet. When the voice is on, whatever the subject, people listen.

Consider these two reflections written by doctors, both writing about their retirements from medicine. Both use colorful language. Both express their feelings. Yet their voices—in tone, pitch, and sensibility—couldn’t be more different. The first, louder, is full of certainty; the second, quieter, is full of questioning:

- I. Being a doctor is a noble profession, a beacon of light for the ill. I have felt the power of that light for over fifty years, in dark gloomy nights of weather full of torrential rain and snow—and in the eerie silence before the sun rises. Many tough times I’ve had, but so gratifying! The memories will continue to fill me with fondness and awe—and will fuel the pages of my writing about this life commitment.

- II. It is twelve years since I walked away from my beloved workbench in the operating room. It was not done with a cheery wave of the hand. For a long time, there was a sense of dislocation as if I was standing on the bank of a stream, and it was the bank that was flowing while the stream stood still. Surgery was my native land. The writer who cuts himself off from his native land does so at great risk. The subject of so much of my writing had been my work as a doctor. Would I be punished for sending myself into exile? Have nothing left to say? I needn’t have worried. There is always the sharp and aching tooth of memory.

—*The Doctor Stories*

The second voice, that of doctor/writer Richard Selzer, is understated. It does not try to impress with a life that’s “a beacon of light for the ill,” spending countless nights “in dark, gloomy weather full of torrential rain and snow.” Instead of self-congratulation, Selzer lets us in on what retirement felt like *for him*, how it produced “a sense of dislocation as if I was standing on the bank of a stream, and it was the bank that was flowing while the stream stood still.” As readers, we empathize, even if we are forty years away from retirement. Why? Because Selzer sounds like a genuine and thoughtful guy. He’s someone who doesn’t have all the answers figured out, someone we might like to know.

Because voice shifts with each piece, there's no one way to find the right one. It evolves as we write and depends on our relationship to the subject, but these guidelines help in the search:

- ✿ *Individualize your voice by drawing on experiences that only you have.* The more general your statements, the more they could be written by anyone ("Being a doctor is a noble profession"). The more specific you are, the more distinctive your voice becomes ("It is twelve years since I walked away from my beloved workbench in the operating room").
- ✿ *Stay away from the predictable.* Avoid platitudes ("... memories will continue to fill me with fondness and awe") and find fresh language that surprises ("There is always the sharp and aching tooth of memory").
- ✿ *Avoid straining to sound eloquent.* A convincing voice is one that sounds natural and trusts readers to "get it" without being hit over the head. A phrase like "in dark gloomy nights of weather full of torrential rain and snow" feels like overkill. Readers tend to lean away.
- ✿ *Show a mind trying to figure things out.* A voice smug with certainty is less compelling than one trying to sort out complexity. ("Would I be punished for sending myself into exile? Have nothing left to say? I needn't have worried.") Creative nonfiction is less about providing answers and more about struggling with questions. Readers are drawn in.
- ✿ *Don't present yourself as The Hero.* Readers like to see the "I" struggle and show some vulnerability. A voice that brags (especially without realizing it) and is convinced that the rest of the world is wrong turns people off—as in real life.

Who Am I in This Story?

We all have many voices. Finding the right one means finding which of our many selves works best to tell a particular story. All can be authentic in that they reveal honest responses to experience, but over time one wears better than the others, feels more comfortable, truer. When that happens we have to switch, as Mimi did when writing about a trip to her father's German village when she was thirteen. She began the essay by using the bratty voice of a teenager that initially felt right to her. But eventually, with much reluctance,

she let another voice take over, one that allowed her to reflect on her teenage self and the forces that shaped her:

- I. I am being dragged through Europe by a father who's intent on convincing me that Forest Hills, Queens is not the world. He hates that his Yankee-born daughter—ME!—wants to be exactly like my best friend Arlene, whose mother has bleached blond hair and serves Campbell soup for dinner. "In Rindheim¹, you didn't do such things!" he'll say, 100 times a day—especially when I want to hang out at Penn Drug on Friday nights after the basketball games. Or when I want to go to a party where he "doesn't know the family."
- II. For years I heard the same line: "In Rindheim, you didn't do such things!" It was repeated whenever the American world of his daughters took my father by surprise. Sometimes it came out softly, in amusement, as when I was a Pilgrim turkey in the P.S. 3 Thanksgiving play. But usually, it was a red-faced, high-blood-pressure shout, especially when my sister Ruth became pinned to Mel from Brooklyn, or I wanted to go with friends whose families he didn't know....

Soon after the adult voice appeared, her essay, "My Father Always Said," which she'd struggled with for years, was finished. Why? Because the new voice offered her a perspective that, unconsciously, she'd been missing:

I loved the first voice, still do. I loved being thirteen again. But by page six of the essay, when I began talking about my family's loss and dislocation from fleeing Hitler's Germany, that voice seemed shallow and flip—and I felt trapped in it. I needed one that could make connections between that 1950s trip, my father's Holocaust experience, and me today. My bratty thirteen-year-old couldn't do that, even though I kept trying until many drafts later, my friend Penny Dugan finally said, "Dump the kid!" Reluctantly I did.

The Voice of Innocence versus the Voice of Experience

Memoirist Sue Silverman talks of two writing voices: the voice of innocence that, like Mimi's thirteen-year-old, responds to the moment;

¹The name of the village has been changed. The finished essay appears in *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, New York: Longman, 2001.

and the voice of experience that looks back and reflects on the past. One voice usually dominates, but both, especially in longer works, can be heard side by side. In fact, it's the tension between the two voices, Silverman says, that makes first-person nonfiction come alive.

We can see that tension at work in essayist Scott Russell Sanders's "Under the Influence" (pp. 223–234), which explores the legacy of his father's drinking. The voice of his opening paragraph is the adult looking back in anger and sadness:

My father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother's trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue so long as memory holds.

But in paragraph two, Sanders becomes the child again. Using the phrase "In the perennial present of memory," he shows us what it was like to live with an alcoholic father. Writing in present tense, he puts us back in time: "I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey...." We listen as father and son talk, pretending that everything is normal:

"What's up, buddy?" he says, thick-tongued and edgy.
"Sky's up," I answer, playing along.
"And don't forget prices," he grumbles. "Prices are always up.
And taxes."

The two voices—one of innocence, one of experience—work in tandem, so that readers experience, with immediacy, what Sanders experienced and also understand its effects over time. The two voices continue throughout the essay, back and forth, insisting on the truth of their duet.

In my nonfiction, the voice is as close as I can come to my own deliberate speech. I realize, of course, that the persona on the page is made out of words; I realize that it's constructed. But the construct bears a close and steady relationship to the person I am outside the page.

—SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

Other Duets of Self

As writers, we often hear conflicting voices within ourselves. There's the super-rational "I" versus the irrational "I"—the first speaking calmly, while the second rages. There's the twosome who loves to debate issues: "On the one hand *this*, on the other hand, *that*." There's the optimist, seeing the glass half full, and the pessimist, seeing it half empty. There's the timid, content-to-be-couch-potato side pushing against its fearless-to-go-bungee-jumping opposite. Let them all be heard, we say.

The chorus of conflict they produce makes for truer writing, as Linda Williamson Nelson points out in her essay, "On Writing My Way Home." Nelson grew up hearing two opposing dialects in her home:

Her mother's

starched Jamaican English, a tribute to the success of *her* mother's warnings against the use of the Creole of the lower class.

Her father's, in the voice of

... a Mississippi share-cropper who spoke to us sparingly in meandering folktales of talkin' alligators in swamps, of cullud boys making their way through graveyards at dusk, and my great grandfather, a runaway slave who "nare one heard tell of sence."

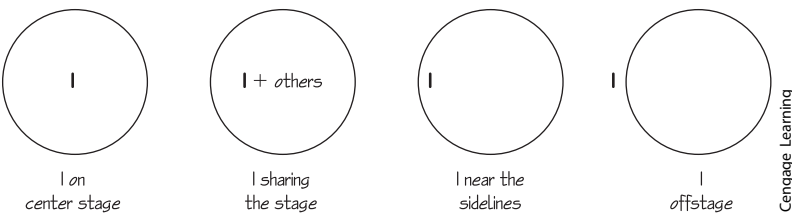
Whenever she wrote, from fifth grade on, Nelson ignored her father's voice and all it represented, as well as the many other voices she heard on West 177th Street in the Bronx, where she grew up. Instead, she used what she calls her "book jacket" voice about a life that wasn't really hers. For school success, she "laundered" not only her voice but also the account of her life.

What I knew best in those early years was Dad's daily departure from our cold-water flat to look for work, but what I wrote was that he was self-employed as a house-painting contractor. When I should have been describing the long afternoons I spent exploring vacant lots, I wrote about trips to the zoo or the circus and family picnic feasts in Central Park. Our actual feasts were five of us kids sitting Indian-style on the living room linoleum eating rice and beans and neck bones while my father gave us guitar concerts of his down-home improvisations called "Spanish Fling Dig" and "Mississippi Back Road Boogie Woogie."

It was years later, while writing her doctoral dissertation on the oral and written narratives of African-American women that Nelson’s own legacy of voices—and the truth they spoke—said, “Enough!” In a personal essay exploring her experience writing the sanitized language that led to what she calls “laundered news,” Nelson heard them and let them speak. They speak still, not only in creative nonfiction that she continues to write but also in her academic work as an anthropologist: “I just get bodacious and let the truth be told, even if it challenges the way some think it ought to be.”

Where Does “I” Stand?

If you draw a circular stage that represents one piece of writing and mark where the “I” stands, it could be in the center, telling personal stories like the doctors. It could share the spotlight with others, as Brian Doyle does in “Being Brians” (pp. 209–215). It could be near the edge, playing a small role as guide or emcee, as Susan Orlean does in “Meet the Shaggs” (pp. 303–313). Or it could be offstage: the observer who is never seen, but heard (Tracy Kidder, pp. 317–321).



Wherever the “I” stands, its voice must be right for the part. If readers think it’s too loud and self-centered, they get edgy. Consider this opening paragraph for a profile of a college president:

I have to admit I’ve always been a little afraid of Alice Chandler. Part of my fear came from her title—president of the State University of New York at New Paltz.... I’ve always found it hard not to be intimidated by the president of anything....

A pleasant voice, friendly. Appropriate *if* the essay is going to be about the writer. But if this is a profile of a college president, the “I” should relinquish center stage.

Sometimes the opposite is true. The voice of “I” disappears when it shouldn’t. The reader is handed information without interpretation. In travel essays, for example, readers need description, but also someone reacting to the landscape, highlighting what’s special.

Gretchen Legler shows how to strike the right balance between voice and description in “Moments of Being: An Antarctic Quintet” (pp. 283–291). She lets readers experience the brightness of this new world for themselves, through her eyes:

At the peak of the Antarctic summer season it is light twenty-four hours a day. The light is bright, sterile, technical, like the light in a hospital operating room. It is unavoidable light that actively seeks and annihilates corners of darkness and mystery. It was a shock to be out with friends, leaving McMurdos coffeehouse near midnight, and have to blink into the brightness, shading my eyes with my hand....

It is also possible to have a strong voice with no overt “I.” You can stand at the edge of the circle, observing events and interpreting them with little reference to yourself. Colson Whitehead, for example, is a master at creating scenes while keeping the “I” offstage. In his description of the way luggage shifts on a long bus ride, he uses “you” to make us feel as if he is standing on the spot:

Something happens to the bags up there in the luggage racks. When you go to get something out of them they are inexplicably heavier, as if they repacked themselves when you weren’t looking. Zippers won’t close, hang open in half smiles. Innocuous imperfections in the highway have consequences. Shampoo oozes onto garments, a drop a mile.

The Need for Outside Voices

“Any voice—no matter how adorable, witty, brilliant, or miraculous—becomes dull over time,” writes essayist Steven Harvey. Other voices are needed to affirm, support, challenge, judge; it doesn’t matter what so long as they interrupt the monotony of the same voice, page after page.

An effective way to do this is to add dialogue. Hearing conversations as if we are in the scene is always more compelling than hearing about what was said. Had Sanders summarized the silence

about his dad's drinking without dialogue, his essay would not put us in the garage of long ago, listening firsthand.

Some might object, arguing that Sanders cannot include dialogues from the past if he has no record—no audiotape or transcript—of the conversation. We respond that in creative nonfiction, especially memoir, tapes or transcripts are not essential. Why? Because the aim is to capture the spirit of a relationship. Even in narrative journalism, when writers often tape conversations, they still select and shape recorded conversation to highlight what's important. Verbatim transcriptions, the kind made by courtroom stenographers, for example, may preserve fact for a court of law, but the truth of experience can easily get lost in endless, unedited detail. As writers of creative nonfiction, our aim is to capture the essence of what transpired, the *felt truth*, of what was said and heard.

Gay Talese, one of the journalists who spearheaded the New Journalism movement that is a forerunner of today's creative nonfiction, says this about using exact quotations: "Since my earliest days of journalism, I was far less interested in the exact words that came out of people's mouths than in the essence of their meaning. More important than what people say is what they think...."

For memoirists depicting their childhoods, this attitude is essential, for how else can they let the people they once knew speak for themselves? Writers can't claim, with credibility, to recall the exact words spoken fifty years ago. What they can claim is to offer the truthfulness of the relationships *as they remember them*. (For more on this issue, see Chapter 10, "The Ethics of Creative Nonfiction.")

Quotations add voices of authority. We quote famous writers throughout this book, hoping to signal, "You see, we are not the only ones who think this is so! Gay Talese, Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates, Patricia Hampl, all these writers are on our side." And it's not just the famous who enrich a text, as Brian Doyle shows in his essay with its many quotes from the Brian Doyles that he found on the Internet. Quoting others, however, does not mean abdicating your own authority. The writer stays in charge, as Steve Harvey points out: "I get to play with the words of those who have, for the moment, usurped my own. I make them my own."

Opposing points of view (OPV) add credibility. When he teaches a class on "Argument and Persuasion," our colleague Jack Connor always talks about the need for OPV. Without it, the writer sounds one-sided, unreasonable, on a soapbox or a high horse. With it, the writer becomes someone who sees the world in more than one

dimension. Credibility goes up; so do complexity and dramatic tension.

You can add OPV by challenging your own opinion. If you write, “My stepmother never said one nice word to me” and prove it in four pages of details, you must think of one time when she was nice, if not to you, then to someone else. Add it, and see how it deepens your argument. You might also let another character add OPV, as Charles Simic does when describing his Uncle Boris (pp. 257–260):

My Uncle Boris would make Mother Teresa reach for a baseball bat. He likes to make big pronouncements, to make the earth tremble with political and artistic judgments. You drop your spoon. You can’t believe your ears. Suddenly, you are short of breath and choking as if you swallowed a big fly.

What over-the-top certainty! And yet the “I” maintains:

I am the reasonable type. I try to lay out the pros and cons as if I were a Judge making a summation to the jury. I believe in the calming effect of an impeccable logical argument.

Simic is signalling OPV through humor. He, as author, is urging readers to step back and wonder, “Is this a reliable narrator?” His answer comes in the next line when his brother tells Simic he’s “full of shit” and who can argue with that? The “I” of course.

The Role of Humor

It’s hard to be funny on purpose, but it’s worth trying out a humorous voice to tell a serious story. Some, like Charles Simic, are funny by using exaggeration; some by understatement; and still others by juxtaposing contradictory feelings. All stop us from taking ourselves too seriously and provide emotional distance that challenges self-pity, paving the way for more poignant stories. Consider Nora Ephron’s “A Few Words About Breasts” (pp. 193–199), which describes Ephron’s self-consciousness as a flat-chested adolescent. Rather than lament the many ways Western culture fetishizes the female body, Ephron shows us the absurdities—and the pain. Had she written, “I hated my body. I hated wearing a bathing suit. I wished I had developed earlier,” she would have sounded predictable. We, as

readers, would understand her point, but not be as engaged as we are by her account of buying her first bra:

... I went there alone, shaking, positive they would look me over and smile and tell me to come back next year. An actual fitter took me into the dressing room and stood over me while I took off my blouse and tried the first one on. The little puffs stood out on my chest. "Lean over." said the fitter. (To this day, I am not sure what fitters in bra departments do except to tell you to lean over.) I leaned over, with the fleeting hope that my breasts would miraculously fall out of my body and into the puffs. Nothing.

The humor pulls us in. We laugh at Ephron, with Ephron, and at ourselves. We remember our own feelings—whatever our bodies had or lacked—as if it were yesterday. We squirm, even as we smile, at the old inadequacies that still linger. Humor can do that.

Humor also works well when writing about others, especially family members. Max Apple uses it to portray his grandfather, who helped him survive a personal crisis (pp. 262–264). But rather than a saint, we meet a curmudgeon:

... [E]ven in sleep there was nothing gentle about this man. He specialized in hating his enemies, even those long dead. As he talked in his sleep, he exploded in anger. From his dreams I learned the curse words of English and Yiddish. Cushioned by his puffs of breath, visions of destruction crowded our room. Boils sprouted on the intestines of his enemies. Cholera depopulated their villages. The deep background of his life as it escaped through his lips became the chorus of my nights.

As we read on about this grandpa full of quirks, amusement shifts to admiration for this 104-year-old toughie, even as we laugh at his snoring and irascibility. Ultimately, we understand a grandson's love more powerfully because of humor.

Even when the voice is mostly serious, a few lines of comic relief are welcome, as Scott Russell Sanders shows in "Under the Influence" (pp. 223–234). He sees no humor in his father's alcoholism, but still includes, with a light touch, the story of his master plan as a young boy "to travel to California, find Ernest and Julio Gallo, inform them of the damage they were doing to his father, and then, if they did not reply appropriately, kill them."

Humor helps both writer and reader work through the pain—and affirms that life, no matter how difficult, has its light side that we must look for and embrace. As poet and essayist Alicia Ostriker comments in *The Writer’s Chronicle*, “Laughter is a strategy. You don’t want your readers to feel lectured at so you need some levity. Levity sweetens any message you hope to transmit.”

“Cheekiness is a way of keeping readers alert. It cuts through the pious and commonplace.”

—PHILIP LOPATE

How to Find the “Right” Voice

Occasionally the right voice appears early on, but often we have to grapple with our subject for a while to find it. The more emotionally loaded the subject, the more that early voice can mislead us. It may be too angry or too mild, too full of self-pity or too flip, too earnest or too know-it-all. It may take time and many drafts to write our way into a truer voice that magically appears one day. When it does we smile gratefully, and write on, still listening.

Here are some strategies to quicken its arrival:

- ✿ Write a first draft quickly without thinking about voice. Remember, you can’t consciously choose a voice; it chooses you. Trying too hard for voice will lead to a stilted self-consciousness.
- ✿ Let the draft sit for a few hours, a day, a week—long enough for you to switch hats from writer to reader and so gain the detachment needed to hear yourself as others will.
- ✿ Read your draft aloud. When your reading voice drops or flattens out, you know your written voice is off.
- ✿ Listen for rhythms that are often buried in an early draft. In an article describing the move from gathering research to drafting, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Donald Murray first created a dull opening. Reading it over, he heard a rhythm he liked that led him to a voice he liked—which

led him to delete the first twenty-two words and then add eight more:

Original:

~~Unless I am completely controlled by a deadline and forced to write before I have completed my research, I am aware that it is~~
time to think about writing^e when I know the answers + will
to my questions
receive to my questions before I ask them^e, when I know
what my sources reveal before I read them.

Revised:

"It is time to write when I know the answers to my questions before I ask them, when I know what my sources reveal before I read them."

—A Writer Teaches Writing

- ✱ If you don't trust your voice, try a new beginning, or two, using a new tone. If you were earnest the first time, try lightening up. If you wrote with great anger, try for more compassion. Don't be false. Just try to get in touch with other dimensions of feeling that may have been buried or silenced but are valid.

A Question of Authenticity

In academic circles, the term "voice" raises questions about identity. Can one ever really write in an authentic voice? Isn't the notion of a genuine voice naive because the language we speak is always based on class, culture, race, and gender? We say, yes, of course. Voice is constructed—but constructed doesn't mean false. Authenticity, for writers, means finding the language to convey the complexity, irony, and ambivalence of what we—as individuals—experience in our lives. In creative nonfiction, in particular, we are not making universal claims of Truth, but rather presenting one person's truths about the nonfiction world. For that, we need a voice that speaks the words that, as Adrienne Rich says, have "the heft of our living behind them."

For us, then, writing true is an invitation to plumb the depths within ourselves, to find the right voice(s) for the occasion, voices that capture what matters in the worlds we inhabit. Our capacity

to do so is what empowers us. This is particularly true for those who are least heard, who often feel little if any entitlement to speak—or write. Creative nonfiction, we suggest, is the most democratic of genres, for it legitimizes the right of all of us to tell our real stories, in real voices—not made-up ones. If done well enough, whatever the subject, however controversial, others who may not agree will listen.

Ways In ...

1. Writing in the Voice of Innocence and Experience

- A. Think of the child you once were: first kiss, first communion, first night away from home, first secret, first Big Mac, first betrayal.... Choose something that happened before you were sixteen. Write in the first-person using the present tense—as if you were again eight or ten or twelve years old. [*I sit in Mrs. Tan’s class, sure that Jimmy sees me....*] Try to capture the voice of whom you once were, choosing the words, rhythms, and attitudes you had at the time. Aim for the immediacy of the moment by using sensory data—sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, objects, other voices. *Tip:* Before writing, read Lee Martin’s “Never Thirteen” (pp. 175–185) and Alice Walker’s “Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self” (pp. 169–175) to see the power of present tense.
- B. Now write about the same experience as an adult looking back. [*How cocky I was in Mrs. Tan’s class, as if I were Madonna and Superman all in one.*] Reflect on why you felt that way and why this memory still sticks with you today. What was at stake then, and do you still feel that way today?
- C. Read both out loud and decide which voice you like best. If both seem equally appealing, you might want to continue with both. Shift back and forth, the way Sanders does in “Under the Influence” (pp. 223–234).

2. Adding Other Voices

Pick an entry from your notebook on a topic you care about. Interview at least two people about their ideas and experiences on this topic. Work in a quote or dialogue based on your findings, as Brian Doyle does in “Being Brians” (pp. 209–215) and Richard Selzer does in “Four Appointments with the Discus Thrower” (pp. 300–302).

3. Adding OPV

Find a line or two in your writing that expresses a strong opinion. Write against that opinion. For example, if you wrote “My sister Jenny always drove me crazy, especially in high school,” think of a time when she didn’t. Or think of what she might say about you, her OPV. Add it to your text: “Of course, I drove Jenny crazy, too”

4. Adding Dialogue

If you are a writer who doesn’t use much dialogue, discover its possibilities. Find a place in a draft that seems ripe for a scene with conversation and add three or four lines of dialogue, the way Sanders does:

“What’s up, buddy?” he says, thick-tongued and edgy.
“Sky’s up,” I answer, playing along,
“And don’t forget prices,” he grumbles. “Prices are always up.
And taxes.”

Tips for writing dialogue: Start each speaker with his or her own paragraph. Use gestures to enrich what is being said, as Sanders does (“he says, thick-tongued and edgy”). Try to set up a tension between what is said and what is thought. Dialogue should do more than tell readers what they already know.

5. Analyzing Where “I” Stands

Choose several readings and/or several of your notebook entries. Analyze where the “I” stands in each. In the center or close to the edge of the narrative?

6. Trying Humor

Think of a day when you were mildly annoyed or worried—and exaggerate your feelings, making it the worst day of your life. Use over-the-top language, so burning the toast is equivalent to the house burning down. In other words, make a mountain out of molehill. See what happens.

Twenty Ways to Talk about Creative Nonfiction

Listen to seasoned writers talk about work-in-progress and you will often hear terms like back-story, foreshadowing, and pacing to point out strengths and weaknesses. Terms like these lead to deeper discussions than is possible with a vocabulary built on “It flows!” or “It needs more!” The glossary below is a compilation of the most frequently used terms for talking effectively about writing. Use them to think about your own work-in-progress, to comment on the work of others, and to analyze the readings in the anthology.

- 1 **Back-Story:** A story never occurs only in the moment; it has a context. The characters had lives before the readers met them; the events discussed had forces that shaped them. The back-story provides the social, political, cultural, and personal context that is relevant for the reader, information that the writer often takes for granted. If you hear, “But what’s the back-story?” you need to add more history about the characters (who they were) and the events (what happened) before your story begins. Research often helps.
- 2 **Challenging Your Own Assumptions:** One way to avoid predictability is to challenge your own assumptions. If your brother means everything to you, think of something that isn’t dear and sweet about him and show why you love him anyway. Using what we call opposing points of view (OPV) is a fine way to present—through dialogue and reflection—perspectives other than your own.
- 3 **Cliché:** Good writing means avoiding the obvious in your observations and in your use of language. If you hear, “It’s clichéd,” you are offering the reader no surprises. At a language level, “clichéd” refers to stock phrases like “the sparkling blue water” and “the crystal clear air.” At a subject level, it refers to obvious

sentiments such as “Falling in love was the best part of growing up.” Without words like “but ...” or “until ...” that demand complication, there is no dramatic tension. Readers may be pleased that you fell in love, but they’ll find nothing compelling about that.

- 4 **Delivering on a Promise:** Every piece of writing sets up a promise in the first paragraph that it must deliver on by the last paragraph so that readers feel satisfied. If you hear, “It set up a promise it didn’t deliver,” you had best take a look at your beginning and then examine your ending.
- 5 **Facing the Dragon:** This term refers to the need to write toward the tensions in the subject, not away from them. The more emotionally loaded the subject, the greater the difficulty in facing the dragon. But even less personal forms, like narrative journalism, have dragons lurking in them—sensitive topics that make writers back away from the fire, fearing self-revelation or reader disapproval, or both.
- 6 **Factual versus Emotional Truth:** These terms refer to the different ways we can depict what “true” is. Factual truth is the “who, what, when, and where” that most people agree upon: the time, date, location, number of people—whatever is verifiable. Emotional truth refers to how one person responds to an experience. It is subjective, the experience seen through the writer’s eyes. If you hear, “Where are you in all this, what is your point of view?” you need to move beyond the facts. If you hear, “This is too much in your head, too abstract for me to feel grounded,” you need to add more external details.
- 7 **Flatness of Dialogue:** This phrase is used when the language doesn’t sound as if real people are talking. The usual problem: either every voice sounds the same or the dialogue is being used as exposition (to provide information) rather than to recreate a scene.
- 8 **Foreshadowing:** Even with surprise endings, readers like to feel as if they could have guessed what was coming. Then the surprise is accompanied by a satisfying, “Of course.” If there are no clues, there is no foreshadowing—i.e., the hints that make what happens next seem inevitable, at least in retrospect. For example, if you open with humor and end with tragedy, you need to foreshadow

that something tragic might happen. Movies use music to alert us. Writers use words.

- 9 **Narrative Arc:** Where did the writing end up vis-à-vis its beginning? How have characters changed? What's been learned by writer and reader? The narrative arc spans the entire writing from beginning to end. To see it, writers must stand back and look for the big picture of dramatic movement in their work.
- 10 **Narrative Tension:** Every piece of writing has tension points that draw the writer toward the subject and, if well developed, keep the reader engaged. Too often the tensions are avoided, leaving readers asking, "Why, of all the stories you can tell, did you choose this one?" or "What's at stake here?"
- 11 **Pacing:** This term refers to how quickly or slowly the writing moves along. If someone says, "It takes too long to get there!" the pacing is too slow. If someone says, "It goes by too quickly!" the pacing is too fast. *Tip:* The latter often happens at key moments, full of tension that needs exploring.
- 12 **Riffs:** Borrowed from jazz, the word in writing refers to digressions that give back-story about characters and events—and/or offer scenes and reflections by the writer. A riff can move away from the main story for a paragraph or several pages before returning back to it. If you hear, "I'd like a scene here," or "I'd like to know more about ...", then consider creating a riff.
- 13 **Serving the Story:** This phrase refers to the need for every part of the writing, be it a short essay or a full-length book, to add something to the whole. When someone says, "This doesn't serve the story," you need to consider cutting. When writing episodically, ask yourself, "In what way does each episode serve the whole?" Just because it happened is not enough of an answer.
- 14 **Showing and Telling:** This pair refers to the need to recreate scenes (showing) and to reflect on them (telling). They must be in balance for the writing to work. If someone says, "Show more, tell less!" that means you are summarizing events without letting readers experience them. If someone says, "But what do *you* think? Where do *you* stand?" he or she is asking for reflection that reveals your point of view.

- 15 **Split Focus:** Often a piece seems to be about two or more things, which is fine as long as connections emerge through the writing. If that doesn't happen, the problem is called a split focus. The writer must ask: "What, if any, are the connections here?" "Why is this all one story?" Then rewrites are needed to make the connections clear. Sometimes that involves subordinating one idea to another or omitting one focus, saving it for another time.
- 16 **The Extraordinary in the Ordinary:** Often the big stories are in the small ones. A writer's job is to find them in the world and make them shine. We must also look for them in our own writing, finding "the nuggets in 50 tons of dirt," as James Dickey reminds us.
- 17 **The Story:** What's the story here? That is a central question for writer and reader alike. "Story," in this context, does not refer to the plot, but to the meaning of the piece: *why* the writer wrote it, *why* the reader should care. If you hear, "I understand what is happening here, but I don't really know why it matters," you need to figure out what your piece is about and convey that.
- 18 **Trusting Your Readers:** Writers need to have faith in their readers' abilities to "get it." If you hear, "No need to beat me over the head!" you may need to be subtler in your word choice and refrain from repeating the same thing over and over again. (*Hint:* It often involves cutting adjectives and adverbs that clutter as in "The cute, cuddly, sweet Panda sat quietly and patiently on the soft, white, pristine bedspread")
- 19 **Verisimilitude:** Fact is stranger than fiction, people like to say. All the more reason for verisimilitude, which literally means "the appearance of being true." An event may have happened exactly as you said, you may have won the lottery on the day the credit card company dropped you, but that is not good enough. What *is* true must also *seem* true for readers to believe you are credible and not inventing stories just to be interesting.
- 20 **Voice:** If a piece of writing does not have a strong authorial presence, a sense that an individual has written the words, it lacks "voice." Voice is at the heart of creative nonfiction, whether "I" is used or not. If the voice is "off," the writer must adjust it. If the prose sounds anonymous, like an automaton, the writer best start again.