

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 some 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 information for the reader to know, 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 Cliche: 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 better 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 of the subject, not away from them. The more emotionally loaded the subject, the greater the difficulty in facing the dragons. But even less personal forms, like literary 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, hair color, 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 needed 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 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?"

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. . . .")

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 making life up to be interesting.



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.

CHAPTER 6

Workshopping a Draft

Writing is a communal act.

—NATALIE GOLDBERG

For most of us, the first stage of writing is a solitary struggle to produce a decent draft, something that interests us, something with potential. But what happens next, when we want to improve the draft? The struggle can remain a solitary one, or we can try to bring other views and voices into our writing by doing what is often called *workshopping a draft*.

Workshopping invites a group of "live" readers to tell us what they hear in our work-in-progress. Some groups are large, some are small; either way their purpose is to let the writer know what's coming across in the writing, what they see as strong, and what they sense might be missing. More and more writers, in classrooms, in libraries, or in living rooms, are discovering that this sort of response can mean the difference between producing a mediocre work and a strong one. Workshopping—if done well and with good spirit—can also turn writing into a social act that is surprisingly pleasurable, one that reinforces the writer's energy, confidence, and insight. This chapter provides strategies to show you how.