

# Creative Nonfiction

## Crafting the Personal Essay

A writing boot camp

**Course Instructor: Ron Farina**

*“The quality of prose is just as important in nonfiction as it is in fiction.”*

—Robert Caro

*I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.*

—Joan Didion

*I always start off with an idea that becomes a question I don’t have answers to.*

—Toni Morrison

**Location: VERNON ARTS CENTER EAST**

### OVERVIEW:

**CREATIVE NONFICTION** In short, creative nonfiction (CNF) is a form of storytelling that employs the creative writing techniques of literature, such as poetry and fiction, to retell a true story. Creative nonfiction writers don’t just share pithy anecdotes, they use craft and technique to situate the reader into their own personal lives. Elements typically found in fictional writing, such as character development, setting, and narrative arcs, dialogue, are employed to create a story or essay.

**THE PERSONAL ESSAY** is perhaps the oldest form of nonfiction prose, and yet it remains one of the most commonly misunderstood. Some people persist in the belief that the essay needs to be antiquated and moldy, while others claim the essay must follow a menu of one hundred creativity-destroying rules.

These misperceptions are unfortunate, because the personal essay is a wonderfully flexible and creative form, as fresh and inventive as the writer wishes it to be. In addition, the essay remains an ideal vehicle for satisfying the human urge so many of us feel—to not just live year to year but to capture a bit of that life, to produce an enduring record of our better thoughts.

That is, after all why so many people—young and old, homemaker and trial lawyer, working and retired—share the dream of being writers, of having others delight and marvel at what has been written.

We want to speak. And we want to be heard.

### **SEMINAR DESCRIPTION:**

This is a six-week writing seminar focused on crafting a short story or personal essay based on an actual event. The course consists of six 90-minute sessions, once a week for six weeks. Attendees will have the freedom to choose, within the frame work of the course, what genre, short story or personal essay to write, remembering that everything you write about in this course will be based on fact.

### **COURSE OUTLINE:**

#### **Session One:**

#### **Basics Refreshers:**

**Point of view** is the writer's way of deciding **who** is telling the story **to whom**. Establishing a clear point of view is important because it dictates how your reader interprets characters, events, and other important details. There are three kinds of point of view: first person, second person, and third person.

#### **First-person point of view**

In first-person point of view, the reader accesses the story through one person. It's like reading the main character's diary. You will notice pronouns like *I, me/my, we, us, or our* in first-person writing. This limits the scope of what a reader can know about other characters, but it is truest to how we live our lives.

There are two ways to write in first person:

- **First-person central:** The narrator is also the protagonist of the story. For example, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout is both the main character and the narrator, meaning this novel is written in first-person central.
- **First-person peripheral:** The narrator is telling the story of the protagonist from close by. One famous example is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The story of Gatsby is told not by Gatsby himself but by a narrator named Nick, a friend and neighbor of Gatsby's.

Why write in first person?

- **Identification:** The reader is discovering information right alongside the narrator, so they identify more closely with them. First-person writing creates a feeling of "we're in this together."

- **Opinion:** If your piece is heavily dependent on opinions, then it's a good idea to establish whose opinion it is. This can be the fictional opinion of a character or the opinion of the writer. Either way, using the pronoun *I* ensures the opinion won't be read as fact.
- **Intrigue:** The limits of a character's knowledge can play to the advantage of the writer if you want to create mystery around other characters. For example, the narrator's distance from the subject in *The Great Gatsby* creates a sense of intrigue about Gatsby.

## Second-person point of view

Second-person point of view uses the pronoun *you*. This point of view establishes the reader as the protagonist or main character. It is the most difficult point of view to maintain in a longer piece of creative writing. As a writer, you want your reader to be engrossed, engaged, and enthralled but . . . involved? There is a time and place for second person, such as nonfiction, advertising, immersive stories, and this blog post. There are some examples of second-person point of view in novels, which we'll explore later in this article. Just know that it's the most challenging and least-often-used point of view in fiction.

Why write in second person?

- **Uniqueness:** It's unusual to find the second-person point of view in creative writing. Write in second person for a creative challenge or to create a novel experience for your reader.
- **Space for reflection:** By inserting the pronoun *you* into writing, you're addressing the reader directly. This is a useful way to generate space for their personal contemplation.

## Third-person point of view

In third-person point of view, the narrator has the ability to know everything. You'll see the pronouns *he/his*, *she/her*, *they/them/their*, and *it/its* in third-person point of view. This point of view allows for the greatest flexibility and also creates the most complexity.

There are three ways to write in the third person:

- **Third-person omniscient:** The narrator speaks freely about everyone and everything. There are no limits to the time, space, or character the narrator can access.
- **Third-person limited omniscient** (also called **third-person close**): The author writes in third person but keeps the thoughts and feelings limited to one central character. The *Harry Potter* series is an example of third-person limited omniscient. The reader has access to scenes across time and space, but they are only ever in the head of Harry himself.

- **Third-person objective:** The narrator is a neutral entity, relying on observations of characters rather than getting in their heads. It's writing from a fly-on-the-wall perspective. Ernest Hemingway was a master of third-person objective. Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants" is the most popular example of this rare style in fiction.

Why write in third person?

**Complexity:** The possibilities are endless in third-person writing. The writer is not limited by the thoughts, observations, or movements of a single character, which gives them the opportunity to build more complex worlds, plots, and characters.

**Flexibility:** Third-person narration is not bordered by time or space, so the writer can move the story wherever they want to.

**Authoritative narrator:** Human beings are inherently biased, so removing the narrator's subjectivity can make the writing feel more authoritative.

## CONCEPT/PREMISE/THEME

**This might be new to some, a refresher for others.**

**Concept** is simply the bare bones basic idea for a story.

**Premise** is the expansion of concept.

**Theme** for our purpose is what you are trying to say, your intended meaning to the reader.

## STORY OUTLINING

The story outline is a great bridge between your story idea and a polished work of fiction. When you're not sure how to start writing a story idea you might have, working on an outline will save you time and frustration, while also generating new ideas.

Some writers balk at the idea of using a story outline, as they think the process constrains their creativity. If you approach story outlining properly, though, it won't limit your creativity—quite the opposite. Let's delve into how to write a story outline, and why learning to structure a short story or novel will actually unlock its creative potential.

## WHAT IS A STORY OUTLINE?

A story outline is a way for writers to organize the events of their story before they actually write it. It's possible to do outlining for short story writing, essay and of course novel. Is it possible to

write a story/essay without an outline, 'Of Course' but when you're not sure where to begin or how to continue, outlining your ideas can help you put one word in front of another.

The story outline is a sturdy bridge between your story concept/premise and theme to a polished, completed piece.

### **BASIC PERSONAL ESSAYS STYLES:**

**Discuss the different essay styles to include but not limited to:**

Memoir

Narrative (story telling)

Contemplative

Political (let's stay away from that here)

Cultural

Lyrical

Opinion

Travel

Informative

AND.....anything you think of.

Homework: Choose the essay style that best suits your purpose. Develop the concept, premise and theme.

### **WORKSHOP (Workshopping):**

Sessions two through six are writing workshops. Writing workshops vary, for this seminar the writing workshop sessions, a peer collaboration, will involve reading one another's work, respectful critiques, questions, suggestions, and advice on revisions.

Come to each workshop ready to review each other's work. Keep an open mind. Remember, you may know exactly what you are trying say, but unless your reader understands it too, you're writing a diary. This doesn't mean you have to agree with every change anybody suggests, listen, evaluate, make your own changes.

### **Session Two through Six:**

Writers' workshop.

### **REQUIREMENTS:**

Access to reliable internet/email

Basic computer skills  
Basic knowledge of Microsoft Word  
Basic document formatting (12-point font, Times Romans, double spaced text).

AN OPEN MIND AND THE DESIRE TO TELL A STORY

## **THE INSTRUCTOR:**

### **Curriculum Vitae**

Ron Farina

### **Summary**

Writer/author/teacher with fiction and nonfiction publishing success, also highly regarded musical teaching artist with successful private studio. Former successful national headhunter, business owner.

### **EXPERINECE**

#### **Author Profile**

2012—present

Recent Published Works:

#### **Short Stories:**

*Names in a Can and A Keyhole* (featured on NPR), In Country and Back Magazine (2012).  
*Unbreakable Embrace*, The Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy (2013).  
*A Place More Kind than Home*, The Odds Were Against Us Anthology, Liberty Island Media (January 2019).

#### **Essays:**

*Keeping Promises*, Connecticut Magazine (2019).  
*Helping Hands*, Connecticut Magazine (2020)  
*Worn Torn*, Connecticut Magazine (2021).

#### **Nonfiction:**

*Who Will Have My Back, Stories of Caregivers to Disabled American Veterans*, Lagrange Books (release date, Memorial Day 2020).  
*Out of the Shadows, Voices of American Women Soldiers* (release date, July 1, 2022)

**Fiction:** *At the Altar of The Past*, a novel of adult literary fiction, RoseDog-books/Dorrance Publishers (September 2022)

#### **Unpublished:**

*Lexicon*, a collection of thirteen short stories based on true events in Vietnam.

*So Far from Done*, a veteran's return to college fifty years after his return from Vietnam.

**Teaching Experience:**

Western Connecticut State University Adjunct Faculty in the MFA Professional Writing Program (2021—) Volunteer instrumental music teacher at Skinner Road School 2011- 2014

**Musical Experience:**

Instrumental Performer and Teaching Artist (clarinet, saxophone and piano). Studied privately with Doctor Thomas Labadorf, professor of clarinet studies at Central Connecticut State University. Performed with CCSU Symphonic Orchestra and Wind Ensemble (2010—2015). Performed with Eastern Connecticut State University Community Orchestra. Own and operate a small private teaching studio since 2009. Experience teaching clarinet, saxophone, and piano to children, teens and adults. Exceptional pedagogical background preparing middle and high school music students for state regional competitions.

**Professional Business Experience:**

Management Search of Hartford, East Hartford, Connecticut (1985—2009). Highly regarded search industry professional with successful ownership and general management experience. Led a nationally recognized multi-discipline executive search practice for 25 years.

**Awards:**

Honorable Mention *Unbreakable Embrace*, The Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy (2013).  
AWP Intro Award for Fiction (2020)  
Society of Professional Journalists, Connecticut Chapter, First Place General Column Magazine for the essay "Worn Torn" published in Connecticut Magazine (2021)

**Education:**

MFA Creative/Professional Writing, Western Connecticut State University 2020  
B.A. Creative Nonfiction, Magna Cum Laude, Central Connecticut State University 2015  
Music Minor 2015  
Certified Personnel Consultant 1987  
International certified 2<sup>nd</sup> degree black belt in Tae Kwan Do 2006