

Meaning, Description, and Scene

Creative nonfiction is often personal, so it's easy to forget to include the descriptions and context your readers need to understand your essay or narrative. An event may be so real in your mind that you quickly summarize it rather than developing the moment in detail to include the setting and characters plus character actions and dialogue. But setting and character are key to helping the reader see the moment as vividly as you do.

For example, you may know that your friend always wears pink lipstick and flowery dresses or blouses when she's outside her house. But for your readers to understand the significance of a moment in which she wears no makeup plus sweatpants and a t-shirt in public, you must describe her in both situations and detail the actions and language of your friend and other characters, plus your thoughts about the friend and events that take place.

Meaning

Much of creative nonfiction is based on events the writer experienced or witnessed. But the act of writing has a social purpose. Offer specifics about your own experiences and perceptions to invite readers into your world. Meaning is not the same as relatability—readers should be able to engage with your work regardless of their personal experience with the topic or events.

If the thought of writing about yourself or your experiences makes you queasy, know that you can also develop creative nonfiction from secondary research, interview, or an immersion experience. The personal perspective is what separates creative nonfiction from traditional, objective reporting, and biography.

To communicate meaning, thoroughly investigate and illuminate the details of your perspective—help readers experience and think about an idea, research, memory, or event from your unique viewpoint.

Description

Writers use concrete and sensory images to create vivid experiences for readers and, most importantly, invite them to experience the emotions, ideas, or events that drive a work. Poets are particularly good at this. As [Natalie Diaz advised during the 2017 Tin House Summer](#)

[Workshop](#), “Make your words physical. You [and your readers] should feel them in your body.” This advice applies to all creative writers.

Include concrete and sensory images, including character and setting descriptions, to help readers see, smell, taste, touch, and hear the places, characters, foods, etc.. Readers should be able to understand and experience the characters and world of your essay or narrative regardless of their personal experience with the people, topic, or situations you present. Concrete and sensory images are important tools for achieving meaning and for encouraging readers to trust that your creative nonfiction is true.

Scene

Real-Time Scene

Like concrete and sensory images and descriptions, real-time scenes help readers engage with, trust, and ultimately believe your creative nonfiction. Borrowing from fiction, creative nonfiction writers often combine **dialogue**, **action**, **description**, and **brief thought** into real-time narrative moments called scenes. Here’s an example of a real-time scene from “Human Snowball” by Davy Rothbart:

summary to set up the scene

I switched buses in Cleveland and took a seat next to an ancient-looking black guy who was in a deep sleep. Twenty minutes from Buffalo, when darkness fell, he woke up, offered me a sip of Jim Beam from his coat pocket, and we started talking. His name was Vernon. He told me that when midnight rolled around, it was going to be his hundred-and-tenth birthday.

dialogue and brief thought

"A hundred and ten?" I squealed, unabashedly skeptical.

action

Happy to prove it, he showed me a public-housing ID card from Little Rock, Arkansas, that listed his birth date as 2/15/90.

dialogue

"Who was president when—"

dialogue, action, brief thought, and description with concrete images

"Benjamin Harrison," he said quickly, cutting me off before I was even done with my question, as though he'd heard it many times before. I had no clue if this was true, but he winked and popped a set of false teeth from his mouth, and in the short moment they glistened in his hand, it seemed suddenly believable that he was a hundred and ten, and not just, like, eighty-nine. His bottom gums, jutting tall, were shaped like the Prudential rock and were the color of raw fish, pink and red with dark gray speckles. The skin on his face was pulled taut around his cheekbones and eye sockets, as leathery and soft-looking as some antique baseball mitt in its display case at Cooperstown.

Be careful: it's easy to fabricate details when you're writing scenes. Rothbart focuses the dialogue, action, and descriptions on Vernon's age and appearance, the only two things he knows about him at this point. Don't go too far with the details. When you start making things up or tacking on gratuitous details, readers—like adults catching a teenager sneaking in after curfew—will know you're lying.

Dialogue, the words of your characters presented in real time, can help your characters feel alive to readers. When writing dialogue, go for truth over fact: you may not remember the exact words someone said from a past event, but you probably remember the general meaning of their words and know the person well enough to present a line of dialogue that's true to their way of speaking. Use qualifiers like "would say" and "maybe said something like" to introduce dialogue or any other aspect of a creative nonfiction work that you completely invent.

Summarized Scene

Summarized scenes can move a work forward without burdening the reader with unnecessary details. In the previous example, Rothbart uses summary to move quickly to the

most important part of the scene. Here's another example of summarized scene from the poem "[Gate A-4](#)" by Naomi Shihab Nye:

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and **she spoke for a while** in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? **This all took up two hours.**

Notice how the dialogue is summarized—"I told him I would stay with his mother"—rather than presented in real time, as in: "I'll stay with her," I said.

Note too the time markers "spoke for a while" and "This all took up two hours" to indicate that this is a summary of what happened over two hours and not a real-time scene. Nye uses this summary to give readers a sense of how much time she spent with the woman without details that might distract from her larger point.

Writers also use summary to describe habitual scenes. These habitual scenes are often signaled by the word "would." Chelsea Biondolillo uses this strategy in "[How to Skin a Bird](#)." Biondolillo writes:

For breakfast, my grandmother **would** make tiny pancakes for my father and me. He **would** put butter and jam on them, instead of syrup. He **would** roll them up like cigars and eat them with his hands. So **would** I.

Read your work carefully to determine where you're using real-time scene and where you're writing in summary. And be careful not to let thought derail important scenes, sending your readers out of the moment and into exposition such as deep thought or explanation.

Writing Tips

- Present your work with clear and specific details and images to help readers engage with your text, even if they have no prior knowledge of the subject matter.
- Fill your creative nonfiction with concrete and sensory images plus character and setting descriptions.

- Include direct dialogue even if you don't remember it verbatim, and use qualifiers like "maybe," "might have," or "probably said" if you invent dialogue. But only invent dialogue that's reasonable and true to the character in the given context.
- Include real-time scenes complete with **dialogue**, **action**, **description**, and **brief thought**.
- Discover meaning through specificity as well as multiple drafts and revision.

Suggested Readings

- [How to Skin a Bird](#) by Chelsea Biondolillo, Shenandoah
- [An Indian in Yoga Class: Finding Imbalance](#) by Rajpreet Heir, Brevity
- [The Ramshackle Garden Of Affection](#) by Ross Gay and Noah Davis, The Sun Magazine
- [Untangling Roots](#) by Mary Chen, Room Magazine