

CREATIVE NONFICTION ILLUMINATED: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY SPOTLIGHTS

by

Leta McGaffey Sharp

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SIGNED: Leta McGaffey Sharp

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## ABSTRACT

Creative nonfiction is abundant and popular. There are many names and definitions for this fluid, multimodal genre, which has played a role in its marginality in academia. This dissertation examines creative nonfiction in composition, creative writing, and journalism. I argue that distinct beliefs and values of each discipline have led to compartmentalized, disciplinary-specific definitions and uses of creative nonfiction. To understand why this is, and to develop a cross-disciplinary understanding, I use Amy Devitt's rhetorical genre theory to illuminate cultural beliefs and values that influence the names, definitions, subgenres, and views of the genre in each field. A rhetorical understanding of genre reveals the purpose of creative nonfiction, the themes it conveys, and perhaps why it is so persuasive and powerful. In examining composition I analyze the historical development of creative nonfiction, its definitions, and current beliefs and values about teaching composition. I argue composition limits its view of creative nonfiction by too often equating it with the personal essay. A personal-expressive pedagogy would help teach creative nonfiction. In creative writing I analyze the definitions of creative nonfiction and the AWP's statements about creative writing education. I argue creative writing has inclusive definitions, if not rhetorical, but the culture of literature limits the genre for students. A strength of creative writing is the teaching of craft that I argue is beneficial for teaching creative nonfiction. In journalism I analyze the culture of objectivism from which literary journalism emerged. I argue literary journalists have developed definitions that identify the purpose of literary journalism and narrative form. I express concerns about the separation of journalism from composition and creative writing that has limited discussions about creative nonfiction and literary journalism. Finally, I argue each discipline should value one another's views and agree on dissensus instead of focusing on denying one another or trying to find a single name and definition. I suggest narrative nonfiction as a subset of creative nonfiction that would benefit students in composition. Creative nonfiction engages students in writing and examining the sociopolitical world from a personal perspective, which aids them in becoming writers for life.

## CHAPTER 1: CREATIVE NONFICTION COMPARTMENTALIZED

### **I Want to be a Writer**

As a child I loved to read novels, and I loved to write about my life. I wrote diaries, journals, and letters, which were stories and reflections about my crushes, my family, my friends. At twelve I filled a twenty-page notebook as a “letter” to my best friend, Sarah, who had gone to Maui for a week. At fifteen I scribbled in my diary with a red pen late at night, desperate to figure out why Doug hadn’t called me back and why Gene wouldn’t stop calling. My family and friends expressed delight in my vivid writing. I decided I wanted to be a writer. But as far as I knew, writers wrote novels, poetry, or journalistic articles. The words “writer,” “author,” and “novelist;” “fiction,” “poetry,” and “journalism” were the only labels I knew. So I tried my hand at fiction and poetry. They were. . . embarrassing.

When it came to choosing a major in college, I knew I didn’t fit my own image of novelist, poet, or journalist, so I suppose I sort of gave up and decided to study psychology, which I figured would give me good fodder if I ever got to writing. It wasn’t until I was a junior in an advanced writing class that I discovered personal essays, memoirs, and travel writing. I found my genres. And I was soon published.

As I admit my ignorance of diverse genres, I see now it was in fact my narrow conceptions of the labels—novelist, poet, journalist—that caused me such angst over what counted as “real” writing (writing that other people want to read) and even who I was and who I could become. Those narrow views of genres are not mine alone. Most people view genres as classifications of forms.

Now I teach composition and work against strict classifications that may limit both me as a writer and teacher and my students as novice writers. I resist binary thinking, particularly the idea that there are only two kinds of writing: entertaining stories versus informational, functional nonfiction. As I have been educated in composition and rhetoric, I have joined the ranks of those who work against the dichotomous idea of personal versus academic. My academic work grows out of my personal interests. I put myself into my writing. My own tendency to cross arbitrary boundaries has led me to think of teaching writing as teaching students to write for life, not only to write for school, although they certainly need that too. I look to creative nonfiction to help build a pedagogy that values the personal, social, and academic and also diverse modes of writing including narrative, description, reflection, exposition, and persuasion.

### **An Engaging Genre**

The question “what exactly is creative nonfiction?” has driven this dissertation from the start. It is not a simple answer. This project sets out to examine the kinds of definitions used to answer this question because, first, it is a vibrant, fluid genre gaining significant attention in popular and academic circles, yet it continues to be written, read, and studied in the margins of academia. Second, because there are many interpretations of what it is. For now, I offer my own. *Creative nonfiction is prose about real people, places, and events that entertains and engages readers as it informs, teaches, and/or persuades.* Creative nonfiction includes, but is not limited to, the personal essay, travel

and nature essay, memoir, and literary journalism as well as narrative-based documentary, cultural criticism, biography, and autobiography.

Creative nonfiction blends modes of writing, making it confusing to define and classify but also powerful and fascinating to read, write, and study. For example, Terry Tempest Williams' book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* blends narration, reflection, and description with traditional argumentation. Williams vividly tells stories about the women in her family dying of breast cancer after being exposed to the fallout of atomic bomb tests in the 1950s. She synthesizes the story of her mother dying with information and claims about the positive and negative effects humans have on our planet and themselves. Creative nonfiction most often uses narrative to paint pictures of real life stories, but it can also blend poetic, lyrical language with informative writing. For instance, in his essays in *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Richard Selzer's vividly describes his scalpel as a cello bow that plays on the string of the body as he teaches the reader and reflects upon the intricacies of being a surgeon. This combination of forms and modes is what makes creative nonfiction different from other genres.

Creative nonfiction is becoming increasingly popular. Creative nonfiction books are now commonly making the same bestseller lists as novels, whereas they usually made it onto best nonfiction lists, which were often not best selling. *Angela's Ashes*, a memoir by Frank McCourt, was on *The New York Times* bestseller list for years. Memoirs or autobiographies are now sometimes recognized as a persuasive medium for politicians to share their views, such as President Barak Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* and Bill

Clinton's *My Life*. Michael Pollen blends personal narrative with historical and scientific information and analysis about the biological and economic evolution of corn in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Sarah Vowell writes best-selling creative nonfiction history. She tells stories about her travels to historical places and shares her reactions and insights about what she learns. Her impressions are quirky and often amusing, making the distinction as a history book odd for some. Book-length literary journalism, such as Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* about the 1996 disaster on Mt. Everest, follows a long tradition of dramatic nonfiction on mountain climbing. Shorter-length creative nonfiction such as personal and reflective essays have a secure place in literary magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *The Sun*. Short literary journalism is becoming common in more magazines but have long held space in *Harper's* and *Esquire*. Finally, there are now journals that publish solely creative nonfiction such as *Creative Nonfiction*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Brevity*. The genre is rich, abundant, and popular.

Precisely because of its rich, multimodal nature, creative nonfiction is written and studied in various academic disciplines, though not always under that name. Literary scholars examine creative nonfiction, primarily as the literary, lyric, or meditative personal essay. Journalism houses literary journalism, narratives of real events. Anthropologists write narrative ethnography. Political scientists teach the power of persuasive narrative. American and cultural studies theorists produce personal cultural criticism. Creative writers teach the personal essay and memoir, and compositionists have long taught the personal essay.

Because creative nonfiction is difficult to to classify and because it crosses modes and disciplines, it is not surprising that scholars and writers debate the name and definitions of the genre, as well as who owns which subgenres. The discussion tends to be focused on nomenclature (What do we call it?), classification (What category of texts does it belong to?), and form (What formal textual features make it creative nonfiction?). As for the name or what to call the category, most popular critics and composition scholars seem to have settled on creative nonfiction, and for that reason I have decided to use this term for my project. Writers and scholars also use the terms “literary nonfiction,” “narrative nonfiction,” and “the fourth genre.” Journalists use “literary journalism,” “narrative journalism,” and “literary nonfiction.” Some writers avoid naming the genre as a whole and simply call themselves memoirists or essayists.

The subgenres of creative nonfiction vary significantly in form, leading to debate about what is included in the generic category. Using the traditional notion of genre, texts are classified according to their textual features, their form. Forms, according to Campbell and Jamieson, are “stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands” (19). Depending on what writers want to achieve in writing situations, they choose forms to reach those goals. Creative nonfiction writers use first-person narrative to tell one’s own story and to help the reader feel close to the writer. Others use third-person to tell someone else’s story and to leave oneself out of the text as a character. Creative nonfiction can be book-length, a column, a blog, or a feature article in a magazine. Narratives may move forward in time or use flashbacks. Creative nonfiction texts may reveal the writer’s reflections or make explicit arguments. With all these variations, it is

reasonable for scholars to work toward shared classifications because such labels certainly aid conversations about genres. By using a shared name and definition, one person can talk to another person about a “memoir” or “reflective essay.”

Although attempts to label and classify creative nonfiction are intended to aid discussion, classifications also lead to boundaries and limits. Amy Devitt, a rhetorical genre scholar, claims that “the classificatory nature of genre is an essential part of understanding genre and its significance (9). Classifications and forms are intended to be useful to participants of the genre, the speakers and listeners, the writers and readers. Moreover, classification systems are intended to be useful, such as the library classification and disciplinary divisions within a university (Freadman 106). However, Devitt argues, classification and form “are the effects of the genre, not the extent of it” (6). There is more to a genre than its formal textual features and its classification name.

One problem with the traditional classification concept of genre is that it places texts into categories based on formal features that change over time and can be used in other genres. For instance, Devitt provides an example of receiving a letter from a friend. It arrives in a standard white envelope with a hand-written name and address on it. She opens it, and the letter begins, “Dear Amy, How are you?” The problem becomes clear when a sales company adopts the form. Again, a letter arrives in a standard white envelope with what looks like a hand-written name and address. She opens it, and the letter begins, “Dear Amy.” What follows, however, is an attempt to sell her life insurance. The forms make it look like a personal letter. But the purpose is distinctly different.

Therefore, Devitt, and other contemporary genre theorists argue genre is more than textual formal features. I present her theory at the end of the chapter.

Another problem with the conventional notion of genre is that classifications vary according to the goals of the classifier. Heather Dubrow claims the problem is that the “characteristics we take into account when deciding whether to grant that label to a given literary type” depends on what we think a genre is and what labels we want to use (5). There are different classification schemes. Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* can be classified as a memoir, journalism, or nonfiction novel depending on whether I focus on his personal dilemmas and reflections, on his presentation of statistics about climbing Mt. Everest, or on the dramatic narrative. No one classification system is right or wrong, it changes depending on purpose.

Preoccupation with finding consensus on terms and definitions limits the argument for celebrating the genre as fluid and multimodal, as well as the sharing of ideas, knowledge, and pedagogy about creative nonfiction. As well, textual boundaries lead to disciplinary boundaries, that though at times is useful are at other times hindrances. Disciplinary boundaries lead to political claims about authority, who teaches which subgenres, who gets funding for research and teaching, and which students take the classes. Classification debates about creative nonfiction reveal the kinds of limitations and exclusions strict labels can create for students and writers similar to what I experienced growing up.

But the conventional notion of genre as classification is difficult to overturn. Genre labels, which often originated with literary critics, have made their way into public

consciousness. Readers are used to genre classification schemes that tell us what form a piece of writing takes. It is common practice today to see, as a subtitle on a book, either “a novel” or “a memoir” so readers know how to take it, a fascinating issue I leave for future work. Nevertheless, readers use their knowledge of a genre to help them understand what they are reading. Fiction tells stories about imagined characters. Readers know a short story because it is a fictive narrative, usually less than fifty pages, and published within a magazine or book. A novel is a fictive narrative long enough to be published individually as a book and is usually more than one hundred pages. A novella is a short novel, shorter than one hundred pages. These descriptions are focused on form: narrative and descriptive modes with distinctions based on page-length.

Within composition, the specific problem with using a conventional definition of genre is twofold. Current creative nonfiction scholars are indeed grappling with what to call creative nonfiction and how to define it. Current work focuses intensely on classification, and not enough on rhetorical purpose and meaning. The second issue with using a classification-based notion of genre is political because it enhances disciplinary boundaries instead of attempting to cross them. Each discipline claims certain subgenres of creative nonfiction to teach, leading to debates about territory.

A note on my own classification: I use the term “creative nonfiction” to designate the broad genre that has many subgenres. These subgenres are just as often called “genres” themselves, such as the memoir or literary journalism. This situation is similar to fiction, which is also a broad genre that includes novels and short stories as subgenres, which then have sub-subgenres like mysteries, romances, narrative realism, sonnets, and

free verse. Yet many people call the mystery novel a “genre,” as evidenced by bookstore classifications. “Fiction” and “creative nonfiction” may then be seen as “genre sets” of genres. Given different circumstances, using the term “genre” as a broad set of texts that share common textual features or a specific set of texts that share even more features are both correct. I discuss these terms throughout this chapter, but to clarify, I use the term “genre” to distinguish creative nonfiction, which then has subgenres.

As for definitions of creative nonfiction, specifics vary, and the subgenres that are included as part of the genre are hotly debated. Nevertheless, there are two common characteristics on which most scholars agree. Creative nonfiction is about reality, and it is written using language that conveys and renders human experience in an engaging way. What is debated is where to draw the line between fiction and reality and what forms and modes can be included. Does made-up dialogue from when the author was five years old turn memoir into fiction? If informative writing is written with poetic language, using metaphors and symbolic imagery, does that make it creative nonfiction? Or does it need something more, like narrative, to classify it as creative nonfiction?

Within composition studies, with which I am primarily concerned, I see a need to broaden definitions and views by moving beyond the personal essay. Composition has been teaching creative nonfiction as the personal essay since the conception of composition. However, in recent scholarship that suggests creative nonfiction as a way to rejuvenate composition, there is a troubling tendency to equate creative nonfiction with the personal essay. It appears creative nonfiction is becoming the trendy way, or as Wendy Bishop describes it, the “sexy” way to talk about the personal essay (“Suddenly”

265). What concerns me about composition's current interest in creative nonfiction is that it is too often limited to the continuing prominence of the personal essay. Some composition scholars claim creative nonfiction for composition but then argue specifically for the personal essay, a subgenre that is valuable in many ways but fraught with disputes. Compositionists need to reach beyond the personal essay to see the possibilities other subgenres offer that are pedagogically valuable. Because teaching creative nonfiction can be so interesting and valuable for teachers and students, composition should hold a stake in the genre beyond the personal essay. I see a problem if creative nonfiction is only taught in creative writing or journalism programs because those courses are usually reserved for their majors. Composition classes, on the other hand, are open to all students because of the belief that all students can and should learn to write.

Although genre theory has changed considerably in the last two decades, most people outside of genre scholarship still use the conventional, classification-based definition of genre. Within composition, the debates go on, trying to find the best nomenclature and classifications for a genre that is at the same time celebrated for being fluid and for crossing textual boundaries. I suggest moving away from the conventional notion of genre and instead looking at creative nonfiction using current rhetorical genre theory to understand and define it so that we understand the nature of the genre, the meaning and purpose that motivates its writers, not merely its forms and classifications. Contemporary genre theory sees genres as rhetorical actions with meaning. A rhetorical stance reveals something more meaningful than classifications and naming formal

features. It reveals the purpose of creative nonfiction, the participants who read and write it, the themes it conveys, and perhaps why it is so persuasive and powerful. Such a view defines creative nonfiction instead of making classifications of the forms that creative nonfiction writers use.

The goal of this project is to aid scholars and teachers of creative nonfiction to come to a fuller understanding of the genre by examining it from the three fields that teach students how to write it. Each field offers different definitions, views, and emphases, but also shares similar concerns about ethical representation, the line between fact and fiction, and the persuasive, engaging power of stories. Composition has a broad view of writing, a long history of theorizing the personal, and teaching library research. Creative writing offers students how to write stories and dialogue with vivid diction. Literary journalism offers an inherent focus on writing for rhetorical situations and a respect for field research, observation, and accuracy. My motivation is to understand creative nonfiction from the standpoint of a writing teacher who wants to improve pedagogy. I see creative nonfiction as one way to improve composition teaching. By learning an interesting genre, students may develop a rhetorical notion of genre and improve their understanding of the choices they have as writers.

To illuminate this genre, I use contemporary rhetorical genre theory as a lens to examine the current definitions of creative nonfiction and the beliefs and values driving the distinct viewpoints of composition, creative writing, and journalism. I use Devitt's rhetorical genre theory, which synthesizes current theories and adds a distinct focus on cultural influences on genres. Devitt's theory embraces the fluid nature of genres, which

is particularly important for creative nonfiction. She argues that to understand a genre, one must grasp the influence of culture, the beliefs, values, epistemology, and norms, as well as other genres available within a culture.

The distinct cultural beliefs and values of each writing discipline has led to compartmentalized, disciplinary-specific definitions and uses of creative nonfiction in each field. I argue that creative nonfiction scholars and teachers would benefit from a cross-disciplinary discussion of the purposes, uses, themes, and insights of creative nonfiction which may lead to a deeper, more meaningful understanding the genre. The goal, however, of cross-disciplinarity should not be consensus on one term or definition, but rather an acceptance of dissensus and an attempt to value each discipline's particular viewpoints and stake in the genre, but also learn from one another and improve creative nonfiction pedagogy. I also suggest students would benefit from a contemporary rhetorical understanding of genre so they may see genres as fluid, responding to changes in culture, and helpful in communication endeavors, not as strict forms that govern their writing. Finally, I suggest a subset of creative nonfiction that I see as particularly valuable for composition because it works against binary thinking and brings together different writing disciplines and theories. This pedagogy draws on personal, expressive arguments that writing about the personal is engaging and also provides students with a means for critical thinking by requiring research and synthesizing diverse information. It also teaches how to blend *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in a way that dividing a curriculum into academic essays and personal essays does not achieve. Creative nonfiction in the first-year composition classroom becomes a way to engage students in their writing, examine

the social world from a personal point of view, and move into a complex perspective of genres.

### **Where's the Creative Nonfiction Section? Nomenclature and Classification**

While most scholars of creative nonfiction celebrate its fluidity and tendency to cross textual boundaries, it also leaves most struggling to name it. Robert L. Root Jr. explains, “The reason it’s so difficult to name nonfiction definitively is that the range of artifacts we draw our examples from is so broad, so diverse, so encompassing, the expressive, poetic, and transactional elements blending in a vast variety of proportions” (“Naming” 254). Almost every article, book, and textbook on creative nonfiction begins with a discussion of what to call the genre. Douglas Hesse argues that deciding what to call the forms of creative nonfiction and what texts should be considered creative nonfiction has implications for literature and writing studies—though he leaves journalism out of his discussions. Identification of the genre, he argues, determines which discipline does the research and writing and likely gets the funding. Root agrees, claiming decisions regarding terms and definitions dictate where we place nonfiction in the English Department and whether it is seen as “tangential literature” or “tangential journalism” or even a “tangential hybrid existing in a disciplinary no person’s land” (“Naming” 250). Nevertheless, he argues, the widespread popularity and academic interest in nonfiction should make it more central; therefore, these definitions are essential. Others agree, as most scholars wrestle with identifying the genre.

Creative nonfiction blurs the conventional boundaries of classification systems of texts. What one calls a personal essay, another calls a meditation. What one calls a historical documentary, another calls narrative journalism. Devitt argues, when using a conventional conception of genre, texts are grouped according to the classifier's purpose and chosen features (7). Some classifiers choose categories based on content, others based on form. The Library of Congress system tends to classify creative nonfiction by content, making it difficult to find creative nonfiction in the library. Hesse provides an example of the categorization problem concerning Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction in 1975. Dillard is a creative writer studied in varied academic disciplines. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the level of biological detail locates her book in section Q, "Science," in the Library of Congress based on its content. On the other hand, it is studied as "literature" in literature classes, creative writing, and some first-year composition classes based on the forms and modes it uses: narration, description, and reflection. Yet one cannot find it in the library in the literature section: P (Hesse, "Place" 237-38). Dillard's narrative and reflective modes have led compositionists to include selections from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in composition textbooks, such as John Warnock's *Representing Reality: Readings in Literary Nonfiction* (348). B. Minh Nguyen and Porter Shreve include an excerpt in the creative writing textbook *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye* as an example of a "nature and science essay." Each classifier has a different purpose, using the same text as an example of different content or form. The Library of Congress's cataloguing complexities of

creative nonfiction result from “the classic clash between form (generally the PRs and PSs) and content (everything else)” (Hesse, “Place” 238).

Adding to the confusion about classification is the lack of a common name. The preferred label for the genre has varied over the years, depending especially on the discipline. Within composition studies, in the late 1990s, Root and Michael Steinberg, titled their textbook on creative nonfiction *Fourth Genre*, but Root has since changed his mind and has taken to calling it simply “nonfiction” (“Naming” 247). In the late 1980s, “literary nonfiction” was the preferred term (C. Anderson *Literary*; Warnock), and W. Ross Winterowd decided to call it simply the “other” literature because nothing else was satisfactory to him. Most in composition and creative writing now call it “creative nonfiction” as evidenced in the recent titles of articles (Bishop “Suddenly”; Hesse “Place” and “Who Owns;” Malinowitz; B. Williams). In creative writing, the term “creative nonfiction” is used by those who write about the genre, such as Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard in *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Instructions and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs*<sup>1</sup>, in recent textbooks (Miller and Paola; Nguyen and Schreve) as well as the editors of the popular writing magazines *Writers* and *Writer’s Digest*.

Journalists also spend considerable space debating what to call their subgenres of creative nonfiction. First off, journalists do not use creative nonfiction for reasons I elaborate below, and rarely discuss literary journalism being a subgenre of what some call creative nonfiction. They speak specifically of the subgenre that occurs in newspapers,

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<sup>1</sup> I have included the full title of most books and articles throughout the dissertation text because they highlight word choices used by authors.

magazines, news websites, and books. John Hartsock, Thomas B. Connery, and Norman Sims, landmark scholars of the subgenre, use “literary journalism.” Hartsock explains that many journalists now prefer the term “narrative journalism” or “narrative nonfiction” because they resist the elitism they see in the word “literary” (6, 11). However, literary journalism seems to have the cultural cachet, as it most often appears in titles and was last year chosen to designate the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies. There are, however, a few practitioners of literary journalism who use the term “creative nonfiction.” Lee Gutkind, though not trained in journalism, writes and publishes literary journalism in the journal titled *Creative Nonfiction*. Some journalists continue to use the phrase that Tom Wolfe—one of the most famous literary journalists—popularized in the 1960s: “new journalism.” He used new journalism to describe his own participant observation and narrative style (Hartsock 6). However, historians of the subgenre claim Wolfe’s style and form was not new, citing literary journalism from the late nineteenth century. Deciding what to call the genre seems to be of central importance to these writers and scholars as they each tackle the issue in their scholarship.

The selected names for the genre all seem to be recognized as problematic and pointing to one program or another holding a higher stake in the genre. If it is called “creative nonfiction,” it is acceptable to teach it in creative writing, but not in journalism where “creative” is antagonistically viewed as “creating,” as in making up details instead of reporting real details. It also implies a *noncreative* nonfiction exists, which Root argues no one sees value in debating (“Naming” 249). If scholars and teachers use “literary nonfiction,” it is viewed as “artistic,” worthy of being studied as literature and acceptable

to study in literature classes and write in creative writing workshops. However, some composition and journalism scholars take issue with the word “literary” because it implies a value-laden judgment about texts deemed worthy of study (Hartsock 9; Root, “Naming” 248). Finally, it is not acceptable to use literary journalism in composition and creative writing because “journalism” is professional writing owned and, therefore, taught by journalism programs. Each discipline has a stake in the genre and wants to hold onto that stake. As Hesse has argued, the label helps determine who owns what (“Place” 241).

Perhaps, as I argue in this dissertation, coming to a single name for the genre is not the most important subject. Maybe one name is impossible, especially when writers and scholars are concerned about the issues of one subgenre, like literary journalism or memoirs. If scholars in creative nonfiction recognize one another’s interest, labels, and concerns, we can all hold a stake in the genre and still have beneficial cross-disciplinary discussions.

### **What is it? Definitions of Creative Nonfiction**

As with the name of the genre, there is little agreement about what creative nonfiction is and what subgenres it includes. Most definitions focus on discerning which combination of forms constitutes the genre, revealing a reliance on the conventional notion of genre. The strongest definitions also include a suggestion of the rhetorical perspective of such texts, by which I mean the definitions suggest the purpose reflected in creative nonfiction as a genre and the themes that are made meaningful through the genre.

Nevertheless, some scholars argue “reality” is not so easy to define and take issue with what is considered real and what is perceived, recollected, or represented.

The most detailed definition that includes a rhetorical perspective of the genre’s purpose is Root’s from “Naming Nonfiction.” He defines creative nonfiction as:

1. The expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived or recollected experience; 2. A genre of literature that includes such subgenres as the personal essay, the memoir, narrative reportage, (a.k.a. literary journalism) and expressive critical writing (a.k.a. personal academic discourse, personal cultural criticism) and whose borders with other genres and forms (i.e. journalism, criticism, history, etc.) are fluid and malleable; 3. The expressive, transactional, and poetic prose texts generated by students in college composition courses. (255)

Root’s definitions focus, though not completely, on form. In the first he locates three modes of writing: “expression,” “reflection,” and “interpretation.” The second provides a list of subgenres and qualifies the list claiming their “borders” are “fluid” and “malleable.” Here Root invokes the classification notion of genre, identifying the borders that are sometimes crossed. His third definition again relies on modes, or forms, of writing: “expressive,” “transactional,” and “poetic prose.” “Expressive,” to express one’s views, and “transactional,” to transfer information, implies the writers’ purpose, but it also points to form. Nevertheless, the remainder of the article focuses on why the many names, the classifications, for what he calls nonfiction are not satisfactory, aiming to find, he hopes, a satisfying term and definition one day (“Naming” 258).

Bloom, a longtime proponent of personal writing and creative nonfiction, focuses her definition resolutely on “style,” implying form is essential for her definition, which is quite different from Root’s. She argues all good nonfiction is creative in “Creative Nonfiction: Is There any Other Kind?” For Bloom, the term “creative” reveals a broad definition of creativity, labeling any writing with style, voice, persona, and that employs themes, motifs, and metaphors as creative (254). Bloom does not dictate that creative nonfiction use particular modes, such as narration or description to indicate the genre. Instead, she relies on style, which indeed still indicates forms of writing, although it does not imply an arrangement or structure.

Forché and Gerard work in creative writing, and, like Bloom, emphasize certain styles as the forms that distinguish creative nonfiction. They define creative nonfiction as “factual prose that is also *literary*—infused with the stylistic devices tropes, and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical of poetry” (1, emphasis in original). They also provide their list of forms that count as creative nonfiction: “memoir, lyric and personal essay, plotted narrative, biography, meditation, nature writing” (1).

Again, the list of inclusion, though it is not a problem *per se* and is quite useful, does point to the classification of forms. Winterowd attempts to define the “other” literature as texts having a literary form, intrinsic worth, and “staying power,” or appear likely to have it (6). His definition relies heavily on terms with subjective interpretations. He then provides a list to include in the genre: the nonfiction novel, new journalism, “essays that are lyrics in prose,” “the confession,” and “the nature meditation” (ix).

Like Winterowd, Hesse rather vaguely defines creative nonfiction as “prose nonfiction marked by a certain complex of rhetorical and aesthetic moves that we associate with ‘authorial presence’ and ‘the literary’” (“Place” 238). In each of his more recent articles on creative nonfiction, he instead relies on a list of subgenres, instead of a formal definition, to delineate his subject matter: “personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism, and certain traditions of travel writing, environmental writing, profiles, and so on” (“Who Owns” 251). Bishop, in “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition” quotes Hesse’s list to establish her subject matter (261). Each subgenre is distinct according to its textual features, but lists tell us little about the meaning of creative nonfiction as a genre.

Moving from composition and creative writing to journalism, I find more focus on the rhetorical purpose and themes of the genre than in composition and creative writing. Connery defines literary journalism as “nonfiction printed prose whose verifiable content is shaped and transformed into a story or sketch by use of narrative and rhetorical techniques generally associated with fiction. The themes that then emerge make a statement, or provide an interpretation, about the people and culture depicted” (xiv). Connery notes what he sees as necessary in literary journalism, the narrative form, and then focuses on the purpose of texts. Literary journalism must make a statement or show an interpretation about people and culture.

Sims, a leading scholar in literary journalism, opts for a list of “characteristics” because it “can be an easier way to define literary journalism than a formal definition or a set of rules” (*Literary* 7). Sims claims narrative or storytelling, as the primary form and

purpose of literary journalism. His list of the most common characteristics of the subgenre include “immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people, and accuracy” (*True Stories* 6-7). This list seems to be delineating what makes texts literary (“character development” and “symbolism”) and journalism (“immersion reporting” and “accuracy”). The “literary” element certainly focuses on textual features, the forms.

Textbooks and readers of creative nonfiction provide telling evidence about the problem of using forms and classifications for defining creative nonfiction. Sometimes, editors provide two tables-of-contents, one arranged around form, one arranged around subject matter or content such as *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction* (edited by compositionists) and *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Instructions and Insights from the Teachers of the Associated Writing Programs* (edited by creative writers). This perceived need for two table-of-contents shows there is a classification concern because of the nature of creative nonfiction: it is written to inform about content as well as to get readers to think in new ways by using different forms.

This selection of definitions provides representative examples of how creative nonfiction is being defined and characterized. It reveals considerable attention to textual formal patterns as a way to define the genre, which is important for understanding the genre, but most definitions fall short of establishing what is important about creative nonfiction. The genre is engaging and often entertaining to read and it can teach, comment, and persuade us to think in new ways by using stories and vivid descriptions

along with logic. This, I believe, is why creative nonfiction is becoming more popular and is being studied more than ever before.

### **Composition's Stake in Creative Nonfiction**

Hesse argues that deciding what texts are creative nonfiction and what value those texts have has implications for literature and writing studies, creative or not ("Place" 240). The increasing interest in creative nonfiction within composition studies is revealed in recent scholarship: the special issue of *College English* (2003) on creative nonfiction and the increasing number of conference presentations on "creative nonfiction" at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Hesse, "Who Owns" 252). Proponents of creative nonfiction argue it has been a part of composition since the inception of composition in America when writing about personal experiences and observations became a norm (Hesse, "Who Owns" 253; Root, "Naming" 255). Hesse also points to the rise of the personal essay in the 1980s as evidence of composition's stake in creative nonfiction ("Who Owns" 257). Such arguments point to composition's stake in creative nonfiction from a historical standpoint.

However, it is the ongoing assignment of the personal essay in many composition programs that prove composition already has a stake in creative nonfiction. The personal essay is one of the most prominent, popular forms of creative nonfiction. Although contested by some, many compositionists argue that the personal essay is pedagogically valuable and deserves further examination (see C. Anderson's *Style as Argument*; Bishop's "Suddenly"; Malinowitz). Personal writing is criticized by those who believe

student personal essays are not appropriate material for first-year writing students because they tend to be self-centered, teach little about academic writing, social conventions, and may make some students uncomfortable (see Berlin “Rhetoric and Ideology”; Bizzell “College Composition”). I develop and complicate the argument for the inclusion of personal material in composition in chapter two, but for better or worse, composition students have been writing a subgenre of creative nonfiction since the start of composition as a discipline until today.

The forms of creative nonfiction I argue for adding to composition curricula benefit writing students in many ways. Students become engaged with their writing when they are invited to research and learn about something connected to them personally, which I see as the key to effective teaching and learning. Because students work on something they care about, they are more interested in getting it right. For instance, one student learned more about her Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and that not everyone’s experience with Ritalin is the same. I benefit as well. For instance, I learned what it is like for a young teenager to have ADHD, something I don't get from the news items that declare we are over diagnosing the disorder. As well, her story was interesting for me to read, a truly pleasant experience for a composition teacher.

Another benefit of writing creative nonfiction is that it inevitably raises questions about “truth,” multiple perspectives, “objectivity,” and “subjectivity,” issues I see as important to tackle for any college-educated student. Thinking about these issues can lead to self-examination. Thinking critically about one’s own experiences and self—especially if we do research to broaden our thinking and knowledge—is important for the self and

society. If I come to understand my own motivations, then I am better able to see motivations in others. Such self-examination leads to more understanding and responsible citizens.

Finally, inviting students' personal experience into the classroom allows students a personal connection to their academic work that challenges the binary thinking that schoolwork is not personal. Creative nonfiction is one way to help teach writing that builds on complexity and avoiding black and white classifications. For these reasons, creative nonfiction should be available for all students, not limited to students in creative writing and journalism. Composition offers the possibility of broadening all students' views of creative nonfiction and writing in general.

### **The Division of English Studies and Journalism**

The problem is that in all the labeling and categorizing, some nonfiction subgenres have been alienated from one discipline or another, and cross-disciplinary discussion of creative nonfiction is difficult, particularly between English studies and journalism. At most universities, journalism separated from the English department in the early twentieth century, where composition and creative writing have for the most part remained, and as a result, little knowledge is shared across the disciplinary boundaries.

To understand the shared and separate knowledge and politics of composition, creative writing, and journalism, the historical development of the disciplines comes into play. I present specific histories on creative nonfiction in the three fields of writing studies in later chapters, but here I provide an overview of the emergence of creative writing and

journalism in academia. Katherine Adams provides insight into these disciplinary divisions in *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges: Years of Acceptance, Growth, and Doubt*. Adams argues advanced composition is the precursor to professional writing in academia: creative writing, journalism, business, and technical writing. She argues that in the late 1800s, there was a shift away from a liberal arts education toward vocational studies. By 1900 university students spent the first two years studying the liberal arts and the last two studying their major (engineering, agriculture, library science, business, and so on). She claims, “The history of advanced composition instruction, then, begins with higher education’s abandonment of the traditional rhetoric training—at a time when business, scientific, and news writing were becoming crucial to an expanding nation” (1). Professionals in the community were concerned with the writing quality of new graduates, so freshman composition was not seen as sufficient for training writers (16, 35). The first advanced composition course established to address the problem was taught at Harvard by Alexander Hill, who was a journalist, and Barrett Wendell, who was a novelist (37).

As advanced composition spread to other universities, Adams argues, variations gradually emerged based on communities’ needs (57). Some schools saw a need for further “basic” instruction in writing, and maintained a continuation of freshman composition. Other schools, however, developed specializations in creative writing and journalism. By 1939, 45% of American colleges had at least one creative writing course, and the Iowa Writer’s Workshop was established (95-96), which led to the predominant

pedagogy of creative writing across the nation, the whole-class discussion of students' work. Creative writing remained entrenched in English studies.

Journalism versions of advanced composition also adopted a practical methodology, Adams explains. Because the career of the journalist had long-established methods of researching, reporting, and writing, journalism quickly developed writing labs and moved away from academic subjects and forms of writing (99). Classes focused on newspaper writing, ethics, advertising, reporting, editing and sometimes feature writing (105). Professional journalists as teachers became standard and then required (116). By 1925 fifty universities offered undergraduate majors in journalism (115). Dichotomies developed between advanced composition and journalism teachers. English teachers thought journalism was anti-intellectual and too practical. Journalism teachers thought English studies was too academic and impractical (116). This dichotomy led to journalism leaving English departments, sometimes becoming their own school, for example at Columbia University, and more often becoming a part of the new mass media and communications departments where they shared commonalities with broadcast news. Adams argues this separation had drawbacks for writing studies:

With the physical departure came professional separation, leading often to mistrust and competition, with English teachers thinking that journalism involves only sterile formats and with journalism teachers thinking that English means impractical belles-letters. This separation has allowed journalism classes and programs to prosper, But it has secluded journalism

teachers from a larger discussion of writing and created unnecessary enmities. (121)

I would add that it has secluded composition and even creative writing from the valuable teaching of craft and editing that journalism offers.

Creative nonfiction is a genre that crosses these disciplinary boundaries, and reveals, again, shared interests. Therefore, I see creative nonfiction as an ideal place to open some new cross-disciplinary discussions about writing and genre.

### **The Common Ground**

The common ground of creative nonfiction begs for a more thorough cross-disciplinary discussion that needs to include journalism. Many compositionists have been arguing for innovative texts that blend research, personal experience, and/or subjective narrative forms, but with little recognition that such subgenres exist in the world outside of academia as literary journalism. For example, Ken Macrorie's "I-Search" paper combines personal narrative and research and was popular in the 1980s. The "I-Search" assignment asks students to write about the personal research process and integrate that process narrative into a researched essay about a subject of personal interest. More recently, Karen Surman Paley's "I-Writing" practices and Sherrie L. Gradin's social-expressivist rhetoric practices invite students to research and write about social and cultural influences on individual experience. In addition, composition and rhetoric scholars are increasingly writing genre-blending texts, including narration, research, and persuasion. Composition is primed to embrace creative nonfiction more fully.

Literary journalism also blends research and narration. Writers research and analyze sources critically and synthesize various forms of research material and modes of writing. Literary journalism requires understanding and writing for a specific rhetorical situation: writing for a specific publication, which has a targeted audience, and usually for a timely issue.

Other cross-disciplinary knowledge concerns teaching craft. Teaching craft in composition has sometimes been seen as treating writing as a *tool only*, whereas composition teachers generally believe writing is so much more, a mode of thinking and learning. A backlash against *too much* focus on critical thinking has critics claiming teachers do not teach the craft of writing enough in classes and respond to craft only on final drafts. In practice, it seems the focus of craft in composition is on teaching style and the craft of *academic* writing. In creative writing, deliberate attention is given to writing narrative, description, dialogue, scenes, and developing characters. In creative writing classrooms, participants closely study student texts in class workshops and discuss the effect of diction and the selection of detail for most of the class time. Creative writing has only recently begun to theorize the teaching of writing and develop what Tim Mayers calls “craft criticism” (xiv). Composition teachers could benefit from a discussion with creative writing about craft, and from assuming that work with craft and attention to critical thinking are mutually exclusive pedagogical practices, where devotion to one is construed as rejection of the other.

Interestingly enough, it is acceptable to read literary journalism in composition, if not acceptable to write it. Composition and creative writing textbooks and anthologies

include literary journalism as literature. John McPhee, for instance, a celebrated literary journalist, is commonly found in anthologies for composition. Many other journalists, such as Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, and Wolfe, have found their way into composition, creative writing and literature courses because their writing is viewed as “artistic,” “literary,” and “narrative” enough to be seen as crossover texts, not “merely” journalism. Though most personal essays would not be termed literary journalism, many other subgenres, such as profiles, cultural documentary, or travel and nature essays are often cross-classified as literary journalism. If authors, popular critics, and teachers of creative nonfiction are cross-classifying and discussing the same texts, the communication between disciplines should be beneficial and interesting. Many scholars recognize the cross-disciplinary nature of creative nonfiction and include texts that have blurred boundaries. It is time to see what these other disciplines have to say about writing the shared genre.

### **Rhetorical Genre Theory Builds a Bridge for Creative Nonfiction**

The textual and political divisions concerning creative nonfiction are exacerbated when scholars use a traditional, form-based classification scheme as its basis for naming and understanding the genre because it does not reflect the *meaningful* ways that people use genres. Traditional notions of genre were developed by literary and rhetorical critics who needed classification schemes to facilitate analysis, critique, and comparison of texts, particularly literary texts (Devitt 4). Genre theories in the last few decades have moved away from this purpose for classification toward theories that help scholars,

teachers, and students see genres as meaningful and classified by *users* of genres.

Drawing from a rhetorical genre theory to analyze creative nonfiction leads to a meaningful, more complex understanding of the genre.

Genres have meaning in our lives in ways that help—or hurt—communication and interaction. A contemporary rhetorical view sees genre as an action that people use to facilitate communication. One way genres help communication is through recognizable forms. When I hear “Knock, knock,” I know not only a joke is coming but a particular kind of joke where I am expected to interact with the joke-teller. If someone is unfamiliar with this genre, there is no joke and no laughter. If I recognize the knock-knock joke, I classify it as such, and I am prepared for the interaction. Nevertheless, a form does not itself carry meaning for users. It does not point to purpose.

In her book *Writing Genres*, Devitt articulates a rhetorical theory of genre that helps reveal the meaning and use of genres. Devitt’s work is important because it refines and extends Carolyn Miller’s landmark argument in “Genre as Social Action” and the scholarship that has evolved from it. Devitt synthesizes the past few decades of rhetorical genre theory, elevating some components, and adding others. The result is a dynamic, contemporary rhetorical genre theory that allows for a rich definition of genre. Her theory addresses the multiple contexts that influence the construction and recognition of genres and highlights the reciprocal relationship between the individual writing a genre and the cultural and social influences on genre. I use Devitt’s theory throughout my dissertation to analyze the definitions and views of creative nonfiction by the different disciplines. Her theory allows me to gain a more complex understanding of creative nonfiction as

influenced by the different cultures and to highlight the stake each discipline holds in the genre.

Devitt's theory of genre is complex and reveals the importance of genres as meaningful in our society. She predicates her argument on Miller's semiotic theory that genre is typified social action associated with a recurrent situation. Using the term "action" implies that a genre is not a static product; it is created over and over with each new text as an action by an individual. Using the term "social" implies the individual's action, the use of a genre, is entrenched in social factors. The social action under consideration here is an act of writing. A "recurrent situation," according to Miller, is not only a recurring rhetorical situation requiring exigence, as Lloyd Bitzer argued. Rather, a recurring situation is a social construction in that an individual must recognize and select characteristics of a situation (that is, construct it) to see it as a recurrence.

From this premise Miller posits that the people who define a genre are the everyday users of the genre, readers and writers (152). Today in genre theory, it is taken as a given that "participant's recognition of a genre is what rightly determines whether one genre is distinct from another" (Devitt 8). Devitt claims this view as essential to her theory, noting "the classificatory nature of genre is an essential part of understanding genre and its significance, but such classification is defined rhetorically rather than critically, by the people who use it, for their purposes of operating in the everyday world" (9). Therefore, classifications and forms are intended to be useful to participants of the genre, the speakers and listeners, the writers and readers. Users select the forms, the language patterns, according to what users recognize in situational demands.

Devitt's argument emerges from and extends these ideas that have become the foundation of current genre theory. Devitt's articulation of her rhetorical theory of genre defines genre as

a nexus between an individual's actions and a socially defined context.

Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individual's actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situation, context of culture, and context of genres. Genre is visible in classification and form, relationships and patterns that develop when language users identify different tasks as being similar. But genre exists through people's individual rhetorical actions at the nexus of the contexts of situation, culture, and genres. (31)

The notion that an individual's actions are influenced by social factors, whether acceptance or a reaction against, is commonly accepted by current genre theorists. Devitt takes this idea further and argues the nature of social and cultural "context" surrounding genre is highly complex because not everything surrounding a situation is relevant (the fact that it is sunny outside), and other things not present are relevant, like an intended audience. To better define what parts of context are relevant, Devitt includes in her theory the influence of the context of situation, developed from Bitzer, Scott, Consigny, Miller, and Burke, and adds the influences of the "context of culture" and the "context of genres." Devitt relies on the concepts of context of situation and the context of culture established by B. Malinowski and developed by M. A. K. Halliday and others, as did

Kenneth Burke in his theory of form and David Russell in his activity theory of genre. I now turn to Devitt's incorporation of their ideas into rhetorical genre theory.

*Context of Situation.* Understanding genre means understanding a rhetorical situation and its social context. The connection between genre and rhetorical situations is the typified response to recurring situations. Devitt argues that the context of situation is a set of circumstances that has recurring purposes, participants, and themes. Miller points out that no situation actually repeats itself, so the user needs to recognize elements between situations that are similar and decide if those similarities are enough to determine that the type of situation has recurred. Miller writes, "Situations are social constructs that are the result not of 'perception,' but of 'definition'" (156). Because the situation itself does not "demand" a single response, users are constructing a rhetorical situation by recognizing and reacting to purposes, participants, and themes (Devitt 13). This complex definition extends Bitzer's definition of a rhetorical situation by addressing what seemed by Scott Consigny and Richard Vatz to be a problem of determinism. They argued that, according to Bitzer, an individual does not seem to have much choice of "rhetorical forms" (though never called "genres" by Bitzer) when a situation recurs. Kenneth Burke argues in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* that users respond to situations by using strategies that "size up" recurring situations (1). Burke allows us to see genres as strategies that have typically been used to answer typified situations. Moving away from the idea of genres as responses that are *determined* by rhetorical situations, current rhetorical genre theory posits a reciprocal relationship between situation and genre.

Central to Devitt's theory is the dynamic reciprocity of all elements. Reciprocal influences are especially important between genre and situation. She argues, "People construct situations through genres, but they also construct genres through situations" (22). Devitt claims an individual must perceive and recognize a recurrence of similar situation and, therefore, know the genre in which to respond. He or she does this by being familiar with an existing genre. However, for the genre to exist, people must have perceived similar situations in the first place. Devitt claims this paradox works because "[i]f a genre responds to recurring situation, then a particular text's reflection of genre reflects that genre's situation. Thus the act of constructing the genre—of classifying a text as similar to other texts—is also the act of constructing the situation" (21). When, for example, readers recognize an editorial, they recognize the reader's and writer's roles and construct the situation that led to the editorial: An editor is invited to express an opinion, not report objectively. The editor also has to define the specific context and determine his or her persona, audience, and purpose for the editorial, thereby constructing the genre. But knowledge of the genre allowed the editor to construct the situation, leading to the reader reading it and playing the appropriate reader-of-an-editorial role. Devitt argues, "Genre and situation are reciprocal, mutually constructed, and integrally interrelated" (25). People construct rhetorical situations through their use of genres, and genres construct situations that are recognized as situations that call for a particular type of writing.

*Context of Culture.* In addition to context of situation, Devitt and other genre theorists recognize culture as essential to defining genre. She defines culture "loosely

[ . . . ] as a shared set of material contexts and learned behaviors, values, beliefs, and templates” (25). What Devitt emphasizes that previous genre scholars gloss over are the ways “existing ideological and material contexts, contexts beyond the more immediate context of situation of a particular genre, partially construct what genres are and are in turn constructed (reproduced) by people performing genre actions” (26-27). Devitt argues that culture is central to and even essential in defining genre. Cultural values, beliefs, norms, and material realities influence the existence of a genre and even its future iterations. For example, American academic culture values faculty recommendations for graduate-school and job applicants, and those recommendations must come in written form, usually not even read by the applicants themselves. These letters represent specific cultural values on evaluation: master-apprentice, unbiased response, and objectivity are but a few of the cultural messages embedded in the genre of a recommendation letter. Despite each individual’s desires to resist these powerful cultural forces, faculty and students across the nation continue to draft recommendation letters following strict guidelines for their acceptance. Culture, then, has an immense influence on current and even future genre conventions. Although previous theorists like Miller and Russell discussed the influence of culture, neither include it in the definition of genre as Devitt does.

Although Devitt clearly explains how culture can influence the existence, formation, and maintenance of genres, she does not clearly define culture and subcultures. In this dissertation, I define culture as the beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors that are sanctioned by a social group. A social group is any group of people that

share a common purpose and use common genres to attain their goals. Therefore, the English department has its own culture, but within that culture, composition has a culture distinct from creative writing, literature, and linguistics because composition's purpose is distinct. Though they share many values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors, each group has its own unique history and knowledge-making standards that are not shared by the others. Therefore, I suggest that Devitt's theory should incorporate definitions of the social groups that use genres in order to better explain which elements of culture are important to a theory of genre.

*Context of Genres.* Another element Devitt introduces to rhetorical genre theory is the context of genres. She proposes the context of genres "includes all the existing genres in that society, the individual genres, the sets of genres, the relatively stagnant and the changing genres, the genres commonly used and those not used" (28). Devitt emphasizes that genres already exist in a social group, and knowledge of those genres influences the use and learning of a genre. The context of genres is the "already existing textual classifications and forms already established and being established within a given culture, the set of typified rhetorical actions already constructed by participants in a society" (28). When people write their first letter of complaint to a company, they may already know the letter of correspondence among friends, the cover letter for a job, and the recommendation letter, so they draw on these other genres to write the new genre. And since they may know the letter of complaint exists, they may seek help from those familiar with the genre. Knowing other genres shapes the learning of new genres.

What makes the context of genres particularly important for the examination of creative nonfiction is that this context not only reveals what people in a social group have read or written, but these genres are the ones others in the group “say we should read or write” (28). Knowledge of genres from which to choose are socially created. Within an academic discipline, students are being taught what genres are valuable in the field. In the case of creative nonfiction, the context of genres is different in each discipline.

I propose that the context of genres is slightly more complicated than Devitt suggests. Once we begin to examine social groups that share many common beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors, as well as *genres*, such as composition and creative writing, it becomes more difficult to determine which genres influence the users of genres in each social group. Devitt argues that the existence of all genres recognized by a culture are relevant and influence what users read or write (28). For instance, in English studies, both composition and creative writing recognize the existence and purpose of memoirs. Creative writing recognizes the subgenre as one that can be read and written by members of their culture. Creative writing students are, therefore, invited to write memoirs. In composition, however, memoirs are seen as valuable reading material, but they are not to be written in the composition classroom. Composition students are not asked to engage memoirs only as readers not as authors. Nevertheless, composition writing teachers may still talk about the ways in which memoirs are distinct from a personal essay (as an illustration), the influence of that genre (as an effect), but not as a valued genre for student writing (not for invention or production). Throughout my dissertation, I argue that while disciplines may employ different texts within the same genre, they do so for

dramatically different purposes and with different value systems. This dissertation argues, then, simply listing genres does little in understanding the broader cultural impact or even the values places on genres across disciplines.

*Social Dynamics of Contexts and Genre.* So how do all these contexts interact? Each of the contexts reciprocally and dynamically influences each other, and at the “nexus,” Devitt argues, lies genre. The genre lies “between the textual and the contextual, the individual action and the social system” (29). The three contexts of situation, culture, and genre interact. The context of situation is in part specified by cultural beliefs, values, and norms, and by existing genres. The context of culture is in part specified by the situations that are recognized as recurring in a social group and the knowledge of the genres used by the group. The context of genres is in part specified by the situations and cultural beliefs, values, norms, and material that have occurred that then have produced various genres. All simultaneously and dynamically influence each other. This reciprocity is what leads to a fluid view of all genres, but it is particularly important for a genre as fluid as creative nonfiction.

*The Individual.* Of course, the individual is also part of the reciprocal relationships, acting in a situation, within a culture, drawing from knowledge of genres to create a text. The individual is influenced by the three contexts, but also influences them by producing a text of a given genre, by accepting or rejecting language, style, conventions, and forms. The text may follow the same form as previous examples of the genre, or it may not, creating a poor representation of the genre or sometimes a new genre.

*Genre as Nexus*. Devitt argues, “the insight—that genres respond appropriately to their rhetorical situation—reveals the rhetorical nature of generic forms and provides the basis for a newly rhetorical theory of genre” (16). If genres were merely classification schemes and language patterns that constitute forms, then nothing about genres is rhetorical. However, if genre responds to social situations and changes accordingly, then genres are rhetorical.

This reciprocity between genres, individual uses of genres, and social and cultural influences on genres helps to reveal the nature of creative nonfiction. If genres are fluidly responding to individual and cultural uses, then it is less confusing and less frustrating when examining a genre as fluid as creative nonfiction. It crosses textual and disciplinary boundaries because it is a powerful, useful genre. As more people recognize its power to engage readers, more writers and academic disciplines use it. As new people and disciplines use it, it begins to evolve into something different. This is the natural progression of genres, according to Devitt, not something that should be fought by trying to nail down forms and classifications that will work forever.

Devitt offers a visual to help provide clarity to the view of genre “as a nexus between an individual’s actions and a socially defined context” (31). I have reproduced it below, figure 1.1. She is careful to point out that this two-dimensional representation does not do justice to the dynamics of her theory; however, she believes it helps put the elements of genre together. It aids in clarifying my analysis of creative nonfiction as seen from the contexts of composition studies, creative writing, and journalism.

For creative nonfiction, Devitt's theory leads to a fluid notion of genre much more so than conventional definitions of genre that primarily classify texts based on form. Her work allows for and helps explain this fluid, evolving, boundary-crossing genre that cannot be held down by one name, one unchanging definition. Her emphasis on culture helps reveal underlying reasons for why each discipline holds distinct views and stakes in creative nonfiction. Her theory helps develop a broader, cross-disciplinary understanding of creative nonfiction that will help instructors of the genre in particular and composition in general teach writing.

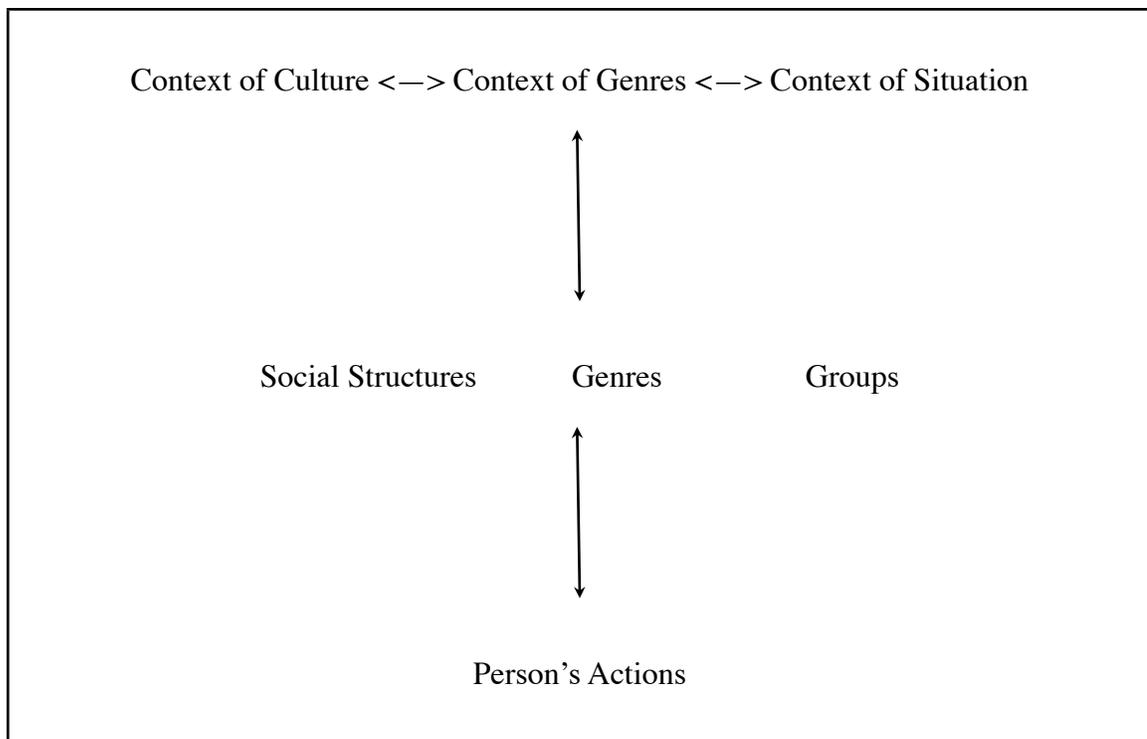


Figure 1.1 Devitt's Interactions of contexts, genre, and action. (30)

## **Overview of Chapters**

In the second chapter, I use Devitt's rhetorical genre theory to examine composition's values and beliefs and the influence they have on composition's view and use of creative nonfiction. I examine the historical development of creative nonfiction as the daily theme, the expressive personal essay and then current beliefs and values about teaching composition. I argue composition has a complex view of creative nonfiction, but when it comes to specific arguments and teaching, compositionists too often resort to equating it with the personal essay. The scholarship is trying desperately to nail down a definition that primarily relies on classification and form instead of a rhetorical definition that identifies meaning and purpose of the genre. I argue that one of the strengths composition brings to writing studies is the pedagogical theories of teaching writing. I suggest social-expressivism as a theory that supports the teaching of creative nonfiction.

Chapter three develops an understanding of creative nonfiction in creative writing. Using Devitt's theory, I analyze the definitions of creative nonfiction and the Associated Writers and Writing Program's statements about education in creative writing programs. I argue creative writing has well-developed definitions of creative nonfiction, but they limit the genre by its focus on producing texts that are considered "literary" or "literature." I suggest concerns that an elitist culture of creative writing makes creative nonfiction classes inaccessible to non-majors, which is a detriment to the genre as a whole and to potential writers who may not major in creative writing.

In chapter four I continue to use Devitt's rhetorical genre theory to analyze the values and beliefs behind literary journalism. I analyze the culture of objectivism from

which literary journalism emerged and examine the culture of accuracy that demands clear, strong research in literary journalism. I argue that literary journalists have developed definitions that identify the rhetorical purpose of literary journalism and of the narrative form. Finally, I express my concerns about the separation of journalism from composition and creative writing that has limited discussions about creative nonfiction and literary journalism and what they have in common.

In chapter five I reveal benefits of a cross-disciplinary view of creative nonfiction. I argue each discipline should value one another's viewpoints and strengths and agree on dissensus instead of focusing on denying one another or trying to find a single name and definition that would cover all the diverse, fluid subgenres of creative nonfiction. I present a pedagogy and assignments for teaching creative nonfiction in composition that moves beyond the personal essay. I claim students benefit from such a cross-disciplinary pedagogy and work on writing that includes research and narrative, a form closer to literary journalism than the reflective personal essay. Students learn to pay close attention to the writing situation and to accuracy in research (a strength of journalism) and they learn the craft of writing description and narration (a strength of creative writing). They learn about discourse, rhetoric, and the power of writing (a strength of composition). Finally, I argue for teaching students a rhetorical definition of genre to help them understand genres and writing choices and to aid them in becoming writers for life.

## CHAPTER 2: THE PERSISTENT PERSONAL ESSAY IN COMPOSITION

### **The Personal Essay Again?**

When I was a new graduate student instructor of composition, teaching my first unit on the personal essay, I was excited but lost about how to teach the kind of thinking and writing involved in a personal essay. As new teachers, we, the new graduate teachers, received surprisingly little information about the goals for teaching the personal essay or training for how to do it effectively. Having written and studied personal essays for years, I was in a better position than some of my fellow new teachers. I searched through my creative writing books to help me develop lesson plans on craft: how to write a vivid description, how to write dialogue, how to determine which details to include and exclude, and how to write about real people with discretion. The training we did receive focused on developing strategies, like lists of questions, to help students think deeply about their experiences so that their essays were not something as superficial as, “I learned how to work hard from my basketball coach because he was very demanding.” Many students don’t know how to develop such an experience into a thought-provoking essay. I know many writing teachers who openly admit they still don’t know how to teach personal essays very well. So why, in the face of all the criticism, do so many writing programs keep teaching personal essays?

### **Creative Nonfiction Moves Composition beyond the Personal Essay**

The personal essay continues to be the main form of creative nonfiction taught in composition classes. This is likely because there is a long history in composition of

asking students to write from their observations and experiences because of the need to write about *something* coupled with the desire to teach some nonacademic discourse. Although the personal essay may be difficult to teach, it addresses two values within composition: critical thinking and writing for varied audiences and purposes. A good personal essay addresses both. It critically examines personal experience to help oneself and others see the complexities of human life, society, politics, and culture.

As a writer and teacher of personal essays, I recognize how difficult it is to teach it well, especially to eighteen-year-olds who sometimes lack experiences and the wisdom to write quality personal essays. Moreover, it is interesting that composition continues to grapple with the personal essay instead of looking at other creative nonfiction subgenres that invite writing for nonacademic audiences. Other subgenres invite personal experience, reflection, writing in varied modes (description, narration, exposition, and argument), and have a critical thinking component built in, such as balancing the personal view with research.

As an avid proponent of creative nonfiction, I was frustrated to read the *College English* special issue on creative nonfiction in 2003 and find so many articles that argue, albeit in new ways, for why the personal essay has value. There are other interesting, complex subgenres of creative nonfiction that fit composition's complex, demanding goals. Unfortunately, as Bishop argues, the term "creative nonfiction" is being used as the new "sexy" term for the personal essay ("Suddenly" 3). To see the opportunity presented by other subgenres of creative nonfiction, compositionists need to broaden their definitions and views by moving beyond the personal essay.

The goal of this chapter is to develop and understanding of the beliefs motivating compositionists' definitions of creative nonfiction using Devitt's rhetorical genre theory to develop a clearer understanding of composition's view. I argue that although composition scholars present a comprehensive definition of creative nonfiction, the working definition ends up being less comprehensive and privileges the personal essay above all other subgenres of creative nonfiction. I claim creative nonfiction emerged as observation-based, personal writing in the earliest classes of composition and later evolved into the personal essay, which reached a peak during the 1960s expressivist movement. Although there are many critics of the personal essay, composition instructors still commonly teach it today. I present social-expressive theories of writing that offer ways to keep the benefits of personal writing and also teach students how to think of the personal as social, political, and cultural. I argue a social-expressive pedagogy could ground creative nonfiction in theories of teaching writing. Theorizing writing is a strength composition can offer to a cross-disciplinary discussion of creative nonfiction. I argue the tendency to think of the personal essay when thinking about creative nonfiction limits writing teachers' use of other creative nonfiction subgenres that are grounded in research and are valuable pedagogically.

Drawing from Devitt's rhetorical genre theory, I also analyze a position statement by the Nation Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), "NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing" (found on their website). This analysis establishes beliefs and values that motivate continuing interest in the personal essay and supports current motivations for including creative nonfiction in the composition curriculum. By

understanding composition's motivation for teaching creative nonfiction, and the personal essay specifically, the field of composition can better understand its working definition of creative nonfiction, the definition that seems to be guiding pedagogy.

### **Selection of a Name**

Scholars in composition use different labels for what I call creative nonfiction. In the late 1980s, the favored term was "literary nonfiction" within composition and rhetoric circles. Chris Anderson edited a collection called *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy* and Warnock edited *Representing Reality*. This term has gone out of favor mostly because critics claim the term "literary" implies a judgment on the quality of the writing. This one is worthy of being called "literature"; that one is not (it is pulp fiction, popular, or genre writing).

In 1990, Winterrowd opted to use the term "the other literature," finding no other "adequate term" (ix), but he makes the argument the genre is worthy of being called "literature," which falls prey to the same criticism concerning a judgment of quality. Root chose the term "fourth genre" in 1994 to distinguish it as one of the forms of literature, (the three genres being fiction, poetry, and drama as declared in Stephen Minot's classic creative writing textbook *Three Genres*), but he has decided that term is not "catchy" enough, nor does it do justice to the fact there had to have been writing about reality before there was writing from the imagination ("Naming" 247). In 2003 Root makes the argument for calling it simply "nonfiction." Root recognizes that the phrase creative nonfiction has "won the most adherents" but argues that using the qualifier "creative" in

front of nonfiction “seems to imply that other writers of nonfiction are not creative,” a position he contests (249).

Nevertheless, creative nonfiction seems to be the accepted term for now. Douglas Hesse, as the guest editor of the 2003 *College English* special issue on the genre, calls it creative nonfiction in the introduction to the issue, “The Place of Creative Nonfiction,” and in “Who Own Creative Nonfiction?” argues the name “*creative nonfiction* has stuck” (251, emphasis in original). All the remaining authors in this special issue use “creative nonfiction,” implying there is some consensus.

### **Defining Creative Nonfiction in Composition**

Devitt’s rhetorical genre theory reminds us that the culture of a social group influences the genres recognized within that culture and how those genres are viewed. The recent scholarship on creative nonfiction within composition is insightful and leads the way into a critical examination of the genre. However, some scholars avoid the task of definition and provide lists of subgenres instead of a formal definition (as discussed more fully in chapter one). Others have a comprehensive definition, by which I mean it covers the many different textual forms that are used in creative nonfiction and include the many subgenres, including subgenres that may not presently be taught within the field, such as memoir or literary journalism in composition. Then there are some who have a comprehensive definition, but their working definition throughout their argument(s) are much more limited. This is where I see the tendency to call the personal essay creative nonfiction then make an argument about the personal essay alone.

Using the list to describe creative nonfiction is a common strategy, and it belies the use of a traditional, classification-based definition of genre. This tendency brings me to Devitt's context of genres, which she claims includes "all the existing genres in that society, the individual genres, the sets of genres, the relatively stagnant and the changing genres, the genres commonly used and those not used" (28). Using lists to define creative nonfiction places genres into categories, naming what belongs and what does not. Preexisting genres are part of what enable individuals to move from their unique experiences to a shared construction of recurring situation and genre. So the genres must be acknowledged by the group to make it available as an option within the group.

In chapter one I use Root's definition in "Naming Nonfiction" as the best example of a comprehensive definition of creative nonfiction. He presents a well-balanced discussion of creative nonfiction that includes composition, creative writing, and journalism. In his definition and throughout his article, Root provides concrete recognition of the importance of literary journalism and does not seem to prefer the personal essay as the best form to be practiced in composition. Root addresses concerns about teaching a form of literary journalism in composition. He argues:

If it's simply journalism, we ought to teach it as part of journalism courses and journalism programs. But there is a form of nonfiction literature which is not principally journalistic and which, confusingly, is also presently called creative nonfiction. That's the one which surely ought to have a place in English departments and which often does have a place in creative writing programs. But the problems in the ways we name nonfiction too

often make it seem like a tangential literature or a tangential journalism or a tangential hybrid existing in a disciplinary no person's land. I believe it is more central than that. ("Naming" 250)

Root argues for literary journalism as a genre to be included in the discussion and teaching of nonfiction. His popular textbook on creative nonfiction written with Michael Steinberg, analyzed below, includes literary journalism as well.

Root's comprehensiveness and inclusion is lacking in other recent articles. Hesse has carved out room for work in creative nonfiction within composition studies over the years; however, he does not provide much attention to journalism's role in the genre. He claims creative nonfiction "serves as an umbrella term for a host of genres, including personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism, and certain traditions of travel writing, environmental writing, profiles, and so on ("Who Owns" 251). He makes vital arguments for looking across the disciplines for sharing the genre. However, he argues for *creative writing* only as a partner in creative nonfiction, not journalism. He claims, "The genres of creative nonfiction, at least for now, inhabit a kind of middle ground between composition and creative writing programs" ("Who Owns" 264). There seems to be a gap between his list of subgenres of creative nonfiction, which includes "new journalism" and "profiles," and his discussion, which leaves out journalism as a field where, at least some, practice "new journalism." He claims journalism continues to be seen primarily as the writing discipline that "handles news and reportage" ("Who Owns" 263) and leaves it at that.

Some creative writing programs may be teaching how to write new or literary journalism, including narrative profiles of people, narrative travel writing, and narrative environmental writing, but people who call themselves journalists also do this writing. Perhaps Hesse leaves out journalism because journalism programs have not made literary journalism a part of the standard curriculum to teach students, but he makes no explicit explanation. (I discuss these issues further in chapter four.) Nevertheless, Hesse's arguments leave out some of the genre or at least some practitioners.

An example of a scholar who uses the term "creative nonfiction" but then discusses the personal essay in the specifics of her argument is Wendy Bishop. Although she worked to bring composition and creative writing closer together for decades, addressing some of the cross-disciplinary discussion I call for, she too leaves out subgenres of creative nonfiction most often written by journalists. Bishop argues for celebrating the "blurry, messy" nature of creative nonfiction and adds to the ongoing argument for teaching personal, reflective essays in composition. She claims the term "creative nonfiction" is the new, "sexy" term for the "essay" ("Suddenly" 272) and that calling the essay creative nonfiction has led to the essay's resurgence once again. Bishop explains her choice of the term essay: "I conflate several forms into that most portable of terms, the *essay*, as synecdoche for the commonly taught subgenres of creative nonfiction" ("Suddenly" 261, emphasis in original). She goes on to quote Hesse's same list of creative nonfiction forms ("Suddenly" 261). Although Bishop's use of Hesse's list implies her definition includes all forms of creative nonfiction, what follows in her discussion shows a significant privileging of the personal essay.

Bishop's argument concerns essays that are "meditative," "personal," and do not offer "certainties" (267). She argues, "We all need to essay our lives. In doing so, we never arrive at the end of things but agree to linger thoughtfully, painfully, ecstatically, along the way" (267). Bishop makes an argument for the Montaigne-esque essay. Her use of the words "meditative" and "personal" clearly leave out some subgenres of existing creative nonfiction. She claims, "Personal journalism, the varied literatures of fact, and many of the forms of the essay are meditative, offering not certainties or unities but attempts that may provoke or support a reader's thoughts" (267). I applaud her effort to include a form of journalism, but her attention to the "personal" and "meditative" overlooks a significant number of texts of literary journalism, ones that tell a stories, but not one's own, and are thought-provoking, but do not come across as "meditative uncertainties."

In addition to what I see as Bishop's overemphasis on the meditative, personal element of some creative nonfiction, I am not convinced that the essay is a "portable" enough term to include, say, a magazine article that narrates the story of an interviewee's life. As I discuss in chapter four, but a preview is required here, not all forms of creative nonfiction are personal and meditative. For instance, Wolfe and John McPhee are recognized as top creative nonfiction authors. Both are literary journalists and keep the first-person part of the narrative and meditations to a minimum in their many volumes. Wolfe and McPhee, as well as Truman Capote and others, tell the detailed, seductive stories of the people they meet and the places they see. Their works are revealing of society, culture, and the human spirit, but in an implicit not an explicit meditative way.

Therefore, these forms of literary journalism would not be classified as “personal journalism” by Bishop it seems (a term she does not define). From her focus on “meditative attempts,” I conclude she means journalism that includes personal reflection. Although her cross-disciplinary argument is promising, her context of genres is limited when she makes recommendations for what creative nonfiction composition instructors should teach.

Another article that lays claim to the term “creative nonfiction” but then argues for the personal essay is Harriet Malinowitz’s “Business, Pleasure, and the Personal Essay.” Malinowitz notes the “escalating interest in the new genre loosely called ‘creative nonfiction,’ which has achieved prominence primarily through the forms of memoir and, more concisely, the personal essay” (316). The qualifier “primarily” here allows room for other subgenres, but the statement that creative nonfiction has achieved prominence through the memoir and personal essay would certainly be contended by Gutkind and Wolfe, who argue it is literary journalism that allowed for the comeback of the personal essay. Regardless of which revived which, like Bishop, Malinowitz leaves little room for a more comprehensive context of genres that includes *nonpersonal* literary journalism.

On the other hand, broadening the scope of creative nonfiction, Bronwyn T. Williams makes a clear argument for the importance of literary journalism as creative nonfiction and for teaching it in composition. Williams used to be a journalist and now teaches composition. In his article, “Never Let the Truth Stand in the Way of a Good Story,” he rejects

the prevailing wisdom that journalism is not about beauty, that fiction is not about the truth or the social construction of culture, that composition should be concerned with rhetoric and the social construction of academic discourse before it is about the personal and the creative in all writing.

(302)

Williams argues that his work in creative nonfiction is informed by different forms and ways of writing, including journalism, where he learned and now teaches his students, to “maintain an interest in hearing the stories of others and a respect for accuracy” (300). He argues composition must be involved in the study and teaching of creative nonfiction, but that we need to pay more attention to the issues of power, representation, and ethics, all of which are essential, even primary, in the field of journalism. Williams puts his finger on what I too see as valuable in teaching other kinds of creative nonfiction besides the personal essay: writing stories about others, finding accuracy through research, and maintaining interest in subjects that reach beyond the self.

Instead of drawing creative nonfiction into the current realm of composition, which appears to be dominated by the personal essay, compositionists need to expand its definition, as Root suggests, by broadening the genres taught in composition classes. This “expansion of composition’s sphere” (Hesse, “Who Owns” 262) means a realization of the comprehensive context of genres that influence the genres we teach and students’ view of genres and of writing for life beyond the classroom.

### **Evolution of a Discipline, a Culture, and a Genre**

According to Devitt's rhetorical genre theory, as explained in chapter one, the context of culture is essential to understanding a genre. The subculture of composition programs shares some values and beliefs with the culture of English departments, the university as a whole, and the larger society, but it also rejects or modifies other values and beliefs. These cultural influences determine how composition views the purpose of first-year and advanced composition classes, as well as what and how students are taught. To understand these cultural influences on the development of creative nonfiction in composition and the persistence of the personal essay, I look at two times when creative nonfiction was particularly important in the discipline and then look at a representation of today's values and beliefs in the field. I examine the emergence of composition at Harvard in the 1880s, the height of the expressivist movement for the 1960s—1980s, and then the NCTE 2004 position statement on the beliefs of composition teachers.

Creative nonfiction, albeit as an informal form, was assigned to students in the earliest days of composition at new American universities. It appears to have emerged out of the need for writing material, the need for a source of invention. In the late nineteenth century, English professors with no formal training in writing instruction were asked to teach writing at new universities (see Berlin *Rhetoric and Reality*; Crowley *The Methodical Memory*). Therefore, teachers looked for writing assignments that suited their students. Observations and personal experiences were accessible sources for invention and, therefore, experiential writing became the norm (Connors 308). According to John C. Brereton, Harvard was the first college to require a freshman composition course,

English A. As early as 1884, Barrett Wendell introduced the “daily theme” into a composition course, which was later adopted across the country (12). Wendell found that, for himself, writing in a daily diary was “profitable” for his writing and thinking (32). So, to get his students to practice writing daily, he developed the daily theme, a two-to-three-paragraph piece where students were invited to “look squarely at some little part of the world, try to catch the color or flavor of what they saw, and then write as significantly as possible” (32). Although this form of creative nonfiction may seem almost trite and process-based instead of genre-based, it is still creative nonfiction; it conveys observations about reality. The daily theme itself became a school-based genre as it continued to exist for the next century and evolved into interest in the personal essay.

This development into the personal essay was advocated by expressivist rhetorics, which emerged in the 1920s. These writing teachers valued personal writing and voice. Although the earliest forms of creative nonfiction may have been born out of the need for a new form of invention, many proponents of creativity in writing, such as Barrett and Hughes Mearns, argued for personal writing as the best source of material for writing classes because it led to personal growth (Mearns 102).

Expressivist rhetorics remained marginalized until the 1960s when it began to significantly impact on the way writing was taught (Berlin *Reality*, 115) and through the 1980s interest in the personal essay was strong. Expressivists attempted to refocus composition by helping students during invention, encouraging writing about personal experience and finding a voice. Expressivism is naturally inclined toward increasing students’ confidence in their ability to write.

Expressivists argue for the power of writing as a mode of discovery and self-expression. The focus is on developing the whole of the individual and on helping students become effective writers in a general sense, rather than writing for a specific discourse community. Peter Elbow, a highly influential proponent of expressivism, suggests that inexperienced writers will learn to write effectively by beginning with what they know. He argues that by writing about their own experiences, students write confidently and usually more clearly. Elbow believes students are more likely to develop a personal “voice” when “writing what they know,” which lends itself toward writing that has strength, conviction, resonance, and power (*Power* 283). Expressivists value this writing with a personal voice that can be heard and understood, and they believe this helps students have power to transform with words (see also Cobine; Britton; Macrorie; Robertson).

Many scholars who endorse expressivism value writing as a heuristic, a mode for making meaning out of language. As students write freely and fluidly about their thoughts and feelings, they discover meanings and connections in their thinking. Elbow suggests “freewriting” as a way to think up topics to write about. He tells students to “[f]ollow threads where they lead and you will get to ideas, experiences, feelings, or people that are just asking to be written about” (*Power* 15). Students and their writing need to be freed, in a sense, to become better writers (see also Peterson; Isaac and Reimer).

Creativity is highly valued by proponents of expressivism. Language and writing are seen as elements to be manipulated and played with through a creative process. Therefore, the main focus of teaching writing is on the process, not the final product,

although the product is recognized as the goal (Elbow, "Teaching Thinking" 4). Donald Murray, a practitioner of expressivism, argues that writing is imaginative, creative, and evolves out of an active process. He claims we need to respect the student for the "search for truth in which he is engaged," and encourage him or her "to attempt any form of writing which may help him [or her] discover and communicate" ("Teaching Writing as Process" 5-6). Accordingly, we attain truth through a creative and individualized process of self-exploration (Spiegelman; Spellmyer; Murray; Gannett).

One of the motivations of expressivist rhetorics is to get students engaged in writing, a value held by most writing teachers, expressive or not. The use of personal writing is one of the ways some writing teachers work to engage students in writing. Expressivists argue that we are most interested in what goes on in our own lives and therefore writing about our lives will produce the best writing. Elbow claims that when writing about their lives, students are naturally engaged. They feel more commitment and responsibility to get it right, to tell their truths ("Closing" 51). Macrorie also sees the self as the source of knowledge and emphasizes that students are more interested in what they are learning if they see their writing as a way of telling truths about their experiences (1). These values and beliefs lead to informal personal writing in composition classes and to the personal essay.

The main criticism of expressive rhetorics is that writing about personal experience tends to be self-absorbed, uncritical, and that it makes students feel independent of social, political, and cultural powers. David Bartholomae, for instance, argues that expressive pedagogies make students "blind to tradition, power and authority

as they are present in language and culture” (“Reply” 129). Similarly, Bruce Horner argues against Elbow’s version of expressivism because it encourages students to ignore the “material, social, and historical operating [. . .] within as well as outside student consciousness” (513). In addition, Allen France criticizes expressivism for failing to give students resources for critiquing their political situations. He sees expressivist teachers as unwittingly taking part in the replication of oppressive capitalist and consumerist ideologies. Such criticisms, according to Maureen Neal, come from the reality that no individual alone “invents, learns, knows, uses, or controls” language and meaning (44). In other words, critics often believe expressivism gives students the false notion that they are utterly unique and individually powerful outside of social and cultural influence.

As we can see from their values and beliefs, expressivists are drawn to teaching personal writing and thus the personal essay. The use of experiential material as a source for invention reveals some of the values in composition.

Continuing interest in and use of personal essays reveals a continuing need for a source of invention. Students still enter university without a guaranteed background knowledge in philosophy, history, or literature. They have not yet begun studies in their major. Yet the reality is that teachers are expected, by writing programs, administrators, and other disciplines, to teach students how to write. Therefore, teachers still grope for sources of invention to suit new college students. Personal experience is something teachers can rely on, whatever those experiences are. Of course, composition teaches other types of essays that use texts or research as a source for invention, but personal

essays are still of interest to many as an alternative assignment. The beliefs and values that motivate teaching the personal essay, though not shared by all, run deep.

### **Social-Expressivism Supports Creative Nonfiction**

Many composition theorists who believe there is merit in expressive rhetorics have done valuable work to bring expressive and social constructive methods together into one pedagogy. This does not mean they begin with personal expressive writing, then proceed through the semester into academic expository writing, and then teach academic conventions. Rather, they have found ways to explore social, political, cultural, and language issues using students' experiential knowledge and expressivist methods. What they have developed presents teachers today with a theory of writing that supports creative nonfiction. Although these social-expressive pedagogies do not discuss creative nonfiction under that name, the essays students write from these pedagogies are forms of creative nonfiction because they share personal experience and discuss the social implications of their experiences.

Creative nonfiction scholars discuss the social nature of personal experience (Bloom; Root and Steinberg). This is where I connect social-expressive theories and creative nonfiction. Horner, Tim Keppel, and Neal argue that the personal *is* social. As Horner puts it, the personal can be used as a site for “contesting [social] meanings, building on, responding to, and revising those meanings” (525). Thus, we must begin with individuals when we discuss the social. Mary Soliday, for instance, uses literacy narratives as a means of getting her students to examine their narratives about learning to

read and write in a social, cultural, and political context. Students explore the cultural force language exerts on their everyday lives (511). In doing so, students learn that their own personal experiences are part of the “clash and transformation of identities, cultures, and languages” (512), thus valuing the personal and the social.

Thomas O’Donnell, attempting to defend and clarify expressivism, presents a similar view: the personal is social and is political. He argues “political issues are often macrocosmic (policy level) versions of matters that are unavoidably personal” (427). O’Donnell illustrates a similarity between expressivism’s reliance on personal experience and Wittgenstein’s ordinary language theory, which establishes that we learn language in specific contexts, not in general descriptions of meaning. O’Donnell argues that we cannot imagine and discuss generalities effectively without specific examples. To be successful communicators, we need to imagine and discuss *particular* instances. Expressivism from this perspective utilizes our ability and tendency to look for particular instances by including student experiences in discussions about the social and political world.

Another example of how compositionists are attempting to value both the personal and the social can be seen in Min-Zhan Lu’s “Reading and Writing Difference: The Problematic of Experience,” where she proposes an approach of rereading texts and rewriting student papers after exploring enlightening theories that help students examine their own experiences in social and political ways. She argues, “We need to imagine ways of using experiences critically: experience should motivate us to care about another’s differences and should disrupt the material conditions that have given rise to it” (239).

She believes that “composition pedagogies based on revision through sequenced reading and writing assignments — revision defined as a means for exploring different ways of seeing — can be used to advance the feminist project of making experience work both experientially and analytically” (239). In other words, Lu sees personal experience as a valuable element for helping students understand and analyze difference and social construction.

Others have used expressivist methods to help students become comfortable getting ideas down on paper before they move onto putting those ideas into academic discourse. Elizabeth Robertson used expressive discourse in a writing lab situation to work with students on developing ideas and making meaning for academic papers. Kathleen Isaac and Constance Reimer use personal journals in the classroom to offer a secure place to try out ideas, practice writing, and explore problems. These authors argue that through expressive writing, students realize their own personal experiences can shed light on academic topics and make such topics more interesting to write about, the argument I, and others, make about creative nonfiction.

Although these compositionists and others have discovered and articulated important ways to work with expressivist and social constructionist concepts, they have not presented us with well-defined underlying theories we can continue to build on. The compositionists in the following section have started to articulate theories based on what Gradin calls social-expressivism.

Gradin, as well as Neal, Keppel, and Anis S. Bawarshi resist the false binary of social constructionism/expressivism and move further toward a more cohesive theory that

takes advantage of both models. Each proposes that either approach taken alone has many weaknesses, but, as Neal puts it, “these two approaches taken together have more to offer the composition classroom than either one alone offers” (42). Each of these compositionists highlights important similarities between expressivist and social constructivist classroom practices and theories.

Blending expressive and social-constructive theories helps accommodate the personal and the social for Bawarshi and Keppel. Bawarshi calls for a “theory of divergence” that combines expressive and social constructive methods to help students “reconcile the autonomous self and the constituted self.” It offers “a way to talk about how writers not only derive from generic, ideological, and discursive conventions, but also how they diverge from these conventions” (80). Bawarshi suggests ways we can achieve an understanding of similarities amongst ourselves as well as differences between us. Similarly, Keppel suggests a theory and curriculum that validate student voices and redistribute authority in a process-oriented, student-centered course. He places considerable emphasis on personal writing to help students find their visions, and also encourages “students to move beyond the ‘I’ in order to see how their identities have been shaped by many societal forces” (125).

In addition to the explorations by Keppel and Bawarshi, Gradin offers a thorough and much needed book-length articulation of a social-expressivist perspective on teaching writing. In her book, *Romancing Rhetorics: Social Expressivist Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing*, Gradin starts out by tracing expressive theories back to romanticism. Her view is guided by her dedication to feminism which has led her to value “the

expressive concern for voice, emotive processes, and lived experience” (xiii) in order to rectify gender and racial inequalities within a white, patriarchal system. She sees social-expressivism as able to help this feminist aim.

Gradin is also driven by the need within education in general and composition in particular for more pedagogies that resist the passivity and indifference of today’s students. She argues for pedagogies that get students interested in what they are learning by connecting academic subjects to their lives outside the classroom. She maintains students better internalize what they have learned when they are engaged in a topic and take their expanded knowledge into the world beyond the classroom.

In order to achieve these goals, Gradin advocates a social-expressivism, which suggests that

all subjects negotiate within the system; they act and are acted upon by their environment. In order to be effective citizens and effective rhetorical beings, students must first learn how to carry out the negotiation between self and world. A first step in this negotiation must be to develop a clear sense of one’s own beliefs as well as a clear sense of how one’s own value system intersects or not with others, and how, finally, to communicate effectively. (xv)

By combining the expressive concept of self-exploration and the social-constructive concept of critical examination of social influences on the creation of self, Gradin suggests a useful pedagogy that allows for a focus on the individual as well as a recognition of community influences that supports the teaching of creative nonfiction.

She points out that the “crucial ingredients” for expressive pedagogies — if they are to move students toward the growth of imaginative intellectuals — are discovery, perception, experience, and reflection (xix). She also takes the important step Keppel and Neal have also taken of highlighting the social practices that have always been embedded in expressivist theory and practice, thus further developing the bridge to social-expressivism and creative nonfiction.

Social-expressivism is a much more complex and realistic theory for composition than either expressivism or social-constructionism alone. Scholarship on combining the two pedagogies provides us with useful theories and practices for teaching effective writing, and provide us with a way of approaching creative nonfiction with a theory of writing. This is an important contribution composition can make to the cross-disciplinary discussion about creative nonfiction.

### **Values and Beliefs of Composition Today**

I now turn to the modern day and examine the NCTE position statement on what composition as a field values, written by the Executive Committee in 2004. The “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” found on the NCTE website, offers to “guide effective teaching practice.” Therefore, it is a statement that declares what writing teachers should believe and value as writing instructors. Because the position statement is relatively current, and it reveals beliefs and values that composition programs supposedly uphold, and because it appears to be a strong representation of the beliefs I have witnessed in composition programs, I see it as worthy of analysis.

One of my arguments for teaching creative nonfiction in composition classes, rather than only in creative writing or journalism classes, is that first-year composition classes are open to all students because of the belief that all students can learn to write. Creative writing and journalism classes are *usually* reserved for majors only. Probably the most foundational belief of compositionists is that people can learn to write. When compared to the belief of the writer-as-creative-genius held by some writers and teachers in creative writing and literature (a notion I discuss in chapter three), it bears noting. The NCTE Executive Committee declares, “Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers” (“Beliefs”). This belief led to the open nature of composition courses in the nineteenth century, and it drives writing-across-the-curriculum programs today. Some students may be expected to take a basic writing class before first-year composition, but eventually those students are also allowed into regular writing classes.

This belief that everyone can learn to write is important to my argument for why composition should teach creative nonfiction even if other disciplines teach it as well, an argument I take up in chapter five. Writing creative nonfiction blends the personal and the academic in a way that engages students in learning to write and improves the teaching of writing for varied audiences and purposes. All students should be given that opportunity. Composition, being the most “open” discipline, should, therefore, teach creative nonfiction.

There are significant expectations of composition from outside the field because of the openness of its classes, or rather, classes are open because of these expectations.

Composition is expected to teach academic writing—by administrators and other disciplines. However, this expectation conflicts with the view of many compositionists, that composition should teach writing for varied situations. The Executive Committee argues that composition classes must offer “ample in-class and out-of-class opportunities for writing and should include writing for a variety of purposes and audiences.” To me, this means we should be teaching students how to write for life, for wide-ranging audiences, not just for academia. However, composition programs receive funding from university administrators who expect composition teachers to teach academic writing so that other professors do not have to. Although educators have begun to accept that each discipline has its own writing, and this recognition has led to writing-across-the-curriculum courses and entire programs, students are still expected to come out of composition curricula able to write for academic situations.

This demand has led to the focus on teaching academic discourse over all other forms of discourse, which then led to composition being viewed as a “service” discipline and its marginality in academia, an issue I will not delve into here. It is important to note that the discordance between writing for academia and writing for life continues, not because compositionists do not believe they should teach academic writing but because most, including the NCTE, believe we should be teaching other forms *in addition*. Personal essays have been one of the forms that we teach *in addition*.

### **Effects on a Genre**

Although few composition teachers today would call themselves expressivists, enough teachers believe in the value of personal, expressive writing to continue the interest in the personal essay, as seen in the social-expressivists. Many of the arguments for creative nonfiction today by Bishop, Malinowitz, and Bloom are resoundingly familiar to the arguments of expressivists and social-expressivists. They value personal expression, creativity, and helping students learn through engagement in their topics and writing. The cultural values of composition today maintain interest in the personal essay. However, using the term “creative nonfiction” to stand for the personal essay is selling the genre short, as well as the potential for students. The many criticisms of expressivism hold weight for creative nonfiction that is primarily personal reflection. It is hardly a surprise that an eighteen-year-old who is invited to write about a personal experience seems self-centered and unconcerned with social and cultural influences on the self.

Therefore, composition instructors need to offer ways to help those students see these influences to aid their critical thinking. Creative nonfiction that is both personal and reaches to sources beyond the self help students think critically and uphold the beliefs and values laid out by the NCTE. Using a social-expressive pedagogy helps to bring theory to the teaching of creative nonfiction. Broadening our view of creative nonfiction leads to rich possibilities for the composition as a field and for a powerful pedagogy.

## CHAPTER 3: THE “LITERARY” IN CREATIVE WRITING

### **The In-Crowd**

I didn't take my first creative writing class until I was a grad student, a sad realization when I have wanted to be a writer all my life. I look back at the obstacles, and it was often the nature of creative writing programs that kept me out of creative writing classes for so long. I wanted creative writing classes as an elective or to create a minor, but it turns out I had to apply and be let in as a major to take any of the classes I wanted.

As a kid, I remember having creative writing days in seventh-grade English class. I still have the short story I wrote that was selected for display at the St. Rose Student Showcase. But creative writing was not offered at my high school.

When choosing a university, I thought about going into creative writing or journalism. But neither was offered at McGill, my number one choice. I selected McGill anyway, then because of the lack of creative writing classes, I did a visiting year at another university. This university had a creative writing program, but it was reserved for students enrolled in it as majors. I tried to convince a professor and the administrators of the program that I was good enough to take their classes. But they wouldn't even read my writing. There were rules. Instead, I took a year-long advanced writing class and discovered the personal essay. I finally stumbled upon my niche. I reveled in the praise I received from my writing teacher, and I worked incredibly hard on improving my writing.

The result of that class was not only my exposure to creative nonfiction as a genre but also my desire to teach writing. When I went to grad school in rhetoric and

composition, I began pursuing connections between creative writing and composition. I tried again to take a creative writing class, this time in creative nonfiction. The creative writing program, again, had strict entrance rules. The administrators said I could take the course as an English graduate student in rhetoric and composition, but I needed undergraduate prerequisites. So I took a my first fiction class with the undergraduates, and I accepted that the credits would not count toward my degree. The following summer I took an “open” graduate-level creative writing class. It was offered by a rhetoric and composition professor who wrote creative nonfiction and poetry and believed everyone who teaches writing should have the opportunity to try writing in all genres.

Armed with two courses and representative writing, I was finally allowed into what felt like the elite society of creative writing. I was elated. I felt as if I was in the in-crowd, especially after an excruciating moment when another rhetoric and composition graduate student was asked to leave the first class because she had not jumped through the hoops. I felt for her, and although I was proud to be in the class, I resented the fact that creative writing had been so closed to me previously. Especially when the first round of essays were brought in for workshopping, I knew I had been prepared for the writing before I took the prerequisites. The seeds for this chapter were planted.

This albeit somewhat bitter story (I certainly accept my own choices played a role in my failure to take creative writing classes) reveals how closed a discipline creative writing can be. Although this elitism is not the case at every college, it is more common than not because of a long held belief in “talent.” I see important work in creative nonfiction and many courses in creative writing programs, but I believe the benefits of

writing creative nonfiction should be available to any student, and creative writing programs do not often have an open-door policy.

### **Creative Nonfiction Flourishes**

It may seem obvious that creative writing has a stake in creative nonfiction. Creative writing programs are currently the primary place for students to take creative nonfiction classes. It was the first academic discipline to accommodate the growing interest in the genre (Hesse, "Who Owns" 252). As recently as 1992, there were no MFA programs with a concentration in creative nonfiction; by 1999 there were thirty-five (Hesse, "Who Owns" 252); by 2008 there were ninety ("The AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs"). As more writers have turned to creative nonfiction to publish in and receive pay from magazines, the discipline has broadened its definition of creative nonfiction from personal essays, memoirs, and travel and nature writing to include non-autobiographical forms such as literary journalism. Creative writing instructors are the most abundant authors publishing textbooks and how-to books on writing creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction uses forms that are seen as fictional techniques (description, narration, symbolism, dialogue, and figurative language), and the association of the term "creative" is viewed by many as clear evidence that creative writing has a stake in creative nonfiction.

Current work on creative nonfiction in creative writing studies reveals a comprehensive definition of creative nonfiction, by which I mean it includes all subgenres of what I see as creative nonfiction. The subgenre most often left out in

English studies is literary journalism, as with composition studies. Although some creative nonfiction scholars in creative writing still view anything that is “journalism” as beyond the scope of creative writing programs, the field as a whole appears to be embracing literary journalism, a promising development toward cross-disciplinarity.

One of my concerns about the teaching of creative nonfiction in creative writing programs is that only students dedicated to writing will ever likely take a “creative writing class” because of the assumption that those courses are reserved for talented, invested writers—which is, indeed, often the case. As Root points out, some students (and faculty) may see a class in a creative writing program as “something chiefly of interest to an artsy contingent of student and faculty writers” (“Naming” 246). When a college has a creative writing major, too often those courses are indeed reserved for students with a major or minor in creative writing. A high interest and demand for creative writing at most colleges leads to limited seats and a protected program. I argue most students do not have access to these classes. Therefore, although the creative writing definition and view may be more inclusive than composition’s, it limits creative nonfiction by controlling who takes creative nonfiction classes.

This chapter strives to understand what creative writers mean when they use the term “creative nonfiction.” As in chapter two, I deploy Devitt’s rhetorical genre theory to analyze the beliefs and values of creative writing studies that have influenced the definitions of creative nonfiction and the subgenres made available to students. Through an analysis of the field’s definitions as well as documents from the AWP, I argue that creative writing has an inclusive definition of creative nonfiction that encompasses

literary journalism but that definitions rely heavily on forms and classifications, particularly the classification of creative nonfiction as “literary” and “literature.” I argue that creative writing offers to the cross-disciplinary view of creative nonfiction a provocative celebration of the genre and close attention to the craft of storytelling and imagery.

I begin by providing a brief history of creative writing in the academy to contextualize the discipline and politics. I then analyze the definitions and views of creative nonfiction provided by scholars and writers in creative writing to determine some of the beliefs and values that seem to be guiding creative writing in its work with creative nonfiction. I also draw from Associated Writing Program documents to examine the cultural influences on the genre.

### **Contextualizing Creative Writing as an Academic Discipline**

Creative writing in the academy was not created by a group of writers who wanted to meet and discuss writing or literature as Wilbur’s history of the famous Iowa’s writer’s workshop implies (Myers 1). Rather it branched off advanced composition at Harvard University in the late nineteenth century (Adams 95). D. G. Myers argues that creative writing grew out of an interest in studying literature from a writer’s perspective, not to produce writers who would go out and publish literature (14). The role of creative writing changed with the emergence of MFA programs in creative writing. In 1939 the Iowa writers workshop developed a practice for working with talented writers (Adams 96). Although the workshop model is critiqued for the “lack of teacher training and

intellectual rigor” a mentality emerged that still influences creative writing programs and students today: that successful creative writers have innate talent and education and mentoring helps hone talent.

The belief is that creative writers are born, not made, and these talented writers will eventually write “literature,” that is, writing deemed worthy of study by literary critics and that can withstand the test of time. Wallace Stegner in 2002 argues that students learn through “imitation” and “omnivorous reading;” the writer “has no other way to learn” (23). Style takes time and practice to develop (24). This implies that the workshop model gives students a place to practice and develop their talents. This belief is certainly a paradox when it exists in places of education. It seems that recent creative writing theories and pedagogies challenges this belief. Nevertheless, this elitist view continues to influence creative writing practices.

From a rhetorical genre theory perspective, this belief influences the genre by creating a standard in the culture to which creative writers are expected to aspire—producing literature. Yet texts considered “literature” change over time based on changing values. Therefore, what is considered literature at one time may not be seen as literature at another. Although I do not attempt in this project to define literature, the fact that reading and writing literature is highly valued in creative writing culture means some creative nonfiction texts would count and others would not, regardless of the forms used. According to Devitt, a genre is defined according the purpose, participants, and themes. It seems that creative writing may see the “purpose” of creative nonfiction is to exist as literature. I explore this notion as I examine the definitions of the genre.

### **Exploring Literary Texts: Definitions of Creative Nonfiction**

The definitions of creative nonfiction from creative writing are for the most part inclusive of many forms of creative nonfiction writing and subgenres, but some scholars reveal a tendency toward emphasizing personal writing, focusing on the personal essay, memoir, and other autobiographical subgenres, as does composition. Wendy Bishop and David Starkey provide a detailed discussion and history of creative nonfiction in *Keywords in Creative Writing*. Although Bishop's work often draws from both composition and creative writing, the title of the book suggests she is here working from the traditions of creative writing. They do not, however, provide their own formal definition. Instead, they immediately begin considering creative nonfiction as "the essay" (62). Notably, the first seven paragraphs of their discussion draws from Philip Lopate's introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* (62-64). His book is about a single subgenre of creative nonfiction, the personal essay, yet Bishop and Starkey choose his explanations of the genre to dominate the first half of their discussion of the entire genre. They summarize Lopate's seven characteristics of a personal essay and describe the form as written by the sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne, who Lopate calls the "fountainhead" of the essay. Bishop and Starkey characterize the Montaigne-esque essay as a trial of ideas, of meandering through a writer's thoughts, elastically moving from topic to topic, often dwelling on the minutiae of everyday life (63).

Bishop and Starkey concentrate on the Montaigne-esque essay form as creative nonfiction. The personal essay is indeed a major, interesting, and important subgenre, but

its place in academia is fraught with tension. In addition, the term “essay” is also used to describe other forms of writing, such as composition papers (essays of the Francis Bacon tradition, as Bishop and Starkey point out), travel stories, and nature meditations. Bishop and Starkey define the essay in the form and style of Montaigne. Not only does creative nonfiction include many more subgenres, but genre is *more* than textual forms, as current genre theorists argue. Bishop’s and Starkey’s discussion mimics Bishop’s claims in her *College English* article “Suddenly Sexy” where she essentially equates creative nonfiction with the personal essay, as I argued in chapter two.

Bishop and Starkey do eventually move beyond the essay and mention the difficulty in naming the genre before presenting two paragraphs on Gutkind’s definition of creative nonfiction, which is supposed to present a different perspective than Lopate’s personal essay. Gutkind, they point out, “has been given the moniker of ‘the godfather of creative nonfiction’” and represents the forms of creative nonfiction that emerged from the New Journalism of the 1960s, literary journalism (65). They summarize Gutkind’s five R’s of creative nonfiction as “required” components of the genre: “Real life, Reflection, Research, Reading, and ‘Riting’” (65). However, Gutkind is not trained in journalism, leading some journalists to dismiss his work. Nevertheless, Bishop and Starkey use his definition and then argue most “essayists” would have trouble with his definition because of his inclusion of “research,” which “clearly places Gutkind’s definition closer to journalism than to memoir” (65). Bishop and Starkey never provide a formal definition of the genre; rather, they continue their description by defining other subgenres: cultural criticism, nature and travel writing, memoir, and autobiography. They

end by claiming the “distinguishing feature of the ‘fourth genre’ appears to be the ‘non’ preceding ‘fiction’”(68) and leave it at that.

Bishop and Starkey’s discussion of creative nonfiction overprivileges Montaigne’s form of the personal essay. Moreover, their presentation of literary journalism through the eyes of Gutkind would be a bit of an outrage for some literary journalists who see Gutkind’s view of creative nonfiction as closer to creative writing than that of journalism (which I discuss in detail in chapter four). So it is telling, as I see it, that Bishop and Starkey chose Gutkind to represent literary journalism, being closer in kind to creative writing than other literary journalists. What I see in Bishop and Starkey is an attempt to describe variations of creative nonfiction. Nevertheless, their discussion leaves a skewed impression based on forms and classifications without a discussion of the genre’s purpose or what holds all the subgenres together.

The production of literature does not come up for Bishop and Starkey; however, it is central to Forché and Gerard's definition. Their introduction to *Writing Creative Nonfiction* reveals their passion for the genre as well as what they see as its aim:

Creative Nonfiction has emerged in the last few years as the province of factual prose that is also *literary*—infused with the stylistic devices, tropes, and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical of narrative poetry. It is fact-based writing that remains compelling, undiminished by the passage of time, that has at heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to *truthfulness*. (1, emphasis in original)

Their use of poetic language stands out. It strikes me as highly distinct from the definitions of creative nonfiction from composition and journalism. They use the words “infused,” “flourishes,” “lyrical,” and “fidelity,” which convey the dramatic and compelling nature they see in creative nonfiction itself. Moreover, their definition provides their view of what textual features literature uses, those that are “infused with the stylistic devices, tropes, and rhetorical flourishes of the best fiction and the most lyrical of narrative poetry.” Their use of superlatives “best” and “most” point toward a literature of the elite.

The literary angle is evident in yet another descriptor found mostly in use in literary studies and creative writing: “lyrical.” Texts are lyrical, basically, when they express a writer’s emotions and thoughts in a beautiful, imaginative way. Describing text as lyrical seems to be highly subjective, and, therefore, problematic within a definition. Regardless, calling a text lyrical is reserved for works deemed “literary.” Their stress on literariness does seem to limit the texts that could be considered creative nonfiction.

The 2003 textbook *Literary Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre* is by Stephen Minot, the author of the now classic book in creative writing *The Three Genres*. As of the book’s publishing, Minot was a Professor Emeritus of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside, having taught there thirty years. It is worth noting a few things about his textbook that stand out compared to Iverersen’s *Shadow Boxing* and Nguyen and Shreve’s *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction* (to which I turn next) both written by newer faculty<sup>2</sup> and we likely assume, educated in creative nonfiction more recently. First,

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<sup>2</sup> I based this assumption on viewing their biographies on their webpages at their respective universities.

Minot's definition is clear and confident. Most other scholars of creative nonfiction qualify their statements more than Minot. He claims, "Literary nonfiction is distinguished by three basic characteristics: It is based on actual events, characters, and places; it is written with a special concern for language; and it tends to be more informal and personal than other types of nonfiction writing" (*Literary* 1). He declares, "These three characteristics are important because they save a great deal of futile argument. They explain the difference between literary nonfiction and other types of prose writing such as fiction, journalism, factual reports, and academic scholarship" (*Literary* 1). His didactic approach seems almost naive after reading so many scholars in various fields that recognize the fluid, blurry nature of creative nonfiction and celebrate that characteristic. No one is likely to argue with the basic elements of his definition, that the genre is based on "actual events," with "concern for language," and tends to be "informal and personal." However, they certainly would argue with his presumptions.

By arguing that writers of literary nonfiction have a "special concern for language," Minot implies writers of "journalism, factual reports, and academic scholarship" do not. I would argue other writers certainly *do* have special concern for language, although some of the concerns might be different than the concerns of literary nonfiction writers. In addition, a simple description of writing as "more informal and personal" is vague. I could argue a brief e-mail could have these three characteristics, but it may not be considered literary nonfiction by Minot or anyone.

Minot's use of the somewhat older term "literary nonfiction" instead of "creative nonfiction" is perhaps revealing of deep ties to literature as well as to an outdated view of

creative nonfiction. More interesting, however, is that Nguyen and Shreve, Iversen, Bishop and Starkey, Forché, and Gerard all include the subgenre “literary journalism” in their definitions and in their lists of subgenres. Minot, on the other hand, never uses the word “journalism” to describe any form of literary nonfiction. He uses “journalism” only once to discuss genres from which literary nonfiction is distinct. This exclusion is all the more strange when I see Minot’s “Appendix B” is a resource for writers, and it lists anthologies and book-length nonfiction that are distinctly known as literary journalism in most circles, such as *Hiroshima* by John Hersey and *Iron and Silk* by Mark Salzman. Minot’s own distinctions are perhaps contradictory.

Kristen Iversen complicates Minot’s definition. The 2004 textbook *Shadow Boxing: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction* presents students with a more complex view of creative nonfiction. Iversen begins with what compositionists also present, the “blurred” nature of the genre, and the fact that critics cannot seem to agree on what should be categorized as creative nonfiction (ix). She has six chapters, each one focused on one subgenre: memoir, personal essay, literary journalism, nature writing, biography and history, and the nonfiction novel. Her book seems well-balanced and inclusive of all kinds of creative nonfiction. Iversen’s word choices, like Forché’s and Gerard’s, imply the production of literature or literary texts:

There are two essential qualities to creative nonfiction. First—simply stated—creative nonfiction is prose that demonstrates skillful use of literary technique. Voice, mood, tone, symbol, metaphor, dialogue, characterization, plot, epiphany—the elements used by the fiction writer, or any good writer, serve the creative nonfiction writer. These

elements, however, serve a slightly different function for the writer who not only writes imaginatively but also desires to grapple with the “real” world, with real life, real people, real situations. Creative Nonfiction is literary writing that is based—perhaps loosely, perhaps rigidly—on real-life situations. The tools of reality—fact, research, history, investigative reporting, experience, and memory—are essential to the creative nonfiction writer. Like fiction, however, it is based on good storytelling. (ix)

There are many things I appreciate about Iversen’s definition. One is the list of what “literary technique” is: voice, mood, plot, etc. She also recognizes that these techniques are used by any good writer, an openness to other forms of “good” writing, even if it is not literature. In addition, she describes “tools of reality” that include literary journalism—“research” and “investigative reporting”—in her definition itself, not only in her list of genres. This emphasis on how to collect the information about the “real world” stands out compared to Minot and Bishop and Starkey’s definition. Iversen reveals an openness that I see as helpful for fostering cross-disciplinary discussions with composition and journalism. She moves beyond the production of literature and attempts inclusion of varied creative nonfiction texts.

Another inclusive definition and a comprehensive textbook is found in *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye*, published in 2005. Nguyen’s and Shreve’s goal is to present, as they call it, a “comprehensive” vision of creative nonfiction, with two categories that put the personal and journalism side by side, essays from the “I” and the “Eye” . According to their categorization, “I” essays include personal essays and memoirs, which emerge from “personal concerns or experiences,” On the other hand,

“Eye” essays emerge from observing subjects beyond personal experience. They note the two categories are not mutually exclusive, as “a work of personal nonfiction must engage in ideas both about and beyond the self.” The distinction is one of focus, the self or “beyond the self” (1).

Nguyen and Shreve begin by offering the other names for creative nonfiction, the “fourth genre,” “the literature of fact,” “the art of truth,” and “literary nonfiction,” recognizing the complicated state the genre is still in. Like Iversen, they note the genre “is continually pushing boundaries” (1). Their textbook reveals their inclination to celebrate this fluidity. What I notice is Nguyen’s and Shreve’s even-handed treatment of each subgenre. They recognize the prevalence of personal writing in creative writing but open up “Eye” forms so that they appear just as provoking and viable for creative writing students.

### **A Culture of Literariness**

These definitions of creative nonfiction reveal creative writing’s cultural connection to literature and the production of literary texts. I now move from the definitions of creative writing to the *AWP Director’s Handbook: Guidelines, Policies, and Information for Creative Writing Programs*, which presents hallmarks for a creative writing education, and is available on the AWP website. The AWP’s influence is felt far and wide. As the primary source for educators developing creative writing programs in academia around the world and for students looking for writing programs, the AWP holds

great sway in the creative writing community. I examine the value of literariness that influences creative writing's view of creative nonfiction.

The 2009 version of a handbook from the AWP recommends hallmarks for an education in creative writing. The goals of a creative writing program are on reading literature and practicing with a teacher-writer. The *AWP Director's Handbook* recommends that "talented students" are necessary for a successful program (9). This belief and its resulting epistemology shape many facets in the development of the field and is difficult to erase, especially when so many embrace their elitism as writers of "literature." I discuss this topic more fully below as I examine the culture and resulting politics of creative writing as a discipline.

Although BA programs in creative writing do not expect all students to go on and become professional writers (Fenza), the culture of creative writing has evolved with the influence of MFA programs, which confer what is considered the terminal degree, and literature studies. MA and BA degrees in creative writing and their courses are highly influenced by the expectations of talented, literary writers in MFA programs and critics in literature. The culture of elitism filters down.

The goal of creative writing programs is to train new writers to produce literature. That aim has led to a culture of elitism. The mission and scope of the AWP has directly influenced the prevalence of that culture. The AWP is described by the 2009 Executive Director, David Fenza on the AWP website. He explains, the AWP's mission is to "foster literary talent and achievement, to advance the art of writing as essential to a good education, and to serve the makers, teachers, students, and readers of contemporary

writing.” Fenza’s use of the words “literary” and “art” distinguish types of writing within creative writing programs. Though the AWP never says they do not teach pulp fiction or “genre novels” like mysteries or westerns, their inclusion of the adjective “literary” seems essential to their mission. Literature is considered written works of superior or lasting artistic merit. The word “literary” implies a value judgment, based on whether critics determine a piece of writing as timeless, the language as poetic, and subject as deeply conveying the meaning of human life. Many, especially those in literature and creative writing, view this judgement as the key to success. Others, especially those who write forms not commonly viewed as literature, such a mysteries, westerns, or feature articles in a magazine, view the term “literary” as elitist. Their argument revolves around the claim that good writing does not have to be timeless or deal with central human values.

Which works are deemed worthy of being called “literature” is an issue debated and challenged by many. I do not intend to argue what counts as literature. The fact that in literary studies and in creative writing there are some works deemed “literature” and others that are “less than” is what has led to a culture of elitism.

Because the AWP has had such wide influence on the creation of creative writing programs, there does not seem to be much variance in this culture. Fenza explains, “The AWP has helped to establish the largest system of literary patronage the world has ever seen. AWP has supported the development of hundreds of educational programs, conferences, reading series, and literary magazines as well as thousands of jobs for writers and new audiences for contemporary literature.” The literacy goals are certainly to

be admired, and the expansion of writing across the globe is impressive. However, their reach has spread the culture that believes “true literature” is best. This may be what is so intimidating to so many young writers.

Creative writing, although expanding to become more inclusive at an undergraduate level, maintains a culture of the elite “genius” of the writer where talent is viewed as a prerequisite for entrance into the community, and those talents can be honed, but not taught from scratch. This culture influences the discipline’s view of creative nonfiction in the following ways. The definition of creative nonfiction is broad and comprehensive, but again, as in composition, we see a limitation in the follow-through, in the “working” definition, when discussing the teaching of the genre. The personal essay and the memoir are still central to teaching creative nonfiction, with literary journalism an “interesting” new direction. But the focus on literariness leaves a question about many creative nonfiction texts that seem to fit everything in their definitions except the superlative examples that become literature.

### **Craft of Creative Nonfiction**

The many creative writing textbooks and handbooks about creative nonfiction offer different attention to writing, the *craft* of writing stories, descriptions, plot, and characters. Craft, in terms of writing pedagogy, means the techniques writers use to attain their purpose(s). Creative writing has long offered books on how to be a good writer. Teaching craft in the classroom uses the kinds of techniques writers use to improve their writing. There has been some resistance to the idea of teaching craft within composition

because it lacks supporting theories or a sociopolitical self-awareness. However, Tim Mayers suggests “craft criticism” is emerging which brings composition and creative writing closer together by theorizing craft.

As one example of what creative writing offers to the cross-disciplinary discussion of creative nonfiction, Iversen’s *Shadow Boxing* textbook presents exercises for students on the effects of using the past or present tense in narrative, how to improve showing through concrete nouns, building plot, and the mechanics of writing dialogue. Craft is something every teacher needs to know if he or she teaches creative nonfiction. Students need to learn the rules and skills of writing stories about reality. Creative writing shows *how* to write creative nonfiction.

### **Effects on the Genre**

Recent trends in creative writing programs are toward a comprehensive view of creative nonfiction that includes literary journalism and related subgenres that depend greatly on research like narrative history and biography. Although these inclusive definitions of creative nonfiction have not yet trickled down into all programs or views of all creative writing teachers, creative writing studies is moving in a more inclusive direction—a model perhaps for composition.

My concern with creative writing is that not many students will take creative nonfiction courses if they are offered through creative writing programs. Because the culture of creative writing remains a closed society with strict entrance requirements and/or prerequisites, students interested in exploring creative nonfiction will either not try to

get into a creative writing class, or the programs themselves may keep them from entering. The access is limited to practicing literary creative nonfiction writing. In the next chapter, I turn to the field of journalism to consider how literary journalism fits into a picture of creative nonfiction and argue for common ground.

## CHAPTER 4: LITERARY JOURNALISM AS A RHETORICAL MOVE

### **But I'm Not a Journalist!**

One semester when teaching an advanced composition course, I titled an assignment a "Literary Journalism Article." The previous semester I had titled virtually the same assignment an "Informal Persuasive Essay." A few students who were not journalism majors strongly resisted the notion of writing "journalism." Close to half of the class was journalism majors. Both times I taught the assignment, students were expected to use narration and personal experience to help develop an argument about a topic they also researched. The first semester, students overwhelmingly reported they enjoyed incorporating personal narration with researched material, and the quality of the papers they wrote reflected their interests. The following semester I decided to tweak the assignment by asking students to pick a magazine in which they thought they could publish their article. I required students to define their rhetorical situations by analyzing the publications and intended audiences. I asked students to target their arguments, tone, and styles for the selected magazines. They were again asked to use personal experience and narration in addition to research to make an argument. We also read samples of literary journalism and discussed the genre.

One student, Joe,<sup>3</sup> who was not a journalism major, wrote his first draft for a one-on-one conference with me as a diatribe against journalism. His essay complained about reporters' limited choice of topics and the sensationalism of stories intended to sell newspapers. Joe's limited definition of journalism was especially frustrating because this

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym. I will be using pseudonyms for students throughout the dissertation.

draft came after weeks of in-class discussions on creative nonfiction's subjective forthrightness and reading narrative-based journalism. I was also puzzled by the fact that Joe focused on journalism as his subject matter when he obviously knew little about the intricacies and breadth of the field. I suggested, among other things, he do research to understand the forms of journalism against which he was arguing.

The next step for him was to revise, then have his paper workshopped by the whole class. As the class discussed Joe's little-revised paper, it became apparent Joe was not the only student hung up on the assignment as journalism. The class conversation that day revolved around journalism more than Joe's paper. Various journalism students took Joe's ideas to task and argued not all journalism is as limited as he saw it. Other students joined in Joe's complaints about journalism, never qualifying different forms of journalism. Naming this assignment "journalism" put some people off as much as it excited others.

The issue continued with the publication-selection task. A few journalism students wrote in their cover letters for the final drafts that they appreciated this "real life" element of writing for a specific magazine. Others, however, continued to resist the part of the assignment that asked them to name and describe their chosen publication and audience by being vague about the publication and targeted audience. These students named a kind of publication instead of a specific one. For instance, Joe chose "a student newspaper" and his audience was "college students."

This story reveals some of the impacts genres and their labels have on our lives, our teaching, and our student's writing. It may also reveal prejudices some people have

about journalism. The somewhat arbitrary divisions between writing studies and genres each discipline teaches is political, not only for faculty and administration but also for students, impacting expectations about courses, writing, and genres. Many of my students did not see what I saw. It was not merely a writing assignment made up for composition, which may be what students are used to and may have been their impression when I called it an “informal persuasive essay.” This experience reinforced for me the division between English studies and journalism. One of the goals of this chapter is to bring journalism into clearer view by examining just how different and/or similar narrative journalism is to creative nonfiction that is accepted in composition curricula.

### **Literary Journalism Thrives**

Not everyone may know what I mean if I use the term “literary journalism,” but more and more people read it in various forms every day. It is becoming more common and acceptable for journalists to include personal insights or stories in their reporting. And the proliferation of blogs is a place where literary journalism is virtually exploding. As a subgenre of creative nonfiction, it has existed and been recognized in journalism for over a century. Interest in the subgenre seems to be fueling books, textbooks, and magazine articles *about* literary journalism as much as literary journalism itself. What draws me to literary journalism is that when a story is well written, I eagerly read about subjects that would otherwise bore me. From this premise I argue literary journalism is interesting to write as well, not only for me, but for students. It invites researching subjects and writing stories that can be driven by personal interests. Studying it as a

subgenre of creative nonfiction reveals potential insights into a rhetorical understanding of creative nonfiction. Literary journalists are highly aware of their purpose for writing about people and events in narrative form and pay close attention to their rhetorical situation. Composition and creative writing can learn much from definitions and views of literary journalism.

Nevertheless, in the field of journalism studies, literary journalism holds a contested place. Literary journalism, also called narrative journalism, narrative nonfiction, and narrative reporting, true stories, and the art of fact, actually works against many of the foundational beliefs of journalism, mainly to “tell the facts,” making this analysis of the genre in the academy particularly interesting. I use the terms “conventional journalism” and “conventional reporting” to indicate standard, non-narrative, written news.

The goal of this chapter is to tease out the values and beliefs driving journalism’s definitions and views of literary journalism. I strive to answer what disciplinary-specific beliefs and values inform these views. Because literary journalism emerged as resistance to conventional reporting, I explore the beliefs and values in conventional journalism and examine the critiques by literary journalists of conventional reporting. To establish a common ground among composition, creative writing, and journalism, I reveal some of the arguments journalists are making about literary journalism that are relevant to all scholars and teachers of creative nonfiction. Finally, by attempting to understand divisions, agreements, and antagonism between English departments and journalism, I

analyze the attitudes the writing disciplines seem to have about one another and the politics they face.

Continuing to rely on Devitt's rhetorical genre theory, I examine the definitions of literary journalism and highlight the cultural influences on the subgenre's definitions, nomenclature, and views. I argue that literary journalism is indeed a subgenre of creative nonfiction and that often the most significant difference between two texts, one labeled "literary journalism" and another seen as *non*journalistic narrative nonfiction, is the author's categorization: journalist or not. In a world of freelance writing and blogs, this is certainly another area of blurry labels that is breaking down.

I begin with the background of journalism's emergence as an academic discipline and a brief history of literary journalism in America. I continue by analyzing definitions of literary journalism, revealing the values of literary journalists, and the lack of association with what those in composition and creative writing call creative nonfiction. Again, using Devitt's rhetorical genre theory, I examine some of the possible causes of this disassociation based on the cultural beliefs and values of journalism and of literary journalism as distinct from but still influenced by journalism as a field.

### **Journalism in the Academy**

Journalism was for a long time a profession that trained new journalists through apprenticeships, not through schooling. This tradition began to change in the late nineteenth century. Adams argues that after the Civil War, when newspapers, popular magazines, and professional trade journals began to rapidly increase in number,

immigrants were also flooding the country and going to universities without prior education in English, rhetoric, and writing. Training professional writers for the numerous new publications became a concern (14). Professional journalists and readers criticized “irresponsible writing” in many newspapers (16). Freshman composition had been established at many universities by the turn of the century, but journalists did not see it as sufficient training for professional writing (35).

University education began to specialize and segment, training students for specific careers. Adams argues that the liberal arts were on the defensive because they were not disciplines based in the newly popular scientific method, so there was a sense they needed to justify themselves. Thus English departments found themselves marketing writing as “real world” classes (61). Most journalism courses remained in the English department for a few decades, but as early as 1908 a separate School of Journalism was established at the University of Missouri and one in 1912 at Columbia University (104). As professional journalists became the teachers of journalism courses, ideological dichotomies emerged between the approach of English teachers and journalism practitioners who were now teachers.

Like creative writing, teachers of journalism disassociated themselves from “school writing” and accentuated the format requirements of specific forms for newspapers and magazines. Adams argues English teachers believed journalism was anti-intellectual and too practical whereas journalism teachers believed advanced composition focused too much on school writing (121). By 1917 practicing journalist/teachers “declared all journalism courses should be taught by journalism specialists (116). Then

by mid-century most journalism programs were housed in their own department or a communications department, which led to further distancing among journalism, composition, and creative writing, although the latter two remained aligned in English departments. Separation from the English department allowed journalism to thrive; however, as Adams posits, it secluded journalism from a larger discussion of writing (121). It appears that journalism remains separate from composition and creative writing in terms of creative nonfiction. Although there is some cross-pollination between creative writing and composition, which for the most part remain in the same department, there is almost no referencing of *scholarship* on literary journalism by journalists within composition or creative writing. The opposite holds true in the journalism scholarship that follows; there is little recognition from journalism that composition and creative writing are also studying and teaching similar texts and issues.

### **History of Literary Journalism in America**

Literary journalism emerged in America in the late nineteenth century as magazine and newspaper articles that included “a human story” and showed readers “a section of life” (Hapgood 424). Some journalists, like Stephen Crane and Hutchins Hapgood, felt the need to share something *more* and *different* than standard journalism, which was devoid of details about people’s lives, according to Connery. These early literary journalists wanted to tell stories that would reveal the everyday lives of everyday Americans. Connery suggests there are three American time periods when literary journalism was “more abundant and more important” (xiii) than other times; however,

some forms of literary journalism have been published continuously since the 1890s. Both Connery and Hartsock name Mark Twain as one of the first American literary journalists. British precursors include Daniel Defoe, William Hazily, and Charles Dickens (Connery xi-xii). Telling “facts like a story” (Hartsock 22) began to grow common in the 1890s and ran in newspapers as well as magazines such as Harper’s, and a few journalists wrote book-length literary journalism (Connery xii-xiii). Variations of narrative nonfiction writing had been around for centuries, but this was the first time a significant number of journalists wrote detailed stories in many different publications. The term “literary journalism” was first used in print, according to Hartsock, by an anonymous author who described “his own efforts to write stories as opposed to news” (9).

The reason literary journalism emerged as a driving force in journalism at this time, Hartsock posits, was due to the prominence of the scientific method and positivism. Society began to value observable, “objective” data above other forms of knowledge. According to Hartsock, journalism in the post-Civil War era was affected by the increasing influence of the objective scientific method (43). Some journalists reacted against this objective journalism, which they felt did not do justice to the subject—the writer’s own viewpoint, the people or topic being written about, or the reader’s perceptions (41). Objective reporting seemed to miss what was going on in people’s lives (59). They began to write detailed stories about people and events. They became, although not likely the first, but the first *significant* and prolific group of literary journalists. Hartsock explains the aim of conventional journalism to be “objective” and claims it continues to be the main driving force behind literary journalism (43).

By the 1930s newspapers were again “solidly entrenched in the information model of reporting,” and narrative journalism became primarily a magazine style through the 1930s and 1940s (Connery xiii). It was not until the 1960s when Wolfe “discovered” “new journalism” that the genre became truly popular and also gained recognition in literary circles. According to Wolfe, he went to cover a story, and apparently found he could not write the article. So his editor told him to write a detailed note so someone else could write up the column. Wolfe wrote all night long telling the story of what he had learned and how he had learned it. His editor called him up the next day and told him they were running it as is (14). Wolfe, argues Connery, did not recognize the tradition his writing was a part of, but Wolfe got the attention of editors, readers, and other journalists. New journalism became the accepted name for a time. The most well-known new journalists include Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, and John McFee. After the 1960s and early 1970s, literary journalism settled into a regular option for established journalists and for readers of magazines like *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and *The New Yorker*.

As Devitt argues, the culture and the available genres within a society are major influences on a genre. Hartsock certainly recognizes the changing epistemology of the post-Civil War era from which literary journalism emerged. The continuing confrontation between ways of knowing may be part of the reason literary journalism is becoming increasingly popular. Many people understand the “news” is filtered through a writer and editor’s lenses. Reading about the lens becomes an interesting part of the story. Experiencing others’ stories is engaging. Devitt would argue that Hartsock’s history reveals a great deal about the genre. Literary journalists purposefully deny any pretense

of pure objectivity and convey stories that people can experience so they may better understand their world, not just learn the facts. Speculating about an increasing desire for more stories and more personal connection today is beyond the scope of this project, but interesting to consider for teachers of creative nonfiction and literary journalism.

### **Naming Literary Journalism**

Similar to composition's debates over nomenclature, the name "literary journalism" is not a settled matter. Indeed, similar to composition and creative writing, every book and article on literary journalism begins with a discussion about what to call it and how to define it. Various names have been used since the late nineteenth century, but literary journalism has been most resilient. It has also developed roots beyond the United States as the name of a new organization implies: The International Association for Literary Journalism Studies. Some practitioners seem to be identifying themselves as writing "narrative nonfiction," possibly revealing a distancing from conventional journalism. The two most recent books published by journalists in academia in 2007 both use "true stories" in the titles of their books, although within the texts themselves they use other terms. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call edited the collection *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide*. They and their contributors use "narrative nonfiction" and "narrative reportage" to distinguish the form. Norman Sims, the most prolific scholar on literary journalism, uses literary journalism in his text and titles his book *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism*. With the use of the term true stories, it is likely some in

journalism are acknowledging the broadening of literary journalism beyond journalists. I discuss these changes below.

I found it particularly interesting that Hartsock explains he does not want to call literary journalism a “genre” to acknowledge it is still emerging. He chooses instead to call it a “form” (3). Hartsock does not define what he means by genre and why he refuses to call literary journalism a genre. Regardless of the fact that he is not using the term “genre,” he is using the conventional notion of genre as a classification scheme for the form. Because a genre is more than the formal features of a text, genre must be defined according the purpose, participants, and themes. Hartsock’s definition and explanation, rather, focus on narrative *form*.

Furthermore, Hartsock explains his choice of the term “literary journalism” based on “the narrative mode.” He declares, “it is understood that [literary journalism] is written largely (but not exhaustively) in a narrative mode” (11). He notes the texts “borrow techniques often associated with the realistic novel or short story” and because there has long been the idea that such texts have the “potential for being literary, [. . .] even if what constitutes ‘literature’ is open to considerable debate” (11). He would prefer, he claims, the “descriptive term” of “narrative journalism” or “narrative literary journalism” (11), but recognizes neither term holds “critical cachet” (11). He distinguishes narrative as part of his definition because otherwise, “There is no reason why the essay or newspaper commentary cannot be viewed equally as a kind of literary journalism” (11). What I see in Hartsock’s discussion is the use of form, which for him is narrative, as the primary way to determine if something should be considered literary

journalism. His distinction between genre and form falls apart when I examine the many essays that take on a dominantly narrative form. Nevertheless he uses the term “genre” at one point: “The kind of literary journalism under discussion here [...] is fundamentally a modal genre, that of narrative” (13). Therefore, his distinction is unclear.

The use of different names for literary journalism again reveals its fluid nature and the concern journalists as well have with classification. I have chosen to use the term “literary journalism” because of its prominence and call literary journalism a “subgenre” of creative nonfiction, which is my belief and argument, and not one explicitly held by most literary journalists. Rarely do any of the scholars of literary journalism use the name creative nonfiction, revealing the separation between English studies and journalism.

### **Defining Literary Journalism: A Culture of Accuracy**

The definitions of literary journalism reveal the values of accuracy, truth, and verifiability, which illuminates the foundational culture of journalism as reporting the facts. The theme of accuracy underlies every topic covered in R. Thomas Berner’s 2007 book, *Fundamentals of Journalism*. He notes, “Gathering information requires journalists to explore a variety of sources and use a variety of techniques, all aimed at producing accurate stories. The best stories come from the best resources” (57). Literary journalism maintains the belief in accuracy as their number one job. Upholding accuracy may seem a little surprising in the face of the argument that literary journalism emerged as a reaction against a push so strongly toward accuracy that it upheld a sense of “objectivity” and “truth” that seemed to leave out half the story, the half that perhaps could not be verified

with cross-checking, human experience, and memory. Hartsock argues in the post-Civil War era people felt they could not trust the voice of authority as they once had. Objective scientific method and positivism were on the rise in American society, and it had begun to influence conventional journalism. Truth was seen as verifiable. Journalists' jobs were to discover, uncover, and present the truth. As editors pushed for more objective reporting, including only verifiable data, some journalists began to resist, claiming they could not tell the full story under such strict data reporting.

Therefore, writers like Hapgood and Crane, according to Hartsock, began to write vivid, detailed stories of life on the streets. They found editors who liked the stories. People who read the newspapers liked the stories, and literary journalism began to flourish (Hartsock 35-47). Hartsock and others claim this motivation to tell a vivid story about real people's lives continues to balance the conventional reporting people get from conventional media. This belief and motivation is strong and clear in literary journalism.

The terms "truth," "verifiable," and "accuracy" appear in definitions of literary journalism. Hartsock's definition of literary journalism is "a body of writing that [. . .] reads like a novel or short story except that it is true or makes a truth claim to phenomenal experience" (1). As I discussed above, and it is revealed here, he takes for granted the characteristics that make prose "read like a novel" except for his requirement for narrative mode. However, his definition reads as if it could certainly describe a memoir, which he implies he is not concerned with (11). When his definition is taken together with his discussion or narration and his choice of the term "literary journalism,"

it becomes evident how central “truth” and “truth claims” are to his definition. Truth, he implies, is verifiable by research.

Hartsock’s discussion of literary journalism is presented as the introduction to establishing its history in America. He provides clear and more persuasive insight into the values that drove the emergence of literary journalism than into what literary journalism is. He does not, unfortunately, weave the rhetorical purpose with which literary journalism emerged into his definition.

In his definition, Connery moves beyond the narrative form to include the rhetorical *purpose* of literary journalism. His 1992 history of literary journalism presents a definition similar to Hartsock’s. Also using the term “literary journalism,” he defines it as “nonfiction prose whose verifiable content is shaped and transformed into a story or sketch by use of narrative or rhetorical techniques generally associated with fiction” (xiv). Connery, like Hartsock, reveals a focus on the narrative form and refers to literary journalism throughout his book as a “form,” revealing a classification concept of genre. For Connery, it seems he is using the term “form” as a substitute for genre. Aside from recognizing the narrative form as essential to literary journalism, Connery does emphasize the purpose of literary journalism in detail. Drawing from some of the first literary journalists in the 1890s as well as later, Connery points out the “primary goal” of the literary journalist is “to attempt to ‘freeze’ life so that reality can be depicted, not by creating, but by attempting to recreate the feel and look of life and experience from a single, subjective point of view” (11). Here Connery draws attention to what Devitt would call the purpose and themes of literary journalism. He argues that the early literary

journalists and the new journalists of the 1960s had the desire to show real people in the midst of life (8) and reveal underlying meanings of life (5). Connery points out that although conventional journalism sometimes reveals, accidentally or purposefully, “observed life in printed prose” it is a secondary purpose to providing information (8).

On form, style, and content, Connery again focuses on the purpose of literary journalism. His description comments on how different it is than conventional journalism:

Of course, if literary journalistic content is different from that of conventional journalism, structure and style will be different as well. The literary journalist makes judgements and interprets by showing and dramatizing, as the fiction writer does, and by selection and arrangement of detail and imagery. Tone and theme are crucial to the literary journalist. This means that what the literary journalist has learned or observed is communicated by using whatever literary techniques and narrative forms work, rather than through the use of conventional journalistic news and feature forms. (8)

What I recognize in this explanation is the literary journalist making rhetorical choices based on what his or her purpose is. The writer is not tied to form for the sake of form. The writer is driven by purpose and uses the literary and rhetorical techniques that will achieve the goal. Coupled with his definition, I see the light of a rhetorical conception of literary journalism.

Connery, like Hartsock, creates a category for literary journalism based on writer-as-journalist, which I find troubling, but as I mentioned, may be disappearing. His *Sourcebook* includes works by thirty-four writers who made a living as literary journalists and who represent “a century of literary journalism” (xv), implying the form must be written by journalists. This interpretation is reinforced when defending his choice of the term “literary journalism.” He argues “journalism” is preferred to “nonfiction” because “much of the content of the work comes from traditional means of news gathering or reporting, including interviews, document review, and observation” (15). Hartsock offers that Connery’s distinction of doing this kind of research does not help with the definition because other nonfiction writers use the same means of gathering data (21), leaving space to wonder what the difference is that Connery, and Hartsock for that matter, are trying to make between literary journalism and other subgenres of creative nonfiction. There seems to be little difference, which implies literary journalism is creative nonfiction, and if that is the case, cross-disciplinary discussions would be beneficial to all involved. I take up the issue of the term “creative nonfiction” again below.

Berner takes issue with other terminology, particularly the use of fiction to define nonfiction. He bristles at the use of the phrase “fictional techniques” used by his colleagues in journalism. In an e-mail to me, he explains that he wants to “redirect the conversation away from ‘creative’ and ‘literary’ and all those other modifiers that people take to mean fiction. I [. . .] have settled on the phrase narrative nonfiction. Whenever anyone says something about using ‘literary techniques,’ I reply: ‘rhetorical devices.’” Berner draws attention to the fact that narrative has been around a lot longer than the

novel and short stories. Our human traditions have been grounded in narrative for as long as we have had language. Berner makes a relevant point about the prominence of fiction that seems to be viewed as the “owner” of narrative and other rhetorical techniques. Again, I agree, as would Devitt, with his claim that the focus should be on a writer’s choices as rhetorical. I see evidence in journalism of a focus on the rhetorical nature of genre that inspires my cross-disciplinary view of creative nonfiction as possible and important.

### **Is Literary Journalism Creative Nonfiction?**

As I move into the discussion of literary journalism as a subgenre of creative nonfiction, written by any writer, I examine writers who call what they write “creative nonfiction” and whose work would be categorized as literary journalism according to the explicit definitions by Hartsock and Connery, though not the implicit addition that seems to focus on career journalists.

The first is one of the most vocal proponents of creative nonfiction, Gutkind. He is trained in English studies, and writes what is sometimes called “immersion” literary journalism. For instance, for his most recent book, *Almost Human: Making Robots Think*, Gutkind spent over a year with the scientists who build robots, doing extensive interviews, document review, and observations (which would satisfy the research requirement outlined by Connery and other journalists). His narrative reporting reads like all other literary journalism I have read. Gutkind, however, is a thorn in literary journalists’ sides. He was named the “godfather of creative nonfiction” by *Vanity Fair*,

but Hartsock argues he was not the first to use the phrase, nor the first to write it, nor the first proponent of it (15). What makes matters worse for critics of Gutkind is that he is becoming famous for writing literary journalism, but he is calling it “creative nonfiction,” and he was not trained as a journalist. In addition to writing literary journalism, he was the director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh and is a professor of English.

Besides the education in different disciplines, there are few distinctions between Connery’s and Hartsock’s definitions of literary journalism and Gutkind’s most current definition:

Creative nonfiction stories are dramatic, true stories that use scene, dialogue and close, detailed descriptions—techniques usually employed by poets and fiction writers—to examine and explore a variety of subjects: politics, economics, sports, race relations, family relations, the arts and sciences and more. (“Literature of Reality”)

Gutkind is more specific about which techniques he considers relevant for telling true stories, and more specific about the “real life” topics that might be covered, but they are “true stories” that are “examined and explored,” just as in literary journalism. The point I aim to make is that the proprietary nature of some literary journalism scholars seems unnecessarily divisive. I would rather see these similarities as evidence of cross-disciplinarily and the possible conversations for the future of creative nonfiction.

Theodore Reese Cheney also uses the term “creative nonfiction” to name literary journalism. In the introduction to his book, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, he draws from

the most prominent scholars of literary journalism, the journalists I too have drawn from. His explanation for using the term “creative nonfiction” over “literary journalism” is, “My feeling is that since it is nonfiction, and since everyone agrees that it is written *creatively*, it can best be labeled creative nonfiction” (2, emphasis in original). Although I agree with him, it is not an argument that would convince the literary journalists who strongly oppose the use of the word “creative.” It is to this issue that I now turn.

The basic criticism of the term “creative nonfiction” from those in journalism is that the word “creative” implies creating, making, imagining details that are not available to the senses. Making up details is the worst thing a journalist can do (Berner, *Fundamentals* 5). This definition of “creative” is a limited one, although it has some merit. Creative means involving the imagination or original ideas. The definitions of “imagination” and “original” are important here as well. There are disagreements about what both “imagination” and “original” might fully imply. Few scholars who discuss creative nonfiction or literary journalism delve into these definitions and debates, and it is not my goal to flesh them out here. What I would like to point out is that journalists like Hartsock and Berner think of “creative” as imaging details that are not available to the senses. However, writers such as Gutkind, Cheney, and many other scholars and writers think of “creative” as putting ideas and sensory perceptions together in an original, unique way—not implying any detail is “created” from nothing real because they argue accuracy is of utmost importance to the subgenre.

As an illustration of how strongly literary journalists feel about the term “creative nonfiction,” I share an e-mail from Hartsock that he wrote to me as I was beginning my research:

In reading your abstract, something occurred to me that you may wish to consider. It seems to me that the term “creative nonfiction” is accepted at face value. But what's begging to be examined is the origins of the term, and how it was an attempt to side-step, at all costs, the use of the term “journalism” by the literature academy. I recall at our own school a faculty member in English saying that creative nonfiction is an old literary tradition (appeal to pedigree). In fact, the term has only been around since the late 1980s. In any event, be careful using the term “creative nonfiction” around some of the journalists listed above, especially\_\_\_\_\_. He absolutely hates it. I don't thrill to it either, but my concern is more with the word ‘nonfiction,’ which I explain in my book.

Journalism reacts so strongly to the term “creative” because of the possibility that “creative” can sometimes mean involving imagined things, whereas the culture of journalism is founded on gather facts, data, information, and reporting the “truth.” Again, these are all loaded terms. Conventional journalism, now as in the 1890s, believes in accuracy and objective “facts” (Berner, *Fundamentals* 21, 67), although recognition of multiple and subjective data-gathering is more common in conventional journalism today (Berner, *Fundamentals* 67). Although literary journalism emerged as a reaction against the positivist goal of “objective reporting,” as Hartsock and Connery argue, literary

journalists still maintain the goal of accuracy. The main difference between conventional journalism and literary journalism, according to Connery, is the inclusion of more information. Literary journalists gather and report data that emerges from personal interviews, participant observation, and seeing more than one side of a story (9).

An examination of the definitions of literary journalism and of creative nonfiction reveal mostly similarities and little difference. Within composition and creative writing, literary journalism is viewed as a subgenre of creative nonfiction. The obstacle is one of nomenclature. Journalism seems to be hung up on the word “creative.” And those in composition and creative writing seem to be hung up on the word “journalism” (see chapters two and three). I suggest, with a genre as rich, complex, and cross-disciplinary as creative nonfiction, perhaps dissensus is more appropriate and productive. What composition and creative writing gain from journalism is the focus on research and accuracy as a value to uphold; however, that does not mean to devalue subjective stories. Literary journalists also move to explore the purpose of the genre, which would help composition and creative writing move toward a rhetorical definition of creative nonfiction. In my final chapter, I propose a concept of creative nonfiction that draws from composition, creative writing, and journalism and argue the genre is pedagogically valuable for first-year as well as advanced composition.

## CHAPTER 5: ILLUMINATING A CROSS-DISCIPLINARY VIEW OF CREATIVE NONFICTION

### **You Want Us to Write What?**

The second-semester writing class at the university where I teach requires a portfolio unit that asks students to re-envision a piece of their writing. As a way to broaden the forms of writing students are introduced to in a first-year composition class, and hopefully make the assignment interesting, I assign creative nonfiction. We study rhetoric throughout the term to highlight the rhetorical influence of intended audience. I ask students to re-envision their academic persuasive essay and rewrite it for a magazine as an informal persuasive essay that uses narrative as an emotional appeal along with the rational appeals gained through logic and research in the academic essay process.

Students select a magazine appropriate to their topic. They analyze the magazine's subject matter, writing style, and the advertisements to determine the intended audience and identify the assumptions about that audience. The assignment requires students to use the research from their conventional academic persuasive essay to help them develop logical arguments and to use narrative to help them develop credibility and an emotional appeal. Students are free to change their arguments and encouraged to make decisions about content and style based on their magazine analysis, for instance, how to cite sources or which information to include and exclude.

One of my students, Jody, wrote her academic persuasive essay on the diagnosis and treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In a conference during that unit, I learned she had ADHD and that she resisted popular assumptions that

there is an overdiagnosis problem of ADHD. For her, the controversy surrounding drug treatment is lived daily as her life improved dramatically once she began taking Ritalin. While writing her academic persuasive essay, she struggled with counter-arguments in her research and writing. Nevertheless, she managed to write a strong persuasive academic argument. Her research led her to recognize problems with overdiagnosis and drug treatment of ADHD, but she maintained her argument that correct diagnosis and treatment will help young people, not only by improving their ability to focus, but also by improving their self-esteem.

When assigned to rewrite her essay for a different audience in a form that could include her personal story, Jody was obviously excited. She spoke to me after class the day I handed out the assignment. She was already deliberating over magazines and audiences. She said, "I'm most concerned about other young girls like me who suffered from a lot of self-esteem problems because of ADHD." To reach teenage girls, she decided to write an article for the "Real Life" section of *Seventeen Magazine*, which contains personal writing.

I was pleased with Jody's energy and determination as well as her final paper. She wrote a highly successful essay for teenage girls who might feel alone living with ADHD or those who think they might have ADHD. She included a detailed narrative of her experience, before and after her diagnosis. She also developed a strong rational argument based on the research she had collected while writing the academic essay. She synthesized the information into her narrative, making both the information and the story interesting, critical, and relevant. Her essay balanced emotional as well as logical appeals

appropriate for her audience, and she carefully worked out her credibility in sharing her story.

In a reflective essay about the revision process, I was able to see evidence of Jody's engagement and learning. Jody wrote:

Though it may seem that my personal life has nothing to do with what I do in my English class, it has actually been the greatest thing for me. Not only have I learned more about my writing, but also how changing the tone and the audience can make a paper take on an entirely different focus. Additionally, because of the topic I chose, I learned new things about myself and my writing, which in turn helped me grow and mature in confidence. In my opinion, that has been more important than the grade itself.

In Jody's comments I see that she achieved multiple goals I anticipate for my students. Jody was engaged in an academic subject because she was able to draw from personal interests. Because she had the opportunity to choose her topic, so she was able to research and write about a subject she cared deeply about. She connected to her academic work and believed she improved as a writer. From my standpoint of helping students see themselves as competent writers, her belief that she improved as a writer is almost as important as me, the teacher, seeing improvement.

Jody's comments also show an appreciation of rhetorical strategies, particularly audience awareness, which I expect will help her with future writing tasks, in academia, her career, and her personal correspondence. When she first began revising, she brought

in a draft. She had obviously done much cutting and pasting to revise. She knew the writing wasn't right for young teenage girls. With encouragement she ended up putting the earlier academic essay aside and rewrote her arguments from scratch. Jody's comments revealed that these changes helped her write with an "entirely different focus." Finally, she expressed an appreciation for what she has learned beyond what it means as a grade in a class—an impact desired, I suppose, by any teacher.

I tell this story to demonstrate the potential of creative nonfiction in a first-year writing class. It shows how students can become engaged with a writing assignment. And I believe it reveals how students, when given the opportunity, can make informed rhetorical choices based on what they see in a writing situation when they have a strong, self-selected, sense of purpose and audience.

### **A Cross-Disciplinary View**

Throughout this project I have analyzed different views of what creative nonfiction is and attempted to understand the beliefs and values motivating each discipline to maintain its views and current stake in the genre. I have argued that a rhetorical concept of genre that encourages recognizing cultural beliefs, values, and norms that influence a genre can lead to learning new, more fluid cross-disciplinary ways of understanding creative nonfiction.

In this chapter I embrace the multifaceted viewpoints of creative nonfiction and argue for the value in dissensus concerning classifications and definitions. I suggest a way to start building a bridge between the three disciplines. Then I argue for a pedagogy for

teaching creative nonfiction specifically in first-year composition that draws from a cross-disciplinary understanding of the genre. What I propose encompasses what many teachers are already teaching in composition and suggests the possibilities of what more composition instructors can do with a creative nonfiction pedagogy. I propose teaching a subset of creative nonfiction subgenres, what I call narrative nonfiction, that is nonfiction that tells a detailed, rendered story, which serves many goals of composition. I suggest narrative nonfiction as a more accessible option than the personal essay for both students and teachers in first-year composition. Benefits of teaching and writing narrative nonfiction are numerous. It challenges binary thinking, not only personal versus academic but also functional versus pleasurable texts, and teaching writing as a skill versus teaching writing as a mode of learning. Narrative nonfiction demands critical thinking and synthesis of researched information as well as narrating experience. Writing narrative nonfiction also gives students experience writing in nontraditional academic styles and forms, broadening the terrain of writing for a wide range of students. Finally, I suggest teaching students a new way of thinking about genre using rhetorical genre theory to help them see that genres are meant to be helpful.

The pedagogy I suggest draws from composition, creative writing, and journalism. I suggest that composition instructors teach craft and storytelling with insight and knowledge from creative writing. From journalism, I suggest its focus on the centrality of rhetorical situation—writers must know their audience, publication, and social context—and the need for accuracy of verifiable research to balance subjective experience. And from composition, I suggest the use of social-expressive pedagogy that

values personal as well as social and political context as well as rhetorical genre theory. For my arguments, and like my arguments, I draw from my own experiences teaching narrative nonfiction as well as from other teachers. I provide my own example assignments and those of others to clarify my proposal.

I begin this chapter with suggestions for teachers and scholars of creative nonfiction: a bridge between the different disciplines. Then I propose a way to classify and think about creative nonfiction as *beneficial* for composition in my proposal for narrative nonfiction. For teachers, I present narrative nonfiction assignments and argue how I see narrative nonfiction achieving many of composition's goals. I also suggest the advantages for students, first-year composition students in particular. Throughout this section I present ideas and arguments that have emerged from a cross-disciplinary perspective of narrative nonfiction.

### **A Bridge between Disciplines**

What I have determined from my cross-disciplinary study is that there seems to be one *major* driving value within each discipline's culture that establishes a point of difference between fields. These *differing* values likely play a part in the difficulty of understanding one another and may be the obstacles we need to overcome. Identifying these differences may be the first step towards building a bridge to a cross-disciplinary discussion of creative nonfiction. Moreover, I recognize that each field is grappling with many of the *same* issues. These moments of similarity may be a place to begin

discussions, even if each field's respective solutions to the issues may be different.

Establishing these common grounds are important for building a bridge.

Each discipline's tends to value something much more than the other disciplines when defining, using, and teaching their versions of creative nonfiction. This does not mean the others do not value it at all, but the *focus* of beliefs is elsewhere. I discussed each value in detail in each respective chapter. Composition values critical thinking. Creative writing values literature. Journalism values accurate research. I argue that these three values are not incompatible. Rather, each discipline would benefit from valuing each other's values more, leading to stronger, more interesting creative nonfiction.

These differences are not incompatible, and there are many issues all three disciplines share. Since my analyses focused on definition, I will begin with the similarities in definitions. As I pointed out in chapter one, all definitions do claim creative nonfiction is about *reality* and that the writing forms and styles are *engaging* for readers, either through poetic, lyrical style or narrative form. Each discipline publishes articles and books that also cover the following concerns for writers of creative nonfiction:

- The ethics of writing about real people.
- The line between fact and fiction.
- The impact of writing from a subjective point of view (as opposed to attempting a more objective point of view, if such a thing exists).
- The reliability of memory.
- What is truth/Truth?
- Rendering or showing vivid details to make an impact on a reader.

- Whether or not to put yourself (the writer) in the story as a character.

I found there is great similarity in the ways these discussions are evolving across the disciplines. Reading the scholarship in one field, then another, felt a little bit like reinventing the wheel. Some cross-disciplinary scholarship may be the easiest place to begin, reading and citing one another in our articles and books. Soon, I hope, there will be more cross-disciplinary conventions and workshops to improve our understanding and teaching of creative nonfiction.

### **Narrative Nonfiction: A Proposed Genre for Composition Classes**

Here I propose two arguments that at first may seem contradictory. I have cautioned throughout this project that focusing on classification and form is not a complete way of understanding genre. One must also examine the purpose and themes of a genre and understand who the writers and readers are. Nevertheless, I have also pointed out the need for classification to aid discourse about genres as well as the reality that texts of a genre do indeed share many, though not necessarily all, forms. Therefore, I propose narrative nonfiction, a classification for subgenres of creative nonfiction that share narrative form. To make my motivations for classification evident, I name it for the purpose of presenting assignments we should teach in composition for specific pedagogical reasons I explain below.

As I offer a name and a definition for my purposes, at the same time I argue that scholars of creative nonfiction should minimize their effort of trying to find the ideal name and definition for the genre and perhaps agree to disagree and find value in one

another's views. The complexity of creative nonfiction is something to intrigue us, to study, to learn from, and to celebrate. I suggest that writers, scholars, teachers, and students of creative nonfiction aim for understanding the genre and the different forms and classifications related to the genre and accept dissensus on a name, even a definition. John Trimbur suggests people view consensus as a utopian ideal that should encourage collaborative learning but that inevitably allows for a group to agree to disagree. Through the process of conversation and attempting consensus, each member learns about the others' ideas (454). I argue this kind of collaborative learning is what is most likely, most viable, and most interesting for creative nonfiction across the disciplines. I don't believe any writer or scholar of creative nonfiction wants to narrow it to a single form and classification. The multimodal fluidity is what makes it vibrant and worthy of writing and studying. As I see it, each writing discipline has beliefs and values that have led to the chosen names, definitions, and views. Politics have influenced the disciplines and subgenres in ways that are unreasonable to ignore or erase. This diversity means we have much to learn from one another. We all have something to gain from a cross-disciplinary discussion.

Arguing for dissensus on finding a single name and definition does not mean that each discipline, writer, teacher, or scholar need refrain from naming, classifying, and defining texts. Instead, working from contemporary genre theory invites us to see the genre as fluid and to therefore be explicit when we do name, classify and define based on our given purposes. I see certain forms and subgenres of creative nonfiction as more suited to composition's beliefs, values, and goals than others.

To this end, I propose narrative nonfiction as a subset of creative nonfiction to teach in first-year composition. For my classification purpose, I see two subsets of creative nonfiction, those that rely on narration (rendered storytelling) and those that do not, but instead rely on diction and style that is poetic, lyrical, and reflective.<sup>4</sup> Lyrical nonfiction is important as a subset because it includes what Bloom sees in her broad definition of creative nonfiction, that all good nonfiction is creative nonfiction (250) and satisfies the inclusion of lyrical, reflective personal essays that many creative writing and composition scholars identify as creative nonfiction. The lyrical essay, as discussed in chapter three, is the main reason most scholars reject “narrative nonfiction” for the name of the creative nonfiction genre as a whole. Therefore, I propose the two subsets of subgenres as described in figure 5.1.

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<sup>4</sup> Labeling a style as poetic or lyrical is subjective and changes over time; therefore a text that is labeled creative nonfiction by one person or at one time may not hold for other groups or times. But this again reflects the fluid nature of creative nonfiction.

CREATIVE NONFICTION	
Narrative Nonfiction	Lyrical Nonfiction
Narrative personal essay	Lyric essay
Literary journalism	Reflective/meditative essay
Travel narrative	Nature Reflection
Memoir	Prose Poem
Narrative Cultural Critique	
Personal academic essay	
Ethnography	
Narrative history/biography/ autobiography/documentary	

Figure 5.1 Classification of subsets of creative nonfiction.

Identifying these subsets may ease some concerns that teaching creative nonfiction in composition is moving too closely into creative writing territory. Just as composition does not teach fiction, poetry, and drama, we do not teach the prose poem. On the other hand, many in composition do teach the reflective, mediative personal essay, as Bishop espouses (“Suddenly” 261-62), but it is not the form I am supporting here. However this classification distinction may help scholars and teachers understand what one person is suggesting versus another. But a definition is necessary to aid this clarification.

I strive toward a rhetorical definition of the genre, one that identifies a writer’s purpose, the participants involved, and common themes, following Devitt’s definition of genre. Narrative nonfiction, then, is prose that conveys information about real people,

places, and events and renders experience through narrative to engage readers' thoughts and imaginations. I break down this definition to clarify my terms, to reveal how I see my definition as rhetorical, and to point out where this definition draws from my cross-disciplinary study.

- *Writing with a purpose.* I distinguish narrative nonfiction by the writer's purpose: to convey information and render experience for the purpose of engaging readers through their imaginations and rational thought. Composition draws from rhetoric to teach about purpose, audience, and the cultural, social, situational, and generic contexts.
- *Engaging an audience.* I use the term "engage" because the writer's purpose is to get the reader involved on an emotional level as well as on a rational level. A writer can interest a reader in the topic, not (only) because the reader is interested in the subject matter but because the writing and story is interesting and sometimes entertaining. For instance, Sarah Vowell's *Assassination Vacation* got me interested in the history of American presidents who were assassinated, not because I am a history buff or particularly interested in Lincoln or Garfield but because Vowell tells stories about her research trips, shares her reflections, and shares an odd sense of humor. Here, composition and rhetoric reveal the importance of *pathos*, and creative writing and journalism emphasize how to write a interesting story through vivid detail, scenes, characters, and dialogue.
- *Conveying information, ideas, and opinions.* I use the term "convey" following the example of literary journalists who argue conveying information is different from reporting. Conveying means information, ideas, and opinions are made known or

understandable, not simply presented or reported. An effort is made toward helping a reader understand and perceive the significance of information. Entangled in the concept of conveying, the writer does not hide the fact that he or she is subjectively selecting and providing information. Here, I use the term “subjective” as the postmodern notion that humans cannot know “objectively” about the world. As Andrea Lunsford argues, creative nonfiction makes a “postmodern turn” by revealing “the constructed nature of all experience” (41). We perceive and select everything; therefore, we can only represent what we know from our point of view. Narrative nonfiction reveals subjectivity; it does not hide it. The importance of making subjective views evident on the page, not hidden behind details or “facts,” is central in literary journalism. Literary journalists also help focus on getting the researched details as accurately as possible but also makes evident that the writer sees and understands and does the conveying. Composition aids this concept as well, emphasizing the importance of *ethos* and *logos* in research, accuracy, and presenting a credible self on the page.

- *Renders experience*. To render an experience means to show in specific detail, represent, or depict with vivid description an experience rather than explaining or telling what it looks, sounds, feels like, and so on. Rendering sensory and emotional experience is an important part of strong narratives. Writers provide enough vivid details that the reader can see, hear, and feel what the writer renders. Elbow argues teaching students to write “discourse that renders” (“Reflections” 136), encourages them to discover new insights and, I would add, asks them to use their observational skills and storytelling abilities. Showing evokes from the five senses. It attempts to

represent what specifically a person saw, heard, and so on. On the other hand, telling sums up an experience and puts a label on it. Sadness can be expressed by telling the reader, “He was sad the baby bird died.” It can also be shown, or rendered, “He bit his quivering lip and tears formed in the corners of his eyes as he watched the baby bird flail on the ground.” Rendering requires detail from the writer’s subjective experience and can therefore evoke emotion in turn from a reader. Composition again draws from rhetoric to teach the power of *pathos*. Both creative writing and literary journalism attend to the craft of showing detail in vivid description, scenes, and dialogue.

- *Writing about reality*. Finally narrative nonfiction requires research. It is written not only about subjective stories but also about information, knowledge, the social and cultural world, and so on. Narrative nonfiction writers research their topics, to greater and lesser degrees, not only to confirm the validity their own knowledge, but to deepen their own understanding and convey that knowledge and understanding to readers. To clarify, even a memoirist whose writing shares a personal story does research to help maintain accuracy and to aid memory.

### **Teaching Narrative Nonfiction**

In a composition class, a narrative nonfiction assignment includes (1) a narrative component from one’s own or someone else’s experience, (2) a research component (from traditional print, the Internet, interviews, surveys, and qualitative research including participant observation), and (3) an integrated synthesis of the two components. A narrative nonfiction assignment manifests itself in many forms.

A familiar representation of narrative nonfiction is an essay or article that begins with a personal story before moving into exposition and/or persuasion. A common form today in academic journals, popular magazines, and even some composition assignments, it does not take a great stretch to incorporate this form. However, I would not call every piece of nonfiction that starts with a “story” a piece of narrative nonfiction. Many of these pieces begin with brief anecdotes that do not render experience; rather they tell a mini story that does not, cannot, evoke a significant response. Narrative nonfiction renders to evoke a response from readers, to illustrate the topic from a real-life perspective. Therefore, the narrative element must be an essential characteristic of the paper, not simply a good hook.

One narrative nonfiction assignment I have often used asks students to write about a topic they have personal experience with. The final product would have the following form, though of course variations are welcome. The paper opens with a personal story about how the topic has touched his or her life. The story renders experience and engages the audience to continue reading. Then, information about the topic is conveyed, perhaps argued, and the conclusion returns to the opening story. For example, a diabetic student chooses to argue that, if her diabetes is well-managed, there isn't anything she isn't able to do. She opens her paper with a story about backpacking across the desert with friends. She checks her blood-sugars often, carries glucose tablets, and negotiates with her fellow hikers when she needs to take a break. She does library research and in the body of her paper she writes about the ways to manage insulin-dependent diabetes, the complications of the disease, and statistics on the number of diabetics who develop certain

complications. At the end of the essay, she argues she and other insulin-dependent diabetics can do anything a nondiabetic can do if she understands and manages her diabetes carefully.

Variations of narrative nonfiction may include stories about someone the writer knows or stories from an interviewee. As long as the writer renders a story, it is narrative nonfiction. Literary journalism often renders other peoples' stories. The narrative may also be rendered throughout the paper, interwoven with the other forms of information. This may be a narrative segmented essay. For instance, placing different personal stories or the development of a single plot throughout the paper in places where information coincides with the story, weaving back and forth between narrative and exposition or argument. For instance, the diabetic student presents the researched information about the biological need to treat low blood sugar quickly; then she renders the part of her story where she stopped hiking, asked others to wait, then ate glucose tablets and sat for fifteen minutes to let the glucose get into her system. Once she returns to hiking in the story, the writer returns again to her research.

Another example of narrative nonfiction comes from Trela Anderson in "Embracing the 'I': Making Room for Creative Nonfiction in Composition Classes." Anderson argues first-year students should be asked to write personal essays, as well as learn "how to conduct research and writing critically" (48). She proposes students be assigned personal essays and in addition be required "to research some aspect of their topic and incorporate it into their essay" (48). In this way the personal and the academic merge, and the student goes beyond the personal into the social and cultural. Anderson

calls it a “research paper assignment” (48). She asks them to research “the origins, related traditions, and activities associated with one annual holiday or festival that their families had adopted to make it uniquely theirs” (48). Anderson discusses her students’ responses to the assignment: “They wrote detailed descriptions of their families’ holiday traditions and activities, incorporated the research material smoothly into their writing, and even had fewer grammatical and syntactical errors than in their earlier assignments” (48). The essays were also well organized and interesting to read (48). I would argue with her use of the term “personal essay,” claiming this assignment no longer falls into the definition on the personal essay as more specifically and traditionally understood as exploratory and meditative. Anderson calls it both a “research paper assignment” and a “personal essay” in the same paper (48), revealing some of the difficulties of the genre I have revealed in this project. Nevertheless, her description of the assignment places it into what I call narrative nonfiction.

Other ideas of narrative nonfiction come from colleagues I have learned from over the years. Students research and write stories about family histories, local histories, travel and nature stories. There are many variations for content, but the main purpose is the same and all require narration and research. In Appendix A, I include my own assignment prompts for two variations of personal academic papers (what I would describe as researched persuasive, narrative nonfiction papers), a travel narrative, and an interview profile.

### **Narrative Nonfiction: So Much to Gain**

I have experienced and I envision many benefits of incorporating narrative nonfiction into composition. Most, even all, of the following arguments have previously been made within composition concerning the personal essay and other blurred genres, but not necessarily about creative nonfiction or narrative nonfiction specifically. One of the most exciting aspects I recognize in narrative nonfiction is the potential it carries for healing divides, complicating binaries, and exploring the world of writing, for writers as well as teachers and students of writing. Here, I explore how it may do so.

*The value of narrative nonfiction in first-year composition.* First and foremost, I argue narrative nonfiction belongs *not only* in advanced composition, though it certainly belongs there, but also in first-year composition. Creative nonfiction in many forms has found its way into advanced composition more readily than into first-year composition. I certainly agree it is beneficial and exciting to teach it in advanced composition. However, the benefits of teaching narrative nonfiction are evident for first-year composition. One of the most important reasons is tied to the fact that first-year composition courses are the only writing classes most college students take. It is important that we include narrative nonfiction in first-year sequences to reach the most students and have a significant positive impact on numerous students' ideas about and responses to writing. This opportunity is important for "the ways large numbers of students understand the terrain of writing and their own possibilities as writers" (Hesse, "Who Owns" 264). Since first-year composition is the place where writing teachers reach the most students, and those students deserve to learn how to write for different audiences and purposes, narrative

nonfiction should be a part of first-year composition. Therefore, the following arguments are focused on first-year composition, but most are true for advanced composition as well.

*Broadens composition's sphere.* Related to broadening students ideas about writing and genres, adding narrative nonfiction to the curriculum also broadens composition's sphere as a discipline. The NCTE Executive Committee position statement claims that composition students should be writing for varied audiences and purposes. Composition teachers should be introducing students to a broad range of nonfiction that will prepare them for a lifetime of writing, including writing for academia, jobs, and personal correspondence. Students are more likely to write a letter of complaint or a letter of appeal to a health insurance company than write literary analysis once they complete college.

Many composition scholars have argued over the years for broadening the kinds of writing taught in first-year writing classes. Hesse argues we need to expose the many students in composition classes to the expansive "terrain of writing" ("Who Owns" 263). Root's argues composition programs are already complex, multifaceted, and teach writing across the curriculum; therefore composition is poised to develop many forms of nonfiction ("Variations" 294). Including narrative nonfiction adds another complex component to composition curricula.

*Challenges binary thinking.* Creative nonfiction is a powerful pedagogical tool that crosses boundaries among forms and academic disciplines and also challenges dichotomous thinking. Creative nonfiction works within and between arbitrary binaries:

personal (subjective) and academic (objective), emotion and logic, school and the “real world,” business and pleasure, narration and exposition, creativity and fact, as well as how we view teaching writing: a skill and craft versus a mode of learning and critical thinking.

Subjectivity, I argue, is the key to complicating the binary of personal versus academic writing. All creative nonfiction writing places the subjectivity of the writer at the center of the piece, whether it is a personal essay or a narrative about others. Recognizing subjectivity makes the writing “personal” because the writer must include personal connections, ideas, and observations central to the writing. Malinowitz makes a powerful observation when she claims creative nonfiction’s “essence is subjectivity, not autobiography” (317). The self is not necessarily center stage. Many scholars are making similar arguments, claiming the personal essay goes beyond autobiography, making language and style as important as logic and subject matter (see Freadman; Malinowitz).

These arguments also challenge the view that writing logically means there is not emotion. Many forms of creative nonfiction show this to be false. Social-expressive pedagogies combine both personal, emotional expressive writing with social, cultural, and political knowledge that draws from logic and social learning.

Compositionists’ arguments about blending the personal and the academic mirror those in literary journalism that claim the author’s subjectivity is the essence of literary journalism, even if the author may not be a character in the piece. For example, in all of his literary journalism, John McPhee vividly narrates and describes characters, interviews, and experiences. He rarely includes himself in the narrative, and when he

does, it is often a brief moment, for instance writing that he was offered a biscuit or got into a truck. The writing focuses on the other characters. His perspective is subtle, in that he does not often explicitly analyze his characters, yet he makes his perspective clear through the details he has chosen to include. His subjectivity is on the page. It is not a personal, self-indulgent narrative. Yet his writing is personal insofar as the reader sees the world through his eyes, with no apologies or attempts at appearing objective.

One of the most rewarding characteristics of creative nonfiction is that it conveys information and can make arguments while also being pleasurable, entertaining, and engaging to read. Most writers of creative nonfiction argue that the same goes for writing creative nonfiction. In “Business, Pleasure, and the Personal Essay,” Malinowitz argues it is time for new rules for academic writing. She believes creative nonfiction is the “cure” for scholars in the English department who feel they have to choose between the “business of theory and criticism” and the “pleasure” of reading and writing creative writing (310). This is the case for composition students as well, who believe composition classes are only about the “business” of academic writing.

*Teaches the power of pathos.* Composition curricula often teaches the power of rational thinking, *logos*, and the essential need for *ethos* in making persuasive arguments when we teach traditional academic discourse. Rendering experience allows students to practice *pathos* in the same piece with logic and develop *ethos* in varied ways. Rendering stories, as essential to narrative nonfiction, makes use of emotional appeals. Rendering evokes empathy, an emotional response. If a writer simply tells the chronological events of a “plot,” we do not feel what the writer is feeling. For instance, “My sister called me

yesterday to tell me our uncle had died,” does not likely evoke any emotion. However, if the writer renders detail to use *pathos* to appeal to reader’s emotions. For instance, it is more emotionally provocative to write, “My sister caught me off guard as I answered the phone while serving dinner. I stood there holding a bowl of curry as she sputtered through sobs that Uncle John had just gotten killed in a hit-and-run. The bowl slipped out of my hand and shattered as I sunk into a chair. A lump raised in my throat.” Learning to render stories and descriptions offers students practice in an important rhetorical appeal. It also allows them to practice building credibility through personal experience as well as through knowledge. Building *ethos* in different ways is one of the most influential ways to be persuasive; therefore, students need to practice establishing credibility through knowledge building, following conventions, *and* presenting personal experiences with a topic.

*Research facilitates critical thinking.* Beginning writers of personal essays often have trouble moving beyond the personal self-centered way of knowing. Narrative nonfiction requires students to research into subject areas that affected their experiences, or others’ experiences. The task of thinking critically about something that is often emotional become easier when viewing that experience through cultural, social, political, or scientific knowledge and through other people’s experience. Research and synthesizing the attained information with a story builds a bridge to critical thinking. Literary journalism offers their culture of accuracy to narrative nonfiction in composition. Doing research from different angles not only confirms information but also helps us see experience from different points of view. Learning the power of research and the skill of

doing different kinds of research from journalism will improve composition's already impressive knowledge-base about research.

*Accesses narrative thinking.* The human mind uses narrative. Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist who has done extensive work on narrative thought functions and narrative discourse argues, "We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (4). He points out that although there is a difference between "narrative mode of thought" and "narrative discourse," it is not especially useful to argue which is more basic, because, as with language, "each enables the others, just as the structure of language and the structure of thought eventually become inextricable" (5). What is useful to recognize is that humans organize knowledge of the symbolic, social, and cultural world in a narrative way. Therefore, it makes sense to share such knowledge through narrative discourse.

Including narrative as a valid mode of discourse within composition studies is not new. The personal essay in composition is often written as narrative. What is more recent, and what I argue composition should embrace is viewing narrative as a form of persuasion. I use the definition of academic discourse provided by Elbow, "Academic discourse makes arguments, solves problems, analyzes texts and issues, tries to answer hard questions—and usually refers to and builds on academic discourse" (*Everyone* 315). Elbow proposes that personal and expressive writing, which primarily uses the narrative form, can do the work of academic discourse. Because narrative invites feelings does not mean it leaves out thinking. As Bruner argues, it is actually a form of thinking.

To push this claim further, not only is narrative a form of thinking, it is a form of persuasion that allows a reader (listener) to see a situation from the writer's (speaker's) point of view. John Rodden recently argues in "How do Stories Convince Us? Notes Toward a Rhetoric of Narrative" that stories can be seen as persuasive when they are interpreted as analogies. He argues that stories appeal not to logic, but to imagination. Narratives are persuasive when the reader or auditor extends the story to make a generalization. Burke calls it "argument by analogy," where the reader comes to identify with the author through the aesthetic form of the story (*Permanence* 105). When the reader identifies with the author, the reader extends the story and applies it to a different situation, making a generalization based on imagination, not on logic. This act of extension is made by the reader, and the result can be seeing eye-to-eye, or "identifying" with the writer. Through an effective, meaningful story, the author persuades the reader to see things from his or her point of view.

Narratives are indeed persuasive, or rather, argument comes out of narrative. Especially when coupled with a logical argument, they become highly persuasive. In composition we do not teach our students enough about *pathos*, how to recognize it or to use it. Students are usually deeply interested when studying rhetoric and learning how *pathos* is used to influence them all the time. As college-educated citizens, they deserve to know not only how to recognize when advertisers and politicians are using emotional appeals to persuade them outside the logical realm but also how to use it themselves. And students need to understand that *pathos* is not always used in a negatively manipulative way. It can be powerful in and *as* arguments.

Narratives are powerful persuasive tools because they appeal to our imagination and they are, therefore, deeply engaging. Because we experience and organize our experiences through narrative modes of thought, it is easy for humans to understand and catalogue stories. People tend to feel like stories are easier to read (they can read stories faster), more pleasurable to read, and easier to understand. For instance, think of the anecdote, a brief narrative used as an example to illustrate a logical argument. Clear, effective writing uses detailed, specific examples an audience can understand. Often, the use of a brief story will make a previously unclear logical argument clear and, therefore, more likely to persuade. Prose that uses stories is clearer and more interesting to read.

The discipline of creative writing has long taught storytelling. Drawing from their strengths, teachers of composition should teach the craft of storytelling. Many creative writing texts provide ways of teaching how to write dialogue, scene construction, build characters, build suspense, and provide essential details. They also teach the craft of showing and rendering experience. Creative writing's knowledge about teaching craft will strengthen composition's pedagogy.

*Teaches a rhetorical understanding of genre.* As I have argued, scholars and teachers need a rhetorical understanding of genre and narrative nonfiction. Devitt's theory of genre allows not only us as scholars, but also our students, to see the reciprocal, fluid nature of genres and offers a way to see this world of variation in narrative nonfiction as something to work with not against. It asks us to take a closer look at cultural, situational and genre influences on what we write and ask our students to write. By teaching a rhetorical view of genre to students, composition instructors might use narrative

nonfiction as a tool to help debunk the conventional classification notion of genre that students likely still hold. Examining the different forms and definitions from across the disciplines, students will begin to understand the fluid nature of genres, and recognize they, as users of genres, are not only influenced by genres when they make choices in their writing, but that they too have the power to reciprocally influence genres. Genres only exist because people use them. As situations and social groups change, so do genres. Examining narrative nonfiction as a fluid, blurred genre makes these views poignant.

### **Moving Forward**

Many composition teachers are already teaching variations of creative nonfiction in first-year and advanced composition classes. They may not be calling it creative nonfiction or realize it is classified as creative nonfiction. Through this cross-disciplinary view of the genre, I hope to open up discussions about creative nonfiction in composition, drawing those teachers in to share their knowledge and views. I also hope to convince composition instructors to teach narrative nonfiction specifically in their classrooms. I hope to influence not only composition teachers who already value and teach personal writing but also those who have previously viewed personal writing as either inappropriate for composition or as interesting but too foreign to teach themselves.

One of the most important issues I see from my cross-disciplinary research is the distance between the fields of composition and creative writing and the field of journalism. Because composition and creative writing are beginning to share across their differences, I see journalism as the writing discipline that is still often ignored by

composition. We need to heal that divide for the sake of scholarship, teachers, students, and writers. Literary journalism scholars and writers, in particular, offers insightful analyses of subjective reporting, the craft of narration, the synthesis of diverse research, and the purpose and importance of the genre. I have taken only small steps into the scholarship of literary journalism, but I see the value of so much more.

Creative nonfiction scholarship would benefit from the cross-disciplinary discussions I have called for throughout this project. Some moves in this direction have begun, but I see the need to heal the divides within academic writing studies. Many of the issues being discussed in one discipline are also being discussed in the others. For instance, the ethics of writing about reality and the line between fact and fiction are both covered in composition, creative writing, and journalism. Analysis on these topics and more needs to be done across the disciplinary lines. These discussions benefit not only the scholarly knowledge of creative nonfiction, but also the teachers, students, and writers immersed in this exciting, diverse genre.

## APPENDIX A: REVISED INFORMAL PERSUASIVE ESSAY

This final essay asks you to completely re-envision your researched argument essay. The goal of this assignment is to get you to consider how much a change in audience and rhetorical situation changes how you write about a topic and how you persuade.

Choose a new audience and situation—and be specific! Think about the people who are affected by your argument, those who would agree with you and those who would disagree. Think about who would most benefit from learning about your topic. You may even make a different argument. But your aim will still be to persuade.

This essay is an informal essay, which can be an in-depth letter, editorial, magazine article, etc. Pick which magazine, family member, newspaper, etc. for whom you imagine your work. Be as personal as seems fit for your topic and audience.

Present what you learned from sources in your earlier research, however, do so in a nonacademic manner, such as mentioning who your source is as part of the information you are passing on (i.e. not MLA or APA citation style). Base your decisions on your audience and the magazine, if appropriate. Your content should fit for your new audience. Consider what your readers will need to know, what they already know, what they may not want or need to know. Your language choices should be appropriate for your audience as well. Remember, detailed concrete word choices are more persuasive than vague or abstract language.

Hint: We don't often see explicit thesis statements in informal writing. However, it should be clear by the end of your paper what you believe and why.

Pretext: Include a brief description of your audience and rhetorical situation before your paper begins, after the header. I will consider your specifications when I grade your paper

Criteria for Assessment:

- You have introduced your topic in an interesting and clear manner.
- You have attempted to persuade your audience appropriately and effectively.
- Sufficient information is provided so that your readers understand the issue and its context.
- You include specific, detailed information, narratives, etc.
- You have chosen information that best serves your needs.
- Clear, effective language choices.
- Length should be 4-5 pages typed, double spaced, 1" margins.

## APPENDIX B: LITERARY JOURNALISM ARTICLE

Write a creative nonfiction essay from the first-person point of view that critically investigates and reveals a social, moral, or cultural issue of our time. The essay must involve research and reporting skills and be based on a real experience you undertake for this assignment. Do not base this essay on a past experience where you did not take notes, reflect on the experience at the time, gather competing perspectives, etc. In order to create a creative nonfiction piece, use narrative (scenes and plot), dramatic techniques (suspense, characterization), dialogue, and literary techniques (figurative language to deepen your reader's impressions from you). Your opinion or idea should be evident, implicitly, as in the suasive narrative, or explicitly, as in an opinion/editorial piece in a newspaper. One of the main elements of literary journalism is that the writer's subjectivity, or positionality, should be evident and engaging as a component of the essay. See the article we read by Laura Wexler, "Saying Good-Bye to 'Once Upon a Time,' of Implementing Postmodernism in Creative Nonfiction." Readers should get a sense of who the writer is, what he or she believes, even if the writer is not an actual character in the events of the essay.

To find a topic, look to the ideas and essays in our readings, your major or hobbies, your life, campus life, and the media for ideas. Read the Wildcat for campus issues and the Weekly for Tucson issues. Go meet and interview a professor or staff member of the university or an organization. Interviews (formal or informal) are an excellent way to develop an essay such as this and extend ideas beyond your own opinion. Your essay could be about a person and the issue she or he works with or be about the issue and approach it from a few different perspectives. You need to do some research to be well informed, but let your own voice and ideas drive the paper even if it is about someone else. The research may be in the form of going out and living through an experience. Options are almost limitless, but as opposed to essays 1 and 3, this essay is not about you, rather it is about an issue. Your own story may illustrate the issue, but it is not simply a story about you.

Select the type of publication: You must select your rhetorical situation, that is—the situation surrounding your topic, your interested audience, and what publication you could see this published in, such as a magazine. Write a descriptive sentence before your essay to describe the type of publication, or ideally, the publication itself. The tone can be serious, ironic, humorous—feel free to experiment, but choose the appropriate tone for your topic, audience, and publication. In order to gain credibility with your audience, you need to prove you are well informed and that you understand the situation thoroughly. Use your knowledge carefully and provide or describe sources, in an appropriate manner, to support your views or evidence.

Hints: Focus your topic by focusing your research. If you try to interview three people about an event, include your own version, and include "outside" research from books and

articles, you may find you are trying to say too much for a six-page paper. Think critically about the one main thing you can see, and want to say, about the event. Then use your sources to reveal that main point.

Criteria for Assessment. Your essay:

- Is geared toward a particular audience and publication.
- Develops your ideas, opinions, and impressions through creative nonfiction techniques as described above and in our readings.
- Has an engaging introduction.
- Readers have a sense of your view by the end of the essay.
- Develops your ideas with details as evidence in the form of: detailed, clear, specific information, and/or vivid stories or anecdotes. Use showing as well as telling.
- Provides a sense of closure in the conclusion.
- Reveals incorporation of peer and instructor feedback.
- Is free from spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. Thus is PROOFREAD well.
- 5-6 pages, typed double spaced, MLA document format (See Hacker manual).
- Cites sources in a manner appropriate to the publication you have chosen.

## APPENDIX C: NARRATIVE JOURNALISM ARTICLE

Write a creative nonfiction essay from the first-person point of view that *critically investigates* and *narrates* a story that reveals a social, moral, or cultural issue of our time and *persuades* a reader to think or do something.

Your Goal: To *inform* and *persuade* a specific audience about a particular subject, and do so using *narration* to evoke responses that objective reporting of data is not able to do.

Narration allows the writer to evoke emotional responses from readers by sharing specific, moving details in story form. Engaging readers on an emotional level is more likely to persuade a reader to actually care about the subject and most likely to persuade a reader to action, to actually *do* something about it.

Again, this genre is fairly open and the final products can look quite different from one another. There is no ONE right way to do this. But there are some basic writing and research elements that are required.

1. **Research.** You need to do some research to be well informed and establish **credibility**. If your audience doesn't trust you, you cannot persuade them. In order to gain **credibility** with your audience, you need to prove you are well informed and that you understand the situation thoroughly. Use your evidence carefully to support your views. Provide **sources (citations)** in an appropriate manner based on your chosen publication. Your evidence, data, information can come from many different sources. Yes, use library and internet research to learn more about your subject. But also, look for someone to interview, and/or use information, details, from your own life experiences. Part of the research may also be in the form of going out and living through a new experience.
2. **Narration.** You must tell a story. The story should be used to illustrate the issue or subject. This can occur in many different ways. You may start your essay with a moving story, then provide your other research, then apply it to the story in your conclusion. You can tell a story throughout the entire article, smoothly integrating your research into the story to help readers understand what is developing in the narrative. Your narrative can be telling your own story about an interesting event (funny or tragic), illness, or situation. You can also tell the story of someone close to you, with or without an interview (depends how many details you already know), from their perspective your yours. Or you can research someone else's story, or the story of a few people. Remember that telling a good story means **showing** the specific details of people, places, scenes with dialogue, plot, suspense, and invigorating, specific language.
3. **Synthesis.** Look at the data you have collected. Critically analyze it. Is this the best data to use? Then when choosing which details to include, you must synthesize, or combine all the different elements to form a cohesive whole. Because you are

combining narration with “outside data” (information obtained outside the story you are telling), this can be a difficult task. Work on integration.

4. **Subjectivity.** One of the main elements of narrative journalism is that the writer’s subjectivity, or positionally, should be evident and engaging as a component of the essay. Readers should get a sense of who the writer is, what he or she believes, even if the writer is not an actual character in the events of the essay. Let your own **voice** and ideas drive the paper even if it is about someone else.
5. **Persuasion.** Your opinion or idea (what you are trying to persuade readers of) should be evident, implicitly or explicitly. You do not need a thesis statement in the first paragraph! You do not need to *argue* in the common understanding of that word. Nevertheless you are making an argument to convince us to care about something that has been ignored, to contribute time or money to a cause and so on. So use the word persuasion loosely, but remember you are *not* simply *informing* your audience.
6. **Rhetorical Situation.** Again, you need to select a chosen audience and publication and be aware of the social context of your subject matter. Especially with persuasion, you need to be highly aware of your chosen audience’s concerns, assumptions, politics, etc. Describe your rhetorical situation in italics before the title of your essay.

To find a **topic**, look at: your major, your hobbies, your concerns and dreams, campus life, your family’s life, and the media. What have you always been interested in, but never taken the time to learn? Read the *Wildcat* for campus issues and the *Weekly* for Tucson issues. Go meet and interview a professor or staff member of the university or an organization. Interviews are an excellent way to develop an essay such as this and extend ideas beyond your own opinion and experience.

Hints: Focus your topic by focusing your research. Think critically about the one main thing you can see, and want to say, about the subject. Use your sources to reveal that main point. And remember, you may find your narrowed focus in a story!

**Criteria for Assessment.** Your essay:

- Is aimed toward a particular **audience** and **publication**.
- Develops your ideas, opinions, and impressions through **creative nonfiction** techniques.
- Has an engaging **introduction**.
- Persuades readers to at least understand your view by the end of the essay, if not be persuaded to change their own views.
- Develops your ideas with **details**, specific **evidence** and vivid stories.
- Uses **showing** to illustrate important points.
- Provides a sense of closure in the **conclusion**.
- Reveals incorporation of peer and instructor feedback.
- Is free from spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. It is PROOFREAD well.
- 5-7 pages, typed double spaced, MLA document format.
- Cites sources in a manner appropriate to the publication you have chosen.

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