

A Student's Guide to Writing Their Very First Ever Terrible Creative Nonfiction Piece

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Introduction

In this particular WRS class, students were asked to reflect on their experience of writing a piece of creative nonfiction. Joan Nwosu showcases how writing is sometimes a struggle, with its process often comprising various and surprising elements.

Keywords: creative nonfiction, drafting, genre, procrastination



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

I hate writing. I've come to realize this through this course. This is a little inconvenient as I would love to work in some kind of legal profession someday. But I really, really, really despise writing. Or at least I hate writing creative nonfiction novels.

The first step is to be introduced. What even is that, a creative nonfiction novel? Apparently, it is a piece of writing that is nonfiction (obviously) but contains the same writing rules and rhetoric as a fictional piece of writing would. In a nutshell, it is a not-boring piece of nonfiction writing. Sitting in the front seat of the class, as you explained this to us, I found myself getting a little annoyed. What was the point? It's not as interesting as a fiction novel, and it's not as informative as a "real" nonfiction paper. It was a strange pretender that I had to contend with. I hated the concept.

The next step is to look for clarification and an example. Reading the Root & Steinberg Creative Nonfiction, the Fourth Genre paper, I hated the concept even more, but I understood its purpose, at least. It was a diary of sorts—a piece of writing that you imbue part of yourself into, to give to someone else. It had to be entertaining, honest, and, on some level, personal. After reading the paper, my first thought was that I was in deep trouble. My second thought was to be slightly amused by the irony of the droning, prosaic language the paper was written in. Why wasn't a paper explaining what a creative nonfiction novel is written in the genre of a creative nonfiction novel? Beats me. The rest of the creative nonfiction genre examples were much more interesting, luckily. The example stage was done.

So I have come past the introduction, clarification, and example stage. Now it was time for the ideas stage. I had to write. Not my actual paper this time, thank goodness, but the ideas for the paper. This is where I find my topic. For this stage, I regurgitate everything my mind could come up with onto a piece of paper and pick the least bad one. My topic was so graciously gifted to me, though after much turmoil.

Now I'm really at the stage where I'll have to actually write. The practice stage. But I'm in luck! There's a technique that can keep you from doing this stage for as long as possible. It's called procrastinating. Do this stage for as long as needed.

I performed your procrastination stage to the best of my abilities, and now I have to write something down. For real this time. The fact that this draft is supposed to be terrible gives me little reprieve. So I write. But not my actual final copy—of course not. I write the draft copy, the freewriting, or idea generation copy. The terrible one. The one that is supposed to be terrible, technically, but it still feels terrible when reread. It is a very important step, almost as important as the actual final draft. It is the "draft copy," so to speak. The copy that you put in any and all ideas that wander into your head. All the best writers have this copy. Or copies. Or they should. It

helps make me a better writer. I don't feel like one. I have my terrible first draft, and I don't know what to do with it.

I've passed a writing stage. I can perform the procrastination stage again!

This is a very interesting stage of the writing process because I have passed the procrastination stage, but I have not gotten past the draft copy phase. This is a desperate time, and desperate times call for desperate measures. I used the University's writing service for help with my paper. They helped; it was invaluable. I have an outline now! This is what I will call the desperation stage.

Now I am at the final draft stage, the worst stage. I have to write something that's permanent; it stays. This is what I've prepared for. I have my idea. I look at my draft copies for inspiration and my outline for where I want to start. I reach my hand for the keys and...nothing. I failed again. I have an immediate deadline, but regardless, I look to distract myself, just for a little bit. I distract myself a large bit. I have less time now, and I'm no closer to where I was pre-break. I'm a bit stumped. So I open up another page, look at the empty, white space, and just write—about anything. Ignoring the topic and my outline and the draft copies that were supposed to help. I just write.

My frustrated writings take a long time to complete, actually. A lot longer than was anticipated. The grammar is awful. No surprises there. Writing something with good grammar isn't the point anyway. After my deluge of writing, I step back and look at what I have made. It's horrendous, obviously—messy, leading nowhere, going anywhere, stops and starts from one point to any point. But also, it's kind of funny, or just amusing, most likely. A little bit insightful. It makes surprisingly reasonable points and arguments when it decides it wants to make a point. And it's terribly honest, creative even. It's kind of good, from a very, very particular angle. I'm proud of myself just a smidge for being such an underrated auteur. I look back at my blank final draft paper and think to myself, This can't be that bad, can it? If I can make something relatively well so easily, what is this to me, too? So I start to write my paper. Wait, I look at my outline and my awful drafts first to remind myself of what I'm supposed to even write about, and how. Then I write, one word at a time, as most writing is done. I take my time and look back at the resources provided for me. After a long, long while, I look at my final draft and think to myself, Thank god the worst part is over. This is the final stage.

After my work is handed in and I'm reading through my terrible paper, I can finally admit to myself that, maybe, secretly, I do like writing creative nonfiction novels, just a little bit. Or at least I don't hate them as much.

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