

Reading Real to Write True

11 Tips for Using Narrative Nonfiction in English Class

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- 1. Use mentor texts.**
Design nonfiction writing lessons around high-quality memoir, literary journalism, and essays.
- 2. Not all memoirs are created equal.**
There's a difference between a ghostwritten celebrity tell-all and a thoughtful, researched personal account. Choose wisely and encourage students to do the same.
- 3. Read like a skeptic.**
James Frey, Brian Williams, Stephen Glass, and Margaret B. Jones (among others) prove that it pays to read "truth" skeptically. Ask students to consider author credibility, narrator likeability, and trustworthiness of the account along with how these questions intersect.
- 4. Use narrative writing to assess reading skills.**
What's better for evaluating student comprehension of literary elements like plot and character: a test/quiz, or actually having students apply these elements to an original narrative?
- 5. Don't censor student writing, unless you have to.**
Empower students to tell their best stories (which aren't always pretty). If you have to censor, be up front and clear about why and under what circumstances.
- 6. Consider timing.**
Traditionally, teachers have assigned a beginning of the year personal narrative as a "get-to-know-you" assignment, but students will be likely be more honest and revealing after they've had time to build a trusting rapport with you and their classmates.
- 7. Help them build the skills.**
What skills do you want students to master? Writing in active scenes? Using action and dialogue? Incorporating reflection? Embedding information and argument in story? Before you assign a personal essay, lead students through a series of mini-lessons to help them develop the skills you'd most like to see (remember to reference the mentor texts!).
- 8. Give them (guided) time.**
Good ideas don't always come overnight (or at other predictable intervals). Give students time (along with guided brainstorming tasks and well-advertised deadlines) to find the right one.
- 9. Do it with them.**
If you want students to write with openness and emotional vulnerability, demonstrate that you're willing to be honest and vulnerable by writing with them and sharing your work.
- 10. Be mindful of sharing.**
Always give students an out when it comes to sharing personal writing. There's therapeutic value in personal writing, even if it remains private. Don't force students to peer-review or make their personal writing public without consent.
- 11. All (good) writing is nonfiction.**
Whether it's a poem, short story or novel, memoir, editorial, research paper, or instruction manual, all compelling writing has its roots in truth and lived experience.

Narrative Nonfiction Resources

Creative Writing Journals Featuring Creative Nonfiction

- **Creative Nonfiction Magazine:** True Stories, well told. <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/>
- **The Sun:** Personal. Provocative. Political. Provocative. Ad-free. <http://thesunmagazine.org/>
- **Hippocampus Magazine:** Memorable creative nonfiction. <http://www.hippocampusmagazine.com/>
- **Brevity:** A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction. <http://brevitymag.com/>
- **Riverteeth:** A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative. <http://www.riverteethjournal.com/>
- **Fourth Genre:** Explorations in Nonfiction. <http://msupress.org/journals/fg/>
- **1966: A Journal of Creative Nonfiction.** <http://1966journal.org/>

Books on the Genre/Craft

- **You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between** by Lee Gutkind
- **Minds Made for Stories: How We Really Read and Write Informational and Persuasive Texts** by Tom Newkirk
- **To Show and the Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction** by Phillip Lopate
- **Writing for Story: Craft Secrets of Dramatic Nonfiction by a Two-Time Pulitzer Prize Winner** by Jon Franklin
- **Tell it Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction** by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola
- **Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction** by Dinty Moore

Personal Essay Anthologies

- **The Best American Essays** (Published Yearly), Robert Atwan Series Editor
 - Guest Editors have included Ariel Levy, Edwidge Danticat, Cheryl Strayed, John Jeremiah Sullivan, David Brooks, David Foster Wallace, and others.
- **The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizens Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear**, Paul Rogat Loeb (Ed)
 - Contributors include: Diane Ackerman, Sherman Alexie, Maya Angelou, Marian Wright Edelman, Jonathan Kozol, Nelson Mandela, Cornell West, and others.
- **40 Model Essays: A Portable Anthology**, Jane E. Aaron & Ellen Kuhl Repetto (Eds)
- **50 Essays: A Portable Anthology**, Samuel Cohen (Ed).

Standout Narrative Nonfiction Podcasts

- **The Moth Radio Hours:** <http://themoth.org/>
- **This American Life:** <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/>
- **Serial:** <http://serialpodcast.org/>
- **Radiolab:** <http://www.radiolab.org/>
- **Snap Judgment:** <http://snapjudgment.org/>

Student Writing Opportunities

- **Scholastic Art & Writing Awards**, Personal Essay & Memoir Category: <http://www.artandwriting.org/>
- **The Norman Mailer High School Nonfiction Writing Award:** <http://www.ncte.org/awards/nmwa>