

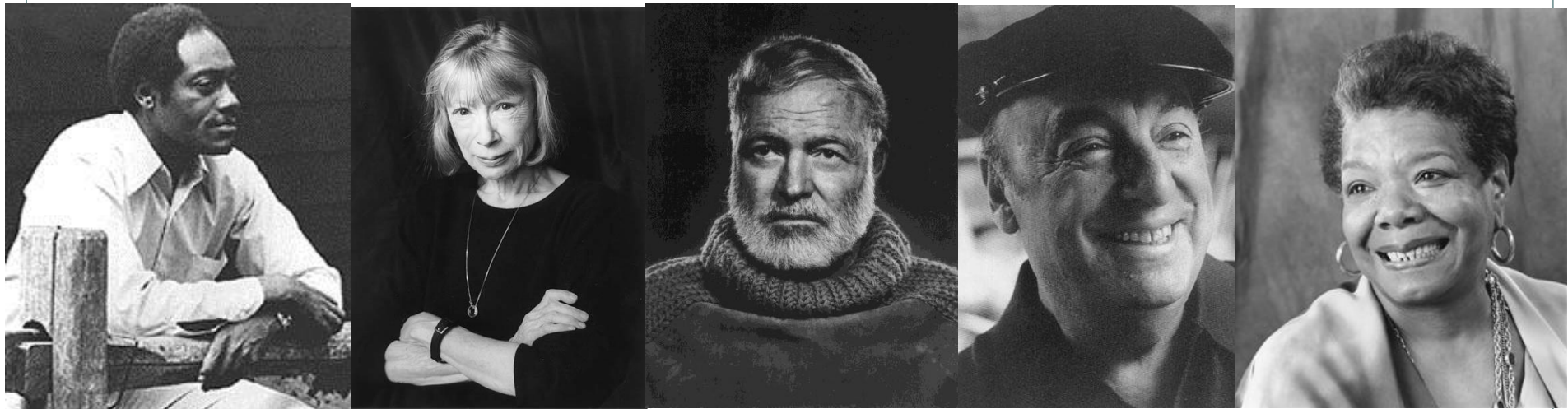
# Elements of Creative Non-Fiction



**THEME, CHARACTERIZATION,  
DRAMATIC TENSION, TONE,  
STRUCTURE/PLOT, IMAGERY,  
SETTING, NARRATIVE POINT OF  
VIEW (POV), STYLE**

**What Writers Need to Think About**

# On Being and Becoming a Writer



**When are you being and when are you becoming a writer?**

# Being and Becoming a Writer



**Is there really a difference between fiction and non fiction?**

“Are they to be described as ‘writing’ in the sense of literature, or as ‘journalism’? I have never quite known where one begins and the other ends, and, as Professor Carey pointed out in 1987, the question is neither interesting nor meaningful—literature not being an ‘objectively attainable category to which certain works naturally belong’ but more or less what ‘culture controlling groups’ decide it is. Carey went on:

# Being and Becoming a Writer



“The question worth asking therefore is not whether reportage is literature, but why intellectuals and literary institutions have generally been so keen to deny it that status. Resentment of the masses, who are regarded as reportage’s audience, is plainly a factor in the development of this prejudice ...But the disparagement of reportage also reflects a wish to promote the imaginary above the real. Works of imagination are, it is maintained, inherently superior and have a spiritual value absent from ‘journalism.’ The creative artist is in touch with truths higher than the actual, which give him exclusive entry into the soul of man. Such convictions seem to represent a residue of magical thinking.”

—Ian Jack, from *The Granta Book of Reportage*

# Being and Becoming a Writer



**At Random, off the shelves, passage 1:**

“Just before dawn the sky darkened. I was too exhausted even to sleep. Surrounded by darkness, I gave up trying to see the other end of the raft. But I kept peering into the obscurity, attempting to penetrate it. That was when I clearly saw Jaime Manjarres sitting on the gunwale, dressed in his uniform: blue pants and shirt, his cap slightly tilted over his left ear, on which I could clearly read, despite the darkness, ‘ARC Caldas.’”

# Being and Becoming a Writer



## **At Random, off the shelves, passage 2:**

“I go to sleep alone, and wake up alone. I take walks. I work until I'm tired. I watch the wind play with the trash that's been under the snow all winter. Everything seems simple until you think about it. Why is love intensified by absence?”

Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water, scanning the horizon for the tiny ship. Now I wait for Henry. He vanishes unwillingly, without warning. I wait for him. Each moment that I wait feels like a year, an eternity. Each moment is as slow and transparent as glass. Through each moment I can see infinite moments lined up, waiting. Why has he gone where I cannot follow?”

# Being and Becoming a Writer



**Could you tell the difference?**

Passage 1: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's, *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*.

Passage 2: Audrey Niffenegger's, *The Time Traveler's Wife*.

**Still confused?**

# Being and Becoming a Writer



**Could you tell the difference?**

Passage 1: Non-Fiction

Passage 2: Fiction

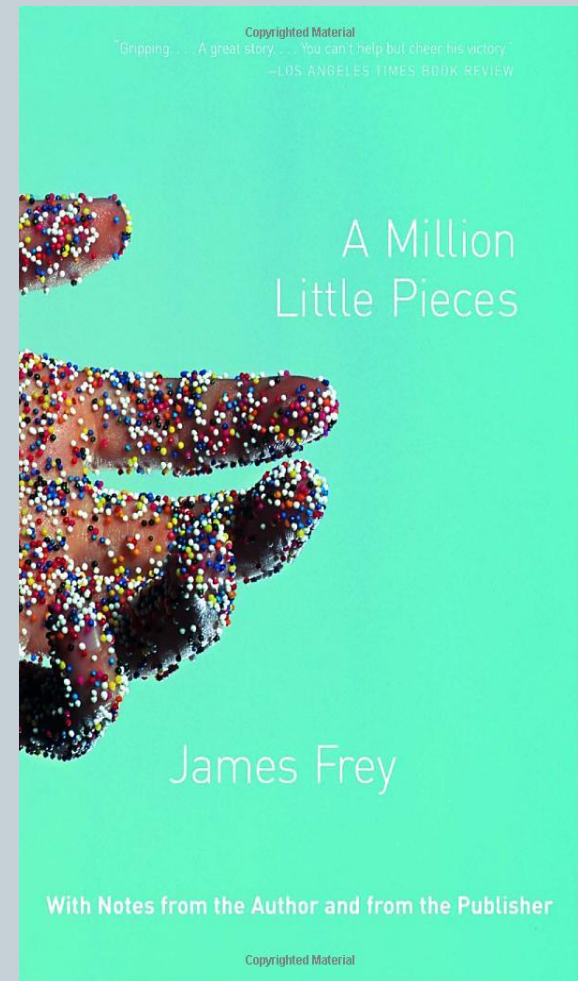
**This was just a random pull from the shelves of two first-person narratives, one fiction and one non-fiction.**



# Being and Becoming a Writer



Is there a “real” difference?  
Remember the case of James Frey’s  
“*A Million Tiny Pieces?*” The book  
was selected and promoted by Oprah.  
Afterwards it was discovered that  
Frey had fabricated, embellished,  
exaggerated some scenes in his “real,”  
nonfiction book for dramatic effect.  
His isn’t the only case. There are  
many in journalism. Does this  
matter? Does it matter that a book is  
declared “fiction,” “memoir,”  
“journalism,” “autobiography?”



# Being and Becoming a Writer



“When Frey, LeRoy, Defonseca, Seltzer, Rosenblat, Wilkomirski, et al. wrote their books, of course they made things up. Who doesn’t? Each one said sure, call it a novel, call it a memoir, who’s going to care? I don’t want to defend Frey per se—he’s a terrible writer—but the very pornographic obsession with his and similar cases reveals the degree of nervousness on the topic. The whole huge loud roar, as it returns again and again, has to do with the culture being embarrassed at how much it wants the frame of reality and, within that frame, great drama.”

“I’ve just finished reading *Reality Hunger*, and I’m lit up by it—astonished, intoxicated, ecstatic, overwhelmed. It’s a pane that’s also a mirror; as a result of reading it, I can’t stop looking into myself and interrogating my own artistic intentions. It will be published to wild fanfare, because it really is an urgent book: a piece of art-making itself, a sublime, exciting, outrageous, visionary volume.”

—Jonathan Lethem

“Aphorism, science, poetry, history, dogma, philosophy, pronouncement, rant, cant, news report, act of faith, funkadelic exploration, literary criticism, one-man wiki, print-page blog, confession, anecdote, truth, and beauty—David Shields’s book is that, and more. It tells us who we are and why we read and why the things we read exist and where it all might go to tomorrow.”

—Albert Goldbarth

“This is the book our sick-at-heart moment needs—like a sock in the jaw or an electric jolt in the solar plexus—to wake it up. *Reality Hunger* will create sensations of like-mindedness in scattered souls everywhere. Shields has goosed the zeitgeist. The point of the polemic is his pugilistic and performative assertion of appropriation’s inevitability: literary artists need to be given the liberties that have long been accorded to visual artists (ever since Duchamp).”

—Wayne Koestenbaum

“*Reality Hunger* seems to come from one author but in fact is a compendium of quoted passages from writers, poets, rockers, and whatnot—all of it traversing the disputed terrain of the real. It’s cranky, generous, ridiculous, serious, and subtle; it’s ambitious but with a nonchalant, throwaway feel, like a Lou Reed lyric. Its parts are so tightly strung together that you can’t pick a single thread without involving yourself in the whole shivering web. Anybody who writes or thinks or breathes is already living inside the questions raised by *Reality Hunger*, which is one of the most provocative books I’ve ever read. It’s perfect for now, for our time: it has that vitality. It’s truly great. I think it’s destined to become a classic.”

—Charles D’Ambrosio

“David Shields’s *Reality Hunger* is a rare and very peculiar thing: a wake-up call that is a pleasure to hear and respond to. A daring combination of montage and essay, it’s crammed full of good things. Reading it, I kept thinking, “Yes, exactly, I wish I said that,” and then I realize I had.”

—Geoff Dyer

“I’ve just finished (for the first of what I know will not be the only time) *Reality Hunger*. Shields says things here that I have thought, wished I thought, wished someone would say. A sparky, brainy, passionate, often very funny, and never small-bearded or pinch-minded book, rigorous, demanding but generous and searching and self-debunking. I have written in the margins, underlined, and be-starred many passages and in general have ruined the book as a physical object.”

—Patricia Hampf

# On Being and Becoming a Writer



***“A writer publishes to be read; then hopes the readers are affected by the words, hopes that their opinions are changed or strengthened or enlarged, or that readers are pushed to notice something they had not stopped to notice before. All my reporting life, I have thrown small pebbles into a very large pond, and have no way of knowing whether any pebble caused the slightest ripple. I don’t need to worry about that. My responsibility was in the effort.”***



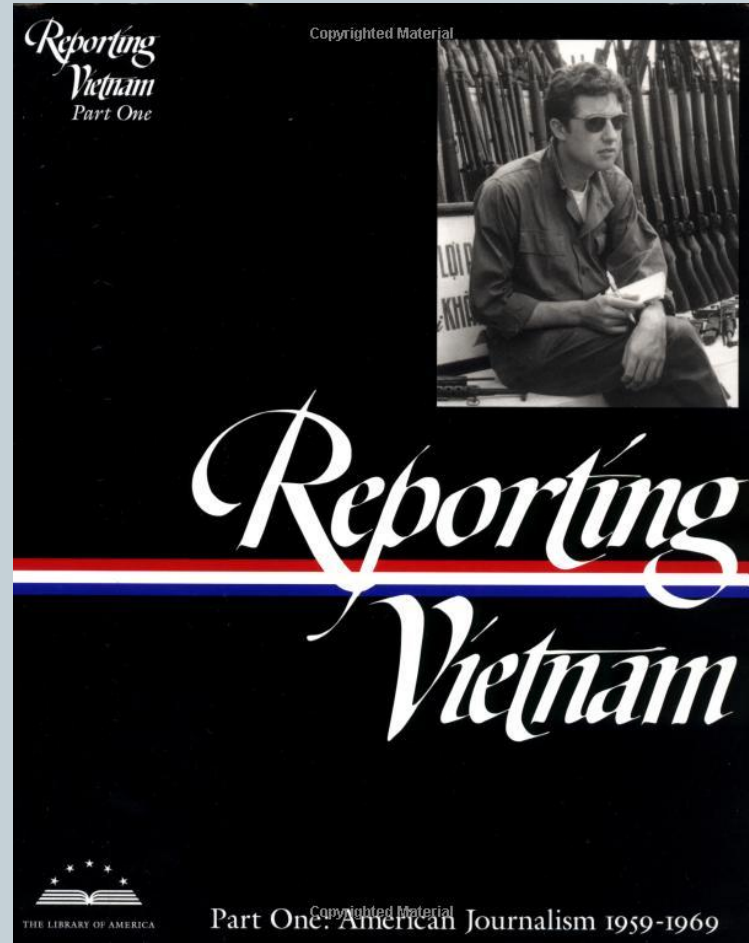
—Martha Gellhorn, from *The Granta Book of Reportage*

# On Being and Becoming a Writer



***“Reportage tends to come, after all, from a different kind of personality; the kind that gives the initial process of finding out an equal, or even a greater priority to the later process of shaping the information discovered—the scene witnessed, the word spoken—into sentences fit for the page.”***

—Ian Jack, from *The Granta Book of Reportage*



# On Being and Becoming a Writer



**Remember, there are overlaps. Creative nonfiction writers and literary journalists use techniques of novelists and even, in some cases, poets.**



# On Being and Becoming a Writer



**From John Gardner's, *The Art of Fiction* (definitely appropriate for creative nonfiction and literary journalism):**

“The writer must create, stroke by stroke, powerfully convincing characters and settings; he/she must more and more clearly define his/her overall theme or idea; she/he must choose and aesthetically justify his genre and style.”

“The writer must complete equations, think out the subtlest implications of what he's/she's said, get to the truth. Not just of the characters and action, but also of form, remembering that neatness can be carried too far so that the work seems fussy, over-wrought, unspontaneous, anal compulsive, and remembering that mess is no alternative.”

# On Being and Becoming a Writer



**From John Gardner's, *The Art of Fiction* (definitely appropriate for creative nonfiction and literary journalism):**

“First business of a writer is to make the reader see and feel what the characters see and feel ”

“In good fiction [and nonfiction], it's physical detail that pulls the reader into the dream, a dream which must have linearity or narrative profluence, be vivid and continuous.”

# On Being and Becoming a Writer



**From Milan Kundera's, *The Art of the Novel* (definitely appropriate for creative nonfiction and literary journalism story):**

“Indeed, instead of seeking ‘the poem’ [or meaning in fiction or nonfiction] hidden ‘somewhere behind’ the poet [fiction or nonfiction writer] engages him- or herself in the service of a truth known from the outset (which comes forward on its own and is ‘out in front,’ he/she has renounced the mission of poetry [fiction or nonfiction story]. And it matters little whether the preconceived truth is called revolution or dissidence, Christian faith or atheism, whether it is more justified or less justified; a poet [writer] who serves any truth other than the truth to be discovered (which is dazzlement) is a false poet [writer].”



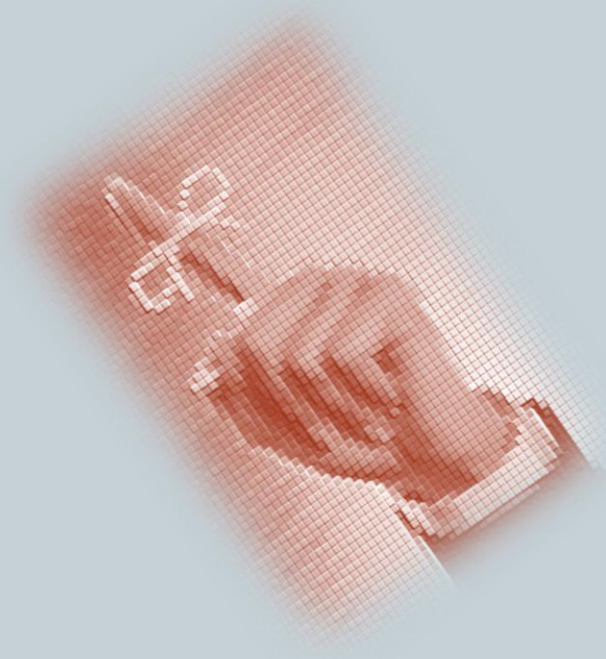


# Seven Elements of Creative Non-Fiction



It is important to keep in mind that these basic elements of creative non-fiction (all of which also apply to fiction) overlap and play off each other in any successful story. Our focus is going to be memoir and literary journalism/essay or experiential writing.

**Remember Again!**





## Theme

*By theme here we mean not a message -- a word no good writer likes applied to his work -- but the general subject, as the theme of an evening of debates may be World Wide Inflation.*

John Gardner

**Theme is a very important element to a successful story. It helps carry and unify the plot and characters. Theme is something you should look for immediately when beginning any story. Search for that general subject and the various ways you can convey and reinforce it: descriptive passages, character's actions, affecting tone via syntax and rhythm, etc ...**

# Themes and Sub-Themes: Main Subjects and Minor Subjects



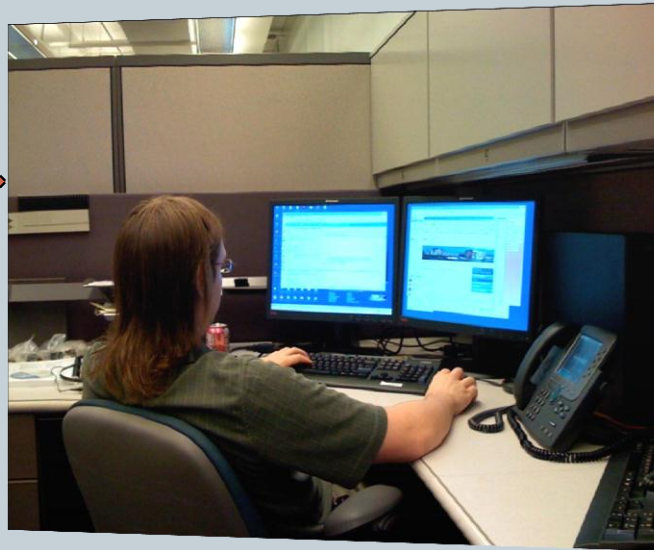
**What main and minor points do you want to run consistently throughout your story? Sometimes a writer is obvious with some themes and hides others behind metaphor, symbol, and imagery and various devices that function to defamiliarize the reader. This can create levels of signification.**

# Themes and Sub-Themes: Main Subjects and Minor Subjects



**Maybe one of your themes is how, over the past 30 years or so, our economy has shifted from gritty blue collar, hands on jobs to more cushy office jobs, and how that has affected the culture of the family?**

# Themes and Sub-Themes



Maybe one of your themes is how, over the past 30 years or so, our economy has shifted from gritty blue collar, hands on jobs to more cushy office jobs, and how that has affected the culture of a family or a neighborhood? Themes work as the glue that holds a story together.

# Themes and Sub-Themes: Main Subjects and Minor Subjects



**After discovering what themes you want to pursue, think about how you want to convey them. There are obvious and more hidden means. Ask yourself does the dramatic action and the characters engage in support of the theme(s)? What are the political, sociological, psychological implications of theme(s) as it/they relate(s) to the context in which you are writing it/them?**

# Themes and Sub-Themes: Main Subjects and Minor Subjects



**Do the metaphors, similes, symbols, and imagery reinforce a political, maybe discriminatory agenda or stereotype? For instance, does using war as a metaphor for love create the impression that men always have a distinct advantage because they are perceived more as the fighters of war? Do metaphors carry a political or moral agenda? Is the story in anyway allegorized?**



# Character

“One of art’s purest challenges is to translate a human being into words.”

—New Yorker editors, from *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker*.

## Character is in many ways the most important, memorable element





Characters come,  
characters go, all variety of  
backgrounds and lifestyles

