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# The Fourth Genre:

Creative Nonfiction in the Writing Classroom

## Seminar Description

- In this faculty seminar, we will explore the multi-faceted genre of creative nonfiction, with a focus on developing writing projects for WR 120 and WR 15X courses. After an introductory discussion of the genre's history and its flexibility, we will read and discuss specific sub-genres, including the personal essay, memoir, and literary journalism. We will consider how these sub-genres can incorporate source material, research, and how they can draw upon traditional, academic rhetorical modes, such as argument and analysis. We will also feature guest speakers, current practitioners of the genre within the CAS Writing Program who will share their expertise, present sample assignments, and participate in Q&A sessions. **Instructors can expect to come away from this seminar with assignments in hand and professional models to help teach them.**

## Connections to Our Program's Values

In our classrooms, we aim to equip students with strategies to participate in academic and **non-academic discourse communities**, acknowledging that the norms of academic writing, and even language itself, are not static or monolithic but constantly evolving. We recognize the communication strengths of all learners and the value of **multiple Englishes**, especially in ways that empower our multilingual students. We work to make our classrooms **transformative spaces**, where students challenge themselves intellectually and help each other grow as communicators and thinkers while **retaining authority** over their own work.

Recognizing that language can be both an instrument of oppression and a tool for freedom and justice, we value how writing and rhetoric help us **learn how to listen, how to be heard, and how to change the conversation to create a culture of empathy, inquiry, and creativity.**

# Connections to Our Curriculum

- Writing is a way not only to express what you have to say but also to **discover** and **evaluate** it. You will write a great deal at BU and beyond, and each occasion will present you with a range of questions: Who is my audience, and what kind of writing does the occasion call for? How should I structure my writing **to engage, inform, persuade, and perhaps even entertain an audience?**

## Curriculum Connections (Cont.)

- read a range of genres with understanding, appreciation, and critical judgment (WR 120)
- produce clear, coherent prose in a range of genres and styles, using different media and modes of expression as appropriate (WR 120)
- understand research as a process and engage a range of sources in order to address research questions and to communicate findings in the form of responsible, considered, and well-structured verbal arguments (WR 15X)
- reflect on how research, reading, oral and signed expression, writing, and editing practices differ for different audiences, genres, and purposes in order to evaluate and improve them (WR 15X)
- learn about the growing call for scholars to communicate their research to the public, study and practice several public genres, and rewrite a research project from a previous course to “translate” it for a public audience (WR 415)

# Connections to the BU Hub

General Education at Boston  
University

- **PHILOSOPHICAL, AESTHETIC, AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION**
- **SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL INQUIRY**
- **DIVERSITY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP**
- **INTELLECTUAL TOOLKIT (CREATIVITY, CRITICAL THINKING)**

## The Genre's Thematic Range

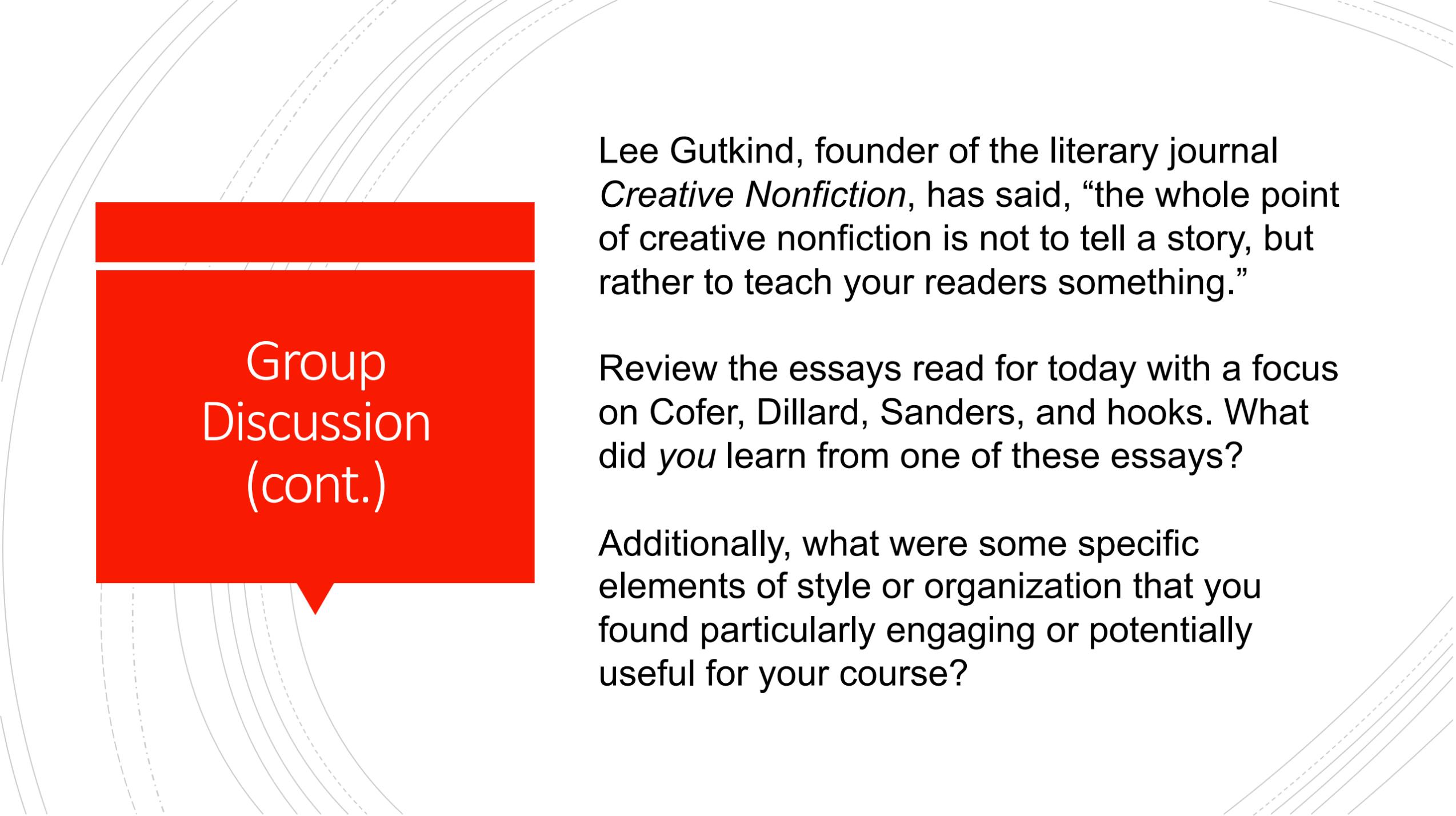
Selected contents from *The  
Writer's Presence*, edited by  
Robert Atwan and Donald  
McQuade. Bedford/ St. Martin's.

- A Sense of Place
- Psychology and Human Behavior
- Ethics and Morality
- Philosophy, Spirituality, and Religion
- The Natural Environment
- History and Biography
- Education
- Popular Culture and Mass Media
- Sciences and Technology
- Law, Politics, and Society
- Racial and Ethnic Identity
- Gender Roles

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## Opening Group Discussion

- Who here is currently using some form of the genre and how so?
- What questions do you have about the genre this seminar can help address?
- What form(s) of creative nonfiction do you think will be most appropriate or useful for your courses?
- What do you think makes creative nonfiction creative?



Group  
Discussion  
(cont.)

Lee Gutkind, founder of the literary journal *Creative Nonfiction*, has said, “the whole point of creative nonfiction is not to tell a story, but rather to teach your readers something.”

Review the essays read for today with a focus on Cofer, Dillard, Sanders, and hooks. What did *you* learn from one of these essays?

Additionally, what were some specific elements of style or organization that you found particularly engaging or potentially useful for your course?

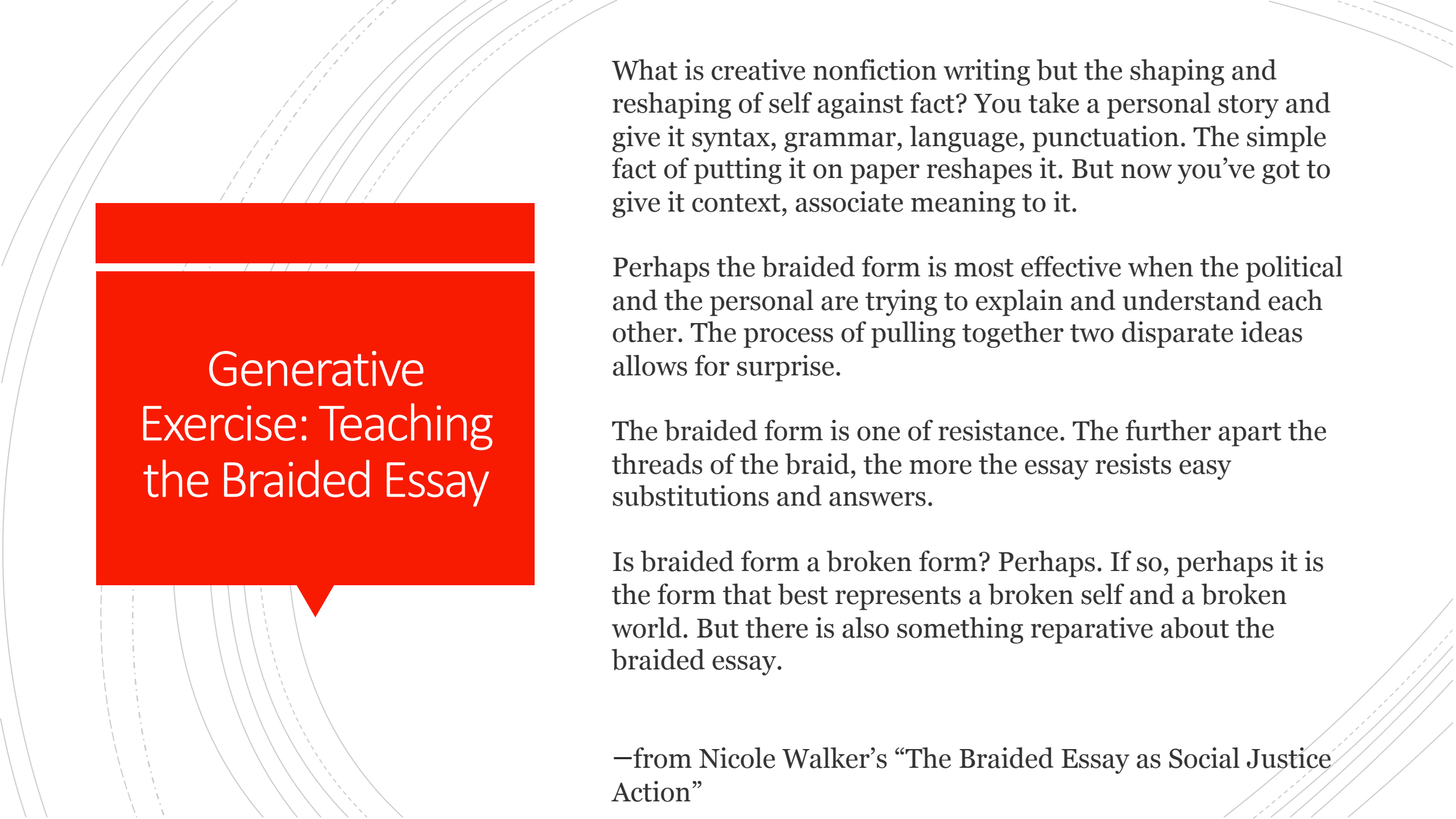
## Session Two: The Personal Essay

Much of my writing begins as a meditation on past events. But memory for me is the “jumping off” point; I am not ... a slave to memory .... I like to believe that the poem or story contains the “truth” of art rather than the factual, historical truth that the journalists, sociologist, scientist... must adhere to. Art gives me freedom.

I am not interested in merely “canning” memories, however .... My intention is not to chronicle my life .... It is not meant to be a record of public events and public histories .... In fact, whenever I felt that it was necessary to protect identities I changed names, locations, etc.

Then, what is the purpose of calling this collection nonfiction or a memoir? Why not just call it fiction? Once again, I must turn to my literary mentor, Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf understood that the very act of reclaiming her memories could provide a writer with the confidence in the power of art to discover meaning and truth in ordinary events.

—Judith Cofer, “on Memory and Personal Essays”



## Generative Exercise: Teaching the Braided Essay

What is creative nonfiction writing but the shaping and reshaping of self against fact? You take a personal story and give it syntax, grammar, language, punctuation. The simple fact of putting it on paper reshapes it. But now you've got to give it context, associate meaning to it.

Perhaps the braided form is most effective when the political and the personal are trying to explain and understand each other. The process of pulling together two disparate ideas allows for surprise.

The braided form is one of resistance. The further apart the threads of the braid, the more the essay resists easy substitutions and answers.

Is braided form a broken form? Perhaps. If so, perhaps it is the form that best represents a broken self and a broken world. But there is also something reparative about the braided essay.

—from Nicole Walker's "The Braided Essay as Social Justice Action"

# The Memoir

A memoir is an autobiographical genre, a dynamic narrative of the various and complicated factors (familial, cultural, philosophical, historical) that converged to form important life experiences. A memoir is a consummate understanding of the self and how that self was forged in the fire of the world, an understanding that the self happens in relation to culture and history and society.

A memoir is not mere self-expression, not mere diary or journal entries, but rather a dynamic self-assertion given in a *story* about some section of the writer's life. Not a writer's *entire* life, but only some section of it. All effective memoirists are effective storytellers.

--William Giraldi

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Lee Gutkind's The  
5 Rs of Creative  
Nonfiction

- **Real Life**
- **Reflection**
- **Research**
- **Reading**
- **W(r)iting**

## Generative Exercise: The Personal Essay

- What is your course content? What are some of your guiding questions?
- Fill in the blank: In this project, I would like students to make a connection between a personal experience (or a pro-occupation) and the \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g. cultural, historical, political, social, environmental, religious, etc.).
- What “craft essay(s)” appealed to you most? Which one might help you best teach this assignment: Bascom, Walker, Gornick, Gutkind, Jacobs?
- What essay did we read that exemplifies some specific issues of craft (of CNF) that you might assign as a model? Perhaps you have another author/essay in mind?
- Beyond giving students the opportunity for self-expression or telling a story, how might the purpose of your assignment “fit” your course sequence and our program’s curricular objectives?

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# Literary Journalism

*Researched Storytelling*

## Defining Literary Journalism

“I think one of the first things for literary reportage should be to go into the field and to try to get the other side of the story. Reportage should give a **fresh vision of a topic.**”

—*Anne Nivat, France*

It is a “journalism that would **read like a novel** ... or short story.”

—*Tom Wolfe, United States*

“A good reportage must not necessarily be linked with topical or political events which are taking place around us. I think the miracle of things lies not in showing the extraordinary but in **showing ordinary things in which the extraordinary is hidden.**”

—*Nirmal Verma, India*

## Research into Literary Journalism

Literary journalism “remains uniquely suited for bridging gaps between class content and contemporary, real-world applications.”

We can use literary journalism exhibits “to explore how both conventional and emerging media impact audiences’ experiences and understanding of information differently.”

Reading in 4-D: “(1) reading for news content; (2) reading for the story form; (3) reading for the legwork (or, the journalist’s own story); and (4) reading for the subject.”

-*Ryan Marnane*, “From Print to 360-Degree Immersive: On Introducing Literary Journalism across Media”



## Literary Journalism in Practice

Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012)

### Discussion Questions:

1. What did you find most striking from the Prologue?
2. Which moments seemed to articulate the book's central theme most clearly?
3. Where, if anywhere, did you feel the story switch from descriptive and narrative to more traditionally informative and argumentative?

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## Group Discussion

### Discussion Questions:

1. How does your course topic and its associated modes of expression align with or resist the practices of literary journalism?
2. What are the skills your students struggle with most? How might teaching the practices of literary journalism help your students address their challenges?
3. How, if at all, has the rise of new media (digital technologies + social media) impacted the modes of expression associated with your course topic?
4. Imagine your own version of a “Reading in 4-D” exercise.

## Sample Scaffolding Assignments

### **Interview Classmate**

Good For: *Summary vs. Analysis; Developing Research Questions*

- Create interview questions before class
- Interview in class
- Begin outlining narrative structure in class
- Determine where more outside research might be necessary, such as looking up information about a hobby or sport your partner mentioned, or a type of cuisine they like eating, etc.
- Write brief story as homework, including minor research
  - OR you can ditch the research element altogether
- Review in next class

## Sample Scaffolding Assignments

### **Real-World Research Excursion**

Good For: *Developing Research Questions; Understanding Audience Expectations*

- Go to an event and be a fly on the wall
- Record all observations
- Write a brief report (approx. 300 words)
- Include a newspaper-style headline
- In class the next day, discuss...
  - Different processes students used to observe
  - What makes a story “newsworthy”?
  - How did you develop your headlines? Do they capture the main point of story and/or serve another purpose?
- Transform headlines into short story titles
  - What is the difference in audience expectations for these two genres of writing? How did your headline change?

# Alternative Genre Assignment

**Directions:** Select a *world*, a *conflict*, or a *cultural mystery* that is important to you (and/or related to the course topic). Investigate your subject, conduct at least one interview, find at least 3 credible sources to help you convey your topic, develop a narrative structure out of your collection of facts and data, and then write your newsworthy story.

**Requirements:**

- 6-8 pages
- 3+ academic sources
- 1 interview w/ relevant person

**Supplementary Material:**

*Reflective Writing Journal*

- Write 1 entry per day/week for duration of this unit. Can be as short as one sentence, or as long as one paragraph.
- Identify what is most difficult and most rewarding about each step of the research and writing process.