



The Elements of Creative Non-Fiction

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The Elements of Creative Non-Fiction (or Literary Non-Fiction) are **truthfulness, mode, sources, viewpoint, audience, scenes, information, narration, and structure**. Literary critics analyze creative non-fiction works with the Elements of Creative Non-Fiction to reveal the **themes** of those works.

Truthfulness

Creative non-fiction must be verifiably true. It is a *hybrid* genre, combining *creativity* with *non-fictionality* (Gutkind 167).

- **creative:** writing that is compelling, vivid, and dramatic
- **non-fiction:** writing that is factually accurate

Creative non-fiction must maintain *truthfulness*, but truth can be *subjective* or *objective* (Cuddon 690).

- **subjectivity:** personal experience and feeling
- **objectivity:** outside of and detached from subject matter

Various techniques affect the truthfulness of a creative non-fiction work (Gutkind 34-40).

- **composite characters:** creating a character who is based on two or more real people
- **compressed scenes:** squeezing together two or more scenes, events, or situations
- **manufactured dialogue:** recreating conversations to eliminate hesitations, deviations, repetition, etc.
- **changed names:** using a different name for a real person
- **fudging:** changing seemingly insignificant details for practical or aesthetic reasons

Mode

Creative non-fiction works contain aspects of *private writing* and *public writing* (Gutkind 57).

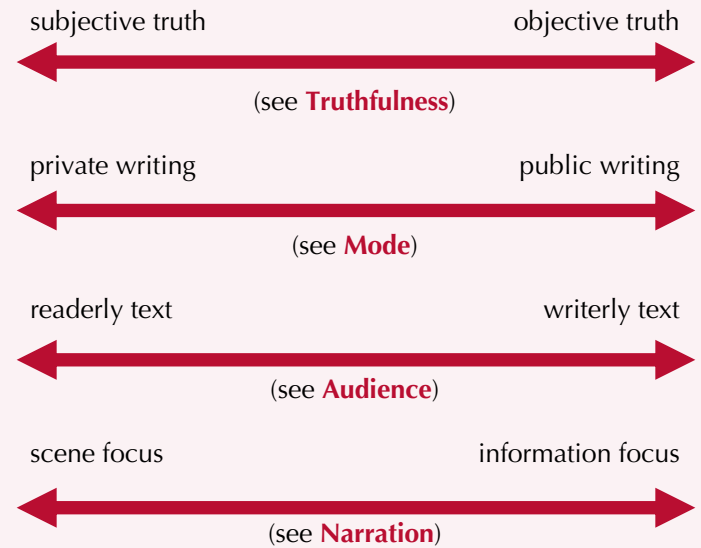
- **private writing:** “reveal[s] the intimacies of ordinary lives” and “small personal issues”
- **public writing:** deals with “big issues like war and politics” to “entertain, surprise, and inform” the reader

There are many different types of creative non-fiction, including different kinds of *essays* and various forms of *life writing*.

- **essay:** a work that seeks to understand some aspects of an idea or of the world (Chalykoff 4)
- **impersonal essay:** an essay that takes a formal tone
- **personal essay:** an essay that takes an informal tone

Striking Balances

Creative non-fiction writers aim to strike a balance between various extremes in their work.



- **lyric essay:** an essay in verse
- **life writing:** a work that recounts a person’s life in whole or in part using various techniques
- **biography:** an account of a person’s life (Cuddon 78)
- **autobiography:** a person’s own account of their life (Cuddon 60)
- **memoir:** focuses on one aspect, period, or incident of a person’s own life (Gutkind 58)

Sources

Writers of creative non-fiction integrate outside sources via *research* and/or *immersion*.

- **research:** the systematic investigation into and study of materials sources, etc. to establish facts and to reach new conclusions (OED)
- **immersion:** the absorption or involvement in a particular activity or condition to understand or to relate to it more deeply (OED)

Viewpoint

As a *narrative* genre, creative non-fiction features a *narrator*, who is usually—but not always—the author themselves.

- **narrative:** a coherent account of a series of interrelated events; a story
- **narrator:** the voice or viewpoint that relates the story; the narrative perspective

Creative non-fiction works are usually narrated in *first-person viewpoint*, but *second-* and *third-person viewpoints* can also be used.

- **first-person:** subjective; pronouns “I,” “we”
- **second-person:** subjective-objective; pronoun “you”
- **third-person:** objective; pronouns “he,” “she,” etc.

Audience

Creative non-fiction works anticipate a specific *audience*, which can be *active* or *passive*. French critic Roland Barthes labelled these *readerly texts* and *writerly texts* respectively.

- **readerly text (*texte lisible*):** a work to which a reader’s response is more or less passive; the reader is a passive “consumer” of meaning
- **writerly text (*texte scriptible*):** a work that makes demands on the reader to work things out, look for and provide meaning”; the reader is an active “producer” of meaning (Cuddon 588-89)

Scenes

A *scene* is one of the events in a creative non-fiction narrative or story (Gutkind 114-23). Scenes contain various characteristics.

- **action:** something happens to impel the narrative forwards
- **structure:** has a coherent beginning, middle, and end
- **details:** includes abstract images symbolizing or acting as metaphors
- **dialogue:** people talking to each other realistically

Information

As an element of creative non-fiction, *information* refers to the additional details, facts, figures, statistics, etc. in a creative non-fiction work (integrated by means of *research* and/or *immersion*) to help advance its theme (Gutkind 94-95).

- **scientific data:** empirical information
- **definitions:** technical terms
- **historical context:** events situated in time
- **statistics:** numerical data
- **facts:** events grounded in reality
- **quotations from experts:** to lend authority to ideas

Narration

Writers of creative non-fiction carefully pattern their scenes and information in such a way to emphasize their themes, a process called *recreation and reconstruction* (Gutkind 138-39).

- **scene-focused blocks:** mostly scenes, little information
- **information-focused blocks:** mostly information, few scenes
- **scene-with-information blocks:** scenes with embedded information
- **scene-then-information blocks:** alternating scenes and information

Structure

Creative non-fiction works often begin with a compelling *hook* (Gutkind 204).

- **hook:** a compelling opening sentence that grabs the reader’s attention

Creative non-fiction works are often carefully structured using one of several organizational methods, sometimes referred to as a *frame* (Gutkind 281-23).

- **chronological:** organized by time, with a distinct beginning, middle, and end
- **flashback:** moving backwards and forwards in time
- **compressed:** selecting only the most important events to focus on
- **bookending:** using a different narrative line at the beginning and end of a work, often bridged with a *callback*, lending symmetry to the whole
- **parallel narratives:** weaving together two or more narratives in the same work to help call attention to their (sometimes unlikely) parallels

Works Cited

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