

Week 1:

Genre: Memoir/Essays/ Creative Nonfiction writing:

The Narrator

Voice and Style

The narrator is the nucleus of any piece of writing (fiction/nonfiction) and the axis around which the narrative/story revolves, and the other elements are all analyzed/perceived through the narrator's lens.

The persona of the author as the narrator is bound to be reflected in the pages.

An author can have many facets to him/her: artist, friend, philosopher, guide, observer or spectator

For each of these facets, the voice/expressions are bound to be unique and different.

In memoir writing/personal essays, the author chooses one/two facet(s) which best define him at that point and reveals that in the pages.

Take for example these opening lines from the essay 'Portrait Of My Body' by Philip Lopate (same name for the book of personal essays):

"I am a man who tilts. When I am sitting, my head slants to the right; when walking, the upper part of my body reaches forward to catch a sneak preview from the street. On one way or the other, I seem to be off-center—or

‘uncentered’, to use the jargon of holism. My lousy posture, a tendency to slump or put myself into lazy, contorted misalignments, undoubtedly contributes to lower back pain. For a while, I correct my bad habits, do morning exercises, sit straight, breathe deeply, but always an inner demon that insists on approaching the world askew perpendicularly.”

What’s his role here apparently?

A philosopher, or observer

Closely watching the peculiar quirks, the twists and turns of his own body parts.

The voice is:

Crisp, yet detailed, analytical

Intimate, yet maintaining an objective stance

Brutally honest, almost scathing

Portrays a universal truth about the human anatomy

Another essay, a family memoir, ‘Mastering The Art Of French Cooking’, by award-winning author E.J. Levy starts like this:

“I have no photograph of my mother cooking, but when I recall my childhood, this is how I picture her: standing in the kitchen of our suburban ranch house, a blue-and-white-checked terry-cloth apron tied at her waist, her lovely head bent over a recipe, a hiss of frying butter, a smell of onions and broth, and open like a hymnal on the counter beside her, a copy of Julia Child’s ‘Mastering the Art of French Cooking’.

The book’s cover is delicately patterned like wallpaper—white with miniature red fleurs-de-lis and tiny teal stars—the title and the author’s names modestly scripted in a rectangular frame no larger than a recipe card: a model of feminine self-effacement.

This unassuming book was my mother’s most reliable companion throughout my childhood, and from the table laid with a blue cotton cloth, not yet set with flatware and plates and glasses of ice water, not yet laid with bowls of broccoli

spears, boeuf bourguignon, potatoes sautéed in butter, I observed her as she sought in its pages an elusive balance between the bitter and sweet.”

Essay about:

Memories, childhood cuisines, family ties and interpersonal relationship, all in reference to Julia Child, the celebrated chef

Role of the author as the narrator here is:

That of an observer and critic of her family’s cultural past

She records in details the minute features of her mother cooking, the kitchen of her childhood memories, the sensory details of the house etc.

The voice is:

Detailed, analytical, most importantly: sensory

Intimate and woven with feelings

Maintaining the balance between subjective and objective interpretation

Portrays a universal truth about family ties through memories/detailed exploration, use of cultural tidbits

The Person, the ‘I’ in Creative Nonfiction Writing

Joan Didion, the famous essayist, nonfiction writer once quoted:

“No matter how dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the impeccable ‘I.’”

Creative Nonfiction: functions subjectively (like fiction and painting).

Personal ‘I’: the medium through the observations, details of the world is filtered.

Creative challenge: How would you frame the experience effectively?

Reconstruction of an immediate truth with a subjective lens, with the ‘I’.

How would you frame your essay?

Joan Didion in her essay ‘Goodbye to All That’, writes in the first paragraph:

“I would stay in New York, I told him, just six months, and I could see the Brooklyn Bridge from my window. As it turned out, the bridge was the Triborough, and I stayed eight years.” (page 263-264: Tell It Slant: anthology)

How does the personal ‘I’ or the self, work in this essay?

- ***Framing the essay: Through nostalgic perspective/through a retrospective view***
- ***Reconstructs the moments of her time in NY***
- ***Recreates the narrative from the POV of a young woman new to the city***
- ***Giving sensory details***
- ***A snapshot of NY, as a faithful reconstruction of the city***
- ***Shaped the narrative/her experience through her particular voice and vision.***
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Questions:

Is it a hardcore realist’s vision?

What does the nostalgic voice do to the narrative?

How is her observation of the world in this part of the essay?

Final analysis:

In both creative nonfiction and painting, as in photography, our outer worlds are shaped by our artistic consciousness/intuition.

The writing will reflect the inner sensibility of the writer

(This is the 'Autobiographical Act')—recreating your past, your sense of self.

Here is where the challenge lies:

Memory v/s imagination

What are real memories?

What do we do with recreating our memories and personal experiences?

The private becomes public (forging connections and metaphors)

The narrator who is the 'I' in the pages: yourself

The 'I' would exist in the text as a character: two distinct selves