

Chapter 11. Redefining Preparation: The Need for Creative Nonfiction in High School

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How does the writer of personal narrative pull from his or her own boring, agitated self the truth speaker who will tell the story that needs to be told?

– *Vivian Gornick*

Trying to work toward emotional, spiritual, familial, intellectual, professional, political and the big ETC. of truths is not just a part of, but is the process of writing, of composing nonfiction.

– *Wendy Bishop*

If we theorize creativity as a highly sophisticated and valuable form of cognition, it must also, then, by definition, be regarded as a necessary and indispensable part of any curriculum in a writing classroom.

– *Patrick Sullivan*

We need more occasions to tell the truth, nowadays, both in school and outside of it. The methods and forms of creative nonfiction are premised on the idea that attending to real life—first-hand experiences, observations, memories, encounters with texts, and other phenomena—can lead a writer to pose hard questions, do research, and move beyond what makes them comfortable or safe, intellectually or otherwise. Creative nonfiction, regardless of subgenre, depends on the writer being willing, able, and welcome to be present on the page, as well as intentional about the experiences they craft for their readers. Writers of creative nonfiction are often self-aware and sometimes self-conscious. In the best cases, these qualities can inform surprising ideas in essays, create thick descriptions in travel accounts, reveal our stances as connected critics, and prompt frank, nuanced reflections in memoirs.

As readers of creative nonfiction, we may be introduced to phenomena that are outside our ken, but even if the subject matter is familiar in some way, writers of what Ronald Weber has called the “literatures of fact” newly navigate territories of all kinds for their readers—often simultaneously. For example, E. B. White, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, Ian Frazier, Colson Whitehead, Eula Biss, Rebecca Solnit, and Phillip Lopate render New York so that their versions remap our

visions of a city many of us know well. They show us a knowable world, enlivened by their distinctive presence and distilled through the fine-grade alembic of their prose. With all of this showing and telling to do, who better to try their hand at creative nonfiction than teenagers in high school? After all, high school is a time when you reckon with what your presence in the world means and how to ask questions about that real world whose answers matter to you, for one.

A high school student's daily experience of writing begins—at this moment in the 21st century—on their phones. They text, they post, they respond, react, link. They don't edit much as they seek readers, some known, some not, in genres they value for their speed and ubiquity. Imperfections are expected, because this writing occurs as part of their lives outside of school, often for people they know (or believe, or hope) exist. Once the student arrives at school, the phone may have to be relinquished or hidden; sometimes they can use it, but only for purposes authorized by a teacher or administrator, who may or may not put their own phones away. Without a phone, the student might write in a notebook, by hand, or on a tablet or laptop, which may have been provided by their school district, if they live in an area where tax revenue or a philanthropic donor funds them. This writing they do is real, too, in its own way. But it's different. Teachers and perhaps other students will read their homework, their quizzes, their in-class exercises. Students may value and seek out these readers, but they mostly do not have a hand in shaping the *purposes* or the forms for the writing. So, the writing may be high-stakes, but not feel as real as what they choose to write for themselves.

As in other subjects, English and language arts teachers assign writing to inculcate skills and prepare students for formal assessments and, perhaps, for college. However, the bulk of these assignments are designed to reflect knowledge students have already acquired. Less common are writing assignments that foster students' capacities as seekers of new knowledge. We teachers, students, citizens need more actively to identify genres and practices that invite us to tell the truths of our lives so that we can examine them, share them, trouble them, and revise them. In the 21st century, high school students and teachers need to read and write creative nonfiction.

When we do not teach creative nonfiction genres in high school, we miss an opportunity to foster negative capability. The term comes from the Romantic poet John Keats and is used to identify the power of some poets to tolerate "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (109). A robust, diverse, and sustained creative nonfiction curriculum in high school can fulfill in under-appreciated ways the goals of literacy standards documents such as the Common Core State Standards, and exceed them. At the same time, a creative nonfiction curriculum can create greater coherence among subject areas, provide meaningful ways to teach what the composition scholar Patrick Sullivan asks us to rethink as "critical *and* creative thinking," improve knowledge and skills transfer, and perhaps most important of all, help teachers

and schools to devise high school writing curricula that produce assignments that are worth reading and worth writing. As American students and teachers know all too well, high school is an environment no more sheltered from the world around it than any other place in our public lives. We show that we value high school as a real time and real place when we teach writing that students will know is meaningful for them *as* high school students, not just as people who are waiting for their “real lives” to begin in college or at work.

Then again, there are reasons—some better than others—why high school teachers and administrators might be reluctant to make creative nonfiction writing a centerpiece of English Language Arts curricula. Here are three common concerns:

- Creative nonfiction writing is for more accomplished people—artists and others who have already demonstrated that they know the “basics” of school writing, whatever they might be.
- Creative nonfiction encourages writers to indulge their narcissism.
- Creative nonfiction does not teach writerly skills that will transfer to college or the workplace.
- It’s not possible, really, to grade a piece of creative writing.

But I suspect it is equally likely that we are afraid . . . of students’ possible revelations of trauma, or confessions of things that we might not be able or willing to hear about their experiences and perception of themselves and their world. Of being confronted directly with their politics-in-formation. Of their ignorance, vanity, mean-spiritedness, and biases. Of first thoughts that masquerade as choices or beliefs or commitments. Of the possible responses of their peers. Of blurring the line between judging their work and their worth as a person. Of assessing a writing genre that most of us have not written ourselves.

Teachers of writing face all of these issues regardless of whether or not we ask students to read and write memoirs, essays, op-eds, travel writing, open letters, and speeches. All seasoned teachers know that we cannot prevent troublesome material from showing up in the first place. If we really want students to be nimble thinkers, then we need to teach them the genres of writing that we have available to us in which to realize and test their thinking.

No teacher denies that it is hard to read through a stack of student work. Yes, it’s the volume—it takes a particular kind of stamina to stay with the 138th student paper in a pile of 150 of them; what truly makes it difficult to sustain our attention is when we sense that the writing is missing the *presence* of the student in it—all of their terrifically odd, striving, difficult, eager, questioning, touchy personhood. When they don’t have a place for their presence, or when they believe (because we teach them) that they should show up on the page in their school work only on special occasions, then we are forfeiting an opportunity to teach them how these seemingly unlovely qualities can give them the motivation to write and a method to articulate the exigence of what they write for others.

Students in public high schools whose literacy curriculums align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are assured that they will build their skills for “college and career-readiness” by practicing various well-known school genres: the literary analysis in English class, the procedural lab report in science, the summary and analysis in social studies. According to the CCSS, these writing assignments will produce three kinds of “texts”: “narrative,” “argument,” and “informational” (CCSS 18). Of course, these are simply abstract skills, not genres at all. However, in the odd taxonomic organization of the CCSS, it appears as if each of these kinds of texts requires its own curricular focus. It is no wonder that even expert high school teachers and administrators might make the choice to keep assignments focused on one literacy skill at a time. So, a student might write arguments and textual interpretations in an English class (perhaps as they practice for an AP language and composition exam), and write informational and procedural texts in science or social studies. But what about narratives? Well, perhaps there will be room for the student to write them when they are practicing their college application essays.

It is, in fact, too easy simply to blame the CCSS for what we are and are not teaching in high school, although there are reasons to explore its impact. A decade after the CCSS were initially adopted, literacy researchers including Arthur Applebee, Judith Langer, and Morgan Polikoff, among others suggest that it is still unclear exactly how school districts have implemented the CCSS, how we can measure their efficacy in terms of student “outcomes,” teachers’ professional development, or according to any of the measures on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

One thing is clear, however. Despite the CCSS, students do not write very much in high school, and when they do, it is almost entirely to summarize or analyze the ideas of others, usually in the form of an answer to a multiple-choice question or one that requires, as Arthur Applebee puts it, “formulaic on demand writing,” even in English class (6). Narrative writing and almost all creative writing, while still sometimes a feature of grammar- and middle-school classes, has largely disappeared from high school English Language Arts curricula, despite the requirement on the CCSS for students to become proficient in writing “narratives” to “develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences” (18).

This fact should interest David Coleman, one of the architects of the CCSS and president of the College Board. Coleman has argued that the CCSS’s emphasis on information and argument “texts” was meant to be a corrective to what he has called the “two most popular kinds of writing [in high school] . . . the exposition of a personal opinion or the presentation of a personal narrative.” Moving away from personal writing is warranted, he argues, because “as you grow up in this world, you realize that people don’t really give a shit about what you feel or what you think.” High school students, like other thinking people, likely would have plenty to say back to Coleman about the rhetorical strategies he employs here,

what kinds of evidence he might need to demonstrate its value, and to explore the implications. Here is one of those implications: too many students learn that they write in school to inculcate testable skills, without a role for their personhood or the languages in which they render it visible. Under these circumstances, these students are less likely to trust writing as “a technology of thought” with which to engage the materials they encounter, as I have written elsewhere. When we teachers frame writing primarily as the performance of skills that students will “really” need later on, we blunt its epistemological force and miss a chance to see how writing fosters social visibility and connection among a wide range of what writing studies scholars now understand as threshold concepts—which Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle first defined in *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* as “concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice” (3). For example, Kathleen Blake Yancey explains in her section the threshold concept that “writers’ histories, processes, and identities vary.” She notes, “we write as both individuals and as social beings,” which are not writerly stances but rather writerly conditions (52). The pedagogical implications of this are significant: “[h]elping writers mature requires helping them write to others while expressing themselves” (52). Threshold concepts tend to register as common sense, even obvious, until one considers what we lose without these understandings informing our classroom practices and curriculums. Students are not likely to write to anyone besides their teacher if the writing itself is understood solely as an exercise. So perhaps it is time to offer an additional threshold concept: writers’ contexts need to be valued by those within and beyond them. The degree to which students experience their writing in high school as real reflects a belief in the fact that high school itself is not just a waiting room for college and career—the “real world”—but a time and place that has intrinsic value.

In the same decade that teachers and students of writing in high school have been reckoning with the impact of the CCSS on curriculum and instruction in their schools, which has reduced to almost nothing direct instruction in creative writing across all genres, the number of creative nonfiction programs and courses in colleges and university have seen exponential growth. Although the Association of Writers and Writing Program (AWP) has been in existence since 1967 and has published its journal, *The Writer’s Chronicle*, since 1970, the academic field of creative writing studies has begun to emerge more visibly since the turn of the 21st century (“Our History”). According to AWP’s most recent figures, as of 2016 there were 1,808 college-level creative writing programs internationally.

The presence of creative writing instruction—and specifically creative nonfiction—has also found its way into professional schools and training outside of the humanities and arts. Rita Charon, an internist and literary scholar, instituted the Master of Science and Narrative Medicine program at Columbia University Medical Center in 2009. Charon has led the effort to recognize the intellectual and emotional value for health practitioners and researchers of writing creative

nonfiction in her articles, books, and talks, including *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. Charon writes: “[M]any of us within medicine and within literary studies have realized the critical importance that writing—autobiography, memoir, pathography, fiction, personal essay—has developed within health care” (62) for clinicians, patients, and families. Of course, narratives of health, illness, science, and care have driven creative nonfiction writers from its beginnings, but the more recent turn to its training value for practitioners signals a significant shift in focus.

Creativity itself, as a teaching and learning goal, is finding new proponents both inside and outside of educational contexts. Patrick Sullivan offers a helpful review of the current literature to argue that creativity ought to be a central pedagogical focus for college composition courses. In “The Un-Essay: Making Room for Creativity in the Composition Classroom,” he cites the eight “habits of mind” identified in the “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing”: curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, metacognition (16). Not only is creativity one of the Framework’s goals, but, Sullivan notes, “creativity manifests itself in a variety of ways on this list. Curiosity, openness, flexibility, and metacognition can all be grouped together within a suite of dispositional characteristics that feed and nurture creativity” (16). Exploring methods for people outside of school contexts to increase their creativity is the focus of popular books by Daniel Pink, Elizabeth Gilbert, the cartoonist Lynda Barry, the educational researcher Ken Robinson, and the biologist E. O. Wilson.

Sullivan’s exploration of creativity ends with a section detailing an assignment that offers an example for what a creative alternative might be for students in a writing course. In the directions for his final assignment, he exhorts his students to find a different form for their work:

I would like you to think about all that we’ve done in this unit and then construct an “UnEssay” that pulls together your thinking about the fine arts and creativity! But it can’t be a traditional essay. It can’t be a five-paragraph theme. It has to be something else and it can be whatever you want it to be. Invent a new form! Write the kind of “paper” or essay you’ve always wanted to write in an English class. Feel free to include pictures, photos, links, and multimedia if you wish. Most importantly: Have some fun with this! (26)

It is clear Sullivan trusts his students to find or invent forms for their ideas. It is likely they would find it liberating to move away from a “traditional essay”—figured here as a five-paragraph theme. At the same time, his invitation suggests that the students have only a single, dominant paradigm in mind for what essays are or could be, and he is not alone in this experience and belief . . . even if it is not entirely accurate.

While Sullivan does not claim explicitly that the five-paragraph essay was imprinted on his students in high school, it is a common complaint among college faculty (Dennihy; Wallack), which has led both to calls for “unteaching” it or “laying it down” (Tremmel) in both high school and college writing courses.

It might not be surprising that what high school English teachers should do with or about this form has been an evergreen concern; articles on the problem have been published steadily in the *English Journal* since its first volume in 1912. In “The Aims of the English Course,” William D. Lewis characterizes the “written theme” as multi-faceted horror: a “poison . . . to complete the destruction of a lurking fondness for our glorious literature,” “a nightmare to the pupil and a night-grind to the teacher” (12). Where he notes progress in teaching composition, it is in teachers’ then-new willingness to “[assign] themes from the daily lives of pupils, only insisting that in their efforts they make us and their fellows see and hear and feel and think with them” (13). Elizabeth Hodgson, writing two years later, notes that students are asked to “conjure together a few ideas from nowhere, addressed to nobody, and aimed at nothing—that is, nothing but credit for one theme duly written” (233). Missing from these themes are both life and purpose. Hodges suggests that writers should “orient” themselves, by deciding prior to writing, “what public to address, upon what subject, and with what purpose” (234).

The enduring current-traditionalist orientation to teaching composition relies on the form’s limits to address every writerly “weakness” from poor grammar to leaky logic (Tremmel). Unfortunately, as Michelle Tremmel notes, “rather than form following function, the formula of the five-paragraph theme precedes function—and is often a-rhetorically and inappropriately grafted onto function—in ways that derail composing” (“What” 34). Defending her high school colleagues who teach the form, Melissa Dennihy explains that they “present [the five-paragraph theme] as one starting point for essay writing” (162). It is possible that in high school there are more teachers who are ready to move past a limited vision for what essays and essaying might entail, but this shift will require a clearer sense of the alternatives.

In literacy and writing studies, scholar-teachers who are concerned with how students learn the essay in school, decide to disavow the essay as a genre. Joanne Addison and Shannon McGee ask almost 100 years after Lewis and Hodges “whether or not ‘the essay’ as a genre is a useful or viable genre upon which to base writing curricula at all levels” (171). The scare quotations are worth considering further. They tell us that a particular variety of essay is suspect; they remind us that the school essay, even beyond five paragraphs, is an unnatural entity, a “mutt genre,” as Elizabeth Wardle so memorably described assignments in first-year composition courses. Genres are mutts (a term she credits to Jamie Heiman) when they “do not respond to rhetorical situations requiring communication in order to accomplish a purpose that is meaningful to the author” (777). Mutt genres such as five-paragraph essays or, as Wardle suggests, the ubiquitous “position paper” not only fail students because they are not responsive, they also actively “[conflate] purpose and genre” (777). They also can impede students from transferring their knowledge and skills from one rhetorical, compositional, or creative context to another (777).

The school essay then not only feels inauthentic; it also acts as a placeholder for some other, more real genres. Addison and McGee suggest that we need to “do more to encourage instruction in genres that embrace both the deep learning promoted when writing is an integral part of any course as well as exhibit the multimodal skills now required across the curriculum and into the workplace” and name as alternatives, “literary journalism that is rooted in artfully crafted narrative and critical research-based writing” (171). That is, they propose that starting in high school, students begin to explore the myriad genres and praxes of creative nonfiction.

Since the Civil War, and arguably earlier, in North America anyone with a stake in shaping English education has sought to identify the goals of English classes. Whenever we have gotten stuck and tried to imagine innovations to our curriculums, we turn to creative writing—poetry, drama, and fiction. Only since the beginning of the 21st century have high school teachers of writing started in earnest to “[imagine] a place for creative nonfiction,” as Douglas Hesse suggests (in his 2009 article of the same title) we could. Hesse argues that the varied genres of creative nonfiction in high school would “provide students with a better map of the textual world” and “teach reading and writing for life beyond institution” (20). As important is Hesse’s understanding that reading creative nonfiction—i.e., works that “let us see ‘the real’ imaginatively or ‘the imaginary’ realistically . . . shape our civic, social, and personal lives, our senses of the world and ourselves in it” (21). Writing in these genres “reminds us that, while facts may be waiting for finding, interpretations are waiting for making” by a specific, individual consciousness—the student’s writerly presence in the text (21). In creative nonfiction, not only are writers expected to be visible, they are also responsive and responsible to the realities they are depicting for the publics they call into being.

Hesse is not alone in offering both reasons and practices for increasing creative nonfiction’s visibility in high school writing classes, particularly in the age of the Common Core. Valuable studies by teacher-researchers have explored the power of creative writing in high school, and yet, these pieces tend to feature or foreground single assignments or units, largely focused on poetry or fiction (see DiMarzio and Dippre; Leigh; Carolyn Miller). Rarer to find in the literature are accounts such as Laurel Taylor’s “More Than a Reading Assignment: Using Nonfiction Texts as Mentor Texts.” In this essay, Taylor describes a year-long experiment she conducted in her high school class featuring Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* as a “mentor text” for her students. Kozol’s book models his approach to writing research-based creative nonfiction. She made this choice to “help [her] students move from their current writing style—that of a five paragraph model—into something more appropriate for college writing and beyond” (49). The projects they produced are 25-page papers exploring an injustice that students want their own readers to redress. After two years of refining this project, Taylor has plenty to revise and rethink. She speculates that the students’ successes had to do with their sustained focus on Kozol’s writerly strategies and the

incremental pre-draft and revision exercises she crafted to help them produce their own papers.

It is not entirely surprising that Taylor calls these final pieces of extended writing “papers,” the most generically featureless name we can give writing in the humanities. It is worth noting that in the sciences and social sciences, the term “paper” is a meaningful genre category whose forms and purposes are known to their writers, both experts and novices. It is not usual to hear a scientist say that they recently read a “beautiful paper”; here, “beauty” is ascribed not to the prose but to the design of the study. While there are no meaningless genre names, scholars of writing-in-the-disciplines such as Chriss Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki have argued that there are no guarantees that the expectations for these genres will carry across disciplines.

What should Taylor have called these extended pieces of writing that looked nothing like the academic essay as Taylor and her high school students knew it? Perhaps the notion of writing “papers” also resonated with what they thought professors teach in college. When teachers do not name papers like these “essays,” we miss a chance to make our rigorous and exciting projects for our high school students into the centerpiece of a fully realized creative nonfiction curriculum, a curriculum that depends on teaching genre awareness.

The 21st century has seen a surge of scholarly interest—in the fields of writing studies and English education—in the distinct contribution genre awareness can play at the high school and college levels. In their helpful overview of contemporary views on the subject, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff argue that

a dynamic view of genre [should include] not only knowledge of formal features but also knowledge of what and whose purposes genres serve; how to negotiate one’s intentions in relation to genres’ social expectations and motives; when and why and where to use genres; what reader-writer relationships genres maintain; and how genres relate to other genres in the coordination of social life. (19)

Their vision of understanding genre depends on examining how people develop, circulate, privilege, and revise genres in the real worlds of school and beyond.

Drawing on the work of Christine Tardy, Ann Johns, and others, Bawarshi and Reiff acknowledge that students are likely not to experience their learning of genre as significant unless the genres they are producing are real to them in the moment—that is, not as trial runs for actual uses and performances of genre. This means that students need to do more than learn to analyze and critique a genre’s functions, features, and effects: students need to both contribute to and test the limits of their genres in which myriad disciplines traffic.

As I have argued in *Crafting Presence*, the essay—that most flexible and mutable of forms—thrives on formal experimentation and is the genre to which

writers across disciplines turn when we are speaking to readers outside of our fields. The agreeable flexibility of the essay provides teachers and students with a genre that easily adapts to writers' changing needs inside and outside of the academy—or across the worlds of high school and college. Essays can range in form from literary experiments and idea-driven explorations, to op-eds driven by a desire to change minds and actions, to research-based work that builds new knowledge. Essays depend on experimentation and hybridity in writers' choices of content, structure, media, and linguistic inflections. We cannot create a sustainable creative nonfiction curriculum for high school without an entirely reinvigorated vision of the essay as genre and praxis—not as its inviolable foundation, but as lifeblood.

However, we only ought to make such efforts on the essay's behalf if the essay itself rewards such investment. A handful of writing studies scholars, including Wendy Bishop, Gordon Harvey, Paul Heilker, Lynn Z. Bloom, Candace Spigelman, and Douglas Hesse, have called for teachers, writing program administrators, and scholars to see in the essay a means to reconsider the goals and promise of writing instruction—both in high school and college. They each offer compelling reasons to do so. Wendy Bishop clarifies the motives of some of us: “those of us who (re)turn to the literatures of fact do so not to avoid investigations of discourse and community. Rather, we find nonfiction prose the appropriate investigative vehicle” (266). Paul Heilker, with refreshing candor, notes that he asks for students to read and write essays because they tend to yield pieces that both they and he can enjoy, and also because essay-writing can yield inherently meaningful work—work that they might want to keep, even after getting a grade. He writes, “I want to assign, foster, and read something that might last, that might have meaning and life outside the course requirements, even outside the university experience. Students' lives are inundated with ephemeral texts” (202). It is not sentimental to want students to engage in writing work that might endure or be worth returning to over time; in fact, some capacities we teach in writing courses (if by other names) are virtues: humility, patience, courage, compassion, and endurance. Essays require all of them.

Reading and writing essays in their various guises and humors provides curricular continuity upon which depends knowledge and skills transfer within high school, and from high school to college. As Kathleen Blake Yancey, Lianne Robertson, and Kara Taczak acknowledge in *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing* (2014), college students “draw on what they learned about writing in earlier educational contexts, [which can include] middle school,” even when they do not go immediately to college after high school (133). They also conclude, in light of Mary Soliday's findings, that to help students transfer their knowledge they should “compose in real world genres—so-called ‘wild genres’—for real audiences” (134). Having a happy role for the wild in high school ought to appeal to those of us who, because of Thoreau, believe that “life consists with Wildness” (20).

Less quixotically, perhaps, teaching the essay as a wild genre rather than a thoroughly factory-farmed one would provide the means to create what David C. Perkins and Gavriel Salomon have called low road transfer, which they distinguish from high road transfer: “low road transfer reflects the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context,” while high-road transfer “depends on deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application in another” (25). The problem of transfer is one to which all teachers in any department should attend, of course. We do not have to give up on the possibility of fostering high-road transfer, while still getting more from low-road transfer across courses in which students already write essays. We would improve transfer if in every course where we asked high school students to read and write essays, we spent fifteen minutes of class time per week discussing, enacting, and reflecting on the essay’s affordances as a genre. If this bar seems too low or too unambitious, high school teachers and administrators should ask where and how we communicate not only what we ask students to write, but why.

The emerging field of essay studies can provide high school teachers with some helpful language about the “why” of teaching essays—as well as other kinds of creative nonfiction. The work of Graham Good, Chris Anderson, Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Brian Norman, Cristina Kirklighter, Carl Klaus, Dinty Moore, Ned Stuckey-French, Robert Root and Michael Steinberg, Patrick Madden, Anders Monson, Phillip Lopate, and Crystal Fodrey has focused on rhetorical theory and pedagogy, the essay’s historical development, craft, and literary analysis. Largely still missing from the literature are the perspectives of high school teacher-researchers about how we can reconsider essays for students in secondary school.

Essays offer approaches to reading and writing that embody some of the goals of a liberal education that must begin in high school, if not even earlier. As I write in *Crafting Presence: The American Essay and the Future of Writing Studies*, essays teach students to

- tack between self-expression and social commentary
- situate themselves in multiple contexts
- engage others’ ideas and materials
- name and reflect on their values
- develop rhetorical awareness
- experiment with form and ideas
- craft new writerly presences in accordance with their materials, the publics they want to address or call into being, and the experience they want to create for their own readers.

Students will only have a chance of experiencing any creative nonfiction genres in ways that expand their capacities, and prepare them for a life of making choices about how they present and reflect on their worlds, if we design curricula for them.

Each community of teachers, in collaboration, will know best about what their students in any given year or cohort will be able to do as readers and writers of creative nonfiction. That being said, I want to propose the following features as starting points for any effort to design a creative nonfiction program, beginning with a focus on the essay:

Historical context: In any course where they might write creative nonfiction genres, students would learn the genres' history in different periods and cultures, and read both famous practitioners and innovators.

Shared pedagogical vocabulary: Over time, departments and schools would identify a limited vocabulary they would use to teach features of creative nonfiction across disciplines and years of study.

Sustained student inquiry: Students would reflect on creative nonfiction they read and write over time (e.g., in extended reading journals, annotated bibliographies, commonplace books.)

Published work: Every year, an editorial board of teachers and students would choose exemplary student creative nonfiction and publish it; teachers would use these publications as peer-mentoring texts for their current students.

Curricular articulation: Each academic year, faculty in each department would articulate and publish as a resource for their own classes' use and for their colleagues how the creative nonfiction genres they will teach intersect with other genres (e.g., blog posts, responses, research papers).

As the director of a writing program that provides first-year students at an R1 institution with their required essay-writing course, I am often asked by middle- and high-school teachers what they should be teaching their students in order to ready them for work at a university like mine. Here is what I have heard myself say:

Your students will be ready to succeed in writing in college if they have begun to know that writing is not just a product, or a process to get to a product, but a set of practices as well as an academic subject that we can study for its own sake. They will benefit greatly if they have had experiences both responding to the work of other people in writing and having their own writing responded to, rather than simply graded. They will be well-prepared for college if they have ever had to come up with a problem to solve as a writer, in genres that they have studied well enough for them to describe their features and their purposes. They will have an easier time, if they have begun to cultivate across their classes relatively useful notetaking strategies, and if they have had multiple opportunities to revise their work. They should always know that there is no such thing as an academic paper, but many kinds of academic genres that depend very much on the discipline in which they are working and often the

faculty member who is assigning the piece. They would be well-served by any writing curriculum in high school if they knew that they had begun to work as writers using real-world genres that they can continue to study across their academic, professional, and social lives. They need most of all for each of their teachers to be reflective and explicit about the intrinsic value of anything that they write in school, so that the work they do for a grade has a shot at being more than simply that.

As recent history has told us, our well-prepared high school students are media savvy and ready to take up and circulate some of the most difficult debates of our time. Let us help to make more of them ready to show up when they know they have to.

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