



Writing Guidelines: “Saving Ourselves” (Creative Nonfiction)

Prompt

In many places around the world, a warming world is already rearing its head. Rising seas are displacing low lying islanders; mountain villagers in the Himalayas are vacating their homes as glaciers recede and rivers run dry. In Algeria last summer, with temps spiking at 123°F (that’s 50°C), workers at a petroleum plant walked off the job. “We couldn’t keep up,” one worker said. “It was impossible to do the work.”

In the coming years, these impacts will only grow more extreme and more widespread. And with time, we will realize that a changing climate doesn’t only threaten the existence of non-human species, it threatens us: people. Talk to islanders and mountain villagers, talk to Californians who have lost their homes to unprecedented fires, or Bangladeshis who have lost their homes to unprecedented floods, and you will realize the threat is already here.

In a 600-1,000 word piece of creative nonfiction, write about the threat of climate change in your lifetime, in your corner of the world.

Although this genre is often defined as an essay, think of it instead as storytelling braided with reflection. We want to hear about an experience in your life, rich with characters and description and conflict and scene... but we also want to know how you make sense of this experience now, how it sits with you, and why it has surfaced as writing. You may not address each of these points explicitly, but the answers should be there in some form, shouted boldly or whispered delicately. Open a window into your life and invite your readers to enter.

Guiding Ideas

ASK YOURSELF, AS YOU WRITE:

- How does climate change impact me personally?
- How do I see climate change unfolding in the physical world around me?
- What is the impact of climate change on me? On my community?

BALANCE SCENE AND SUMMARY. As you develop your narrative, consider your methods of



delivery. Scenes will draw in your reader, build tension, and offer telling details. Usually a personal narrative will revolve around 1-3 key scenes. Summary and reflection are also important. Summary efficiently delivers information (and can set the stage for scenes), while reflection allows you to communicate significance to the readers, building their investment in your experience.

CONSIDER TIME AS FLUID. Do the events in this piece unfold chronologically (the order in which they happened)? Or do they jump around in time, according to their connection to one another and their significance? Organizing your piece in a sequence that is *not* chronological can build suspense and a sense of purpose in our writing. For example, you might throw us into a dramatic scene in the opening paragraph, and then back up, filling in details to help ground the first scene in context. Jumping into the past is called “flashback” and into the future is called “flashforward”—two techniques to keep in your toolbox.

FIND THE HEART OF YOUR NARRATIVE. Oftentimes we don’t know the “main point” when we start writing, and are instead guided by instinct. Something is telling us that a particular experience is significant and worth investigating. It is the process of writing itself that reveals to us the purpose for telling our story. So, although you don’t need to articulate a hypothesis or point or purpose before you start writing, at some stage it’s useful to step back and identify the following elements of your piece:

1. What is powerful about the experience?
2. What has it taught you?
3. How has it changed you?

You may not answer these questions directly in your final piece, but thinking about these questions will infuse your writing with significance.

WRITE TO YOUR AUDIENCE. Your audience for this narrative is a large, vibrant, supportive community... of mostly strangers! And strangers from across the world, no less, who don’t know what smog in India looks like, or how wildfires have changed California hillsides, or what it’s like to have the glaciers above your town recede further each year. Make sure to give your readers all the details they need to understand your experience.

DON’T SKIMP ON SETTING: The intimate details of place invite the reader into the narrative. Because your piece is about changes to the environment around you, it’s extra important to establish these details. As you craft your descriptions, remember that setting can also provide access to the emotional undercurrents of the narrative. Defining place is not simply writing down descriptions of mountains or seacoasts, trees, sky, horizons. The language the writer



chooses is important for mood, pace, and temperament. For instance, a description of place can be gloomy and flat or buoyant and loud. Each of these adjectives describes a mood which the reader internalizes as the story goes along. (This is called the objective correlative.) And one more thought, dear writers: because we are a global community, your readership is global, too! This means your setting doesn't need to be "exotic" to be interesting. In fact, describing the seemingly mundane could be quite otherworldly to one of your readers. Dogwood stems turning neon orange in winter! A river the color of chocolate milk! Sand storms in August!

FIND A UNIVERSAL THREAD. Although you are telling a story that is personal in nature, are there elements you can develop to make it resonate with a broader audience? Here are some options to consider:

- Appeal to your readers through emotion, allowing them to feel a particular experience.
- Demonstrate how the subject you're exploring also impacts others.
- Demand the reader's attention by expressing the urgency of an issue or problem.
- Be particular. We naturally relate to a story when we can step inside the shoes of the main character or narrator. Report your story with attention to specific detail and nuance.

STEER CLEAR OF DIARY ENTRIES. Personal narrative essays are most powerful when they tell a story. Instead of treating this piece like a diary or confessional, focus on all best elements of narrative—character and conflict, action, reflection and resolution.