



# Getting Creative with the Truth

## Keeping it Real in a High School Nonfiction Class

WILSON DIEHL

Photograph by PICSFIVE.

It's my second day as a writer-in-the-schools, and thirty fifteen-year-olds whose names I do not know are lobbing questions about creative nonfiction at me with an eagerness I'm finding overwhelming this early in the morning.

*Is nonfiction the one that's fake or the one that's real? Why is it called creative nonfiction? You went to school for this?*

I've always considered myself a "morning person," but there's a difference between sitting on the couch in pajamas reading *The New York Times* effectively at 7:45 a.m., and teaching high-schoolers effectively at 7:45 a.m. I lift my coffee to my mouth, trying to wake all the way up. I'm used to teaching college students and grown-ups; the enthusiasm of these kids is both heartening and fatiguing.

"Isn't it better to tell a good story than to be, like, a slave to the truth?" a boy in the back of the room asks while demonstrating his expertise in tipping a chair precariously far backward. According to a nameplate made per my request (it's one thing to be an effective teacher to high-school students at 7:45

a.m., it's another to memorize their names) the chair-tipper's name is Shawn.

I'm striving to answer their questions with just the right amount of authority—enough that they take me seriously but not so much they lose all respect for me as a credible teacher/adult/human. Teenagers, like babies and horses, know when you're full of crap.

I share with Shawn and the others what I believe about creative nonfiction: what matters is sticking to the emotional truth—yes, being a "slave" to it—and remembering as many actual, real details as you possibly can. "They say truth is stranger than fiction," I tell them, then hasten to add that "they" mean "strange" in a good way.

"How do you write dialogue from when you were a baby or whatever?" a girl named Grace calls out through a mouthful of braces.

"Good question!" I say, channeling my inner cheerleader. "We don't carry around tape recorders our whole lives, right? But we can't make people say things on the page they would never say in real life."

"I heard that guy who wrote that one book got sued," Shawn says, his chair now tipped precariously far to the side.

A boy named Troy—a self-proclaimed "drama kid" who tries out a different accent every time he speaks—says with a Southern drawl, "Ah heard he became a millionaire."

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I don't know who "that guy" is or whether he got sued or became a millionaire, but I bring up James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and how I loved reading it. But had I known his depiction of recovery was fabricated, I never would have gotten past the first few pages. "It felt like an amazing account of this guy who really struggled to get his shit—" I pause, remembering too late that I'm in a high school "—uh, *act* together. If I'd thought it was fiction, I would have been, like, 'Great—another novel about some blowhard dude by some blowhard dude.'"

A handful of the boys in the room raise their eyebrows almost imperceptibly. More than a few of the girls allow themselves the tiniest hint of a smile.

Roosevelt High School is considered one of the best in the Seattle district. The teachers I'm partnered with are excited to collaborate and accommodate, helping maintain classroom discipline and giving me free reign over what I teach. "Just make sure you give them homework" seems to be the consensus. The students are accustomed to thinking creatively and participating with minimal prompting, as first period demonstrates by peppering me with personal questions. Am I married? What's my fiancé's name? Did *Jared* buy my engagement ring at *Jared*?

We've just read a few dozen six-word memoirs from the compilation *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, and I bring our attention back to the lesson at hand by asking which is their favorite. The winner by a landslide is, not surprisingly, Dave Russ' "I like big butts, can't lie."

I prompt them to try and explain why they like it—what makes it good?—but all I get are shrugs and

mumbles of, "It's funny, man."

"I like big *boobs*, can't lie," a male voice adds helpfully.

I pretend not to have heard and call on a girl named Kendra whose hand is tentatively half-raised. She says she likes Drew Peck's "Ex-wife and contractor now have house" because "It hints at a larger story."

"Great!" I say. "Let's talk about that for a minute. What's a memoir, again?"

A boy in the back whose name appears on my roster as "Connor" but whose nameplate reads "Lil C" speaks up. "Isn't a memoir true and stuff?"

We talk about the "larger story" tucked behind "Ex-wife and contractor now have house," touching briefly on character and conflict. Then we circle back to Grace's question and discuss how in memoir sometimes the details and dialogue have to be finessed due to the constraints of memory but how it's important to be faithful to the heart of the scene or character. "You can't just randomly make stuff up—at least not if you want to keep Oprah on your good side."

Before I lose the students, I clap my hands together in that reflexive way teachers do, as if we're movie directors marking a new take, and announce that it's time to compose their own six-word memoirs.

The room fills with the sounds of paper rustling and teenagers complaining as they resign themselves to ten whole minutes of labor.

Christian, a boy who always chooses a seat front and center and challenges every instruction, asks, "Does what we write have to be true?"

The class, seemingly in unison, looks up to hear

We discuss how in memoir sometimes the details and dialogue have to be finessed due to the constraints of memory, but how it's important to be faithful to the heart of the scene or character. "You can't just randomly make stuff up—at least not if you want to keep Oprah on your good side."

my answer.

Does what they write have to be true? I spare them from hearing about grad school, how the issue of “truthfulness” came up in every seminar, as ubiquitous as cheese-and-hummus plates at graduate student parties. Someone would mention how betrayed they felt when they heard Annie Dillard’s cat’s bloody paw prints from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*—the ones that made her look as though she’d been “painted with roses”—were fictional. Then the student with the perfect posture and penchant for correcting everyone’s grammar argued that all creative nonfiction must be 100% true. Someone would complicate this notion, which was not hard to do. As Grace asked, what about dialogue from when you were a baby? To say nothing of the subjectivity of the “truth.” And around and around we’d go.

No matter what class I’m teaching, someone always asks *Does what we write have to be true?* From teenagers the question is not so surprising. It’s one in a litany of tests having to do with boundaries and limits. *Do you mean one page front and back, or just front? Does that include the space that’s taken up by my name and the date and class period? What if I’m not in class next week—can I still get full credit?* They are looking for rules to rebel against, figuring out where the margins of self are on any given day as they metamorphose into adults.

But what about the adults that sign up for my creative writing classes, which are clearly marked “nonfiction,” “memoir,” “personal essay” in the catalog? When I ask them to, say, craft a super-short essay in the form of a personal ad, why do they ask whether it *has to be true?*

Writing creative nonfiction is taxing work. It’s challenging in the way that all writing is—facing

the blank page, maintaining belief in yourself, fighting with your own brain to come up with the right words to express exactly what you’re aching to say, forgiving yourself for getting it all wrong, continuing to work anyway. It is uniquely challenging in that, unlike novelists and poets, we essayists and memoirists don’t get a third-person-omniscient point of view or longstanding tradition of cryptic-ness and iambic pentameter to hide—or pretend to hide—behind. We all feel exposed when we share our work, but the non-fiction writer actually is.

I want them to experience the redemptive power of baring their souls and having someone else—a reader—say, “You know what? I’ve felt that way, too, but never could have said it as well as you just did.”

My students ask if their work has to be true, and I waver. On the one hand, I want to be the hip artist who encourages my students to express themselves any way they can. You want your memoir to be eight words instead of six? Go for it! You want to write a memoir from your dead step-grandma’s point of view? Awesome! You want to turn in a drawing instead? Here are some markers!

On the other hand, I want my students to come to know the potency not just of writing but of writing creative nonfiction. I want them to experience the redemptive power of baring their souls and having someone else—a reader—say, “You know what? I’ve felt that way, too, but never could have said it as well as you just did.” Or at least I want them to know they can reveal themselves and get made fun of and survive.

On rare occasions I have the clarity to say, simply, “Yes. It has to be true.” Most days my answer is more convoluted, like: “If you absolutely can’t think of one true thing to say, then make something up. But I’d really prefer that your work in this class be nonfiction.” On this particular day what comes out of my mouth is, “Eight of your six-word memoirs have to be true. The other two can be fiction.”

My pronouncement is met with considerable groaning, the kind you would expect after telling a class to complete a research paper—with citations!—over a holiday weekend. But they get busy anyway, hunched over their papers, mouthing words to themselves and counting on their fingers as if they were composing haiku—which, in a way, they are.

Most of their six-word memoirs are, on first read, as dull as this one: “I like chicken.” “Well, I don’t.”

But with a little flexibility and imagination, the insipidness can become charming in the landscape of memoir. Who is having this exchange about chicken with the narrator? Might the disagreement actually be a power struggle? An assertion of identity? Or does the narrator just have really strong feelings about poultry for some reason? And what reason might that be? Why is this distaste (or fondness?) for chicken so central to the student’s life that he crafts a memoir—albeit a six-word one, but a memoir nonetheless—about it? (If in reality the author couldn’t care less about chicken, well, I don’t ever want to find out.)

Taken not as narratives per se, but as small nuggets of truthfulness from reluctant adolescents, these petite pieces start to resonate. Presumably without feeling “enslaved” by the truth, they share the following—each of which in its own way hints at a larger story.

We have the quotidian:

Six people, one bathroom. This sucks.

The melodramatic:

Best friends forever; what a lie.

The insightful re the modern human condition:

Want that. Got it. I’m bored.

The paradoxically bold:

The humor just blankets the insecurities.

And the searing and incisive:

I am perfect. I am lying.

A shy girl named Drea is gone the day I teach six-word memoirs. Her regular teacher fills her in, but somehow the assignment to come up with ten six-word memoirs gets miscommunicated. The next week when I see her she hands me this:

When I think, I can’t do.

When I don’t think, I fail.

That’s how sports go for me.

I think I have every illness.

Leukemia, anemia, meningitis, tumor, strep.

I always cry when animals die.

Two sides of my family different.

One white-trash losers, one dorky scholars.

Both messed up in some way.

Dad caught the slap at fourteen.

Mom started the diet at five.

Go to Aunt Barbara’s: see obesity.

Go to Aunt Ardis’s: see insolence.

Correction: both sides insolent, but different.

Born in Chislehurst, UK, only one.

Only vegetarian to keep the record.

Always had some kind of anxiety.

My brother hits too hard—ouch.

Dad’s turning Asian from the teahouse.

Yes, I can only whistle out.

Apparently I have a death stare.

I am embarrassed to be American.

I’m too tall for high heels.

Dad says he’s tired of Christianity.

Mom had cancer. Now it’s gone.

Time is moving way too fast.

Yes, I still can’t tell time.

There are many kinds of intellect.

I try hard and care alot.

I think I confuse my teachers.

I am quiet sometimes, loud  
others.

I never really feel smart  
enough.

I know I worry too much.

When I glance down and see that Drea has turned in a poem made entirely of six-word memoirs,<sup>1</sup> I'm blown away. "This is amazing," I tell her. She managed to both sidestep my instructions and exceed my wildest expectations—and compose something strikingly forthright in the process.

She shrugs and says, "I thought that's what we were supposed to do."

Stupidly I say, "Next time I *will* assign this as homework." Then, seeing her reaction, I assure her I won't divulge that she was the inspiration for the assignment.

That's the thing about teaching. Our students are so often our inspiration, and we're as proud of them for tackling tasks more complex than we thought them capable of as they are horrified that they are doing more than the bare minimum. We want to give them a shout-out as badly as they want to blend in. But when they don't have a place to hide (*Yes, it has to be true!*)—they can do the digging and discovery necessary to produce vulnerable, honest writing.

Drea stands close by as I read her piece more carefully. When I'm finished I tell her that I, too, am often embarrassed to be American and am arguably too tall for high heels. My dad has been tired of Christianity for a long time, and my mom was just diagnosed with cancer. Like her, I try hard and care a lot and am sometimes quiet and sometimes loud. I've never felt smart enough, and I definitely worry too much. Then, caught up in the moment, I tell her I never could have said all this as well as she just did—which may or may not ultimately be true. ☺

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*For more resources and ideas on using six-word memoirs in the classroom, see the T&W Blackboard page at the end of this issue.*

#### Sources

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. HarperCollins, 1974.

Fershleiser, Rachel & Smith, Larry, eds. *Not Quite What I Was Planning: Six-Word Memoirs*. HarperCollins, 2008.

*Seattle Times* School Guide, [community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/schoolguide](http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/schoolguide).

<sup>1</sup>The fifth line of the first stanza is only five words—but who's counting? And the second line of the last stanza is six words if you're fifteen years old and of the belief that "a lot" is one word.