

# Creative Nonfiction Pedagogical Framework Analysis

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The purpose of this analysis is to map connections between nonfiction creative writing instruction and concepts represented in scholarship. Personal narrative writing is the branch of creative nonfiction writing that will be discussed in this analysis because “narrative is not merely a research method but an integral part of life (Leavy, 2020, p. 43), and its creative approach is far too often neglected in ELA classrooms. Instruction for creative prose will be applied for the purpose of teaching effective personal narrative writing, with attention to the craft and audience. Included in the analysis are instruction ideas to better enable pedagogy for developing student creative writing skills, empowering them in the meaning making process and the storytelling of their lived experiences. Therefore, this pedagogical framework analysis will focus on selected basic tenets of nonfiction creative writing principles and instruction accompanied by theory and supported by scholarship.

Potential limitations for integrating creative writing instruction in ELA classrooms include nebulous assessment and evaluation criteria, the mandate to fulfill more easily quantifiable curriculum standards, and the overall lack of teacher training in creative prose. It might be hard for some teachers to wrap their heads around assessing creative writing off of effort, attention to audience, and aesthetics instead of mechanical accuracy. However, research shows that “achievement in writing [tends to be] very poor largely because instruction [and expectations] are too structured” (Olagbaju, et. al. p. 100). We must embrace the artistic essence of both the literature that we teach and the concepts of creative writing that we want our students to explore, which is something that is not typically understood by governing bodies of ELA standards. In Kansas, for example, the word “creative” is only mentioned once in the 92-page ELA standards document from KSDE, in the secondary “Speaking and Listening” category, *not* writing (2025, p. 89). Instead, we find that the ELA curriculum is strongly influenced by the more easily quantifiable, i.e. reading test scores, mechanical errors in writing, and multiple-choice vocabulary quizzes. A consequence of the numerical data-driven expectation for curriculum and assessment is that preservice teachers are, themselves, not learning to write creatively and therefore are not confident in teaching creative prose because “preservice teachers take far more literature classes than writing classes. Creative writing courses are not required, and they are difficult to fit into the heavy course load[s] required by [their respective] programs” (Altier, 2022, p. 4), even though “engaging teachers as creative writers can enhance their professional development” and improve their overall pedagogy (Martin, et. al, 2021, pp. 482-483). What the prescribed, state-mandated curriculum standards are missing is that “English language arts classrooms are at a specific advantage in authentic [meaning] making [through creative nonfiction writing that] focus[es] on developing expressive products through forms of communication that are beautiful, elegant, and compelling” (Polman et. al., 2021, p. 14).

Student's lived experiences, identities, and paradigms intersect as part of the human condition and we need to shift the typical power structure that erases students' control over their personal stories; we need to view students as authors (Williams, 2001). It is inherent in our human nature to try to make sense of our life events and to tell our life stories. "We are constantly telling stories to give meaning to our lives, so much so that they are almost as necessary as the air we breathe" and is essential for living (Leavy, 2020, p. 43). We practice and build human agency when we tell the narratives of our lives (see **Figure 1**). We discover ourselves, really, when called upon to capture ourselves on the page. When we know ourselves better, we also know our fellow humans better. "When we understand the processes by which a life [...] takes on its particular character, we understand something of value" (Peshkin, 2017, p. 24). Nonfiction, personal narrative writing quintessentially acts to capture one's stories and make sense of one's lived experiences.

**Figure 1**

*Scholarship on the connection between autonomy and personal narrative writing.*

| Autonomy and the Personal Narrative Writing Connection                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Narrative writing allows "people to constitute themselves as agents with respect to the conventions and narrative models of agency made available by their culture" (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 225). | "The self in the long view is an autobiographical life story of the narrator over time, complete with actions, motives, values, intentions, characters and positioning among them, evaluations of good and bad, themes, scripts, structure, and many other elements of narration" (McAdams, 1985). | Narrating one's agency intrinsically displays "the agentive dimension of human subjectivity, [...] individual within societal synthesis" and "determinant of activity" for human action (Brockmeier, 2009, p. 218-222). |

Supporting theories for creative nonfiction writing pedagogy include self-determination theory (SDT), social cognitive theory (SCT), and expressivism. Individual perspectives are made up of collective contexts including multiple subjectivities and outside influences (Bandura, 1989), which SCT teaches. We intersect our understandings of ourselves with comprehension of the world around us, or rather, our perception of the world around us and by so doing make sense of our lives. Writing our lived experiences "encourages selectivity of experience, multiple

interpretations, future orientation, and agency in representation” (Mack, 2015, p. 59). While we absolutely reflect our communal and familial influenced subjectivities, we also work through our life moments and decide for ourselves what they mean and how to frame them. Narratives of life experience (variably called ‘autobiographical memories,’ ‘personal narratives,’ ‘self-defining memories,’ or more broadly ‘life stories’) allows for the study of how people integrate (or do not integrate) their actions with a broader understanding of self-identity” (Bauer, 2018, p. 89). Therein SDT philosophically iterates that “facts, as putatively objective descriptions of someone or of someone’s life, do not require a story. But to make sense of facts, one must evaluate them and situate them within a context of meaning. To do this, people use narrative thinking” (Bauer, 2018, p. 88). To help navigate meanings in life events and the great self vs. society tension, “expressivist practices have always been about complex negotiations between self and other, and the dismantling of the ‘public’/‘private’ binary that still seems to too often haunt our conversations about writing and pedagogy” (Roeder et al., 2015, p. 8). For when we share our understanding the binary between ourselves and others crumbles. Therefore, “expressivism places the writer in the center, articulates its theory, and develops its pedagogical system by assigning highest value to the writer and her imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior” (Burnam, 2001, p. 19).

## **ELA Classrooms Need Creative Nonfiction Pedagogy Integrated into the Curriculum**

An abundance of writing practice leads to higher achievement, academic and otherwise. High quantities of writing practice benefits student comprehension, regardless of subject matter and content (Graham, 2014, 8:20). Primarily, writing is the assessment tool instructors use to gage aquisition of content. The more practice students get in putting their understanding down on paper, the better they will be at writing overall. The more students write, the better they will do in everything, in and out of the ELA classroom. When beginning students on a journey of lifelong writing, starting with writing about themselves is the perfect spark – allowing them full agency over the material of which they have unlimited access of knowledge to share and explore.

## **Student Centered Creative Nonfiction Pedagogy**

By fully handing over the curriculum to the creative minds of students, we are “orienting language arts instruction that privileges student agency [which] views students [...] as knowledge generators and resources that are valuable and essential to student learning” (Vaughn, 2024, p.222). How students frame their understanding of lived experiences influences overall learning and achievement (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 72). Furthermore, integrating agency through creative, personal narrative writing, invites “students’ voices, histories, languages, and interests into the curriculum” (Vaughn, 2024, p. 222). We thusly minimize our own, often dominating, voice in favor of students developing their own respective voices.

Creative nonfiction learning is a multi-layered process that combines into a “panoramic framework” (Tuchman, 2017, p. 55), which can prove particularly effective (see **Figure 2**). It approaches more of the learners’ whole self by encompassing the absorption of material, comprehension of it, and expression of that comprehension. After all, “good teachers of [creative

writing and] literature help children to make sense out of each literary experience and to go on to discover patterns and make significant connections among all of their literary experiences" (Sloan, 1991, pp. 39-40). It begins with reading and discussing good literature that emblemizes the particular creative writing tenet we wish the students to learn<sup>1</sup>. Students then need to be given extensive opportunities to analyze the literature with a specific explorative objective of asking themselves *how can I apply this skill to my own writing?*<sup>2</sup> Teachers then need to compartmentalize the teaching of specific elements of creative writing<sup>3</sup>. For teachers to excel at teaching elements of creative writing (elements such as show don't tell, dynamic dialogue, and description through sensorial detail among others), if they were unable to take creative writing courses themselves, there is excellent guidance to be found in creative writing textbooks along with other professional development opportunities. Each time a component of creative writing is introduced, students should then be allowed the time and space to practice and collaborate<sup>4</sup>. After they have developed some writing and collaborated with their peers, instructors then need to take the time to provide them with wise feedback that avoids prescriptive structure in favor of offering meaningful challenges that engages with their work and asks them to do the same<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 2**

*Cyclical Formula for Creative Writing Instruction*



<sup>1</sup> “Although ‘Write what you know’ centers reflective powers on personal writing, ‘Write what you read’ focuses analysis on the writing of others, its possible translation into personal authorship, and the role of critical response to one's own writing” (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427).

<sup>2</sup> Students need to be “given multiple opportunities to read and talk extensively and analytically about text” (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 428).

<sup>3</sup> An example of a helpful creative writing textbooks is *The Practice of Creative Writing* by Heather Sellers.

<sup>4</sup> Practice and collaboration is complex but is also is a space that “feels alive. There is work to be done [...] but there is also laughter, questions, negotiation, disagreement, and even quiet” (Boadman & Trepper, 2021, p. 36).

<sup>5</sup> Students need “feedback they can understand” that sets goals to improve (Baxa, 2015, p. 1686) and that provides meaningful challenge (Poleman et al., 2021, p. 15).

## Ideas for Student-Centered Approaches to Creative Nonfiction Writing Instruction<sup>6</sup>

|                                                  | Read Good Literature <sup>7</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Learn Elements of Creative Prose                                                                                                                                                              | Practice & Collaborate <sup>8</sup>                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Learn Show Don't Tell                            | Lee's <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> ;<br>Hemingway's <i>The Old Man and the Sea</i> ;<br>Dillard's <i>American Childhood</i> ;<br>Morrison's <i>Beloved</i>                                                                                 | Demo show don't tell;<br>review To Be verbs and discuss active verb alternatives.                                                                                                             | Given several choices, practice converting a typical "telling" into a creative "showing" passage; review writing, finding To Be verbs then changing them to active verbs/phrases      |
| Learn Character Development Through Dialogue     | Austen's <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> ;<br>Wilde's <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> ;<br>Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"                                                                                                           | Demo correct dialogue formatting; show students dialogue in novels.                                                                                                                           | Character Building Chart, Dialogue games/practice; draft collaborative conversations                                                                                                  |
| Learn Descriptive Language with Sensorial Detail | Fitzgerald's <i>The Great Gatsby</i> ;<br>Marquez's <i>One Hundred Years of Solitude</i> ;<br>Angelou's <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> ;<br>Stoker's <i>Dracula</i> ;<br>Lowry's <i>The Giver</i> ;<br>Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" | Examine highly descriptive passages while students draw the images they hear in the literature; play wordless music then having students discuss the senses that come to mind while listening | Go outside and practice describing nature; play blindfolded description games; have students write out descriptive scenes that come to mind during music; draft descriptive passages. |

<sup>6</sup> There are many more components to creative prose writing that can be applied to personal narrative writing and integrated into ELA curriculum. The three explored here are a great place to start. For more comprehensive textbooks to aid in teaching creative writing, recommended texts include *The Practice of Creative Writing* by Heather Sellers (2007), and *Elements of Creative Writing* by Grant Tracey, Rachael Morgan, and Jeremy Schraffenberger (2023).

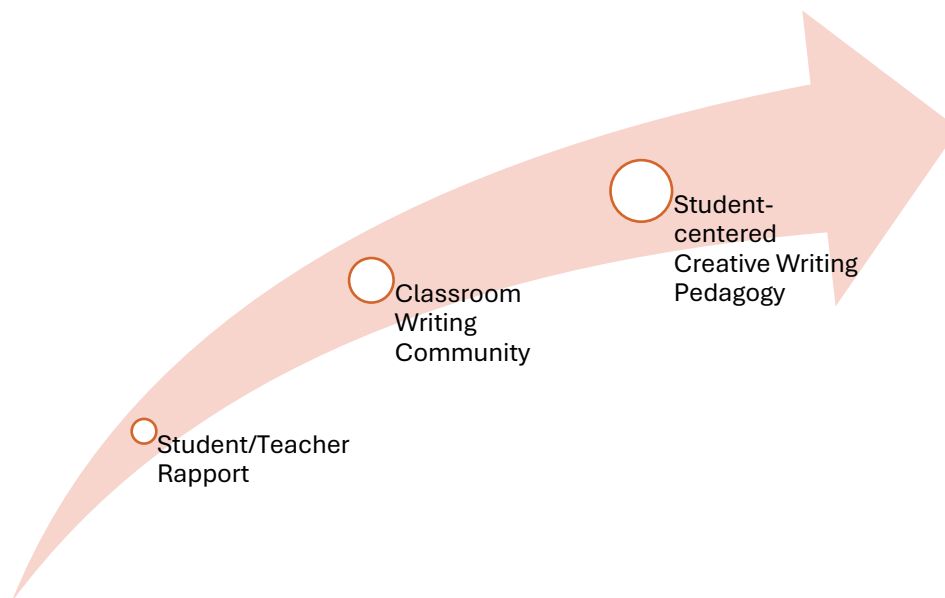
<sup>7</sup> First, read good literature (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994, p. 427). Then, follow-up reading with analytic conversations that ask students to make personal connections between what is happening in the stories and what they see in real life, or may have even experienced in some way. Questions should be open-ended and discussions should be open to diversity of thought. Students need to feel that their teacher approves of them, regardless of their opinions and interpretations of literature (Polman et al., 2021, p. 16).

<sup>8</sup> After students have collaborated with each other, and have produced a piece of writing, provide feedback they can understand that helps them set goals for improvement as they continue to write (Baxa, 2015, p. 1686). Remain encouraging and try to avoid feedback about small mechanical errors. Read their stories to *understand*, not to criticize (Samfira, et al., 2021, pp. 9-10).

## Building a Positive Classroom Writing Community and Student/Teacher Rapport is Student-Centered

Creating a student-centered approach includes building a positive classroom writing community and a healthy student/teacher rapport (see **Figure 3**); one would be difficult to exist without the other two. There is a certain necessity of interactionism through "language, communication, interrelationships, and community [...]" whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes, and values of a community" (Crotty, 2015, pp. 7-8). Through this open exchange of ideas and personal stories, the classroom writing community is built with individuals willing to share pieces of themselves. "Vulnerability from both teachers and students can be essential" (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 80). The exchange of stories, in various mediums, should take place between teacher with students as well as students with peers.

**Figure 3**  
*Student-Centered Creative Writing Pedagogy Tenets*



Kindness and relevant, non-patronizing praise should be the foundation of teachers' approach to building rapport with students (Yassine et al., 2020). With beginning writers, they will need to be prompted most of the time (i.e. given a broad idea about how to begin). However, teachers should be discouraged to introduce narrative writing lessons with didactic ideology, be it political, religious, or moral. While students are strongly encouraged to explore those aforementioned categories, the teacher should try to allow the students to express themselves without fear of disappointing the teacher if their perspective does not align with the instructor's (Samfira, et al., 2021, pp.9-10). Furthermore, "teacher and student [must] respect one another's ideas, opinions, and backgrounds, listening to one another and responding to one another's ideas," reciprocally (Guggenheim, et.al., 2021, p. 74). The teacher-student connection is made up of interpersonal exchanges and meaning-making interactions that must involve "trust, [...] warmth, and low negativity [...] from the teacher" (Samfira, et al., 2021, p. 2). Caring

conversations, speaking and listening with each other, encouraging and wise feedback all contribute to a positive student/teacher rapport.

The kindness and openness that we model to our students in building that rapport then needs to be carried over into classroom writing community expectations. Excellent classroom writing community interactions “include students building on the thinking of others, working together to improve the group’s thinking, and listening closely to one another” (Boardman, 2021, p. 34). Speaking and listening, oracy, plays an integral role in creative nonfiction pedagogical practices. “Engaging in a listening practice can lend itself to caring because it is a crucial ingredient in recognizing the emotional needs of others” (Guggenheim, et al., 2021, p. 80). Students do not develop writing in a vacuum, especially when trying to make sense of their living reality. They must learn that their teacher is listening, that freedom of expression applies to them, and that their peers have important contributing perspectives.

### **ELA Teachers Should Develop Their Creative Writing Passions and Expand Their Abilities**

There is currently a gap in creative writing expectations and curriculum in all secondary and elementary levels. This particular pedagogical framework analysis has potential to add to the field of ELA education by bringing attention to the need for integration of creative writing in preservice educator curriculum, which will then translate into its needed integration into ELA classrooms as creative nonfiction writing contributes exponentially to autonomous learning and academic achievement overall. As teachers attend to the writing needs of their students, they need to attend to their own writing needs, too. “When ELA teachers share their passions for composing and reading literature and media, students become even more inspired to find this kind of passion in their own writing” (Polman et al., 2021, p. 18). ELA teachers began their careers excited about reading and/or writing and they need to continue to pursue these passions outside of the classroom. Therein, too, they will be better able to instruct their students in the content while also experiencing personal fulfillment in their careers.

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