

The Writer Within – What Kind of Writer Are You?

Article Six: What Is Nonfiction?

By Janice Alonso

Simply stated, nonfiction works are true. They are recordings of events that actually took place and can be substantiated by facts. Nonfiction is a broad field that can be broken down into smaller categories. The following is a good representation, but not complete, of popular types of nonfiction:

Essay – a piece that is written from someone’s point of view, normally the writer’s personal opinion or attitude

Journal/diary – a list of entries usually recorded by date reporting events that have happened

Biography – a detailed account of a person’s life written by another person

Autobiography – a detailed account of a person’s life written by that person

User Manuals/instructional booklets – a set of directions explaining how to use or build something

How-to – a set of directions on how something can be done

Self-help – a set of directions/explanations on how to better one’s life

Memoir – an account of someone’s memories/past experiences; a memoir is different from a biography/autobiography in that it focuses on particular excerpts or events from someone’s life, not the entire life story

Devotional/inspirational – a piece that inspires and/or motivates

Travelogues – an account of a journey or trip

Let’s go back and look at the piece I cited in Column Two, “Turtle Steps.”

http://www.janicealonso.com/janicealonso.com/GWA_Connection.html

“Turtle Steps” falls under the nonfiction category. It is true. It happened to me. I saw the turtle and constructed a story around the event. Of course, I had to add other information to create a story, but everything I included is also true. I could have chosen several other ways to tell this story, but a devotional was the vehicle I chose to carry the message of

“slow and steady wins the race.” Aesop chose fiction . . . a fable . . . to share his message. His was a work of fiction. Two authors, the same message, two different approaches.

The vehicle you choose to tell your story will be a decision you’ll need to make when you begin each new piece. In the second series of columns of “The Writer Within,” we’ll look at how to select the best form in which to place and let your story unfold. I’m including these two short explanations of Nonfiction and Fiction, along with their subcategories, so when the time comes for you to begin writing a story, you can make an educated choice for the best fit for the particular piece you are creating.

It is important to have a planned time and place to write, and it is important to have a planned structure when you sit down to mold that idea into a concrete story. Just as Nonfiction and Fiction have specific requirements, their subcategories have guidelines as well. You need to be familiar with the guidelines of the form you select for your work. I say guidelines because as you progress as a writer, you’ll want to inject your creative flare. That personal style is what makes Hemingway Hemingway and Follet Follet.

You can even combine Nonfiction and Fiction categories. Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* and Homer’s *The Odyssey* are both travelogues, but they are fiction; the authors used the idea of a journey to frame their story. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a true story written in the form of a diary; however, many fictional stories have been written as diaries.

Another popular category of Nonfiction, and one I use frequently, is Creative Nonfiction. I use this form mostly when I write personal experience pieces – mine or those related to me by another person. When writing a personal experience, the story can become dull in the telling. I like to embellish my stories, making them more readable and interesting. I want the piece to read like fiction; but, a *very strong word of caution*: the story I write is true. I never fudge on the facts or add something that didn’t happen for the sake of making it a “better story.” Personal experiences usually have a message or “take away” at the end of the story. The *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series is a good example of personal experiences.

The process of picking and choosing how you will present your story is what will give you your distinctive mark as a writer. As I promised, we will take small steps before we

begin delving into actual writing. For now we will examine what defines nonfiction and fiction.

Step Six: Read and identify examples of nonfiction, write every day, and sign your name to it.