

# Jazz Up Your Nonfiction/Memoir with Fiction Techniques

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by Donna Meredith

[www.donnameredith.com](http://www.donnameredith.com)

[meredithds@comcast.net](mailto:meredithds@comcast.net)

\*Denotes a West Virginia author or book

Creative nonfiction is factual; the CNF writer doesn't make stuff up. But unlike other types of nonfiction, such as technical writing or journalism, the emphasis in creative nonfiction is on factually true yet elegant literary expression. The writer tries to make the facts dance.

Guy de Maupassant, famous for his short stories, once described the writer's challenge as "not to give us a banal photograph of life, but rather to give us the most complete, impressive and convincing vision of life."

Today's strongest nonfiction authors also aim to provide a complete, impressive, and convincing vision of life by using fiction techniques to convey factual information in an entertaining way.

Stories in this genre could include memoir, food or travel writing, personal essays, new journalism, biography, nonfiction stories, and nature writing. These true stories should read as compellingly as a good novel, with all of fiction's elements of character, pacing, plot, dialogue, suspense and conflict.

It wasn't until 1959, when Truman Capote read a newspaper article about a murder and began the investigation that became *In Cold Blood*, that the possibilities of narrative nonfiction really grabbed both the literary and popular imagination. In the decade that followed, what Tom Wolfe dubbed as "new journalism" energized and revolutionized nonfiction writing.

## **Narrative Nonfiction:**

*Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, The Devil in the White City, Marley and Me, and Into Thin Air.*

## **Memoir with novelistic techniques:**

*Angela's Ashes, A Walk in the Woods, \*October Sky, The Color of Water, \*The Glass Castle, and Into the Wild.*

### **Three reasons CNF became popular**

- Because everyone (almost) would rather read a good story than a textbook
- A more entertaining way to get the same information
- More personal stories can engage readers' emotions

*Three keys to a good story are hooks, characters, and scenes.*

### **1. Hooks**

The first line or paragraph should lure readers and then thrust them right into the piece. Use hooks as the first lines of your story, and in each scene that composes the larger piece. A successful hook informs readers about what they're going to learn as well as injects them with the desire to at least read a little longer.

Bless her heart. That's what we say. It's a catchall.

"Aunt Sue's getting divorced."

Bless her heart.

"Velma lost her job at the bank."

Bless her heart.

"Crystal backed over the cat with her Cadillac."

Bless her heart. Bless the cat's heart.

And so that is what we say when we are told, "Your grandmother is getting worse."

Bless her heart, we say, although her heart has never been better. The problem is, as always, in her head.

— *\*Beauty Before Comfort* (Allison Glock)

Until I began to build and launch rockets, I didn't know my hometown was at war with itself over its children and that my parents were locked in a kind of bloodless combat over how my brother and I would live our lives. I didn't know if a girl broke your heart, another girl, virtuous at least in spirit, could mend it on the same night. And I didn't know that the enthalpy decrease in a converging passage could be transformed into jet kinetic energy if a divergent passage was added. The other boys discovered their own truths when we built our rockets, but those were mine.

— *\*October Sky* (Homer Hickham)

I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster.

— *\*The Glass Castle* (Jeannette Walls)

## 2. Characters

In nonfiction you are writing about real people, but they become characters in your story. To be interesting on the two-dimensional page, you must perform magic! You must transform the two dimensions of the page into three-dimensional characters. Characters need to be quirky, not vague; flawed, not perfectly bland.

- The first step is to know the finest nuances about their physical appearance.
  - You must find the details that best reveal who they are. This might include their posture, the way they dress, the lines in their faces, and the kind of jokes they tell.
- External and internal elements should work together to yield a vivid portrait. Put them in action scenes to draw out their character.
  - They should be suspense stories themselves.
  - The more complicated, the better.
  - Make them hard to predict.
  - Readers should want to know what they will do next.

### **Example of Quirky Characters**

My mother, Billy-Pearl Fancler, was daughter number seven of the reverend Peter Fancler and the last to marry because she insisted on finishing college. She had strange tastes for a girl who looked like she should model for Charles Dana Gibson. She loved horses and guns, and she was an expert in both; at twenty-one she was the champion shot of West Virginia.

Horses have to be the reason she married my father, as there were two or three more desirable prospects in line. My father was a drunk from the age of seventeen, but the Curtisses still owned the best horse farm in the state, and it was only five miles outside of town from her father's church.

. . . Her only problem, aside from losing control of my father, was that we lived in a very large house. My mother had grown up in a large family, and she couldn't deal with all those empty rooms. She went about gathering up people—that's how Stella came to us. Of course, she was Stanley then.

—*\*Sins of the Seventh Sister* (Huston Curtiss)

### **Vivid and quirky**

I heard the creak of Miss Addie's rocker when she settled herself to talk . . . She was wearing the blue and white checked poke bonnet that made wings down both of her cheeks and partly hid her face, red from working in the summer heat. . . She made the bonnets for herself, and she wore them when she went into the garden, no matter how much it embarrassed the girls. She didn't refer to her daughters any other way. "My girls," she would say, glancing over her shoulder at them whenever they were gathered at the center of the house, the huge kitchen table, discussing their troubles, "have not got one iota of gumption." Then she would add, "except for your mother." It was the only nice thing, at least I suppose it was nice, that she ever said about my mother. "Not one iota" was a favorite size with her. She could use that diminishment like a club.

She sat there on the back porch foursquare on her hams, with her legs apart, leaning on a hoe. I recognized that stance later when I saw statues of Athena that seemed to grow out of the ground. I never thought of Miss Addie as fat, but she had a thick body like the trunk of an old tree.

—*\*Addie: A Memoir* (Mary Lee Settle)

### **A Different Sort of Grandmother**

Let it be said that there is nothing on God's green earth my grandmother would consider better than an opportunity to stare at her. She has spent at least seventy of her eighty-two years cultivating stares and making damn sure she has warranted the attention. To gaze at my grandmother is not a passive exercise. She's no Vermeer. She gives you bang for the buck—be it by making faces, cracking jokes, offering a peek at her undies, or any other shtick she can whip up for your amusement. She's beyond a pro. . .

Time was, no one worked a room like my grandmother, Aneita Jean Blair. A slinky redhead with a knowing smile, she sailed through every doorway as if on a wave, ruffling each man and sending them sniffing after her like hounds in heat. In seconds, she would be surrounded. Drinks were brought to her. Cigarettes were lighted by a convoy of matches. She was fanned or draped with sweaters as the climate required. When she rose, all eyes stretched to watch her walk

away, hypnotized by the tick-tock swing of her hips. My grandmother always found a reason to look back, and it filled her with a torrid joy to discover the men's eyes focused on places they shouldn't have been.

— *\*Beauty Before Comfort* (Allison Glock)

## Narration in Memoir

One popular type of nonfiction is memoir. Memoir is not autobiography. It centers around a specific snippet, a specific turning point in your life, a specific memory which has affected you profoundly. With this in mind, it's important for you to elucidate the overarching "theme" of your memoir before you begin writing. So, for example, let's say your memoir is inspired by overcoming a potentially life threatening illness, and your story is one of resilience when the odds were against you. This is the "theme" of your memoir, the message you are trying to put across – one of hope, triumph and courage.

You should not make up material in a memoir. But in some respects, writing memoir requires the writer to lie by omission. This just means that you omit details which, while true, add nothing to the overarching theme.

In writing memoir, you already know what has happened—at least the version of truth as you remember it. You have the story. But you don't necessarily know what to make of it. When you write memoir, you are researching your past, figuring out what to make of it. You may need to interview others about the events to broaden your understanding and corroborate your facts. If you dig in and come up with honest insights, you'll surprise yourself and engage your readers.

## Two perspectives

Narration in memoir often employs a double perspective. The narrator (you now) and protagonist (you back then) are two different people. Yes, they are both you, but not the same you. They are you at very different times in your life. The adult narrator knows things the protagonist doesn't know.

First, it is important to write scenes in real time that allow a reader to participate vicariously in your experiences with the same confusions and misapprehensions you felt at the time.

But the second perspective usually offered in strong memoirs is that of the **retrospective narrator**: the more mature intelligence able to interpret the past. The heart of a memoir or personal essay often shines in those passages where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her experience.

In the beginning of memoir or personal essay, the writer often has to provide a set-up, telling what year the story takes place, how old he or she is at the time, where the events take place, and something about the narrator's family background. It is important to write these passages with personality and style. These are told in the narrator's voice, not the protagonist's.

All nonfiction is an imaginative shaping of facts into a pointed narrative. It distorts or lies by being highly selective. It strives for a literary, rather than a literal, truth. In a memoir that relates childhood experiences, it would be tedious to read only vocabulary and sentence structure a child would know. Instead, the retrospective narrator tells much of the story. The dialogue in real-time scenes, of course, would have the child using only words he or she would have known at that age.

A compelling memoir needs a complex, quirky "I" character. If you offer someone who is perfect surrounded by perfect people, you will bore and annoy your readers. Your story won't feel as though it is written about real humans. On the other hand, if you only offer a "victim" of whatever—unloving parents, gender bias, racial prejudice, physical or sexual abuse—you risk repelling readers. Instead, if you can show a person rising above a rough start, moving beyond self-pity to self-actualization or even finding humor and tenderness in past events, you stand a better chance of writing a successful memoir.

For examples of retrospective narration, look at the openings of *Marley and Me* and *\*October Sky*. The narrator is looking back on these experiences, rather than telling you what is happening at the moment. This is a key difference between scenes with protagonists and narration.

## Narration with retrospective narrator—this is "telling" in a chapter opener.

Since settling in Santa Barbara, California, Stella had become the patron saint of the privileged class. The whole town turned out to celebrate her eightieth birthday. It was really her eighty-second, but I was probably the only person in the world who knew that, and I wasn't going to tell. She didn't sing, of course, hadn't for years. When you've been acclaimed the voice of the century, why muddy the waters?

—*\*Sins of the Seventh Sister* (Huston Curtiss)

**Scene with protagonist—this is real-time “showing,” later in the same chapter. A section of narration at the end is in italics.**

She came toward me, twirling the opera-length pearls that were her trademark, so I wouldn't miss them. And the memory train that runs through my head started getting up steam.

“We're getting old, Hughie.”

“I know . . . No one's called me Hughie for a long time.”

“What does Helen call you?”

“Son of a bitch.”

“That's unfair to your mother. She was the only true lady I ever knew. But you can't tell our story without admitting what a little shit you were.”

*I began to write Stella's story with what I thought was one of the best opening lines in American literature: “When I was ten, I took a straight razor and cut my father's throat as he lay in a drunken stupor over my mother's dead body.” But then I threw it out.*

*I knew immediately there was no way to tell Stella's story without telling my own.*

—\**Sins of the Seventh Sister* (Huston Curtiss)

### **Retrospective Narrator Telling**

To me, there was no better time to launch a rocket than in the fall, especially a West Virginia fall. There seemed to be a cool, dry energy in the air that filled us with a renewed sense of hope and optimism. I had always believed that our rockets were lifted as much by our dreams as by burning propellants, and as the lazy summer faded and a northerly wind swept down on us, with its lively breath, anything seemed possible.

—\**The Coalwood Way* (Homer Hickham)

### **Real-Time Protagonist Showing**

O'Dell looked at the stopwatch he'd borrowed last year from one of the coal company industrial engineers and forgotten to give back. “I think it's still flying,” he said.

“Then where is it?” I demanded. We couldn't lose it. Like every rocket we launched, it held answers we had to know.

—\**The Coalwood Way* (Homer Hickham)

## **Scenes & Frames: Building Blocks of Creative Nonfiction & Memoir**

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Your job as a writer is to create order out of chaos, to construct a story with suspense from facts, research, and memories. You are documenting change.

### **What is summary?**

Anything that doesn't unfold beat by beat in linear fashion. The writer **tells** us what happened. Use it as a short cut to get you from scene to scene or to supply truly necessary information to understand the coming scenes.

### **Example of Summary**

Next she paged through her Dover books of clip art and located an elaborate engraving of two cherubs. She enlarged it, redrew it, and blasted it.

The result was dazzling. Gorgeous. Marketable. The beginning of a plan.

Over the next five days, Kelsey and Link developed a catalog of 400 different window design with a pricing schedule. Kelsey, one quickly learns, never does anything by half-measures.

—\**Magic in the Mountains* (Donna Meredith)

### **What is a scene?**

It is a little story or episode told in real time. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Something happens. Doesn't have to be monumental. It “shows” rather than “tells.” This doesn't mean you never tell. Half your final draft should be “showing.” A scene uses character, dialogue, description, action, and suspense—all the techniques used in fiction.

### **Characteristics of a Strong Scene: Hook, Intensity, Prompt. They're HIP.**

#### **Hook**

Every scene needs a hook. Something that grabs the reader's attention and pulls them into the narrative. Action and dialogue work best as hooks. Avoid lengthy description of setting or character as scene openers.

#### **Intensity**

Every scene needs to have some degree of intensity. Can be physical action. Can be emotional turbulence. Intensity should vary from scene to scene. Readers would be worn out if you never give them a chance to breathe. The intensity of big scenes should escalate as you move toward the end of the book.

### **Prompt**

Try to end scenes with a prompt, a reason to read on. Examples include a mysterious line of dialogue, a secret suddenly revealed, a major decision or vow, an announcement of a shattering event, a reversal or surprise, a question left hanging.

### **Example of HIP from a scene in \*Chuck Kinder's Last Mountain Dancer**

#### **HOOK**

When Jessico White was four years old, his bed had been the back seat of a '47 Ford. His poor parents had passed him on to live with an old man they identified as his Grandpappy in a garage where the '47 Ford rested up on cinderblocks . . . Those were the happiest times of Jessico's life.

#### **INTENSITY**

When Jessico was older and living back home, he began huffen gasoline to get high and float beyond his life. His daddy, Donald Ray White (D. Ray), famous down in the Boone County beerjoints as a mountain dancer who would clog or tap-dance his heart out for a tall, cold one, would punish Jessico for getting high huffen gasoline by chaining him to a bedpost and whupping him with belts, tree branches, pieces of old tires, a plucked chicken oncet, or just aim empty beer cans at Jessico's head for a long, lazy, boring Sunday afternoon of target practice whenever the old teevee was on the blink.

(My summary) Jessico's daddy D. Ray gets killed and Jessico is shot in the throat and thinks he is going to die.

#### **PROMPT**

It was the voice of Elvis, The King, that Jessico heard, and The King told him, —Jesco, don't you go dying on us now, daggone you, don't you go and do it, you got to carry on in your daddy's footsteps, son, The King's voice said . . . Jesco, now you get up out of that ditch and get off tem drugs and go on out and do what you have to do. Cause, son, now that your daddy is an angel tap-dancing up in heaven on them streets of gold, you are the last mountain dancer down here on the face of this old Earth.

### **Summary Moving Into Scene**

Sandra remembered one street-tough fourteen year old who just moved to this neighborhood from a public-housing project in the Bronx (New York). Shortly after enrolling in her middle school, he walked into the office to get a late pass. . . She noticed he was staring at a huge vase of her purple irises on the counter.

"Is everything all right?" she said.

"What are those?" he asked. "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

. . . Turning to leave, he quickly wiped away a tear and said, "Where I used to live, it was all concrete and graffiti. My new neighborhood is full of broken screens, doors, and windows. Mom tried flowers, but someone smashed the pots."

*\*Life Through These Eyes, Vol. 1 (Michael Lambiotte)*

### **Types of scenes**

- **Action (Major importance)** Person **does something** to obtain his main goal.
- **Reaction (Major importance)** Person **feels something** after facing an obstacle. Mulls over what to do about it and how to go after goal now.
- **Setup (Minor part of book)** Something readers must know for subsequent scenes to make sense. May show who person is, what she does, why she does it. Keep to minimum. Usually get this over with early.
- **Deepening (Also minor)** Spice that reveals character or relationships

### **Example of an Action Scene**

Belknap called out, asking who was at the door. The noise stopped. He held his breath and listened and heard the sound of feet moving down the hall. He was certain that initially two men had been outside his door, but now one of them had left. He called again. This time a voice answered. Belknap recognized it as belonging to Patrick Quinlan, the caretaker.

*The Devil in the White City (Eric Larson)*

### **Example of a Reaction Scene**

(Anna is locked into a vault—deliberately but she does not know that yet.)

Anna removed her shoe and beat the heel against the door. The room was growing warmer. Sweat filmed her face and arms. She guessed that Harry, unaware of her plight, had gone elsewhere in the building. That would explain why he still had not come despite her pounding.

As she considered this she became a bit frightened. The room had become substantially warmer. Catching a clean breath was difficult. And she needed a bathroom.

He would be so apologetic. She could not show him how afraid she was.

*The Devil in the White City (Eric Larson)*

### Example of Setup Scene

A German spy drops from a black Focke-Wulf reconnaissance plane over Cambridgeshire. His silk parachute opens with a rustle, and for twelve minutes he floats silently down. The stars are out, but the land beneath his feet, swaddled in wartime blackout, is utterly dark. His nose bleeds copiously.

The spy is well equipped. He wears British-issue army landing boots and helmet. In his pocket is a wallet taken from a British soldier killed at Dieppe four months earlier: inside are two identity cards, which are fake, and a letter from his girlfriend, Betty, which is genuine.

*Agent ZigZag (Ben Macintyre)*

### Example of Deepening Scene (to reveal character and family relationships)

Thrilled by her prospects, Kelsey called her father.

“I’ve found it, I found, it I found it! I’ve found what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’m going to manufacture etched glass windows.”

“How are you doing it?”

“Sandblasting.”

His voice grew stern. “What are you wearing?”

The family had noticed her father was beginning to get a little strange mentally. *Omigod*, she thought. *He’s really lost it. He thinks I’m his girlfriend or something.* “Well, Dad, I’m wearing jeans and a tee-shirt.”

“No, no, what are you wearing on your head?” He sounded downright angry.

She handled him as gently as she could. “I’m sitting in my living room. I’m not wearing anything on my head.”

“No, no, when you sandblast.”

Kelsey still couldn’t figure out where he was going with all these questions. “The sand kind of hits me in the face, so I got one of those little plastic shields with a rubber band. Why?”

The force of his words vibrated in her ear. “You stop what you’re doing right now. You’ll be dead of silicosis in two years. You get an air helmet before you blast another thing, and you promise that or I will come and do it for you.”

—\**Magic in the Mountains: Kelsey Murphy, Robert Bomkamp and the West Virginia Cameo Glass Revolution (Donna Meredith)*

### Triangulating the Senses

In your most important scenes, try to engage at least three of your readers’ five senses. You might keep lists of sensory words.

A brisk cold wind blew down the street from the creek chasing leaves and candy wrappers before it. Frantic birds flocked above and behind the wind, riding the violent currents, screaming, overloading the trees. A fat tomcat, sooty gray like the sky, was sitting on the steps of the barbershop when Johnny arrived. It didn’t flee or move aside but sat looking at him brazenly as if to question his right to enter. Although it was already after nine o’clock, the weak morning light made it seem much earlier.

—\**Beetlecreek (William Demby)*

There was a blinding light inside him, a blinding light that lit him up inside from his stomach to his head, a blind green streak of lightning. Outside this inside light, he could feel the old man’s hands on him. He felt as if his blood had been changed into hot steel. He must get away! He must get away!

His fist closed tighter on the handle of the gas can and he felt his arm swinging out in a high swooping arc. And he heard a dull clang. And he felt Bill Trapp become limp. And he saw him fall to the ground.

—\**Beetlecreek (William Demby)*

I was on fire.

It's my earliest memory. I was three years old, and we were living in a trailer park in a southern Arizona town whose name I never knew. I was standing on a chair in front of the stove, wearing a pink dress my grandmother had bought for me. Pink was my favorite color. The dress's skirt stuck out like a tutu, and I liked to spin around in front of the mirror, thinking I looked like a ballerina. But at that moment, I was wearing the dress to cook hot dogs, watching them swell and bob in the boiling water as the late-morning sunlight filtered in through the trailer's small kitchenette window.

I could hear Mom in the next room singing while she worked on one of her paintings. Juju, our black mutt, was watching me. I stabbed one of the hot dogs with a fork and bent over and offered it to him . . . I felt a blaze of heat on my right side. I turned to see where it was coming from and realized my dress was on fire. Frozen with fear, I watched the yellow-white flames make a ragged brown line up the pink fabric of my skirt and climb my stomach. Then the flames leaped up, reaching my face.

I screamed. I smelled the burning and heard a horrible crackling as the fire singed my hair and eyelashes. Juju was barking. I screamed again.

—\**The Glass Castle* (Jeannette Walls)

Four other people, two policemen and two civilians, stood at the rim of the clearing, near the edge of darkness.

The low murmurings of human voices didn't carry far in that three AM night, but the intermittent crackling of police radios seemed awfully loud.

The smell of rotting meat.

—\**Full Bone Moon* (G. Cameron Fuller)

*(After the death of Sarah's aunt)*

As Sarah carried a box down the back stairs and into the kitchen, again she thought she smelled molasses and ginger. She whirled around, half expecting to see Livvie in her apron—the cherry-print one with a tissue tucked into the bib—ready to pop a pan into the oven. She could almost hear the clink of a whisk against a mixing bowl, almost feel her finger dipping into whipped cream and then it was all gone, leaving her as hollowed out as a dessert spoon.

—\**The Glass Madonna* (Donna Meredith)

**Frames** hold the scenes, the building blocks of a story, together. They usually come in one of three types.

- **Chronological** - May begin at the beginning. Then middle. And end.
- **Or start at the end if it's a great hook**, then go back to beginning and move forward to show you ended up there. (*Glass Castle*) (*Sins of the Seventh Sister*)
- **Or you may start in middle**, circle back to beginning, and move toward end. (In Media Res)

**Example beginning in middle** from John McPhee's "Travels in Georgia"

John, Sam, and Carol discover dead turtle on road and scrape it off highway with intention of eating it for dinner. (Gross—hooked your attention, right?) They arrive at stream where crane operator is widening riverbed.

This illustrates focus of story. The naturalists are on 1,300 mile trek to examine wetlands and discuss importance of their conservation.

Then McPhee loops back to beginning of journey and tells how and why they started their trek. He develops their personalities through scenes like showing them camping, eating dinner at Carol's house surrounded by her rescue animals.

Then McPhee takes us back to the riverbank and crane. He finishes the journey with canoe ride and chat with Governor Jimmy Carter.

## **Talk, Talk, Talk:** Using dialogue to enliven nonfiction & memoir

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### **Dialogue Basics**

- New paragraph with each change of speaker.
- Avoid information dumps full of words and summaries people wouldn't say aloud.
- Use contractions and fragments.

**In Memoir & Nonfiction, you re-create on the page what you or others remember.** Memory can be faulty.

- You might choose not to use quotation marks for dialogue to signal you are uncertain exactly what was said.
- Or you might use quotations marks, expecting your reader to know the words are filtered through memory and thus approximations.

- For nonfiction, use tape recorder with permission.
- ***Schindler's List* (author not certain of exact words said, doesn't use quote marks)**  
My workers, said Schindler. Essential industrial workers. My office manager. It's idiocy. I have Armaments Inspectorate contracts, and here you are taking the workers I need to fulfill them.  
You can't have them back, said the young man.

### Avoid the "Talking Heads" Syndrome

Ground people in a setting. Let them act and think while they converse.

**A Speaker Tag** is how you let readers know who is talking.

After the first few lines with two speakers, you can skip tagging next few lines.

Don't skip tags for more than three or four lines and make it hard for readers to know who's talking.

**The "Said" Tag** is invisible. A good thing! Use it almost exclusively.

**Avoid attaching adverbs to "Said" like** Said dismissively, gently, hurriedly, angrily. Tone, gesture and language should reveal emotion instead.

**Beats instead of "he said" are often the best way to tag dialogue.** Use character's actions and reactions to what is said.

#### **Better beat with action**

Morris tapped the truck horn. "Hurry up. I got places to go."

#### **Better beats with reaction**

My voice trailed off and I knew I couldn't finish.

That was about the dumbest thing I'd ever heard.

**Avoid overusing certain phrases.**

- |                        |                |
|------------------------|----------------|
| ▪ She pointed.         | ▪ She sighed.  |
| ▪ He smirked.          | ▪ He smiled.   |
| ▪ She looked at...     | ▪ She grinned. |
| ▪ She rolled her eyes. |                |

**Nouns of address as tags:** "Tamika, how's your coffee?"

**Naming who is spoken to:** First name, Nickname, Endearment but don't overuse or it becomes unnatural.

**Long dialogues:** Remind readers of setting occasionally. Show a bit of surrounding action. Have a person's mind wander or take in details like competing noise and distractions.

**\*Craig Johnson using different tagging methods In *The Cold Dish*: beats and reaction and nouns of direct address. Notice the humor inserted through internal dialogue. Walt's thoughts add humor missing from the TV series.**

She leaned against the doorjamb and went to shorthand. "Bob Barnes, dead body, line one."

I looked at the blinking red light on my desk and wondered vaguely if there was a way I could get out of this. "Did he sound drunk?"

"I am not aware that I've ever heard him sound sober."

I flipped the file and pictures that I'd been studying onto my chest and punched line one and the speakerphone button. "Hey Bob. What's up?"

"Hey, Walt. You ain't gonna believe this shit . . ." He didn't sound particularly drunk, but Bob's a professional, so you never can tell.

### **Punctuation**

Periods and commas always go inside the closing quotation marks.

Avoid using exclamation marks. Words spoken should carry emotion by themselves.

Avoid using quotation marks to indicate thoughts. Confuses reader.

**People have different styles of talking. Try to differentiate your characters, even when they're real people.**

- |                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| • Formal or informal               | • Poor grammar                                       |
| • Breathless, run-on sentences     | • Omitted words                                      |
| • Incomplete thoughts in fragments | • Habits like "I dare say" or "anyway" or "whatever" |
| • Cynicism, sarcasm                |  |

### **Contrast the style of language in these examples.**

Lavinia leaned forward into the small nimbus of light and spoke fiercely, insistently. “We do not get what we deserve! Never! If we did, the world would be just! We get what we work for, or what we’re born to, if fortune does not intervene to take it from us!

\* *Quiet Dell* (Jayne Anne Phillips)

Sheriff come round in three days and nailed the notice to vacate on our cabin door.

“What gives you the right, Omar?” Mamaw said.

Sheriff wouldn’t look at her. “Henry set his mark to a paper, didn’t he?”

“His mark?” I said scornfully. “He didn’t have no call to make no mark. My papaw could read and write.”

\* *The Unquiet Earth* (Denise Giardina)

### **Calling attention to the way someone speaks**

“Well,” she said. “How delightful.”

Abe smiled. He liked the way she said delightful—quick as if built from a single syllable.

\* *Hanging at Cinderbottom*, Glenn Taylor

### **Another example of calling attention to the way someone speaks**

There was a brief jostling of the phone, and a younger version of Bob’s voice answered, “Hey Shuuriff.”

Slurred speech. Great. “Billy, you say you saw this body?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“What’d it look like?”

Silence for a moment. “Looked like a body.”

I thought about resting my head on my desk. “Anybody we know?”

“Oh, I didn’t get that close.”

Instead I pushed my hat farther up my head and sighed. “How close did you get?”

\* *Cold Dish*, Craig Johnson

**Avoid using dialect in an offensive way**, like bad spellings or dropped g’s at the end of words or jus’ to show Southern speech. Avoid writing “seester” instead of sister to show a Mexican speaking. Dialect offends some readers. Use omitted words or word order or other markers like rhythm or idiom to show ethnic or regional speech.

### **Writing Suggestion**

Think back on the last vacation you took. Picture the locale. Try to write a brief scene that takes place there that incorporates at least three senses and a piece of dialogue that includes your unspoken reaction to something someone says. If your reaction adds humor or satire to the scene, all the better! If that idea doesn’t spark words on the page, choose a different place: your work place, a meeting with a publisher, a family meal.

### **Partial Bibliography**

*Keep it Real* by Lee Gutkind

*Writing Creative Nonfiction* edited by Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard

*Plot & Structure* by James Scott Bell