

# Tucking the Pigeons up Your Sleeve: Ten Personae Teach One Nonfiction Course

Bonnie S. Sunstein  
University of Iowa  
bonnie-sunstein@uiowa.edu

Writing is a craft before it is an art; writing may appear magic, but it is our responsibility to take our students backstage to watch the pigeons being tucked up the magician's sleeve.

—Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing*

**W**e know the clichés all too well: “Ah, that performance was seamless.” “Whoa, his pitching is so smooth.” “Oh, she skates effortlessly.” “Facile.” “Easy.” When we respond this way to our finest papers, we inadvertently trick students into thinking that good-to-read writing comes naturally and quickly. These metaphors imply no work; they suggest little preparation. They ignore the processes we want to teach. The concept of flawlessness masks the rigors of craft. In his poem “What Teachers Make,” Taylor Mali considers our salaries and social status with acerbic wit but then reflects tenderly on the tough, ironic tasks of the classroom. I love this line: “I make them show all their work in math. And *hide* it on their final drafts in English” (29; italics added).

Hide the work? Keep it secret? Trick them? Invite them backstage, as Donald M. Murray writes in his often-quoted line, to watch the magician's pigeons. Not a new idea. Baldesar Castiglione's 1526 *Book of the Courtier* was a book of etiquette, of political correctness: “I have found a quite universal rule . . . to practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura* [nonchalance], so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought” (32).

So, there's a history here. Sixteenth-century standards for an ideal courtier were high stakes indeed for athletics, rhetoric, music, dancing, and

what we might now call “arms management.” A successful, high-achieving courtier had to meet all of those standards, but meet them with “*sprezzatura*,” as if he weren't doing them at all.

In short, creating magic isn't magic at all. It takes effort to demonstrate effortlessness. To achieve art, you master craft—you work hard, think creatively, and someone teaches you strategies for doing it. I find the disciplines, genres, and varieties of nonfiction—writing and reading your own or someone else's reality, and conducting the related research—are good places for students to think about and practice both the rigors of craft and the arts of writing. And so, with a splash of *sprezzatura* and a hint of collegiality, I set out here to write a piece of nonfiction about teaching nonfiction.<sup>1</sup>

## Nonfiction's Categories

I define nonfiction writing as simply this: the mix of art, craft, and information, put together by writers who let readers know they are interested in a topic, and who speculate about what that interest or topic might mean.

Our students' ages or “levels of competence” as readers or writers are less important than the strategies they practice as they learn. But there are questions. What should we include in a nonfiction class or unit? In what ways is nonfiction different from “literature” or “composition”? Why the recent

curricular attention to “nonfiction” as a category from K–12 through college? As standards require more “academic” writing, is “personal writing” shifting into “nonfiction”? Where does “the research paper” belong? “The I-Search paper”? “Feature writing”? What are the distinctions between the confusing terms “creative nonfiction,” “literary nonfiction,” “literature of fact,” “literary journalism,” “the new journalism,” “the *new new* journalism”? How does nonfiction appear to students in magazines? On the Internet? Documentary film, radio, and TV? On standardized tests?

I’m not sure I want to classify nonfiction as a genre, although we recognize it as “the fourth genre”; it’s its inclusiveness that I celebrate the most. James Britton, English educator and writing researcher, writes, “We classify at our peril,” and then, with ironic hesitation, he presents a discussion about classifications. “It is easy to classify fires or missiles because we already possess knowledge of the different categories which are available,” Britton explains. “There is, however, no way of classifying pieces of writing” (1). And so, in homage to Britton, I will present my own set of classifications.

Despite what appears (and, worse, what *doesn’t* appear) on our school-based tests and in our curriculum guidelines, nonfiction is not simply the academic paper or the personal memoir. There are not two poles—“creative nonfiction” and “the five-paragraph essay” (noncreative nonfiction?)—with an empty space between them. All good writing is creative; all good writing holds information. We can classify nonfiction into a bigger, harder to define, constantly shifting spectrum of subgenres: nature writing, travel writing, food writing, science writing, sports writing, the radio essay, the video essay, the lyric essay, the personal essay, the segmented essay, the braided essay, the ethnographic essay, the historical essay, the book review, music review, art review, the autobiographical memoir, oral histories, and family stories. We can combine or divide those categories just as easily, and some of our most intriguing writers do just that. At its best and its most general, nonfiction blends information and meditation.

Nonfiction writers and scholars enjoy playing with the “non” in its name. Robert Root writes, “Imagine having labeled television as ‘non-radio’ or cinema as ‘non-publication’ or a saint as ‘non-prophet.’ Efforts to coin a catchy alternative in jargon-laden

academic disciplines leave us nonplussed, produce only nonce words” (3). Root distinguishes its difference from other genres: “Fiction, poetry, and drama are patinas slathered on reality and need reality as their foundation; for nonfiction, reality is its essence, its outward show as well as its inner core” (4).

John D’Agata emphasizes nonfiction writing’s remarkable art in his new *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, offering us its long and literate history as a form beyond simply the marketing of information. D’Agata’s book reveals that there is no consensus even on what nonfiction really is: “Do we read nonfiction in order to receive information, or do we read it to experience art? It’s not very clear sometimes. This, then, is a book that tries to offer a clear objective: I am here in search of art. I am here to track the origins of an alternative to commerce” (2).

## Nonfiction’s Cultural Artifacts

For over 40 years, without being conscious about classifications, most of my writing teaching has been in nonfiction. I taught junior high and high school English in Massachusetts for ten years. For another ten years, I commuted around my New England home as an adjunct faculty member at a small liberal arts college, a large vocational-technical college, a huge urban university, and a high-tech business’s night school. I was both tutor and director at a writing center; I taught Basic Writing and Composition in urban and rural settings. All this time, my students write weekly if not daily, and I admit that not much of it is fiction, poetry, or drama. It’s still true. I think nonfiction writing offers us, as teachers, a perfect opportunity to roll up our pedagogical sleeves, take students backstage, and give them the language and the strategies—the magician’s pigeons—so they can try the genre for themselves.

At this stage of my career, I have the privilege of teaching at the University of Iowa, a state university that is proud to call itself “The Writing University” (<http://www.writinguniversity.org/>). We have an MFA residency program dedicated entirely to nonfiction writing. I offer one course called Teaching Nonfiction. I supervise 12 to 15 sections of undergraduate nonfiction reading and writing per semester, taught by those MFA graduate students, and I regularly teach one myself. Our MFA students are often new to teaching, although they are preparing

to be professional nonfiction writers in an environment that celebrates writing. Here at Iowa, we enjoy a dazzle of specialized departments of writing: fiction, poetry, translation, playwriting, scriptwriting, journalism, communications studies, rhetoric, and even book studies. Iowa City's downtown sidewalks are literally paved with writers' words—quotes embedded in concrete and metal. Contemporary authors visit regularly, give readings and seminars, sign books, and pack our public venues as frequently as our sports teams play intercollegiate games.

Our undergraduate students read widely in various forms of nonfiction, engage in writing exercises detailing prose style, sentence structure, research options. We help them jog their memories, sustain their metaphors, expand their details, and then zoom in to focus. Students try as many forms of nonfiction as one semester permits, read and respond to each other's work in workshop settings, watch themselves as they write, and document their way through all the features of their writing processes—inventing, revising, polishing, publishing. Students produce a few formal essays as well as a portfolio (or its equivalent) representing their work and the writing processes that created it. At the end of each semester, we delight in a two-night festival of formal public readings devoted to nonfiction, "Writers Gone Public." Along with commemorative T-shirts and snacks, they enjoy sharing this event with family members, friends, and other faculty. I've learned a lot about nonfiction from students' writing and the writers who teach them. I've organized end-of-course public readings, not quite this elaborate, every place I've taught. Students need to share their finished essays as well as their in-process drafts.

## The Nonfiction Syllabus

Why have I loved teaching nonfiction all these years as an English teacher in such different contexts—and not even categorized it as such? To see what exactly I might learn, and how other teachers see nonfiction, I decided to focus on one element, the syllabus, which I think serves as a defining artifact for a nonfiction course. College teachers define their courses with syllabi, as secondary courses do with lesson and unit plans. So I studied syllabi from 164 sections, offered over seven years' time, taught by the MFA nonfiction students I supervise. Taken to-

gether, with these new instructors' words to their students, it offered me a sweeping look at what we mean when we use the term *nonfiction*. Each syllabus I examined is a passionate personal statement about the principles of the genre, about one working writer's beliefs. As I looked at them together, I saw my classifications. I began to imagine a kind of "dramatis personae," a cast of characters—ten imaginary actors who each take their students backstage, roll up their sleeves, and illustrate not the magic, but offer a collective peek into the exciting reality of nonfiction's special features.

I like to think each category represents little parts of all writing teaching, but together they offer an overview of the main themes in teaching nonfiction. The bigger truth to my little fictional personae lies in the many real teachers' messages to students. I'm hoping that by meeting these personae, reading the voices of my ten composite imaginary teachers as they share their true beliefs, you will expand and enrich your thoughts about teaching the "culture" of nonfiction, as I do each semester.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The Tradition-Bearer: Anna Analman

All cultures have tradition-bearers, often the elders who pass on knowledge to their apprentices in the next generation. Our tradition-bearers are writers, teachers, mentors, on the page and in our living histories. "Think of writing as process, craft, and work, not divine inspiration," writes one instructor on the top of his syllabus. That wasn't his idea alone. Our "divine inspiration" comes from a rich inheritance of essayists such as Seneca, Sei Shonogan, Montaigne, Erasmus, Hazlitt, E. B. White, and Joan Didion. And, as in any craft, the traditions evolve over time as each new writer puts an original spin on old words.

Our contemporary essayists dazzle us, sometimes without our even recognizing their work as nonfiction. Ira Glass, host of NPR's *This American Life*, writes,

As far as I'm concerned, we're living in an age of great nonfiction writing, in the same way that the 1920's and 30's were a golden age for American popular song. Giants walk among us. Cole Porters and George Gershwins and Duke Ellingtons of nonfiction storytelling. They're trying new things and doing pirouettes with the form. But nobody talks about it that way. . . . And like the best

reporters, they either find a new angle on something we all know about already, or—more often—they take on subjects that nobody else has figured out are worthy of reporting. They're botanists in search of plants nobody's given a name to yet. (4)

My sample syllabi are full of comments describing nonfiction for their students, attempts to invite them into the world of topics for research, and writing with an eye on reality:

- “To chase fuller meaning, a writer must be committed to noticing, and a writer must transform that noticing into art by giving it a written architecture.”
- “Nonfiction involves explicit and embedded reflection, so the closer we get to understanding the train of our own thoughts and the thoughts of others, the stronger the writing becomes.”
- “Writing is a practice of constant re-working. As nonfiction writers, we write about our experiences. But we don't always know what those experiences mean or what we want to say about them or why we are telling them. It's important that we keep writing and re-writing until the significance of a story emerges. It might be more accurate to describe ourselves not as ‘writers’ but as ‘rewriters.’”

But the traditions are not always so deep. Writers have mechanical traditions to pass on to their apprentices, too, and the course syllabus is a good way to see them. Writers welcome talk about writing and documenting the progress of drafts. They discuss their tools, writer's “material culture,” an anthropologist would call it, brands of pens and pencils, daybooks or journals, varieties of paper, printers, flash drives. It is part of a writer's culture. A few examples:

- “Save hard copies of everything. Save hard copies of everything. Your final portfolio should include excerpts from your journal, writing exercises, and your essay. Save hard copies of everything.”
- “Bring two copies of each essay to class the day it is due, one for me and one for a classmate. This way, you will receive two sets of feedback.”
- “You'll need: a notebook you love, a smart way to keep track of all the pieces of paper

you hand me and I hand you; web access, regular use of a printer; funds to photocopy readings and your workshop submission, a folder you love, a three-ring binder in which to save everything, and funds for one book of nonfiction of your choice.”

## 2. The Tradition-Breaker: Buster Complacency

On the other hand, we break with tradition, too. Experimentation and personal “spin” are characteristic of any art, in this case, honed by a writer who's thinking and practicing craft. “Find the tension,” “Look for the counter-examples,” my teachers demanded of me, giving permission to break rules after I'd learned them. “The real story is in the mortar, not the bricks.” There are many ways for a teacher to give students permission to break the rules, to see the interstices inside the real-life situations they document. Here are a few:

- “We must leave our safe, everyday attitudes of neutrality behind. Human beings learn when they are uncomfortable. Or perhaps it is real learning itself that makes us uncomfortable. That learning—self-learning—is the most important anyone can do.”
- “We will experiment in this course, especially with perspective, voice, and point of view. We will practice entering other realities; discovering places we would not normally visit. These places may be found in the physical world, within those people we write about, and of course within ourselves.”
- “This class is about seeing yourself as a writer, considering the world around you worthy of attention. . . . It will be about keeping your fingers moving on the keyboard, fishing for your notebook as you walk down the street, having overheard something you want to record, writing things you NEVER EXPECTED to write.”

## 3. The Writer-as-Reader; the Reader-as-Writer: Janus Influentia

What choices can we offer in a nonfiction course so that students become more informed and aware readers? What habits? Can students document how their reading influences their writing? Most of the time we read for information, argument, or enjoyment. As English majors, English teachers are programmed to read as critics—to make value judgments about our

reading and construct claims and warrants to back them up as we write. Instead, in a nonfiction course, we can focus on style and craft for a change. My colleagues and I find it liberating. When we “read as writers,” we consider what we learn from the writer’s style and delivery as much as we can from the information. This ought to be true in all teaching: literature, rhetoric, research writing, business writing. But we know it isn’t. The syllabi explain it to their students in these ways:

- “When we read as writers, we want to look at *how* the writer conveys material. How it is successful and how it fails. A successful reader response will examine the subject matter only in how it illuminates the telling, which is our focus in this class. Pay attention to the choices each writer makes.”
- “Which parts of the text catch your attention? What kind of persona is at work? What words, phrases, figures of speech, themes, images, or subjects are repeated in the text? Where do the repetitions occur? How often? To what effect?”
- “You’ll indulge your bizarre obsessions (strawberries?), vivid memories (a playground?), and genuine concerns about the larger world (life without Michael Jackson?) as you become a practitioner—and a connoisseur—of the most expansive and hotly contested genre of literature.”

#### 4. The Exercise Coach: Lexical Aerobix

Like an athletic coach or a pricey personal trainer, a teacher of nonfiction develops exercises, requires constant practice, nudges the writer when it’s necessary, points out options and choices, and cheers the writer on toward a finished piece of work. Teachers use muscle and personal networks to assist when a piece of writing is ready for publication. Neither the topic nor the specific piece is as important as the writer’s goal to achieve good writing. It is a continual attempt to reach for a “personal best”; its value comes with how you play the game. My sample syllabi enact the coach-self with these kinds of statements:

- “We will build up stamina, developing strong habits of revision.”
- “Writing with brevity is a challenge. Work to see that every sentence, every word fulfills a purpose.”

- “Authors play with certain sentence styles in order to achieve certain effects. Write at least one example of each: the cumulative sentence, the periodic sentence, the fragment, the kicker, and the balanced sentence.”
- “Healthy brains get restless if they are treated as places for huge piles of information; writing is one fine way to show ourselves as something more than receptacles.”
- “Go overhear dialogue. Write it down, as closely as possible. Write a scene that relies on dialogue. It won’t be all dialogue; there has to be exposition, too.”
- “Our most common and poisonous enemy is CLICHÉ. Clichés surround us, crowding around our word processors, nibbling at our feet. They are even inside us, chattering in our heads . . . words and phrases we hear three hundred times per day and which are therefore the first ones to occur to us as we sit down to write. But they prevent actual thought from occurring, and they smother our writing.”

#### 5. The Private Counselor: Seymour Gestalt

Nonfiction writing is personal writing—personal because the writer chooses to share a topic with a reader. Whether the “I” is ever-present or implicit, the writer’s uniqueness is what offers the information and the ideas the information evokes. Whether the piece is a family exposé or a meditation on a moth, we can claim that nonfiction writing is about what it means to be a person, that person who’s thinking those thoughts about that set of information. And so, like a private counselor, a teacher of nonfiction has students think about philosophical consequences as they write. “Everybody has a right to a voice,” one syllabus begins, reassuring the student writer that what we think—and how we think about it—is valuable:

- “Our own examined lives are the raw material out of which we shape our writing as we move toward an understanding of the essay genre and mastery of its techniques.”
- “Deep down, you recognize that you have unique eyes on the world. You also have an urge to share, in one way or another, the interpretive work your brain does naturally.”
- “Writing is one way of making ourselves sit up and become conscious of the lives we are



living; it gives us a window of discovery and opportunity, a way of gaining perspective on thoughts, experiences, and surroundings.”

Maintaining the role of “Private Counselor” presents a special challenge to writing teachers because we are not really counselors. We may fret about students’ mental health, but we can’t heal the personal wounds we notice. We tread a fine line. As writing teachers, we can and do offer the distance of the page—and the therapeutic effects of revising, researching, writing—and sharing processes along the way. But just like the contrast between the “Tradition Bearer” and the “Tradition Breaker” roles, our “Private Counselor” role contrasts with a more public role, one I’m calling the “Public Collaborator.”

## 6. The Public Collaborator:

Sympatico M. Pathique

If you’re familiar with our field’s research on students’ writing, you want to create “a community of writers.” And do it within minutes. We need to teach students strategies for response that lead to revision. We want students to share substantial drafts—far before they consider them finished—so they can test their writing on a real reader. We want them to work in our writing centers, use writing groups appropriately, confer with us and with each other, treat one another’s work with the care and dignity it deserves. But we don’t always have the time or the wherewithal to teach them how.

Who sets the rules and rituals for a writing community? What are the behavioral boundaries? The initiation rites? How does a writing teacher use the vocabulary of collaborative work in writing? I think we expect student-writers to collaborate in two distinct ways, with two sets of etiquette: the one-to-one conference and in the informal or formal classroom small-group setting we call the “workshop.” Here are a few teachers’ attempts to define collaboration in their syllabi:

- “We will become a community of writers, offering constructive editorial advice and benefiting from others’ perspectives on our work, showing mutual respect.”
- “I propose that we work together to sharpen our powers of observation and to deepen our feelings about the world—we can discover, talk about, and experiment with the ways we

writers have of communicating—sharing our minds on paper as we do it in class.”

- “Meditate on your process. Talk about yourself as a writer: how you view writing, how you feel you have changed, what surprised you as you put your portfolio collection together, who you are writing for, and why.”

Establishing a writing community means clearing a space for it in our classrooms and our curricula. Although *writing workshop* is a term that I’ve found problematic and difficult to define, any time a writing class engages in reading, responding, and revising—and students share that work—in my thoughts, a “writing workshop” occurs. Whether it’s a formal reading of one student’s draft accompanied by rules and rituals of responding, or informal small groups looking for specifics in one another’s drafts, a community forms around the writing. Whether it’s ninth graders working on second drafts or MFA students on essays for their theses, if they are reading one another’s work—together in a classroom—I call it a workshop.

## 7. Reluctant Grader: Woody Gavel

How does a writing teacher “grade” in a writing class? What outcomes can a teacher expect? Can a student writer expect? How do we distinguish “assessment” from “evaluation”? For any teacher who believes students have something to say—and that they all say it differently—attaching a grade or a position on a scale is a confusing responsibility. We want to encourage writing growth, not arrest it with a summative stamp. So how do we handle grading when institutions demand it and we feel uneasy about our power to do it? These syllabi recognize the instructor’s role as final evaluator, reminding students that what’s most important is developing their written work. In teaching nonfiction, documenting the process, including comments detailing the choices and changes made within each draft and workshops and conferences between student and instructor between drafts, is a way to evaluate a student’s commitment to the growth of a paper. Fewer grades than drafts imply both the value of tracking the process and the student’s right to develop and articulate an idea over time.

- “My comments are intended to help guide you as a writer, not to indicate success or fail-

ure. I will grade your written work as a whole twice during the semester.”

- “Your final grade for this course will be based on the average of three grades: one for completing assignments, one for class participation, and one for the quality of your final written portfolio.”
- “I will assign letter grades in this course only when absolutely necessary: once, at the end of the semester. I will respond to every piece of writing, and keep a tally . . . we’ll have conferences about your progress. If you yearn for a grade at that time, tell me, and I will estimate one for you.”
- “I reserve the right to lower your grade for lack of participation—or for lack of complete documentation of your writing process.”

We and our students understand that *participation* is crucial in a writing class, but we don’t often define the boundaries we associate with the term. We leave it as our “wild card,” the portion of the grade we can puff up or deflate at the end of a grading period. But we are responsible for clarifying the cultural behaviors and rituals we include in the terms we use. *Participation* might mean a written response to one partner’s draft, a minimum of three comments in discussion, continual responses to everyone’s work as well as each reading, or simply submitting work on time. How we define *participation* is one complicated ethical challenge among many.

## 8. The Commissioner of the Truth: Polly Veritas

Nonfiction writing holds another special challenge that students sometimes misunderstand. “I can’t write more details because I don’t remember what she was wearing.” “I can’t observe because the event is over.” “My grandmother is dead, so I can’t interview her.” Showing and telling are always selective; what actually happened is less important than getting at the larger truth of an idea. The smaller details that nag students can obscure their search for a larger truth. Without having tedious postmodern explanations about how to “read” one person’s truth over another’s, or whose truth holds more value, it is important to let them know that writers have long considered issues of “truth” in writing about the truth. Nonfiction focuses on the fullest telling, rather than seeking a truth through an apocryphal

event, as other genres do. But the irony is that you need to understand your material so intensely that as you write, you learn more about what you believe. Your truth. My syllabi explore the ironies involved in truth-shaping:

- “As aspiring writers of nonfiction, our job is exactly that: to handle and communicate the truth.”
- “Nonfiction is distinguished from fiction by the ‘contract’ between writer and reader, that the words on the page are true: that they describe the true experiences of real people, that they offer a true picture of life in this world.”
- “During this course we will engage the eternal concerns and debates of nonfiction writing: what it means to tell the truth (and/or lie), how to represent the ‘I’ or first-person narrator as character, issues around telling others’ secrets, and the unreliability of memory.”

Ira Glass describes the essayist’s job as plotting a story, and then affirming the story with elements of truth, not necessarily the niggling ones, but the more universal ideas behind the story a writer tells: “I think you’ve really only got two basic building blocks. You’ve got the plot of the story, and you’ve got the ideas the story is driving at. Usually the plot is the easy part. You do whatever research you can, you talk to lots of people, and you figure out what happened. It’s the ideas that kill you. What’s the story mean? What bigger truth about all of us does it point to? You can knock your head against a wall for days thinking that through” (8).

## 9. The Travel Agent: Sally Forth

And with the search for universals, we begin to distinguish, as Vivian Gornick reminds us, between “the situation and the story.” Welcoming the reader in and detailing all the features of the landscape makes every nonfiction writer a travel writer. Pico Iyer, one of our most eloquent contemporary essayists, describes his learning process meeting the genre for the first time as a student: “in the company of Hazlitt and DeQuincey, those essayists who will build whole castles with their enthusiasms and who use the sentence as others use coloured stones to build a room . . . there’s not a dead spot on the page, he notices, and every sentence betrays the newspaper writer’s gift of telling you something new and con-

crete" (63). Iyer pays homage to his mentor, Jan Morris: "I saw a generosity toward the world that was the lifelong companion to a sharp, entirely undiluted understanding of it and how it worked" (65).

Becky Bradway and Douglas Hesse, in their comprehensive new book *Creating Nonfiction: A Guide and Anthology*, recall their mentor Carl Klaus's observation that the essay has a dual nature, "a story of events that is also the story of a writer's mental journey" (5). Writing allows us to "travel," assert my sample syllabi, whether there are actual trips involved or not, taking a reader along on a journey in search of ideas, others, and, especially, the self:

- "We want to become less ethnocentric, in both our literary and our literal travels, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange."
- "'Travel' comes from an old French word 'travailler,' which means 'to work,' so work will be an essential in this course."
- "To be a traveler, you don't need to cover any particular quota of miles. Every time you walk, run, drive, or ride to class, you're traveling."
- "Scene does not just tell us where we are. It can help to advance the narrative, and clue us in to some sort of change in emotion, mood, feeling, thought."
- "People think of essay writing as lyrical prose that tries to mirror wonder or crisis. There are some writers writing on behalf of nature, for example, who find it in unlikely, more awful-than-awesome places."

## 10. The Archivist: Stash Quotable

My final category is the one with which I began this essay: quotes. Quotes we think pithy and inspiring to writers. Ideas we'd never be able to say better in our own words. We love to collect what other writers have to say, and luckily, writers write a lot about writing. Conscientious anthropologists of the written word, English teachers are archivists, and over a career most of us amass galleries of quotations. We use them as our decorative arts, hanging them in the corners of our syllabi, on the walls of our essays, into the cork in our bulletin boards. They clog our computer memories, color our classrooms. My own teacher, Don Murray, who titles and starts this essay for me, collected writers' quotes about writing from the age

of 14 until he died at 82. Before computer disks or flash drives, he had five heavy shelves full of them, classified and typed, punched and bound in scores of big, black, three-ring binders. His collections appear in most of his essays and books about writing, on his syllabi and handouts, and in his book devoted to quotes, *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers*.

My collection of syllabi echoes Murray's passion. Each quote placed carefully on a syllabus implies that broad reading, simply noticing what others say, is something professionals do regularly. It grounds readers and writers in our art and craft, and it places us as insiders in a larger culture of writers who think about writing. Some samples include the following:


- "A grave blockhead should always go about with a lively one—they show one another off to the best advantage." (William Hazlitt, *Characteristics: In the Manner of Rochefoucault's Maxims*. 2nd ed., London: Templeton, 1837.)
- Lt. Daniel Kaffee: "I want the truth!" / Col. Nathan R. Jessep: "You can't handle the truth!" (Aaron Sorkin, writer, Rob Reiner, director. *A Few Good Men*. Castle Rock Entertainment, 1992.)
- "Do stuff. Be clenched, curious. Not waiting for inspiration's shove or society's kiss on your forehead. Pay attention. It's all about paying attention." (Susan Sontag, *New York Times*, 1982.)

I've rarely seen a nonfiction course without a teacher's personal collection of quotes about writing by writers. So I'm going to end my essay by sharing a few of mine with you. In Pico Iyer's essay about Jan Morris, he delights in the art of her nonfiction, "The verbs pulse and churn and cavort and scintillate in this writer's prose, muscular with gerunds, inlaid with details, but what they are pointing to is something beyond the sensual, even beyond the visible: a sense of wide horizons and a perspective that is its own, and rooted, but open to just about everything" (62). *New Yorker* staff writer Mark Singer pays homage to his mentor Calvin Trillin: "[W]hat excited me about his writing was its implicit notion that a lone reporter could arrive in an unfamiliar locale where some event resonating beyond that specific place had occurred . . . by getting just the right people to open up, could unravel what had happened and how lives had been af-



fected.” He adds, “My stories are really ‘about’ one thing: my curiosity” (4). Ira Glass describes his delight as a reader of Malcolm Gladwell: “He stumbles onto some new phenomenon, and he’s trying his damndest, for page after page, to think through what it means. And part of his mission is sharing the sheer pleasure in thinking it through” (5).

It is that earnest, pleasurable search for larger ideas, the “bigger truth,” as Glass calls it, that we hope students will try. We help them try by inviting them into our rich culture as readers who like to notice the crafts involved in the art of writing. I cannot imagine a more human kind of truth. Bradway and Hesse remind us that nonfiction always offers “a strong authorial voice. Even if the writer doesn’t make a personal appearance, we can tell that a distinct individual has produced those words—and that he or she is yelling or whispering” (3).

Our voices as teachers—teachers who write, readers who have favorite writers—offer guidance for students to join the culture of writers who share what they’re thinking. Nonfiction has a long tradition, a definable set of cultural understandings about the craft and art of this ever-changing “fourth” genre. In 1580, Montaigne writes, “The tone and inflection of my voice help to express the meaning of my words; it is for me to regulate it in such a way as to make myself understood . . . There is a voice for teaching, a voice for flattery, and a voice for scolding. I would have my voice not only reach my listener, but perhaps strike him and pierce him through” (348). To me, the greatest joy of teaching writing is hearing each voice afresh each year, each semester, each draft, perhaps being stricken and even pierced, as I take students backstage to watch, with the most delicate of sprezzatura, each pigeon as it moves up the magician’s sleeve. 

**Bonnie Sunstein** holds a joint appointment as professor of English and of education at the University of Iowa. She teaches English education, nonfiction writing, research methods, and American folklore, and she serves as both director of undergraduate writing in English and program chair of English education. Before coming to Iowa in 1992, she taught in public secondary schools and colleges throughout New England, and she continues to teach in local, national, and international institutes. She wrote *Composing a Culture: Inside a Summer Writing Program with High School Teachers* (Boynton/Cook, 1994). With Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, she authored *What Works: A Practical Guide for Teacher Research* (Heinemann, 2006) and *Field-Working: Reading and Writing Research* (Bedford), soon to be in its fourth edition. Bonnie has edited three books on portfolios. Her chapters, articles, and poems appear regularly in professional journals and anthologies. She’s been an active member of NCTE since 1966, most recently serving on its Task Force for the National Day on Writing and the Steering Committee for the Norman Mailer Writing Awards.

## Notes

1. A special note of thanks to my writing community, whose work and responses have taught me so much about nonfiction: Rossina Liu, Yasuko Akayama, Bill Broz, the instructors in 8N:202 Fall 09, and all the instructors whose syllabi took us backstage.

2. I presented two earlier versions of this article called “Twelve Behind the Syllabus” at the 2005 NonfictionNow conference, University of Iowa, Iowa City; and another at the 2007 CCCC, New York City.

## Works Cited

- Berger, Harry, Jr. “Sprezzatura and the Absence of Grace.” *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation*. Ed. Daniel Javitch. New York: Norton, 2002. 295–307. Print.
- Bradway, Becky, and Douglas Hesse. *Creating Nonfiction: A Guide and Anthology*. New York: Bedford, 2009. Print.
- Britton, James, ed. *The Development of Writing Abilities 11–18*. London: Schools Council Research Studies, 1975. Print.
- Castiglione, Baldesar. *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation*. Ed. Daniel Javitch. New York: Norton, 2002. Print.
- D’Agata, John. *The Lost Origins of the Essay*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2009. Print.
- Glass, Ira, ed. *The New Kings of Nonfiction*. New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.
- Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, 2002. Print.
- Iyer, Pico. “Jan Morris at Eighty.” *Brick: A Literary Journal* 79 (2007): 62–66. Print.
- Mali, Taylor. “What Teachers Make.” *What Learning Leaves*. Newtown: Hanover, 2002. Print.
- Montaigne. “On Experience.” *Essays*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. 1580. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.
- Murray, Donald M. *Shoptalk: Learning to Write with Writers*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1990. Print.
- . *A Writer Teaches Writing*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton, 1985. Print.
- Root, Robert. *The Nonfictionist’s Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction*. Lanham: Rowman, 2008. Print.
- Singer, Mark. *Somewhere in America: Under the Radar with Chicken Warriors, Left-Wing Patriots, Angry Nudists, and Others*. Boston: Mariner, 2005. Print.