

Getting Started with Creative Writing Assignments

A UMW Writing Center Presentation

NONFICTION

Nonfiction

1. Don't think about it as an "essay" if that means you're using academic-variety formal language - you're allowed to go in any direction with the prose that feels right (humorous, poetic, conversational...)
2. Overcome the idea that "nothing's ever happened to you" - nonfiction can be about a variety of mundane things too.
3. Follow your interests, your memories, weird connections, intersecting patterns. Sometimes it's helpful to connect your experiences to something larger - a person, a historical fact, something you learned in middle school science that's stuck with you for years...

Examples?

> **Example:** The same summer I lost one a close friend, I worked as a guide for a ghost tour company. What does that say about the contrasting modes in which we handle death? How did those two experiences intersect for me?

> **Less Frighteningly Serious Example:** I lived fifteen minutes away from Barack Obama's house in Chicago during the 2008 election, which also happens to be my first memory of any election. How did that shape my understanding of the political process? How have electoral politics changed throughout my life, or through all our lives?

> **Even Goofier Example:** Taylor Swift filmed the video for "Teardrops on My Guitar" at my high school in Nashville, Tennessee. How is her fictionalized experience of "high school" and others like it distinct from my own? How does the music we grow up with shape our expectations?

FICTION

Fiction

1. For fiction – and for all forms of writing – *write something that you enjoy reading*. As you brainstorm, ask yourself: what kinds of conventions and characters appeal to you in fiction?
2. Once you have some ideas – helps to split up into **character, setting, and plot**. Work from what interests you, and then makes connections. If you have a vivid image of a setting (a tiny school, a huge city, an isolated distant planet), ask yourself what kinds of people this setting has formed. And if you have a sense of plot, ask yourself where it could have happened, and how.
3. **You don't have to know everything!** Any starting point is a productive one.

Examples again!

> **Example:** I read a lot of fantasy as a kid, but as I grew up I started wondering about the villainous rulers of fantasy worlds, and how worlds' day-to-day functionality was carried out under their rules. For my Intro to Creative Writing class in freshman year, I wrote a short story from the point of view of an evil empress's accountant.

> **Another Example:** I love Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (set in the American West), and I love Star Trek: The Original Series (inspired by that period of time.) After thinking about how the two connected, I wrote a story about how two children might grow up together in a science fiction universe.

> **Bizarre But True Example:** I wrote exactly one line of dialogue stemming from something I wished I could have told someone I was angry at, but never did. One year later, the line of dialogue has spawned a 150-thousand word science fiction novel.

POETRY

Poetry

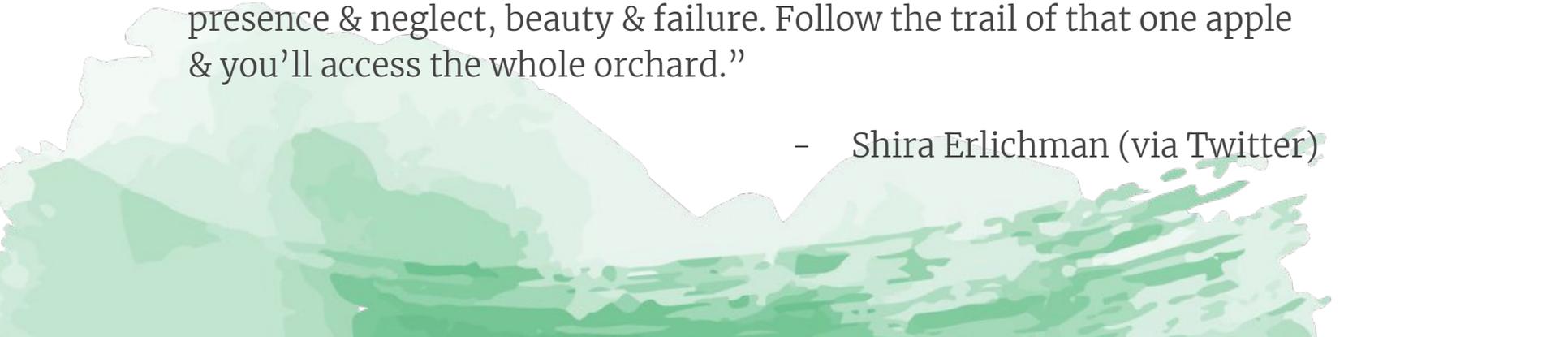
1. For many people, poetry is the most daunting genre; in some ways it has fewest 'rules', and even the fewest definition.
2. In many ways, a poem can be (though it doesn't have to be!) like a nonfiction piece; the difference is that you are bound to image and sound more than you are bound to the truth.
3. Experiment with language and image: what can you say in poetry that you can't say in prose? Think about it in terms of **the concrete** before you think of it as the abstract - start small rather than big.

My favorite writing advice

“A common worry I hear from students is that they feel like they need to tackle EVERYTHING in 1 poem. ALL of racism or sexism or illness (or all 3, you overachievers). But—weird example—if you want to write about your father, owner of a vast apple orchard, start with one apple

One apple holds everything. How it grew, how he tended to it (or didn't), its color & scent—they hold fatherhood, in all its shades of presence & neglect, beauty & failure. Follow the trail of that one apple & you'll access the whole orchard.”

– Shira Erlichman (via Twitter)



Good luck, and most of all...
write what you'd like to read!