In the Scanlon scene, you feel and see the confusion and panic as you view the awful frustration of their lives through their own eyes. You also hear Elizabeth's agonized threat of suicide. But to elongate tension and point of view, there can be a second or third scenic "twist."

> With the exception of playing with her shoes, Debbie Rubin has skillfully led the session without exhibiting a great deal of emotion. She has been warm, attentive, and responsive. Even now, Rubin does not change her expression. She maintains eye contact with the distraught mother. Rubin knows that suicide is not a new idea for Elizabeth, for she has previously admitted to Debbie that she considers death a viable option to living with Meggan. But this time, she has added another frightening wrinkle to her destructive scenario.
>
> "You would leave Tom and Doug with that legacy of suicide?" Rubin asks her.
>
> "No," says Elizabeth calmly. "My new idea is that we will all three make the choice of going together."

Remember: The creative nonfiction writer may not employ "literary license"—the writer may not alter truth to enhance the story or the dramatic narrative. In other words, writers cannot create conversations that did not happen—or even dramatically embellish upon those that did happen. But in creative nonfiction, the writer is encouraged to capture the drama and force of real life, in the most literary way possible.

The creative nonfiction writer is encouraged to utilize all the literary techniques available to the fiction writer in order to render his or her true story as dramatic, appealing, and compelling as possible.

GUTKIND

4

Scenes: The Building Blocks of Creative Nonfiction

4.1 *The Yellow Test*

Scenes (vignettes, episodes, slices of reality, and so forth) are the building blocks of creative nonfiction—the primary factor that separates and defines literary and/or creative nonfiction from traditional journalism and ordinary lifeless prose.

The uninspired writer will *tell* the reader about a subject, place, or personality, but the creative nonfiction writer will *show* that subject, place, or personality in action. Before we discuss the actual content or construction of a scene, let me suggest that you perform what I like to call the yellow test.

Take a yellow highlighting marker and leaf through some of your favorite magazines—*Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker* or the journal I edit, *Creative Nonfiction*. Or return to favorite chapters in those previously mentioned books—*Jaws*, *The Bridges of Madison County*, *House*, *This Boy's Life*, *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Highlight the scenes, just the scenes, long and short. Then go back to the beginning and review your handiwork. Chances are that anywhere from 75 percent to 95 percent of each essay, short story, or novel selected will be yellow. Plays are obviously constructed with scenes, as are films. Most poems are very scenic.

There's nothing fancy about a scene, by the way. A scene is a story. The examples in this book are all scenes—in Gene Solomon's examination room, on the Skyline Drive on the motorcycle, in the psychiatrist's sanctuary with the Scanlons—all scenes. Do a yellow test with the Readings in the back of this book: scenes. As the Pulitzer Prize-winning author David McCullough once said: "Writing a book is not as complicated as it seems; it's just a series of stories."

4.2 *Integrating Scenes*

As a reader, you may not have noticed the proliferation of scenes until now. Good writers understand that craft—the techniques they employ—must remain ever so subtle, so that the writing itself never gets in the way of the story they are attempting to tell. Readers should not be aware of the fact that they are reading scenes. The idea behind writing in scenes is to make the prose flow so smoothly that readers are entranced, living the experience about which they are reading.

Here's an example of a series of scenes or stories knitted subtly together, but in a logical and chronological pattern. Try my "yellowing" technique, then count the actual scenes embedded in this one story.

> Orthopedic surgery is not always the answer when a horse loses its ability to race at full speed or its will to gallop aggressively and win; in fact, surgeons at New Bolton have developed a number of highly sophisticated diagnostic tools in order to understand the often subtle and complicated reasons why horses experience difficulty on the race track.
>
> The horse Eric Parente has been asked to evaluate is a quitter. This horse goes like hell for five-sixths of the race and then, just about the time the owners are counting their money and computing their profits, he slows down. Parente, a 32-year-old veterinarian, a graduate of Cornell School of Veterinary Medicine whose specialty is sports medicine, is muscular and well-built, with thick brown hair lightly speckled with gray, a square jaw, and a row of perfect teeth.

> His office is a mess. There are sweat clothes and running shoes stashed under his desk. He's wearing basketball shoes, white socks, khakis, and a light blue shirt with a New Bolton emblem on it. The shirt is significantly wrinkled after a long semi-sleepless night.
>
> Among other interests, Parente has been focusing his attention upon the many problems having to do with lameness in the hock, which is a common ailment for horses. Hocks are like human ankles. Steroids are usually used to treat these problems, Parente says. "The cheaper horses get more steroids because they're not going to win many races, so the owners race them and forget them, whereas for a more expensive horse an owner will invest the money to permanently heal the lameness and eradicate the pain."
>
> As we walk from his office to the Jeffords Treadmill Facility, Parente discusses the horse we are going to see, a chocolate brown three-year-old with a brown mane and one white foot who seems to slow down at the home stretch, the point at which he should be barreling at top speed. Preliminary examination has ruled out obvious problems, such as lameness.
>
> First, Parente must grind off the traction-inducing toe grabs on the horse's shoes, which would tear into the rubber of the treadmill. For this he uses a large carpenter's sander with extra coarse sandpaper. He shows the grinder to the horse and triggers it so that the horse can become familiar with its sound—and also learn to trust him. He places his hand on the horse, and he holds on when the horse tries to jerk away. In a persistently gentle manner, Parente holds on tightly until the horse is comfortable with his touch.
>
> I've observed him practice a similar philosophy with the horse's mouth during a dental examination. "Hold on, allow them to make their objections. But be relaxed and firm at the same time," he says. Horses, Parente explained, have

incisors in the front and molars in the back of their mouths—and an interdental space in the middle. "So if your psychology fails, and they decide to bite down with your hands in their mouth, your fingers will be safe if you keep them in the interdental space. As an added safeguard, a veterinarian can reposition a horse's tongue to the side so that it lies between molars. Then, if they do get testy and chomp down it will be on their own tongues, and they will be in much more pain than you. In that way, you can examine one side of the mouth in relative safety. Then flip the tongue back to the other side of the mouth and complete your examination."

Now Parente slowly creeps under the horse, lifts its front leg at the hock, and begins to grind. The noise is disturbing to the horse, as are the fiery metal sparks, which he carefully directs away from any contact with the horse. Leg coverings have been wrapped around the horse below the knee, but despite the three students holding it and attempting to keep it relatively still, the horse rears up and kicks, a hoof whizzing past Parente's shoulder as he jumps away.

They try again. This time they employ a tool made of an ax handle with a loop of clothesline at the end. The loop is fitted around the horse's nose, and the ax handle is twisted until the horse is brought under control. It's called a twitch, as in "Do you want me to 'twitch' him, Dr. Parente?"

After the grinding, the horse is allowed to become accustomed to the treadmill by walking around it, sniffing and nudging it with his nose. Then he is led up the ramp and onto the matted rubber floor; eventually he is tethered up against a breastplate. The speed of the running surface is controlled from a console.

The treadmill simulates racing conditions. At a top speed of 37 miles per hour its running surface is elevated to an uphill slope of six degrees, which forces animals to work harder. For diagnostic procedures, the animal is worked up

to 200 to 240 heart beats per minute, the heart rate at racing speed. In the process, sports medicine clinicians compile an impressive broadside of tests, including cardiovascular evaluation utilizing a radio telemetric heart monitor. An endoscope, inserted into the horse's throat through a nostril, reveals the larynx, viewed on a large TV screen to detect irregularities that may shed light on the "noisy breathing" of a racer, a sign that a horse's airway is somehow being restricted.

Other crucial measurements compiled while the horse is running include oxygen consumption, CO_2 and lactic acid production, respiratory and upper airway flow, blood and venous pressures, blood gases, glucose metabolism, and oxygenation. These measurements are fed into three computers that are located in the diagnostic laboratory adjacent to the treadmill. In addition to two stalls, the centerpiece of the building is a twelve-windowed steeple braced by two magnificent arches that rise dramatically to the ceiling. "It's kind of like the Sistine Chapel," Parente says.

The treadmill, made by Walmanik International Corporation in Freedom, PA, is fully enclosed by bulletproof polycarbonate in case a horse loses a shoe while galloping. Perhaps one thousand standardbred and thoroughbred horses have been evaluated on this treadmill since the diagnostic center was opened in 1992. "I guess you could find out what's wrong with this horse sooner or later by trial and error, but the investment in time and energy might be prohibitive," Parente says.

Now the treadmill is activated, allowing the horse to walk, at first slowly and then more briskly. Gradually, the horse is led into a slow and steady trot, lasting just a few minutes. The pace is reduced, then once again increased. This time the horse is worked from a walk to a trot to a canter. It is amusing to observe the horse orient himself to the treadmill. The floor suddenly starts to move beneath

him, but he is amazed to discover that the walls are staying right where they are.

The horse steps gingerly on the moving tread, as if attempting to clutch the ground with nonexistent toes. Attendants have been stationed on both sides of the horse to steady and control him with guide ropes. Once in a while, the horse bristles. His pace breaks. A couple of taps on the rear with a crop by one of the attendants reminds him to resume his unhurried canter.

The space beneath the treadmill is hollow, and the hooves striking the tread make deep, full-timbered drumbeats. As the horse's speed increases, hooves pounding, the intensity infects everybody gathered in the complex, students, observers, and clinicians alike. But before the horse reaches his galloping peak of power, the pace is eased again. The horse is bathed and rested. An hour later, the official test begins.

The horse ran two miles in the warm-up phase, but the test will be about two and a half miles long—and much more intense. While waiting, Parente shows me videotapes of a racing horse's normal breathing rhythm recorded by the endoscope. "Before having the capacity to videotape the action in the epiglottis, veterinarians would have to interview jockeys about the 'noisy breathing' a horse was making. Or the vet had to sit on a rail and listen as the horse galloped by."

Since joining the treadmill diagnostic team and identifying and repairing breathing problems, which has become a special interest, Parente has had one horse achieve a lifetime speed mark. "I look at the newspaper from time to time to see who's racing, and I often recognize the names of the winners as horses I worked on. That's a great payback."

Another payback is closer to his heart: As a young boy, Parente's father spent a great deal of time at the racetrack with a favorite great aunt. Inspired by his father's stories,

Parente chose veterinary medicine as a career and equine surgery as a specialty, even though he has hardly ever ridden a horse. Even now, six years out of veterinary school, he suspects he hasn't been in the saddle ten times in his entire life. His father is uncomfortable leading a horse on a leash. But Parente, his father, brother or mother are not the least bit uncomfortable buying and racing thoroughbred horses.

The family started with a $5,000 cheap claimer and is now involved in the upper echelon of horse racing known as "stakes racing" as owners of a two-year-old thoroughbred whose grandfather is the famed triple-crown winner, Seattle Slew. Their thoroughbred's father is named Houston, and Parente's father's nickname for his favorite great aunt was Ziz. Thus, their horse acquired his name, Tex Ziz Slew. Parente, who is engaged to an equine veterinarian he met at Cornell, is happy with his work and his life. "The horses are athletes. And the challenge is both physical and intellectual. You try to finesse rather than overpower the animal. To me, that's what racing and training is all about."

Soon the quitter is brought back onto the treadmill. The breastplate in front of the horse is removed, because the team has found that when horses begin to flat-out gallop, they sometimes get so carried away that they want to try to jump over it. Now everyone gathers around, positioning themselves in front of a monitor. Then an attendant steps forward, placing the twitch on the horse, as Parente inserts the endoscope tube into the horse's nostril for the videotape of the throat. Now the twitch is removed. The treadmill elevation is increased three degrees. The horse walks, trots, canters—and then explodes into a sustained gallop.

Against the black tread of the floor, the brown hooves are lost in the blur of his gallop; all we can see after a while is the flash of a single white hoof. His mane is bouncing against his neck. The thundering sound is deafening. The horse begins to snort. He is being slapped on the butt with a crop from both sides now. His body is strained. His

muscles are flexing. His eyes are glazed over with excitement. A technician is yelling out numbers as she glances back and forth at the heart monitor. A veterinarian visiting from Ohio State University is bellowing "Hup! Hup!" Someone else begins to yell "Yahoo!" The scene is hypnotic. Everyone is either screaming or stomping their feet.

Suddenly, at the two-mile mark, something happens. A subtle measure of intensity in the horse seems to dissipate. Did he lose momentum? Did that stallion, that gallant racer, in fact quit? He is slapped several more times with the crops, but clearly something significant has occurred. The treadmill slows down, gradually. The test is over. The veterinarian from Ohio State applauds.

Immediately Eric Parente goes to the videotape, rewinds it, and plays it back. "Here's the problem." The horse is displacing his palate, which folds up over the epiglottis and partially restricts breathing. "Listen to the sound," Parente says, turning up the volume. "Hear it? *Huh, huh, huh.* His airway closes down on him from time to time, and he's struggling, can't expire fully, and since he can't expire fully, he also can't get a fresh full swallow of air. So when he breathes in, half of the air he's trying to breathe has already been used. It's all here on the tape," Parente concludes.

Is "noisy breathing" the same as "roaring"?

"A roarer," he explains, "can't open his arytenoid all the way because of fatigue. When a horse is going full-tilt both arytenoids should remain completely open. A horse will roar when one collapses and shuts down." The arytenoid flaps every time the horse breathes in, the way the swinging door to a cowboy saloon flaps when anyone enters the room. A couple of different surgical procedures are used to help silence the roaring horse. One is a laryngoplasty, which involves tying back the arytenoid so that the paralyzed vocal chord is removed from the airway. Sports medicine surgeons at New Bolton will perform about 100 of these procedures a year.

Officially, the quitter's diagnosis is dorsal displacement of the soft palate. It's a functional problem in the throat as compared to a structural problem, which means that it may be more difficult to repair. Parente will suggest a minor procedure that has been borrowed by veterinarians from pediatric surgeons. For children with aphonia, who cannot trigger enough vibration in their vocal chords to make a noise, a liquid Teflon-like material is injected under the epiglottis. Scar tissue is formed, stiffening the bottom of the epiglottis.

The tool utilized for the procedure resembles a caulking gun with a long needle. Pediatric surgeons inject the Teflon in this way through the mouths of children who are under anesthesia. "We do it with an incision underneath the larynx. You couldn't ever reach the epiglottis through the horse's mouth. We've had relatively good success with this procedure for horses who displace," Parente concludes. "This may not be the horse's only problem, but it is a partial answer to the owner's nagging question: 'Why does this horse quit?'"

How many of those crucial building blocks called "scenes" come together to be integrated into one overall story? Again, much depends on how you define or isolate the scene, but here's a pretty safe breakdown, beginning with the statement of the problem—the horse is a quitter. From Parente's office (1) to grinding the quitter's shoes and "twitching" (2); checking out the treadmill (3); activating treadmill—first run (4); second run (5); wild gallop and then the horse suddenly quits (6); Parente's diagnosis: Why this horse quits.

Perform the yellow test on the essays in the Readings section. Count the scenes—you'll be surprised at how many you discover. There are more than a dozen in Donald Morrill's "I Give Up Smiling," in a voyage that takes the reader worldwide, while Margaret Gibson is equally scenic although her story takes place mostly in rural Virginia. In fact, while

you are reading and counting, block out the dialogue and description in order to see how scenes are constructed and how, once those scenes are intact, they are integrated into a larger story.

4.3 *Leads Thrust the Reader into the Essay*

We live in a very cinematic culture. We don't go to a movie theatre anymore—it's now called a cineplex—and there are often a dozen feature films from which to choose. In the livingroom at home, we channel surf, and in our office, we browse the Internet. A viewer's (and a reader's) eye is attuned to movement, action, a three-dimensional experience. In addition, the competition for the busy reader's attention is heated. This is one of the reasons that writers attempt to be as scenic as possible, whenever possible, to catch the attention of the reader and to convince the reader that you (the writer) have something to say.

Leafing through a magazine, a reader will see the title of an article or essay, and it might interest him or her to begin browsing or scanning the first few words. The reader will read a paragraph—perhaps two—during which time a decision will be formulating in his or her mind. The reader will ask, What is this essay or article about? Am I interested in this subject? Am I willing to devote 30 minutes (or three hours) of my precious time to this writer's work? At some point, fairly quickly, a reader commits or rejects your work, continuing to read or moving on to something else.

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the first few paragraphs in an essay. They must be cinematically compelling and substantively communicative, getting readers involved in the action of the scenic narrative while informing them about what they will be learning. The idea is to grab readers and thrust them into the heat of the action, before any other essay or article attracts their attention, as is done in the first paragraph of "The Garden in Winter" from Readings:

> This was supposed to be the weekend I put my garden to bed for winter—time to clip the lilac suckers, mulch some perennials and tuck in a few last bulbs—but instead I'm on a train to Philadelphia to say goodbye to a friend who is dying. I had planned for my hands to be happily immersed in dirt, but then I got the call asking, "Will you come hold my hand?" She never asked me to hold her hand before. I'm thinking about her, and my garden, and suddenly I'm reconfirming my resolve to specialize in perennials, plants that only pretend to die. They surprise you each spring with a resurrection you never really expect, but then there it is.

The triumph in this lead is that it is dramatic and suspenseful (Who is this friend and why is she dying? Will the narrator make it to Philadelphia on time?). We know simultaneously that the friend and the garden are metaphoric: The theme is not subtle; it strikes home. This lead also contains dialogue and a bit of description. All in all, this is a small package—with a big impact. The first chapter of *Stuck in Time: The Tragedy of Childhood Mental Illness* accomplishes the same objective for a book-length work.

> When I drove up to the house, Daniel was walking toward me. I got out of the car and waited for him to approach. Even though he waved and flashed a quick smile, he seemed grim and befuddled. "What's wrong, Dan?"
>
> He shrugged and shook his head as we walked up the steps toward the porch. "Nothing's wrong," he said. But his eyes were darting erratically from side to side.
>
> Daniel had been working periodically that summer at a rental property I owned, cleaning out the basement, a filthy job that he savored. Nothing made Daniel happier than getting dirty, especially with a bunch of junk. A pack rat, Daniel had always rummaged through trash, rescuing an array of mechanical objects—manual typewriters, speedometers, radios, lamps, rusty tools, old motors. Keys of any size, shape, or condition were his special passion, and locks, whether or not they corresponded to the keys. Sometimes he managed to clean or fix a derelict item of junk and sell it at a Sunday flea market, but usually Daniel

was more interested in contemplating these items in the questionable safety of his room.

Daniel is short and broad, part muscle from his recent forays into weight lifting and part paunch from overeating. It was not unusual for him to devour a large pizza with sausage, mushroom, and pepperoni—our traditional Saturday afternoon snack—followed by a few hot sausage hoagies for dinner. Over the past few years, he had changed a good deal physically; when he was twelve, he weighed 90 pounds, a frail and exceedingly delicate feather of a boy; now, still very short, he could more aptly be described as a fireplug.

We stopped at the top of the steps, and I put my hands on his shoulders. Ruffling his curly hair with my hand, I joked about how dirty he was and made a crack about his ears, which are unusually small. I could almost always get him to laugh by invoking his ears or by pointing out that he was most handsome on Halloween when he wore a mask. But this time he did not laugh or protest; he was so somber that I pulled him down on the stoop and looked him straight in the eye. "C'mon Dan, something's wrong; what's going on?"

Although I could see it coming, I was surprised at the power of his emotions. A mask of fear suddenly exploded onto his face, and he began to whine like a small, frightened child. "Oh, I'm so scared. He's going to kill me."

His eyes darted crazily, and he tried to stand up and run, but I held onto him. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

Tears were streaming down his face, which were buried in my chest. "A man molested me." He reached down and began squeezing his buttocks. "Oh, it hurts," he wailed. "It hurts so bad back there."

Another way of enticing a reader is to start with a scene designed for dramatic impact, as in Margaret Gibson's mention of Boston Blackie in "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in the Readings section. Blackie on TV establishes a mood, but the first real scene, at least as it relates to the story being told, is when Edwin kills a chicken.

Both methods can and do work. The objective is to start a story and introduce the main characters and the conflict in which they are involved or the problem that confronts them—in an action-oriented manner. In this manner, a good lead manipulates and compels the reader to read further.

4.4 *Reading with a Double Perspective*

This might be the time to point out the difference between reading as a reader and reading as a writer.

As writers, we must learn to read the products we produce through the eyes of the people we are trying to reach. This is how editors choose the essays, articles, or books they decide to publish. It is not only what they, personally, like to read that counts, although that is an important factor. What will appeal to their readers also matters.

If you were a buyer for a department store, a manufacturer's representative might come to see you with a sample case full of shoes. You might be impressed with the style and quality of the products the salesperson presents, but before you buy you must be convinced that your customers will be equally impressed, so much so that they will buy enough of the shoes to allow for a healthy profit for your company. Analogously, you must learn to analyze your essay through a reader's eye.

However, what we are doing in this book, more than anything else, is learning to examine our work with a *writer's* eye to understand the elements or the architecture of creative nonfiction. Engineers, for instance, will examine a bridge in two distinctively different ways: First, they will consider how it looks from the surface, to the people who will walk or drive across the bridge. Then, their eyes will dig deeper, noting and evaluating the structural pattern and integrity of the edifice.

Similarly, the writer should visualize the structural elements of essays, chapters, books, and so forth, in order to achieve intellectual harmony with the work, specifically, and the reader, generally. The architecture

of the essay—the structural integrity—begins with the repeated use of scenes.

4.5 *The Elements of a Scene*

Words and concepts to remember: Scenes are the building blocks of creative nonfiction. Scenes specifically and creative nonfiction generally are action-oriented, cinematic, three dimensional. They may contain all the devices through which the best fiction is constructed, including dialogue, description, point of view, and specificity and intimacy of detail.

Scenes move the narrative forward and compel the reader to stay involved.

Scenes are dramatic; they often pose a conflict that promises resolution, which is another reason a reader will remain involved. The conflict is established immediately in the Solomon scene when he asks,

> "Tell me what you feed her." The woman gulps and lowers her head.

Now the reader will want to know why the woman is embarrassed. This is the same conflict Jeanne Marie Laskas establishes when she says,

> I'm thinking about her, and my garden, and suddenly I'm reconfirming my resolve to specialize in perennials, plants that only pretend to die.

It is the same conflict in "The Quitter" who

> . . . goes like hell for five-sixths of the race and then, just about the time the owners are counting their money and computing their profits, he slows down.

Scenes are pictures; they are cinematic representations of reality, which elicit curiosity and excitement, enticing the reader onward.

In this age of TV and video culture, a writer must evoke a three-dimensional portrait of the subject about which he or she is writing.

Scenes contain specificity and intimacy of detail. This is something I have not yet discussed, but it is a crucial yet subtle element in high quality literature.

4.6 *Intimate Detail*

To make scenes seem authentic and special, writers attempt to include memorable small or unusual details that readers would not necessarily know or even imagine. A very famous intimate detail appears in a classic creative nonfiction profile of Frank Sinatra written by Gay Talese in 1962 and published in *Esquire* magazine. In this profile, Talese leads us on a whirlwind cross-country tour, revealing Sinatra and his entourage interacting with one another and with the rest of the world, and demonstrating how the Sinatra world and the world inhabited by everyone else will often collide.

These scenes are action oriented; they contain dialogue and evocative description with great specificity and intimacy of detail, such as the gray-haired lady spotted in the shadows of the Sinatra entourage—the guardian of Sinatra's collection of toupees. This tiny detail—Sinatra's wig lady—loomed so large in my mind when I first read the essay that even now, 35 years later, anytime I see Sinatra on TV or spot his photo in a magazine, I find myself unconsciously searching the background for the gray-haired lady with the hatbox.

Look for intimate details in excerpts of essays and books published in this section and in the Readings. Here is a sample from Margaret Gibson. This is good descriptive writing, but we also learn special details we would not necessarily know or easily imagine:

> I saw Edwin in front of the open shed, in baggy overalls, no shirt on. He was Marie's husband. A hen fluttered and squawked in one of his hands. He had her by the ankle part of her legs, and her yellow feet stuck out the back of a hand as big as a baseball mitt. Sun flashed off the head of the

hatchet that hung in the ring of his overalls. I stopped still and watched him intently. What was he doing? He was whistling.

4.7 *The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*

The writing process is not a scientific endeavor, despite my emphasis on the anatomy or architecture of the essay. The writing process contains two integral parts, beginning with an essential spontaneity, which is the cornerstone of the creative experience.

Poets, composers, and sculptors do not create by thinking about the basic structures and patterns in their craft, such as rhyme, meter, shape, and so forth. This is inherent, ingrained knowledge—something they feel or know instinctively and have studied and contemplated over the years.

Superstar athletes—baseball players, basketball players, tennis stars—study forehands, foul shots, fielding techniques. But during a game or match, their bodies perform spontaneously. After a game, they will isolate their mistakes by studying a videotape or using other evaluation tools. So will sculptors or composers who refine spontaneous creative efforts. But during the process of playing (writing, creating, and so forth), an instinctive fluidity is necessarily let loose.

Similarly, in the creative nonfiction writing process, the anatomy or architecture of the essay eventually should be ingrained so that the writer instinctively conceptualizes scenes, stories, dialogue, and so forth and applies them during the writing effort. After the spontaneously creative effort, during the many necessary revisions, structure and craft come into play more directly.

5

Framing

5.1 *The Convoluted Story*

Pulp Fiction, Quentin Tarantino's brilliant, violent Academy Award-winning (Best Screenplay) film, actually begins in a diner with a conversation between two psychopathic lovers who, in the course of eating breakfast, decide to stage a holdup, stealing money from the cash register and from all the customers.

But before the viewer knows whether the crime ever takes place, Tarantino flashes back 24 hours to introduce a number of key characters involved tangentially in a smarmy web of drug-induced corruption and murder.

In a series of tautly paced and powerful scenes, Tarantino plunges the film's stars, Bruce Willis, John Travolta, Samuel Jackson, Harvey Keitel, Uma Thurman, Roseanna Arquette, and Eric Stoltz, into situations that lead to dangerous conflict in each of their lives and simultaneously demonstrate gritty entanglements among them.

Most of the conflict has been resolved and the film is nearly over when Jackson and Travolta decide to end a harrowing and exhausting day and night with breakfast at a diner—the same diner where the movie began. They slide into a booth and place their orders a few minutes before the psychopathic couple stage their crazed and daring hold-up. The two men allow the robbery to take place while safeguard-

ing themselves and the patrons and the story then progresses forward to a surprising and ironic point at which one of the two is shot and killed.

What I have described to you is the very basic plot outline of the film, which, for creative nonfiction, might more aptly be called the story structure or the frame.

The frame represents a way of ordering or controlling a writer's narrative so that the elements of his book, article, or essay are presented in an interesting and orderly fashion with an interlaced integrity from beginning to end.

5.2 *The Chronological Story*

Some frames are very complicated, as in *Pulp Fiction*, where Tarantino skillfully tangles and manipulates time. But the most basic frame is a simple beginning-to-end chronology.

For example, *Hoop Dreams*, a dramatic documentary, begins with two African American teenage basketball stars who live in a ghetto and share a dream of stardom in the NBA. The film dramatically tracks both of their careers over the next six years. The essays in the Readings section also are chronological.

Can you find the frame or story structure in the excerpts so far reprinted in this book? The story of the quitter horse on the treadmill sticks to a very basic four-scene chronology: from an introduction of Dr. Parente in his office, to the horse working out twice on the treadmill, to the final diagnosis—the resolution.

The Wendy Freeman dis-budding scene is part of a much longer essay, but it is also framed chronologically. The essay begins when she leaves her office in the early morning to go on a series of house or farm calls:

> Dr. Wendy Freeman, who is a Field Service veterinarian at New Bolton, the rural campus of the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine, guns the mobile clinic pick-up truck out of the parking lot and down the road, the oversize rear tires spitting gravel.

The dis-budding scene occurs in the middle of the essay, while the essay ends when she returns to her office in the late afternoon to see a final patient and to perform a sad but unavoidable euthanasia.

> Wendy Freeman stoops on a patch of grass adjacent to the parking lot near her office, examining a brown Nubian goat inflicted with a rare kidney disease far too expensive for its owner to afford to treat. The goat's owner is a woman with whom she has worked for a half-dozen years who is suffering from an increasingly debilitating case of multiple sclerosis.
>
> The conversation is short and to the point; the woman's options are significantly limited. "Okay," she says to the veterinarian, holding her hand like a traffic policeman, palm straightforward, signalling STOP. "That's enough talk."
>
> Looking back, I realize that the euthanasia happened quite quickly, but at the time it occurred, the process seemed agonizingly long. I watched it in kind of a 10-second delay, as if it was being played back to me in slow motion.
>
> Wendy Freeman takes out a catheter with a long tube filled with pink liquid (sodium phenobarbital) and injects it into the goat's neck. First blood spatters onto the veterinarian's hand from the catheter. For an instant, the little goat seems to simultaneously inflate itself—and momentarily freeze—midair. Then comes a silent single shudder that ripples like quiet thunder through every dip and graceful curve of her dramatic and biblical body. Finally, the goat caves in, collapses on the grass with a muffled thud.
>
> Now the woman cries. She sits on the ground and pets her goat, stroking the goat's ears and laying each ear, one at a time, back on top of the forehead, tears streaming down her wrinkled cheeks. Freeman reaches down and attempts to close the goat's eyes with the palms of her hands. But the eyes open back up again, continuing to

assert themselves. Those eyes are ice blue. They look like diamonds or stained glass glinting in the sun.

I don't know if anyone realized what has happened at that particular moment. Or why Freeman selected such a public place to perform such a private act. Many people seemed to be going about their day as if nothing had changed, as if an animal hadn't lost a life and a woman, who herself is slowly dying, hadn't lost a friend.

On the other side of the grass, a stable hand loading a horse on a trailer is talking loudly to a companion. Maintenance workers drive by, smiling and waving. Daphne, a high school student who has been interning with Freeman, has joined us in our tight little circle of mourning. The goat continues to shudder and groan, the woman stroking its ears.

"He's already dead," the woman says aloud. "Even though he's making these noises, I know they're involuntary. He's not coming back."

Soon the woman struggles to her feet, hobbles back to the road and climbs shakily into her pick-up truck. She starts the motor and drives away. I can see her watching us in her rearview mirror. Now Daphne, the veterinarian and I are standing alone on the grass, staring quietly down at the goat. "It was a nice goat," Wendy Freeman says. "I wanted to tell the woman, 'Let's put her in the hospital and I'll pay the charges to fix her up.' It would have cost $300. But I do too much of that; I just didn't want to spend my own money this time."

5.3 *Manipulating Time*

A bit more complicated frame (but not as convoluted as *Pulp Fiction*) is *Forrest Gump*, which opens with Tom Hanks sitting on a bus-stop bench sharing the details of his life from birth up to this moment with any stranger willing to listen. When the viewer finally learns how Gump came to be sitting on this bench and where the bus will take him, half

the film is over. The story continues chronologically when Gump boards the bus.

As demonstrated in *Pulp Fiction* and *Forrest Gump*, writers do not always frame in a strictly chronological sequence. My book, *One Children's Place*, begins in the operating room at a children's hospital, introducing a surgeon, whose name is Marc Rowe, his severely handicapped patient, Danielle, and her mother. Debbie has dedicated every waking moment to her daughter Danielle, including two years of her life spent inside the walls of this hospital with other parents from all across the world whose children's lives are too endangered to leave the confines of the hospital.

As Danielle's surgery goes forward, the reader tours the hospital in a very intimate way: observing in the Emergency Room; participating in helicopter rescue missions as part of the emergency trauma team; attending ethics meetings, well baby clinics, child abuse examinations. The reader is taken into every conceivable activity at a typical high-acuity children's hospital, learning from the inside out how such an institution and the people it services and supports function on an hour-by-hour basis. We even learn of Marc Rowe's guilty conscience about how he has slighted his own wife and children over the years so that he can care for other families.

The book ends when Danielle is released from the hospital. I dedicated two years to researching and writing this book, returning on a day-and-night basis to Children's Hospital in order to understand the hospital and the people who made it special, but the story in which it is framed begins and ends in a few months.

Many Sleepless Nights, my book about the world of organ transplantation, begins when 15-year-old Richie Becker secretly takes his father's sports car on a joy ride. Three blocks from his home, he wraps the car around a tree and is subsequently declared brain dead at the local hospital. Devastated by the experience, but hoping for some positive outcome to such a senseless tragedy, Richie's father, Dick, donates his son's organs for transplantation.

Then the story flashes back a half century, detailing surgeons' first attempts at transplantation and all the experimentation and controversy leading up to the development and acceptance of transplant techniques.

I introduce Winkle Fulk, a mother of four, dying with an incurable heart disease, and Rebecca Treat, a recent high school graduate with hepatitis, who is in a coma and near death.

Richie Becker's liver is transplanted into Rebecca, and his heart and lungs are sewn into Mrs. Fulk. The last scene of the book is dramatic and telling and finishes the frame three years later, when Winkle Fulk travels to Charlotte, North Carolina, to personally thank Richie's father for his son's gift of life.

> At the end of the evening, just as we were about to say goodbye and return to the motel, Dick Becker stood up in the center of the living room of his house, paused, and then walked slowly and hesitantly over toward Winkle Fulk, who had once stood alone at the precipice of death. He eased himself down on his knees, took Winkle Fulk by the shoulder, and simultaneously drew her closer, as he leaned forward and placed his ear gently but firmly between her breasts, and then at her back.
>
> Everyone in that room was suddenly and silently breathless, watching as Dick Becker listened for the last time to the absolutely astounding miracle of organ transplantation: the heart and the lungs of his dead son Richie, beating faithfully and unceasingly inside this stranger's warm and loving chest.

5.4 *Circular Construction*

Note the circular way in which essays are constructed. *Many Sleepless Nights* begins and ends with Richie Becker; *One Children's Place* begins and ends with little Danielle; *Stuck in Time* begins and ends with Daniel. Even the essay about the treadmill begins with the concept of the quitter (a horse that quits) and ends with the repetition of the phrase along with the resolution of the problem (a partial answer to the owner's nagging question: "Why does this horse quit?") just as Quentin Tarantino chooses to begin and end (almost) in a diner.

5.5 *Finding a Frame*

As in many questions about writing, there is not an easy way to explain how to find a story that frames your narrative. On the surface, one might say, "Well, I'll just tell the story from beginning to end—a simple chronology." That might be a perfectly appropriate idea, but it is not so cut-and-dried.

Forrest Gump might not be nearly as effective beginning with his birth and chronicling his early years; viewers remain interested partially because they want to know why he is sitting on the bus-stop bench, just as in *Pulp Fiction*, after the first diner scene, when the crazed couple plan the hold-up, a completely unrelated story is told. But in the back of a reader's mind exists a growing curiosity about how and when the diner scene will fit in. This significantly enhances suspense.

Even if you decide that a story told in chronological order is the best and most effective idea, how does a writer know when, exactly, to begin the chronology? For "The Quitter," I actually spent a couple of days with Parente, learning about his life as an equine sports medicine surgeon. This was the sixth horse I had observed going through the treadmill diagnostic process.

The best answer to finding a frame and where in the process to start it is to isolate a point in the story at which a major action or conflict or idea resolution is about to take place. Begin a little bit before that point so that you can easily work up to it. Starting a frame or story as close to the heat of the action as possible is the best way to involve readers and compel them onward.

5.6 *Classic Frames and Essential Schedules*

James Baldwin's popular and fascinating autobiography of his first 21 years is framed by the funeral of his father, which is introduced on the first page and is finally concluded 53 painful and compelling pages later when his father is actually lowered into the ground.

John Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers* begins when Wideman's younger brother Robert is involved in a robbery that goes sour,