

On Profiling.

I don't like the words *things* and *stuff* and *everywhere*.

I really dislike the word *people*. I really, really dislike the sentence *People were everywhere*. If someone ever wrote the sentence *People were everywhere holding things and doing stuff*, I might hope that their tombstone say *Here Lies Somebody*.

This is why you should use profiling in your writing.

Profiling involves mini-scenes or using lists to reveal as much information in as little a space as possible. You want to describe the scene for your reader, but you don't want it to take up your whole essay/poem. Totally understandable. So, profile! Pick three really specific details (writers love *threes*: *three* traits about your mother, *three* reasons you hate your job as a waitress; there is something so perfect about the number three--it must be the makeup of how our brains recall information, or possibly ingrained in our mostly-Christian-based-media-influenced culture).

Let's say I'm writing an essay about Black Friday. I'd be compelled, in my first draft, when describing the parking lot, to say *cars were everywhere*. *People were fighting for spots*.

BORING. Where's the *real* visual of that scene? Where's the anxiety and the pressure of Black Friday? *How about you profile?*

Then, the essay would become:

A black Escalade cuts across three rows of spaces and screeches into a spot next to the handicapped space, a blue Jetta drives on top of a snow bank and sinks its tires into the sugary mess of it, and a gray BMW full of moms wearing baseball caps lurks up each row of spots as though trolling for Walleye.

See? It's not that much longer, and look at how much more information it reveals about not only the experience, but the author's take on the shopping trip.

So, my challenge for you as you write, is to look at Profiling-and-the-rule-of-threes. It doesn't always have to be with people (and it doesn't always have to be three)--it can be a room, it can be a character and some of his traits (instead of *my father is a walking contradiction, say my father buys lottery tickets after church because he thinks he deserves to win after having endured mass, he tells me to mind my manners at the table through a low-toned burp*), but it should give your reader an establishing shot of where you are and who you're talking about. It also might help you, if you have this problem, from *over-describing* scenes that aren't quite adding to the momentum or purpose of your poem/essay. (That is, maybe you could cut paragraphs or stanzas and profile, instead.)

Learn to love the list. It doesn't even have to absolutely rely on accuracy (like a hypothetical). If you don't *exactly* remember what the hospital room looked like, then list images in a composite hospital room. You know *why* you're describing it, so choose loaded, symbolic images that were **likely** there and that enhance the conflict of your piece.

For example, in many hospital rooms, a patient will have an IV pole. You get to decide if the patient has power: described as *he held the pole like Gandalf's staff*--or whether the patient is having a difficult time: *the pole was taller than him, and instinctually, he held it with both hands, as though trying to shove it down into imaginary soil*.

And, as always, tricks like these are best used when they really pack a punch. Don't get over-zealous, now.

On Hypotheticals.

When I get stuck writing a piece of nonfiction or poetry--when I know there needs to be *more* but I don't know how to make *more*--I rely on the slippery trick of hypotheticals, or speculation, or *what ifs*.

Advocates for fiction writing say that fiction is so great because it allows writers to create and invent, while nonfiction forces us to pick and choose and reflect. Nonfiction haters say it doesn't offer anything *new*. Writing is like being in the kitchen. When you're working with fiction, you get to invent the ingredients, pull exactly what you need from the cupboard. When you're writing nonfiction, it's like you walk into a big messy kitchen that someone has neglected. (This kitchen is your life.) Food is everywhere. The powdered thyme is dumped onto the counter, egg shells are cracking at your feet like newly-formed ice, steaks are stacked like dead bodies, bleeding into the same red puddle.

You have so much in front of you in that kitchen! Which ingredients do you use? Which do you leave behind because they won't matter for the final recipe?

This is where hypotheticals come in. You see how I created that scene of the messy kitchen? I invented that. And it's still nonfiction!

When you get stuck, try this. Play the *what if* game. What if my mother hadn't married my father. What if we *did* remove that word from our language. What if I chuck up this job. What if my cat started talking back to me. What if I hadn't slammed on the brakes. What if. *What if* makes you a philosopher.

Try it. With hypotheticals, you can sneak in symbolism, thematic meaning, conflict, character, and lovely detail. Maybe it's one sentence, maybe it's a paragraph, maybe it's half of your piece or all of it. (An entire essay could be: "What If I Hadn't [Made that Choice]."

If you cut it later, cut it. But think of the information you could reveal by pretending you had that kind of power over your real life.

Ms. Prokott

Now that you've added profiling and hypotheticals to your piece, do the following to revise:

1. Circle the figurative language in your piece (similes and metaphors). There should be lots, but they should "keep us" in the story.
2. Cross out the abstractions. Maybe profile, instead.
3. Cross out the clichés.
4. Identify the conflict (write it down): *what's at stake? What does your piece suggest about the human condition? (How is your piece universal?) How does the piece end up in a different place than it started?*

Even More Tips for Moving Forward With Your Personal Narrative

Ways to start your essay...

- *In media res*: or in the middle of an anecdote (little story) that is chosen to build emotion.
Example: *Joanna was clipping her nails: I didn't appreciate her reaction to my big news.*
- *Action*: a main character in the middle of doing something.
Example: *I dropped the cookie dough on the floor.*
- *Dialogue*: characters speaking.
Example: *Dad left some hot dogs for you in the sink. Joe had already eaten dinner.*
- *Reaction*: a character thinking (probably you since you can't read people's minds)
Example: *I always hated the smell of my grandmother's cologne.*
- *A general description of the time-frame*: to create setting, atmosphere, and the mindset of the person you were at the time of this memory.
Example: *The winter I was thirteen year old, I killed twelve squirrels, two rabbits, and a quail. I considered this tally impressive because I wasn't allowed into the woods with a gun until my father got home from work at 4:30, which left less than an hour of shooting light.*

...and ways to end it.

- Avoid a standard *conclusion*. This isn't that type of essay. Take the advice of poet Richard Hugo: *the reader should go through the window at the end. **Throw** them through the window.*
- Avoid telling your reader what to get out of your essay. You don't need to wrap it up in a box or to say *I learned...or the point of this essay is...* instead, let your story speak for itself. If you tell it well, we get the point without you having to say so. Instead:
 - End on an image...
 - of the setting (like if it matters that it's fall or that you're in a swimming pool).
 - of an object of significance.
 - of a character.
 - of you with a character.
 - End on a reaction.
 - End on a final thought that isn't overly sentimental or cheesy.

Even *More* Writing Tips to Chew On

1. Try to put "distance" between you and the event, even if it happened last summer. If possible, imagine an eighty-year-old thinking back on the events in your essay. This technique will help you to establish your voice.
2. Keep your audience in mind and remember that the audience is beyond just me or this class. Imagine the essay published in a literary journal and that your goal is to connect with your audience, to help them learn something about you *and* about themselves.
3. Keep the focus in mind always. If your essay is about the death of a pig, and your father is there for the death of this pig, don't get off the track and turn the piece into a father-son essay, unless of course that's what you want or your father *is* the pig in some weird *Odyssey* rewrite or science fiction retelling of events.
4. Voice: In the sample essays you should note how the writers create their voices to be wryly ironic, or comfortably self-mocking, or satirical, or detached-but-soon-to-become-sympathetic. Creating "voice" is hard to perfect; you have to read your own work aloud to make sure it sounds the way you want it to sound.
5. Write in conversational, not formal English. For example, feel free to end a sentence with a preposition: "Going shirtless around the house was something my grandmother wouldn't put up with." Or write "Like I said . . . ," instead of the proper "As I said"
7. Avoid such formal transitions as "however," "thus," "moreover," and "therefore."

Not unlike Magic "Tricks"

Once you have set up the focus and are into the essay, there are a number of strategic "tricks," or formulas, you can use to keep your essay immediate and urgent.

1. Every **place** that you mention gets a sentence or two of description. Before any character in your essay can do anything, he or she has to be somewhere in which to do it. Obviously, some places get more attention than others.
2. Every **character** you mention needs to be described, some characters in more detail than others. A main character will require some specific detail.
3. Let some characters talk. Set up a scene or two that showcases their characteristic phrasing. A character's directly quoted words should do only one thing: create character. That's it. Avoid long exchanges of dialogue unless you are using some local-color expressions to build a character or community.
4. Don't fear being "personal" and somewhat confessional, showing the flaws in your own past self that, as the essay proceeds, usually leads to some realization that justifies your writing about this event, tragic or comic as it may be. You, the writer, should be invoked by nearly every line.
5. Humor is a key element to all essays, even darker ones.
6. Remember always that you are the wise man in the essay, someone who is imparting some wisdom of existence to your audience.