

Nonfiction is prose writing about real people, places, and events. Unlike fiction, nonfiction is mainly written to convey factual information, although writers of nonfiction shape information in accordance with their own purposes and attitudes. Nonfiction includes a diverse range of writing: newspaper articles, cookbooks, letters, movie reviews, speeches, true-life adventure stories, advertising, and more. Nonfiction can be a good source of information, but readers frequently have to examine it more carefully than fiction in order to detect biases, notice gaps in the information, and identify errors in logic. Use the following passages to learn about some of the major types of nonfiction.

Autobiography

An **autobiography** is a writer's account of his or her own life and is, in almost every case, told from the first-person point of view. Generally, an autobiography focuses on the most significant events and people in the writer's life over a period of time and on the ways in which those events and people affected the writer. Shorter autobiographical narratives include such private writings as **journals**, **diaries**, and **letters**. An **autobiographical essay**, another type of short autobiographical work, focuses on a single person or event in the writer's life.

YOUR TURN From the excerpt at the right—part of an autobiographical essay—what do you learn about the writer's feelings about her heritage?

Biography

A **biography** is an account of a person's life written by another person. The writer of a biography usually researches his or her subject in order to present accurate information. The best biographers strive for honesty and balance in their accounts of their subjects' lives, highlighting weaknesses as well as strengths, failures as well as achievements. Remember, though, that every writer has attitudes and feelings that can influence the way he or she writes about a subject.

YOUR TURN In this excerpt from a biographical essay, what words and phrases reveal the writer's attitude toward Nelson Mandela?

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

When I found out that my parents had invited the minister's family over for Christmas Eve dinner, I cried. What would Robert think of our shabby *Chinese* Christmas? What would he think of our noisy *Chinese* relatives who lacked proper American manners?

—Amy Tan, "Fish Cheeks"

BIOGRAPHY

After more than two decades in prison, confident that on some crucial issues a leader must make decisions on his own, Mandela decided on a new approach. And after painstaking preliminaries, the most famous prisoner in the world was escorted, in the greatest secrecy, to the State President's office to start negotiating not only his own release but also the nation's transition from apartheid to democracy.

—Andre Brink, "Nelson Mandela"

Memoir

A **memoir** is a form of autobiographical writing in which a writer focuses on his or her involvement with noted people, significant events, or both. Memoirs are usually anecdotal or intimate in tone, giving the reader insight into the impact of historical events on people's lives. The focus of a memoir is usually on newsworthy people and events that the writer has known at first hand.

YOUR TURN The excerpt at the right tells of events on the day after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to surrender her seat on a bus to a white person. E. D. Nixon and Ralph Abernathy were civil rights leaders. As you read the excerpt, look for characteristics of a memoir.

Essay

An **essay** is a brief work of nonfiction that deals with a single subject. Some essays are **formal**; in these, writers systematically develop their ideas in an impersonal manner. Others are **informal**, perhaps including anecdotes and humor. Two common types of essay are the persuasive essay and the expository essay. In a **persuasive essay** a writer tries to convince you to share a belief, to agree with a position, or to take some action. The primary purpose of an **expository essay** is to convey or explain information.

YOUR TURN Read this excerpt from an expository essay. What explanation is the writer offering?

Personal Essay

A **personal essay** is an essay that expresses a writer's thoughts, feelings, and opinions on a subject. This type of essay allows a writer to explore the meaning of events and issues in his or her own life. Personal essays tend to be written in an informal, conversational style.

YOUR TURN As you read this excerpt, look for clues as to the essay's subject and the author's attitude toward the subject.

MEMOIR

The first we knew about it [the Montgomery bus boycott] was when Mr. Nixon called my husband early in the morning of Friday, December 2. He had already talked to Ralph Abernathy. After describing the incident, Mr. Nixon said, "We have taken this type of thing too long. I feel the time has come to boycott the buses."

—Coretta Scott King, "Montgomery Boycott"

ESSAY

Clockwise is the turning direction of the hands of a clock, and counterclockwise is the opposite of that. Since throughout the day we often stare at clocks (dial clocks that is), we have no trouble in following directions or descriptions that include those words.

But if dial clocks disappear, so will the meaning of those words for anyone who never has stared at anything but digitals.

—Isaac Asimov, "Dial Versus Digital"

PERSONAL ESSAY

One summer, along about 1904, my father rented a camp on a lake in Maine and took us all there for the month of August. We all got ringworm from some kittens . . . and my father rolled over in a canoe with all his clothes on; but outside of that the vacation was a success and from then on none of us ever thought there was any place in the world like that lake in Maine.

—E. B. White, "Once More to the Lake"