

Nonfiction is writing about real people, places, and events. You encounter nonfiction when you read a movie review, a newspaper editorial, or a history textbook. Unlike fiction, nonfiction contains mostly factual information, although the writer selects the information in accordance with his or her purpose. Nonfiction includes a wide variety of writing, from recipes and speeches to sports articles and encyclopedias. Use the following descriptions and examples to learn more about the characteristics of nonfiction.

Biography

A **biography** is a writer's account of another person's life. Typically the subject of a biography is well-known, either in history or in contemporary life. The biographer must research the subject's life, using both primary and secondary sources, in order to present the facts accurately. The best biographers strive to produce balanced accounts of their subjects, including strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures.

Autobiography

An **autobiography** is a writer's account of his or her own life. Autobiographies generally focus on their writers' personal experiences over a period of time. A **personal narrative** is a short autobiographical work that focuses on a specific experience in the writer's life. **Diaries, journals,** and **letters** are also forms of autobiographical writing.

YOUR TURN In the passage at the right, Frank McCourt describes his hospitalization for typhoid fever as a child. What aspects of the passage help you to understand how he felt?

Essay

An **essay** is a relatively short piece of writing on a single subject. Some essays are **formal**—that is, tightly structured and written in an impersonal style. Others are **informal**, with a looser structure and a more personal style. There are three common types of essays:

- **Expository essays** present or explain information and ideas.
- **Persuasive essays** present arguments and attempt to convince readers to adopt particular points of view.
- **Personal essays** express writers' thoughts and feelings about subjects.

YOUR TURN Is the passage at the right from an expository, a persuasive, or a personal essay? How do you know?

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My ankles and the back of my hand are throbbing from the tubes bringing in the blood and I don't care about boys praying for me. I can hear the swish of Sister Rita's habit and the click of her rosary beads when she leaves the room. I fall asleep and when I wake it's dark and Dad is sitting by the bed with his hand on mine.

—Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*

ESSAY

For Christmas, I begged for go-go boots. The rest of my life would be endurable if I had a pair of those white, calf-high confections with the little black heels. . . . Never mind that those little black heels are like skate blades in inclement weather. I would walk on air.

—Barbara Kingsolver, "Life Without Go-Go Boots"

Informative Article

An **informative article** provides facts about a specific subject. This type of writing takes two basic forms:

- **News stories** give objective, or unbiased, accounts of current events.
- **Feature articles** appear in magazines as well as newspapers. Many of them are human-interest stories, focusing on interesting people or events.

Informative writing also can be found in textbooks, encyclopedias, and reference books.

YOUR TURN Do you think the excerpt at the right is from a news story or from a feature article? Give reasons for your conclusion.

Interview

An **interview** is a conversation in which one person asks questions of another to obtain information. The interviewer takes notes or tape-records the conversation. Using those notes, the interviewer may then write a **profile** of the person. A profile may include the writer's own interpretations of the interviewee's responses, along with information from other sources. Another approach is for the interviewer to present interesting parts of the interview word for word, as an edited **transcript**. A transcript of an interview lets the personality of the interviewee come through in his or her own words. This is the approach used in "Unfinished Business" (page 260).

True-Life Adventure

Nonfiction can be every bit as exciting and dramatic as fiction. True tales of heroism, survival, and adventure are the subject of many popular books and articles. The excerpt at the right is a good example.

YOUR TURN The events in this excerpt happened in the past, but the writer used the present tense to relate them. What is the effect of this use of the present tense?

INFORMATIVE ARTICLE

For the children of Northern Ireland, violence is embedded in the rituals of daily life. Early curfews are the norm, public places are commonly avoided, and Catholics and Protestants rarely venture outside their own neighborhoods.

Since sectarian violence began in 1969, generations of Belfast youngsters have known only "the Troubles"—and many have grown up to repeat the cycles of terrorism and despair. Project Children aims to change all that, child by child, lifting them out of Northern Ireland and placing them with American host families for six weeks in hopes of showing them what life is like when peace is the norm.

—Gayle Tzemach, "A Respite from 'The Troubles'"

TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURE

Dark is only three hours away, and the departing H-3 pilot doesn't think the *Satori* will survive another night. She'll run out of fuel, start getting knocked down, and eventually break apart. The crew will be cast into the sea, and the helicopter pilot will refuse to drop his rescue swimmer because he can't be sure of getting him back. It would be up to the *Tamaroa* to maneuver alongside the swimmers and pull them on board, and in these seas it would be almost impossible. It's now or never.

—Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm*