



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Boston

FOR INFORMATION:

CQ Press

An Imprint of SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Matthew Byrne
Editorial Assistant: Janae Masnovi
Production Editor: Bennie Clark Allen
Copy Editor: Deanna Noga
Typesetter: C&M Digital (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Laura Webb
Indexer: Sheila Bodeli
Cover Designer: Glenn Vogel
Marketing Manager: Liz Thornton

Copyright © 2016 by CQ Press, an Imprint of SAGE Publications, Inc. CQ Press is a registered trademark of Congressional Quarterly Inc.

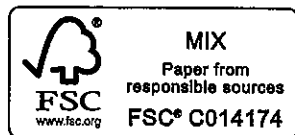
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record of this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4522-3085-6

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



15 16 17-18 19 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Write Choices

Elements of Nonfiction Storytelling

Sue Hertz
University of New Hampshire



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Boston

Preface

EVER SINCE THE TERM CREATIVE NONFICTION was coined in the early 1990s, nonfiction storytelling has enjoyed unprecedented attention and innovation. Open any magazine, literary journal, or online publication and you will find a rich array of compelling tales of fact that employ literary techniques. Personal essays, memoir, travelogue, opinion, and journalistic explorations of timely and timeless events line the table of contents. Just look at a recent *New Yorker*: Readers choose between memoir (writers remember their times with J.D. Salinger), personal essay (John McPhee ponders the death of his father while fishing for pickerel), opinion (Hendrik Hertzberg reacts to a presidential speech), and narrative journalism (Jon Lee Anderson chronicles one Haitian woman's effort to save her community). Log on to your computer or iPad, and not only must you choose among the panoply of text stories, but also related videos, audio slide-shows, and interactive graphics. Narratives of fact have never been so varied.

Given the seemingly infinite variety of ways to tell true stories, emerging writers feel often overwhelmed. They find themselves so tangled in labels and forms — Is the piece a profile or character essay? Is a first person tale rich in research considered memoir or literary journalism? Is a newspaper feature narrative? Is a radio essay? — that they lose sight of what is really important: telling a good story, taking a reader on a journey that educates as well as entertains, that strikes viscerally as well as intellectually.

"Write Choices" blasts through these boundaries, exploring the decisions all writers confront when crafting any kind of factual narrative — from a reflective essay to a *Rolling Stone* profile to an 80,000-word memoir to a video script. Rather than isolating each of these forms, "Write Choices" celebrates the decisions faced by all nonfiction storytellers. The book takes emerging writers step by step from idea to revision, analyzing the questions they will face along the way. What makes a compelling idea? What do you want to learn? What will your reader learn? What is the central mystery? What information do you need? What sources must you seek? Who are your main characters? What is the structure?

What is the narrative arc? Who is the narrator? What scenes best illustrate the message? Is dialogue appropriate? Which details are significant? Which are superfluous?

"Write Choices" asks emerging writers to ignore the labels and instead focus on telling the best story possible, to find the form that fits the content. In short, "Write Choices" serves as a commonsense approach by celebrating the universal elements shared by all true stories told with a narrative arc. The mission for us all, from the memoirist to the magazine writer, is to weave accurate and creative narratives, with a journalist's drive for content, a poet's eye for imagery, and a fiction writer's sense of drama. And in this digital age, to recognize the ways technology can enhance — not replace — our words. Because as New Yorker editor David Remnick said at a forum called "Long Form Storytelling in a Short Attention Span World," language remains our greatest invention.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

"Write Choices" targets writers of all levels, from undergraduates testing the narrative nonfiction waters to graduate students stretching their writing muscles to seasoned practitioners seeking inspiration from the masters. Based on interviews with over 60 print and digital storytellers as well as my own decades of teaching and publishing factual narratives, "Write Choices" provides insights from a wide variety of voices. Emerging writers will learn how these veterans determine critical issues, such as how Ryan Van Meter identifies a memoir's focus or how Cynthia Gorney selects the narrator's point of view for a story about child brides or the moments Phillip Toledano seeks to illustrate in his photo essays. By following the pros on their literary quests, the book's readers will acquire tools necessary to help them choose the best path for their own narratives, whether they chase a Montaigne-like idea (Is lying less sociable than silence?), an image (What did the glass castle her father talked of building symbolize about Jeannette Walls' chaotic childhood?), or an external conflict (Why would a high school sophomore stab his classmates?).

"Write Choices" will assist students in any course — be it labeled journalism or creative nonfiction — that celebrates factual tales employing narrative techniques. Or to borrow a phrase from *Creative Nonfiction* magazine: "True stories, well told."

It will also assist them to think digitally. While most writers may not prove as adept with a camera as they are with a pen, recognizing how sound and images can enrich the reading experience is vital in this digital age. Online publications such as *Atavist* may employ a team of tech stars to integrate timelines and interactive maps and videos with text, but the writer, the story's engine, can best dictate what will enhance and not detract. Besides, as online journals and e-books expand our opportunities to publish, new and seasoned writers alike will benefit

from learning how multimedia artists approach their storytelling. And perhaps how they, the steadfast writers, might too employ their computer and smart phones as creative tools.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

"Write Choices" follows chronologically the choices writers make as they craft their narratives. Each chapter is devoted to a major decision. Chapter One explores what makes a worthy subject. Chapter Two asks what form is best for the subject. Succeeding chapters cover selecting content, focus, structure, and components. The journey ends at drafting and revision. Along the way readers will encounter how multimedia artists confront the same challenges, a reminder that regardless of medium, regardless of form, we all worry about organization, tension, and rich characters.

Each chapter breaks down the choice into digestible pieces, embellished with the insights and experiences of the veteran writers as well as excerpts from their work. Scattered throughout each chapter are writing exercises based on a particular challenge. For example, following a discussion of point of view, writers are offered prompts that test their skills at telling a story through multiple narrators. By asking student writers to act on what they have just learned rather than wait until the chapter's end will, hopefully, keep them engaged and bolster their confidence. As they try and wobble, then try again and succeed, they collect the skills necessary to launch them into the next round of choices. Writers learn by writing.

Each chapter also includes two features. The first, "Challenging Choices," highlights one particular writer's experience wrestling with that chapter's central choice. Speaking in his or her own voice (Studs Terkel oral history style), the writer will tell how he or she navigated through the challenges of choosing a focus, or structuring a narrative, or revising a mishmash of a rough draft. This feature allows the reader to hear the writers walk through a dilemma in their own words rather than through the narrator's filter. By the end of the book, the emerging writer will have a working knowledge of choices made by a wide range of narrative artists.

The second feature, "Web Choices," details the decisions involved in creating a digital story or essay or a multimedia complement to a prose narrative. As with "Challenging Choices," a craftsman — which in this case could be a videographer, or a photographer, or a scriptwriter — explains how he or she tackled that chapter's choice while creating a multimedia project. How do you build character in a video? How do you narrow the focus of an audio slideshow? While "Write Choices" is aimed at an audience who loves words, and telling stories with words, it also hopes to expand the writer's understanding of narrative nonfiction in the digital age. Through "Web Choices," the text's readers will gain

insights into the similarities — and yes, differences — encountered while building a narrative based on images or sound, or both.

A FEW WORDS ON TERMINOLOGY AND SOURCES

While different scholars have different definitions of what constitutes an essay or a story, “Write Choices” emphasizes that the lines have blurred. Certain writings are clearly essays — the narrator explores an idea, untangles an intellectual puzzle — and others stories that lead the reader scene by scene to an epiphany. Yet many true tales could fall into both camps. Consequently, often in “Write Choices,” the two terms are used interchangeably. More often, the more-inclusive term *narrative* is used. Narrative, after all, covers stories told with a beginning, middle, and end, stories that employ literary techniques such as scene and dialogue. A nonfiction narrative is not a litany of facts or a news report but a carefully carved tale that takes the reader on an intellectual and emotional journey through its inventive style and colorful content.

To avoid gender favoritism, hypothetical writers mentioned throughout the book alternate between male and female. Sometimes the writer is a he and sometimes a she.

Internal refers to narratives or parts of narratives based on the writer’s own experience and reflections. *External* means content gleaned from other people’s experiences and reflections and sources such as books, media, databases, and court records.

Most of the direct quotes included in “Write Choices” were acquired during my conversations with the storytellers. These interviews were conducted by phone, e-mail, and in person. The sources of all other quotes are stated directly in the text. A list of chapter-by-chapter references can be found in this book’s final pages.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As in many narratives, the message of this book is best expressed in a scene:

The season was late winter, the setting my office. The graduate student across from me scrunched up her face in concentration, her fingers pressing against her temples. We sat knee to knee in my office, the afternoon sun illuminating her like a spotlight. Yet neither the sun’s warmth nor anything I said soothed her anxiety. “Where,” she said, pausing between each word, “am ... I ... in ... this ... story?”

A writer with a distinctive narrative voice, an ear for dialogue, and a passion for the personal essay, this student was most comfortable writing about her own experiences. Yet the project we discussed, the project causing her so much agita, had nothing to do with her past adventures. Rather, the idea she pursued — why baseball doesn’t attract African-American players — was about other people, a whole slew of other people. The goal of our conference was to whittle down this

huge topic into something manageable. Yet she was paralyzed. If she was not front and center in the story, she couldn’t envision how the narrative would unfold, let alone grasp how to begin.

What we worked on that afternoon was what “Write Choices” is all about — recognizing that crafting the project she proposed, one based on research, employed the same tactics she used to pen the kind of essays she had always written. The content may be different but the process was identical. Whether she was exploring baseball diversity or her memories of summer school, she faced the same choices from beginning to end.

At the end of our conference she looked a little less strained, relieved, it seemed, to have vented. More important, she had a plan. And that plan looked surprisingly familiar. “I can do this,” she said.

And she did.

What's the Big Idea?

Overview

Finding an idea that is as compelling to the reader as it is to the writer looms often as daunting a task as scaling Kilimanjaro — barefoot.

Yet sources of inspiration are all around if we know where to look and what questions to ask. In this first chapter, we examine the paths that could lead to narrative topics, including brainstorming, the writer's passions, conversations, observations, reading, reflection, and web cruising. Once we have a subject, we ask ourselves the hard questions — Where lies the conflict? What's surprising? Is this idea timely or timeless? — to ferret out the fresh angle.

For Bill, Luke, and Jordy Steelman

THE INVITATION WENT SOMETHING LIKE THIS: Please attend a pot-luck dinner to which you will bring a taste treat for the guests and a book idea for the hostess.

A Book Raising party, I called it. And because the only folks invited were writers and because writers, or at least all the writers I know, will put up with pretty much anything for food, I predicted that I'd host a full house. Which was a good thing because I desperately needed help. In my early 30s, I had moved from newspaper feature writing to magazine article writing and longed to leap into the world of tens of thousands of words, to dive deeply into a topic, expand my skills, and surface an author. For the past year I'd explored a variety of ideas that for one reason or another — too depressing, too simple, too boring — tanked. I hoped that the combined creative genius of my writer friends would produce a project far more electric than the ones I'd thought up on my own.

And so they arrived to this brainstorming session with zucchini casseroles and spinach salads and chocolate-raspberry cupcakes. At the door they signed a waiver conceding to the hostess all rights to all ideas. One friend, a feature writer for the Boston Herald, needed story suggestions for a Monday meeting with her editor and refused to sign. I didn't blame her. She and her hummus were still allowed in. We ate, we drank, we laughed, and then we got down to business. By the end of the evening I had what I thought were two intriguing book ideas to pitch to my literary agent.

While he loved the concept of the book raising party, he dismissed one of the two ideas, and was only mildly interested in the second. Still, he contacted an editor, who, within minutes of hearing the pitch, said it wasn't for her, thanks and hung up. Still on the line, I sighed, frustrated, muttering that I wanted to write about social issues, but that it felt like I would never land the right idea. "Sure you will," my agent said. "What you need is a vehicle."

"Like what?" I asked.

He paused, thinking. "Like a year in the life of an abortion clinic."

"Yuck," I said.

"No, it is great," he said. "Think about it."

I did, and 2 years later Prentice Hall published "Caught in the Crossfire; A Year on Abortion's Front Line," my narrative nonfiction account of how the politics and the protests on the outside affected the staff and patients on the inside of Preterm Health Services in Brookline, Massachusetts. What my agent had known, and I was in too much of a hurry to appreciate, was that subjects are everywhere, but *ideas* require a hook, or as he called it, a vehicle. My writer friends and I could talk until we were breathless about potential topics — shoe trends, addictive video games, sibling rivalry — but without a specific approach to those topics, we were merely treading water, flapping around but not moving forward. Yes I wanted to write about social issues, and sure enough, abortion is a social issue, but what about abortion did I want to learn? What angle could I pursue that would surprise? What could I discover that was new?

As writers, we are always searching for stories to tell, whether those stories are about our own lives and experiences, or the experiences and lives of others. Whether we hope to write a short essay, a 5,000-word magazine narrative, a thick book or text for a digital slide show. Yet so often we find ourselves staring into the abyss, a big empty vat, when we try to summon ideas to pursue. Our literary quests would be so much easier if we trained ourselves to think in terms of questions rather than subjects.

Subjects, indeed, float all around. A subject to explore on the page could be a hobby (fly fishing, scrapbooking) or a fear (small places, slithering snakes).

A subject could be a memory (a father's rage) or an event (a trip to Istanbul). Subjects emerge from daily media stories (small town racism, wheelchair basketball) or observations (territorial winter surfers, over-friendly dog walkers). Conversations breed potential subjects — a casual chat about willful toddlers or a ferocious brainstorming session that yields a slideshow of embarrassing middle school memories. Sometimes subjects surface when we least expect them — soaking in a steaming tub, driving on a rural back road, half-asleep on the hammock — any occasion, really, when our racing brains relax. As we let our thoughts ramble, the inner critic shuts down and from our subconscious bubble concerns (plastic bag pollution), pleasures (Red Sox tickets), recollections (sailing on a stormy Lake Michigan).

An idea for a narrative, however, is not based on a subject, but rather on a question about the subject. What do you want to learn about the impact of your father's rage? How do territorial surfers affect the sport? What's new in your town about the effort to ban plastic bags? Is a seat at Fenway Park worth the cost and hassle?

A reporter by trade and by nature, I'm an annoying fountain of queries, as my friends and family will attest. I ask about their day and their health. I ask about their feelings toward a proposed historic district. I ask why the elementary school abolished morning recess. I ask whether the wind turbine keeps them awake at night. And as a result of three decades of telling true stories, I ask myself what I want to learn from topics assigned to me and topics I drum up on my own. Ask any writer and he will tell you the same thing: Every story begins with a question.

So let's begin this journey into nonfiction storytelling by first fishing for subjects and then directing our energies into applying a hook, into discovering the mystery we want to solve about the subject. Picture yourself in a car, settling into your comfy leather seat, ready to go. First you decide on your destination. Then you figure out a route. In the craft of telling true stories, the question you pursue is your GPS. But the best part is that you don't need to tinker with an electronic tracking device to launch your idea. The only ingredient required is curiosity.

WHERE LURK SUBJECTS?

Flannery O'Connor once said, "Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days." In other words, anyone over 12 has plenty of subject matter for literary pursuits. Branch out beyond one's own life and potential topics sprout as thick as tallgrass on a prairie.

The first step toward identifying whether a subject has enough inherent drama to spawn a narrative is to stomp to shreds that noisy internal editor, the voice that shoots down every idea, every suggestion. Not all topics will be winners but you won't know what could prove fruitful if you nix rather than nurture.

And what would be easier to nurture than something that fires you up? First stop for the subject sensor: your passions.

Find subjects in passions

"I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be."

— Joseph Campbell in an interview with
Bill Moyers for the documentary "The Power of Myth"

When the mythologist Joseph Campbell coined the phrase "Follow your bliss" to help guide his students and readers toward a richer life, he could also have been speaking to writers in search of ideas. If you're bored by a topic, no doubt your reader's attention will drift off to favorite YouTube videos by Paragraph Two — so it only makes sense that writers seek ideas within subjects about which they are passionate.

Todd Balf is an avid outdoorsman. He loves to bike and run and kayak and hike. He loves sports, all sports, and is fascinated by how humans push themselves physically and emotionally in pursuit of a dream. Little wonder, then, that he has made a career out of writing and editing for adventure magazines, such as *Outside*, *Esquire*, and *Men's Journal*. His first book, "The Last River," was about a tragic kayak trip taken by some of the top U.S. paddlers down the Tsangpo River Gorge in Tibet, his second, "The Darkest Jungle" about the failed 1854 expedition to find a route across the isthmus of Panama, and his third, "Major," a biography of one of the earliest stars in competitive bicycling, an African-American named Marshall Major Taylor. "I get my ideas mostly from what I'm passionate about," says Balf. "Because I'm not particularly expert in anything, I use my inexperience and curiosity to feed ideas." While he cheerfully admits that his passion is adventure and travel, he adds that his definition of adventure is broad. "It could mean growing a really good tomato or it could be trudging across a jungle in Panama," he says. "The mindset is always the same; you have something that you aren't sure you can do, you're committed to wanting to do it, and then you write about that experience and journey to getting to it or not getting to it."

When asked how they come up with ideas, writers will often say one word: "theme." Just as athletes migrate to specific sports and chefs to certain cuisines, writers have favorite topics they pursue again and again. Tracy Kidder, for one, spent his early energies writing books about process — the process of building a computer, of building a house, of educating fifth graders. Susan Orlean has devoted decades to writing about people and their obsessions, be they a New York City fishmonger or a Spanish bullfighter. Born of a Nigerian father and Finnish mother, Faith Adiele centers much of her writing on identity.

As much as I'd like to call myself a generalist, with a portfolio containing tales ranging from problem feet to ghost hunts, the subjects that ignite my curiosity

inevitably involve people confronting adversity. Parents of homicide victims learning to cope. Parents of young children learning to juggle child-raising with caring for their aging parents. Scientists struggling to conduct their research amid political turmoil that threatens their life's work.

What are your passions? Are you an avid road biker? Traveler? Family genealogist? Quilter? Egyptologist? Are you fascinated by architecture? African-American history? Do you find yourself flipping to magazine stories about women struggling to balance ambition and family? To stories of survival? To entrepreneurs creating life-altering devices and services? What subjects pique your curiosity? Harbor mystery and fascination, perhaps even frustration? Often we write best about topics that perplex us the most.

Find subjects in conversations

During my years as a regular contributor to *Boston Magazine*, an editor once asked me to write a BIG story on day care. The father of a toddler, he found himself in frequent conversations with other parents about problem nannies and overcrowded day care centers, and he figured that if that many of his peers were obsessing about child care, then so were plenty of *Boston Magazine's* subscribers. He didn't have a specific angle; finding one was my job. Ordinarily, I would have been happy with the freedom, but in this case, I clutched. Single at the time, I lived alone, my daily contact with children limited to waving to my landlord's

TRY THIS

1. What do you love? Fashion? Rock climbing? Vintage cars? Reggae? Think of an experience involving that passion. Perhaps you recall a huge fight you had with a parent about a clothing choice, or a terrifying moment as you dangled from a ledge, your mountaineering harness coming loose. Now what about that moment, that experience do you want to understand? The passion is the subject. What you want to learn is the angle, the idea. Start writing, beginning with the critical moment. Where does it lead?
2. Flip through CNN.com. What topics enrage you? Annoy you? Entertain you? What do you want to learn about the issue? Research stats, facts, and other people's experiences about that topic. Where does the research lead? What central question surfaces? If the topic is gun control, what do you want to learn about firearm rights? How a local group is waging war against the National Rifle Association? How your grandfather's devotion to hunting changed your mind about gun owners' rights?

two young daughters who lived on the first floor of our apartment building. What I knew about daycare was what everyone knew — that finding someone to care for your child with love and humor and healthy snacks and lots of outdoor time was tough. But a story about the trials of finding quality day care wouldn't make it past the pitch. Too trite. Too obvious. Frustrated, I vented to my carpool mate Barb en route to our teaching jobs at the University of New Hampshire. "What about a story from the day care provider's side?" she suggested. Her mother-in-law owned and directed a day care center just north of Boston, and while she prided herself on the attention and education she offered at her center, the visits and inquisitions and demands she received from the state were daunting at best. Ever since Tookie the Clown had been arrested and found guilty of child abuse in another Massachusetts center, the state had been relentlessly aggressive in monitoring the men and women who cared for other people's children. Some might say too aggressive. What, then, were the challenges of providing quality care in an era of hyper state vigilance and helicopter parents?

"Brilliant!" I said. The surprise factor was great; who thought of the day care provider's perspective? The editor agreed. After weeks of shadowing both sides — the day care providers and the social workers assigned to assess childcare centers' safety and quality, as well as talking to parents and dependent care experts, I had the answer to my central question: While all parties agreed that child safety was paramount, the state would better serve providers, and thus children, if it served as an advocate rather than adversary. Between the low pay, long days, constant criticism by parents, and social workers demanding pounds of paperwork, more fans, and fewer electric cords, the providers were run ragged. "Who Cares for the Child?" offered all sides but leaned sympathetically toward the women and men who care for children as a livelihood. Had my carpool mate Barb never mentioned her mother-in-law, I would have missed this angle.

One of my grad students, too, profited well from a conversation. During a casual chat with a friend, she heard the story of a dramatic winter rescue on Mt. Washington, New Hampshire's notorious tallest peak that until recently, held the world record for strongest recorded winds. A group of volunteers, skilled climbers from the North Country, faced the brutal gales and below-zero temperatures to recover a stranded hiker. Amy, an athletic blonde who loves being outdoors in all kinds of weather, perked up, her story antennae erect. What was the name of the volunteer group? she asked. Mountain Rescue Service. How long have they operated? Since 1972. Why would anyone risk his life in the legendary wind, cold, and snow of the White Mountains to rescue unprepared hikers? No answer. Amy decided to find out and spent the next year learning how the Mountain Rescue Service climbers operated, and the next year following them out on rescues. The answer to that original question proved the pulse of her MFA thesis, a portion of which became an article for the Appalachian Mountain Club's magazine.

Dialogue prompts reflection, and reflection can lead to a piece of memoir, or a personal essay. Bonnie Rough and her new husband spent many an hour debating the wisdom of having their own children, weighing the risk of passing on a rare condition for which Rough was a carrier. The discussions inspired an essay that was published in the New York Times Modern Love column and later a memoir titled "Carrier."

While working at the front info desk of Powell's Books in Portland, Oregon, Kevin Sampsell exchanged words with a customer that led him to mull his own life choices, which led him to write the essay "I'm Jumping Off the Bridge." The customer, a "frazzled-looking young guy" named Chris, stood before Sampsell and announced that he was going to hurl himself off the Burnside Bridge. Sampsell kept him talking and called for help, and 30 minutes later an ambulance arrived. Chris was safe, at least for the moment, but for months afterward, Sampsell ruminated about his failed relationships, his responsibility to his son, his depression. He, too, contemplated suicide. But instead he wrote about the experience and his epiphany: he needed to live to love his son. The end to his essay circles back to that initial conversation with Chris:

The next morning I woke up and shaved and took a shower and drank my coffee. I went to work and took my position behind the info desk. The store opened two hours late because it was New Year's Day. Customers came filing in, looking for books, looking for stories. Looking for the bathroom. I sat there, feeling fresh-faced and feeling like a survivor. I was ready to help anyone who needed it.

Conversations with friends, colleagues, aunts, uncles, classmates, and even siblings could guide one to rich territory. With a nudge, most people will share their opinions, their news, their dreams, their worries. If a neighbor complains about the effects of a juice cleanse, chances are others have suffered ill experiences, and a story is born. Or perhaps the chatter will lead the writer to try her own cleanse and write about it.

To catch provocative conversations, one need go only as far as one's laptop or smartphone; Cyberspace is awash in complaints, postures, and bold statements. Anonymity protects and lifts the filter. Online publications post reader comments, and while some of those commenting hope only to stir debate, perhaps there's a kernel of an essay idea lodged in a tirade about Michelle Obama's love of kale chips. Facebook and Twitter provide plenty of fodder to peruse as friends and followers converse digitally. About what are people complaining? Rejoicing? What kinds of comments surface when you search for random topics, such as "movies," "shoe trends," or perhaps something timely such as "legalize marijuana"? Many media writers troll aggregator sites such as Reddit for ideas. A news brief might grab them — say "Man killed wife, parrot because they talked too much" — and they start mulling story options, such as how do pets impact

relationships? What are the most bizarre reasons for crime in this region? Or one of the site's "SubReddits" (categories such as jokes, music, creep, fitness) might spark an idea for a personal essay. A title such as "Instagram Sunglasses — yay or nay?" could launch a reflective piece about the role of social media in our daily routines. Where are the boundaries?

Find subjects in observations

Writers notice things. Perhaps it is because we are fascinated by human nature, by what people do and why they do it. Perhaps it is because we have developed a keen sense of the absurd, or just the unusual. Or perhaps it is because we are just nosey. Regardless of the reason, writers observe, and often out of those observations sprout story ideas. While watching women's soccer on television several years ago, the author and journalist Gay Talese became fascinated with a young Chinese woman who missed a shot and lost the game against the United States. How does she endure? he wondered. He flew to China to interview her and write her story. Earlier in his career, Talese, a New Yorker, became fascinated with the building of the Verrazano Bridge, imagining what it was like to work on something so high, so dangerous. "The Bridge" chronicled the building from the workers' perspective.

TRY THIS

1. Gather three friends and ask them to each write down five things people do that annoy them. You, too, make a list. Then start talking. For each topic that flares red, write down a question that you might pursue in an essay. How do you deal with coworkers who text during dinner? How do you feel about casual sex? Should you stay friends with someone who can't keep secrets?
2. Think of a conversation you once had that left you with more questions than answers. Write down the questions and ponder how they could be approached on the page. Of these questions, isolate the ones that pose the most promise for a thorough exploration that will lead to understanding. For instance, not long ago, an aging relative told me that my father's side of the family was Jewish, that most of his relatives, including his parents, had left Germany in the 1930s to escape the concentration camps, not because they thought business was better in the United States, which was the story I had always heard. Since all the players, including my dad, were dead, I had a litany of questions. Why the cover up? How many relatives died in gas chambers? But the prompt I would choose for an essay, the question that would lead to a layered exploration would be: "How has this knowledge impacted my sense of self and family?"

Likewise, Jon Krakauer was intrigued enough by the sight at an Arizona mini-mart of women dressed in 19th century garb that he began asking questions. Who are these women, he asked the locals, wearing high-collared, long-sleeved, ankle-length dresses on a sweltering summer day? To his surprise, he learned that the nation's largest community of Mormon fundamentalists, a group who believed entry into heaven required polygamy, lived in Colorado City, Arizona, not Utah. Several thousand polygamists lived in the town under the control of a former tax accountant, the husband of over 75 women. "Under the Banner of Heaven," an examination of religious fundamentalism, resulted.

Observations don't have to involve thousands of polygamists to provide idea ammunition; often something we notice in our daily routines will crank the engine. Reflecting on random moments with his children — his toddler daughter insisting she walk alone, his son explaining why he dumped sand on the patio, his oldest daughter, now a Tibetan Buddhist nun, explaining at six that she and the man she spoke with were "not the same person" — Will Baker wrote the essay "My Children Explain the Big Issues." The frustration and humiliation of being unable to access her gynecologist's examination table from her wheelchair prompted Nancy Mairs to write "Sex and the Gimp Girl," an essay exploring the ways our culture views women with disabilities specifically and women as a sex in general.

A sign I spotted every time I drove or biked through Ipswich, a neighboring town near my home on the North Shore of Massachusetts, launched my freelance relationship with The Boston Globe Magazine. "Voice Lessons: All Kinds," the sign read. Considering that during party sing-a-longs I was relegated to the kitchen and that years later my own son would say to me, "Mommy, when you sing you make babies cry," the thought that voice lessons would be of any value was, well, laughable. But as I sat that Friday afternoon at the desk of a Boston Globe Magazine editor prattling off Big idea after Big idea, watching her head shake like a bobble toy at all my story pitches, I blurted, "What if I take singing lessons?"

She stopped rifling through her papers. "Take singing lessons and write about it?" she asked.

I nodded, eyeing her warily.

"Yes!!!" she said exuberantly. "People love those kinds of stories."

The opening line of the essay that followed: *I sing like a mule.*

Find subjects in reading

While observation kickstarted my Boston freelance career, reading launched my Seattle writing life. Fresh out of college and new to the Pacific Northwest, I needed ideas to pitch to newspaper editors with the hope that first they'd hire me as a freelancer, and then, wowed by my skill, or at least my willingness to write for cheap,

they'd hire me as staff. At least that was the plan. But first I needed ideas. So I buried myself in the Seattle Public Library's periodical rack and there, in the classifieds of the Seattle Weekly, was the ad. "Hire a Wife," it said. "Will clean, buy groceries, pick up theatre tickets, anything a wife would do except have sex." I called the phone number, interviewed the woman behind the ad, and won the lottery. Not only was her work noteworthy, but also so was she: The author of the ad was the daughter of actor Anthony Quinn, (Think "Zorba the Greek"). Tired of California, Christina Quinn had packed everything she owned into a VW bug and drove north. Without a job, she needed income, and watering other people's plants and feeding their cats was one way. The idea became an assignment, which led to more assignments, which led, eventually, to a staff feature-writing job — with health benefits!

Read everything, in print and online. Read what you don't usually read, what the people you want to write about read. Gems of ideas lurk in all kinds of text in all kinds of places. In the classifieds. In news briefs. In medical journals. In Car and Driver. In court files. During a one-day conference called "Law School for Journalists," an assistant attorney general for the state of New Hampshire told his audience that while most journalists were interested in only three or four high profile cases of murder for hire and cop killing, the state's court filing cabinets were teeming with fascinating cases. Jennie Latson, who covered courts and cops for a variety of newspapers, including the Houston Chronicle, nodded her head enthusiastically at the suggestion; some of her best stories, she said, came from rifling through files buried in court cabinets, directing her to assaults and robberies and lawsuits that had escaped media attention. Not as sensational as the high profile cases, they were nevertheless quirky and complicated and dramatic enough to make good reads.

Jonathan Harr's book "The Lost Painting" sprang from a short article in The New York Times about the unveiling in Dublin of a Caravaggio painting that had been missing for centuries. Likewise, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc discovered the idea for "Random Family," her acclaimed saga of crime, love, drugs, and poverty in the South Bronx, in a Newsday brief about the trial of a fabulously successful heroin dealer. Susan Orlean reads specialized publications — dog magazines, hunting magazines — to find people with specific interests. My editor at the Hartford Courant snagged most of his ideas from reading newspapers and magazines from other cities. One morning as he read a story in the Dallas Morning News featuring a man complaining that no one took him seriously because he was too good-looking, lighting struck. "How about a story on what it is like being a drop-dead handsome man?" my editor said, turning to me. Please no, I responded. But he prevailed, and I spent the next few days asking female coworkers to recommend men they deemed not just attractive, but gorgeous. Jon Hamm or Jamie Foxx dazzling. I called the candidates, playing it straight, using the same neutral tone I used when talking to high school principals, as I asked them to explain the hardships (and benefits) of sporting looks that others envied. After a pause, then a guffaw, most of the guys agreed. They talked about the burden of friends using them as

bait at bars, of women propositioning them at parties, of colleagues assuming that they are bubbleheads. I'd like to think that my stories on more pressing issues, say elder abuse in wealthy suburbs, earned more attention, but I fear that "Drop Dead Handsome" was my best read story during my tenure at the Courant.

Find subjects Web cruising

Essayist Eula Biss found inspiration navigating the web. Fascinated by telephone poles, she gleaned from the hundreds of websites she perused that telephone poles had been used for lynching, which fed into her interest in racism. The essay "Time and Distance Overcome," a meditation on race and connection and telephone poles, resulted, and is the opening essay in her prize-winning collection "Notes from No Man's Land."

No telling what an afternoon of online reading or listening or viewing will birth. Start with digital publications, from literary journals (Brevity, River Teeth), to media sites (Salon.com, NPR.org), to individual writer's sites (Rottin' in Denmark), or aggregators such as Longreads.com that publish what their editors deem the best narratives of the past and present. Let the variety of subjects, of approaches wash over you. What thoughts emerge? Does the essay on comfort food inspire memories of past meals, past relationships? How about the piece on the alcoholic lawyer whose addiction imperiled his clients? Thoughts on other professionals plagued by demons? Does the essay about the fraternity guy's gay experience spawn questions about sexuality and gender?

Dig deep. On media sites, particularly those with a hyperlocal focus (Patch.com, Uptown Messenger, Buffalo Rising), click on the links to individual stories. What are the pressing issues in Buffalo? New Orleans? Carlisle, Pennsylvania? Any similar controversies bubbling near you? Town-gown conflicts? Land use wars? Charter school vs. public school scuffles? David vs. Goliath encounters?

When searching for ideas on trends — what people are buying, doing, researching, studying, cooking, crafting — my undergraduate students are quick to hit the social network sites — Twitter, Facebook, Linked-In, Friendster.com. If they want to learn the latest in online gaming, they go to Hi5. If they want to learn more about environmental activism, they log into Care2. When they tire of those, they move onto blogs, seeking insight into the opinions found on Xanga.com, Blogspot, and WordPress. There's no guarantee that a diamond of an idea will evolve, but, hey, it is worth a try.

Cruise the blogosphere. Skip over the legions of vacation posts and baby photos, and ferret out blogs about people's fascinations. Google's Blogsearch can take you on a wide variety of trips through politics, sports, fashions, and odd hobbies. Blogs on media sites can provide a writer's insight into a subject about which he has been researching and writing, or it can serve as an ongoing conversation. The New York Times has dozens of blogs, ranging from a professional writer posting

stories and dialogue about the college process to Beltway analysis to car maintenance to monitoring the health care industry to parenting to climate change. Searching through blogs is sort of like shopping at Marshall's; you know there are great stories lurking but it may take a few visits to snag one. Be patient.

Find subjects in reflection

No one ever really knows why someone would take his or her own life, and when that person is your father, your beloved father who bought you and your sisters boxes of grapefruits the week before he shot himself but didn't leave a note, the confusion and hurt is deep and lasts forever. And if you are a writer like Joan Wickersham, you use your words to seek some answers, or at least some understanding. You start out in the genre that is most comfortable — fiction — but after years of writing a novel around suicide and recognizing that the imagined parts were weak while the parts based on your experience were rich and compelling, you try telling the tale as nonfiction. And it worked; "The Suicide Index" is a memoir so textured and elegant that it was nominated for the National Book Award.

Or you could be Jan Waldron, who was 15 and overwhelmed when she gave up her infant daughter for adoption, only to reconnect with her girl 11 years later, the beginning of a turbulent and extraordinary relationship. Through her years studying literature and writing as both an undergraduate and graduate student, Waldron had written around this most complicated and central bond but eventually realized that she needed to tell the whole story, completely, honestly and thoroughly. "Giving Away Simone" earned Waldron a guest appearance on "Good Morning America," hardback and soft cover editions, and years of grateful letters from readers wrestling with their own adoption issues.

Often, writers new to telling stories in the first person fret that their lives are boring, that they don't have the dramatic history of a family suicide or teen pregnancy to share on the page. Yet they have experienced loss and success, family complications (whose family isn't complicated?), rejection, acceptance, love, fear — all the emotions and life events that harbor great literary potential.

When you think about it, all writing boils down to the same handful of themes. Consider the events that have shaped you, challenges you have overcome, people you admire. Consider changes you have weathered, observed. Consider situations that have disturbed you. What key moments surface when you close your eyes and reflect on your past? Your present?

As the essayist Ryan Van Meter says, "Life gives you one, maybe two essays, in which you just have to write down what happened. Most of what you get from life experience is anecdotes." And those anecdotes, those scenes of car crashes and adolescent angst, require the author to explore further what they mean, to reflect, make connections, perhaps between that anecdote and other anecdotes. "That's the work," says Van Meter, "the figuring out."

TRY THIS

1. Make a list of five international recent events, five national events, five regional events, and five super-local events. Underneath each, make another list of how that event has influenced you or people you know. What questions simmer? How has immigration reform impacted the migrant workers in general and one migrant worker specifically at the local apple orchard? What do your friends and relatives from other countries think of the proposed changes in U.S. immigration laws? What is their experience in their adopted country? Or if you are new to this country, what is your experience?
2. Pick a Twitter message — say, Creative Nonfiction's tweet about how everyone gets rejection letters, even Kurt Vonnegut and Madonna — and write five questions about your own experience with the subject. In the case of rejection, #1: What was the hardest "No" you ever received? #2: What did you learn from the rejection? #3: How do others you know deal with rejection? #4: Who in your circle deals with rejection the worst? #5: What have you learned from his behavior? Which of these questions intrigues you the most? What scenes illustrate the situation?

WEB CHOICES

Videographer Ann Silvio Seeks the Story in the Subject

Her dream was to be a longform writer for The New Yorker, but the only job Ann Silvio could find when she arrived in New York in her mid-20s was as a fact checker for Esquire. She freelanced a bit, too, but when a better-paying job as a research editor at The Boston Globe Magazine presented itself, she jumped. Little did she know then that her new job would lead to a whole new vocation: multimedia storytelling. When the Globe decided to move wholeheartedly into new media and sought staffers interested in audio and video stories, Silvio raised her hand. Why not? she thought. Within 3 years, she became one of the newspaper's most adept and sought-out multimedia talents and documentary producers, so talented in fact that she was soon scooped up by "60 Minutes" and became the senior producer who launched the online "60 Minutes Overtime."

Like any good reporter, she recognizes that a video requires a tension thread and a narrative arc. But as a multimedia storyteller, she also knows that not all stories lend themselves to audio and video. Her mission on every assignment is to ferret out the angle that best lends itself to her medium. And that's not always easy.

For instance, in June of 2010, as the Boston Celtics battled the Los Angeles Lakers for the NBA title, Silvio was asked to accompany a print reporter to shoot a video of the World Feed

(Continued)

(Continued)

Truck parked just outside the TD Banknorth Garden's doors. The focus of the text story was the international marketing of the NBA games, and Silvio's video would illustrate the hub-bub in this truck in which technicians would broadcast feeds of the Boston Celtics vs. Los Angeles Lakers Game #3 all around the world. But what Silvio saw in the World Feed Truck — a bunch of American producers sitting in front of computers and soundboards, pressing buttons as they sent the game to media outlets around the planet — wouldn't work for her medium. The week after her video ran, she reflected on her reporting and editing choices and how she found the story:

Nothing visual, I thought. Where is the action? Where is the audio?

The reporter got a good quote out of the vice president of the world unit, but he was not interesting to watch. I miked him up and shot him but didn't use any of it.

The game started, and I didn't have enough to tell the story. So I took my equipment, walked over to the Garden and started poking around. I began seeing these guys, none of whom spoke English, in separate rooms broadcasting the game. These guys were so animated, both physically and in the sound of their voices. There was this comic element, this cacophony of sounds, of these guys yelling in Italian and Japanese and Spanish. I asked, "Is this okay?" and started shooting. I thought, This is my video! This is my lede!

But then I had tech problems. I had this great footage of these guys but I couldn't hear over the roar of the crowd. I spent part of the night hunting down cables to plug into their audio feeds. I went into each room to get isolated sound from them, which took an hour and a half.

When I came back to the Globe, my editor asked how it went. I find that the first thing out of my mouth in conversation with editors after returning from the field is usually my best material. "Pretty good," I said. "I captured all these announcers speaking their languages doing play by play for their home audiences."

The first thing I did was watch all my interviews, which create the spine of the story. Interviews are the A roll. B roll is all footage that isn't interview. If you don't have a B roll to support the interviews, you don't have enough. You need interesting visuals and sounds. You're always trying to get variety since people get bored watching someone talking.

You quickly scrub your B roll to get a sense of what is there. You grab some clips, build a time line, a rough cut, and show it to the editors. We call that chunking up a story. You establish mini chapters by creating a time line of chunks. In the NBA story, I started with the French guys, then the Japanese guys, then the Spanish guys. I came up with the order of chunks, moving from one section to another. I put the voice over on a separate track. It took me 6 hours to edit and write a script for the NBA story. For me, that's fast.

WHAT'S THE QUESTION?

My sixth-grade teacher Mrs. Crawford summed up the heart of narrative when she said, simply, "Every story has a problem." And it is that problem, or question,

that propels the reader from page to page; we read to find out how or if the problem was resolved, how the question is answered. As writers, we need to figure out long before we lower our fingers to the keyboard just what problem we hope to solve in our research or reflection. Otherwise, we sit in that car in those comfy leather seats, ready to go but with no destination. The central question the writer pursues directs the thinking and content collecting.

For Terry Tempest Williams, the question she pursued in her memoir "Refuge" was how do we find peace in change? In the spring that her mother was ill with ovarian cancer, the Great Salt Lake began to rise, threatening to flood the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, a spiritual haven for Williams. By weaving scenes from these two events, Williams takes the reader — and herself — on a journey to a greater understanding about control and release, about acceptance.

For John Branch, the question was how could a group of 16 elite skiers and snowboarders, many of whom knew the mountain intimately, get caught in an avalanche in western Washington? The answer, collected from months of interviews and research, is "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek," a multichapter narrative supported by interactive graphics, videos, and slideshows that explains how even the most experienced, most technologically savvy skiers can fall victim to nature.

For Chris Jones, the question was how do the remains of a soldier get from the sands of Iraq to a cemetery in Scottsburg, Indiana? After learning on CNN.com about the death of Sgt. Joseph Montgomery, Jones spent half a year tracing the route of the military man's final journey. His piece, "The Things that Carried Him," told the story in reverse — opening with his burial and concluding with the IED that killed Montgomery. By the time we meet Joey in the last pages, we understand the loss his family in particular and all military families in general endure.

Writing is an exploration, either of one's own experiences or someone else's. The question that launches the exploration can be factual (Chris Jones' pursuit of a soldier's final journey) or esoteric (Terry Tempest Williams' seeking insights into what it means to be human amid devastating change). The central question will lead to other questions, a plot and multiple subplots. Those subquests will lead the writer on various paths, but all flow back to the main thread, building context and support. Think of the main question as the spine and the subquestions as the vertebrae.

For some writers, the central query is inherent in the idea. Isabel Wilkerson interviewed over 1,000 people for her book "The Warmth of Other Suns" as she sought the answer to why thousands of African-Americans migrated from the South over a 56-year period. How does one enjoy the mundane after the loss of a child? asked Donald Murray in many essays he wrote after the death of his 20-year-old daughter. Why did I leave New York, asks Joan Didion in her essay "Good-Bye to All That?"

For others the idea is still fuzzy, and the challenge is how to zero in on that one angle. Often the answer lies in determining the core conflict.

Where lies the conflict?

Abby, a former grad student of mine, was a polished wordsmith who could wax eloquently on the page about politics, geography, and history. What she had yet to master was telling a story. An indefatigable researcher, she would plumb the Internet, interview, and observe for every subject she chose, and then she would write great blocks of background and scenes and dialogue. The only problem was, the stories meandered in all directions. While she had fascinating subjects and gobs of information, she didn't have a central question that she pursued. Without a central question, the stories offered no central message. Without a central message there was no narrative arc, and without an arc, there was no story.

One afternoon she appeared at my office door hoping to chat about her latest project. I was ready. Proposed subject: a woman who owned a small cosmetics company in New York City. "What about her?" I asked. "What's the question you'll chase in your research?"

Abby scrunched up her face. "I *hate* when you ask that," she said. She didn't have a question, she admitted, only the desire to write about this woman who faced competition from cosmetic Goliaths such as Macy's and Sephora. "Isn't that the question?" I asked.

She looked at her knees, her hands clasped tightly together. I pressed on. "Aren't you curious about how an independent small-time cosmetics boutique can survive?"

Well, she nodded slightly, yeah. And off she went, devoting most of her Thanksgiving break to interviewing and observing the woman entrepreneur in her Greenwich Village storefront, as well as researching background on the mascara and blush industry. What she learned was a testament to the will and creativity of the woman, as well as a keen business savvy, who figured out how to provide services that cosmetic chain stores cannot. In a few weeks, Abby submitted a draft that could have been titled "The Little Make-Up Company that Could."

At the heart of the journey of all nonfiction narratives, from reflective essays to personality profiles to true crime books, is some kind of conflict. The conflict provides the tale's tension, the thread that keeps the reader reading. Even a John McPhee essay on an object, say a river, explores inherent challenges, say how a proposed dam would impact the river and its ecology, not to mention those who use the river for livelihood and pleasure. Without that conflict, that thread, the story would be just blobs of information without a string connecting them.

Like you, your readers are busy. They are inundated with school and work and family demands. They are bombarded by different media screaming Watch me! Read me! Listen to me! It's your job, your writerly duty, to provide a strong enough angle into a subject that your readers will choose to devote their attention to your tale. You just can't say, "This subject interests me" and think that your reader will automatically agree. Instead, think of your reader. Why would a reader be interested in this subject? What will the reader learn? Terry Tempest Williams' "Refuge" was a personal tale that resonated universal themes about grief and denial and acceptance. Chris Jones pursued a timely tale that, too, illuminated how humans deal with death and tragedy. Both answered the most important question writers can ask themselves:

So what? Why would anyone want to read this?

Is the subject timely or timeless?

After "So what?" the next critical query is "Why now?" Clearly, if you write for a daily publication, either in print or online, the time element is critical. You are competing against other stories that are newsworthy that day, that week, and you need to update the reader, tell him what's new about the subject, what he doesn't know. If the time-sensitive issue is, say, a drought, stories might focus on who is affected (farmers, gardeners, children seeking swimming holes), and essays might ponder the author's reaction or reflections on water deprivation. If you write for publications that appear less regularly, say monthly, you have a bit more leeway but your reader — and editor — will still ask why. What about the drought will be relevant in two months?

Timeless subjects, too, require an angle, a question that will elicit fresh insights into subjects we have read about again and again. Tom French has built a career writing narratives about age-old issues — teenage relationships, murder, imprisonment — giving them life by viewing them through a specific lens. The murder of a mother and her two daughters vacationing in Florida had been covered ad nauseum by the daily press. But in French's hands, the facts became an

TRY THIS

Make a timeline of your life's major events. Zoom in on one that illustrates a choice you made and the consequence you experienced. Write the story (anecdote) of the choice and what happened afterward. Sit back and analyze. What have you learned from this experience? What do you want your reader to learn? How can you revise this to evolve from a central question that lures the reader from beginning to end?

exploration into good and evil, into trust and depravity. Instead of reporting just what happened, in the Pulitzer-winning "Angels and Demons," French shows the events through character, through the husband and father left behind, the detectives hell-bent on finding the killer who took the Rogers women out on his boat, bound them, assaulted them, tied a rope attached to an anchor around their necks, and then tossed them into Tampa Bay. Once the key suspect is arrested, we understand the drama through the eyes of the prosecutors. Through French's indefatigable research, the crime becomes a psychological drama, rich in emotion and complexity.

French tackled the concept of imprisonment by immersing himself in the daily routine of the Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo. Again, his intensive research provides a layered narrative that explores the universal themes of exile and loss, betrayal, extinction, and freedom, and the human's role in all of it. The angle is this specific zoo populated with its specific people and animals.

On a more personal level, one of my grad students announced one afternoon in his second year that his MFA thesis would center on another timeless topic: adoption. I waited, assuming that an elaboration would follow. But instead, silence. So I asked the obvious: What about adoption? What's new? What's a compelling angle?

He paused, rubbed a hand through his hair, and said that, well, he was adopted. He had found his birth mother, written to her, sent her a photo, but had never heard back. He tried again. Still, no answer. He knew that she had a family, two young daughters and a husband, and was a volunteer at her church and kids' schools. Intellectually, he recognized that she might have kept secret the son she bore as a college student, that she couldn't contact him for fear of what his existence could do to her family equilibrium. Emotionally, he was devastated. How could she not want to meet him?

I couldn't mend the wound, but I could help him think about what he wanted to write that might provide some healing insight. So we talked about what disturbed him most, and out of the list, which question might resonate most with an audience. His conclusion: How did open adoption laws and the resulting efforts to find birth children and parents impact the players? With that question in mind, he had an objective to guide his research and ultimately the writing of the thesis.

Curiosity fuels the narrative quest

In a talk Joan Didion gave at the University of California, a talk that later became her much-lauded essay "Why I Write," the revered writer spoke of writing to answer the images and questions in her head.

"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. Why did the oil refineries

TRY THIS

1. Timeless ideas are based on universal themes, such as grief, resilience, and perseverance. What friends, family members, or acquaintances have experienced one of life's major challenges? What is their story, and how can you tell it?
2. Timely ideas answer the questions so what? Why now? When stuck, think of a trend and how that trend impacts you, impacts others, or both. For instance, as more parents and professionals use Facebook to communicate with friends and colleagues, how have the original users — the under-25 set — reacted? How do your peers use social media? What is your relationship to current social media trends? What do you love and hate about them? What do others?

around Carquinez Straits seem sinister to me in the summer of 1956? Why have the night lights in the bevatron burned in my mind for twenty years? What is going on in these pictures in my mind?"

When considering the central question, tap into your own curiosity about the subject. After my initial conversation with my agent about a book on a year in the life of an abortion clinic, I pondered what I wanted to know. What was it like to work as a nurse in an abortion clinic, to park your car blocks away so that the protesters shouting outside your employer's door every morning wouldn't recognize the license plate and follow you home? What was it like to work as a doctor and receive daily threats to your life and your family's safety? What was it like to be a woman wrestling with the toughest decision of your life while navigating through a morass of bloody fetus posters and protesters screaming "Murderer!"? What was it like to await a Supreme Court decision to know whether or not you should show up for work, or for a scheduled appointment? When forced to provide one central question, I settled on this: How do the politics and protests on the outside affect the people on the inside of an abortion clinic?

And think of the essay, of how it originated with questions pondered by Michel de Montaigne as he sat in his French chateau overlooking the Bordeaux countryside. A lawyer by trade, he thought he'd let his mind rest when he retired, but instead he found his thoughts racing, questions bubbling like fizz in a fine champagne, and an urgent need to answer those questions in writing. What is a father's responsibility for his children? How does romantic love destroy a man's freedom? What did he think about vanity? About presumption? About glory? And so he wrote, and wrote, and wrote. Not solving anything, except his need to explore his thoughts on paper about this wide range of subjects.

Think, too, about the question behind every nonfiction narrative. In his book, "Among Schoolchildren," Tracy Kidder seeks to learn what it takes to motivate and educate 10-year-old students from a wide range of economic backgrounds. In "Soul of a New Machine" Kidder asks, "How is a computer created?" Susan Orlean wants to understand why her subjects find their chosen profession, or hobby, enthralling. The trick, Todd Balf knows, is to ferret out a fresh angle within a subject about which he cares deeply. In the case of his first book, "The Last River," he was among many writers vying to tell the story of the tragic venture. But one of the reasons that the paddlers chose Balf as their storyteller was that he wasn't interested in just rattling off the step-by-step account of what happened as they tried to be the first to ride "the Everest of rivers." Instead, he planned to explore the personal and professional impact on the kayakers of the loss of their friend and their failed excursion.

As my friend Sheila Anne Feeney says, if you have an organic interest in people and their experiences, you will always find that angle, that question. For Feeney, who has written for newspapers and magazines on both coasts, the central question always involves, as she says, "the people on the ground." When assigned to write a behind-the-scene feature about an NBA playoff game at Seattle Center, Feeney wrote about the tongue inspector, the woman who stood at the gate and asked attendees to open their mouths so that she could check for gum. A few years and a 3,000-mile move later, as she listened to her editors for a New York magazine discuss a proposed policy to prevent gay men and women from serving as foster parents, Feeney wondered what the kids in the foster care system thought. What she learned was that the kids *preferred* gay foster parents. In the kids' view, gay adults were less likely to want a foster child for money, and more likely to seek children to nurture, love, and shelter. As one boy in a do-rag and oversized pants told Feeney, gay parents spend money on them, pay attention to them, provide them with beds and clothes. "Yo man," he said, "they even buy you soy milk."

Now there's a story.

CHALLENGING CHOICES

The Washington Post's Jacqueline Salmon
Confronts The Bad Idea

Jacqueline L. Salmon has coauthored three books, including one about the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan that spent a month on The New York Times bestseller list, and written for numerous magazines, including GQ and Glamour. But it was during her 23 years as a

reporter for the Washington Post that she learned best how to navigate around one of the inherent minefields of the writing life: the editor-generated bad idea. Any writer who has worked closely with an editor knows the trepidation when the boss opens with, "What about a story on" Holidays are particularly dicey, since Valentine's Day and Thanksgiving and Easter come every year, year after year. Original approaches are at a premium. At Christmastime a while back, Salmon's editor suggested an idea that Salmon sensed wouldn't go anywhere. Instead of agreeing then writing what she wanted, which would have irritated the editor, or agreeing and writing something she deemed lame, which would have irritated her, she enlisted a maneuver she learned waiting tables in high school.

When I was a teenager, I was a waitress at Howard Johnson's, where I was told never say no to a customer. When asked for an item that was not available, say a blueberry muffin, I would offer something else, like a corn muffin. Or a Danish. That's the attitude I take with editors. Never turn them down flat. Always present them with an alternative. So in December a few years ago, an editor came to me with an idea. He was not a parent but thought that because parents were working so much these days that they must be cutting back on Christmas. "I'd like you to do a story on how they cut back," he said to me.

"I think it is the opposite," I said. "I think parents are killing themselves to bring kids a bigger and better Christmas with as much homegrown stuff and activities as possible."

This was based on my gut feeling and what my friends were saying. I had the sense that my life and my friends' lives were pretty typical, but when I went out and did the reporting I made sure that I didn't focus on white, middle-class families. I went to immigrant centers that are racially diverse, ethnically diverse, and income diverse. Often reporters talk only to friends and people like them. I interviewed parents at day care centers and in grocery store parking lots. I introduced myself and asked, "How busy are you at Christmas?" My topic would grab them. If they were in a rush, I would ask for their name and number and called them later.

I was surprised by the length that parents would go to give their children a perfect childhood. I tried never to judge them, though, and instead let the readers judge.

The result was "Holiday Rush: A Tradition Some Can't Do Without," which opens like this:

There's no such thing as overdoing Christmas as far as Linda Osborne is concerned. She is mailing out more than 100 Christmas cards, buying 75 gifts for family and friends, baking dozens of cookies, throwing the holiday party for her 5-year-old daughter's class at school and organizing a holiday tour of her Silver Spring neighborhood.

Her pre-Christmas schedule is so jam-packed, Osborne said, that she had to string her outdoor lights at midnight a few days ago because it was the only free moment she had.

No matter. Osborne, 40, a full-time legal secretary, accepts this exhausting pace as one of the season's rituals. "I feel like I'm trying to do more and more," she said. "I don't know why. I'm crazy, I guess."