Creative Approaches to Writing Qualitative Research

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter addresses the use of creative writing forms and techniques in qualitative research writing. Paying attention to the aesthetics of writing qualitative work may help researchers achieve their goals. The chapter discusses research method, writing forms, voice, and style as they relate to the craft of creative writing in qualitative research. Researchers use creative writing to highlight the aesthetic in their work, as a form of data analysis, and/or as a qualitative research method. Qualitative researchers are asked to consider their research goals, their audience, and how form and structure will suit their research purpose(s) when considering the kind of creative writing to use in their qualitative writing.

Keywords: aesthetics, audience, craft, creative writing, qualitative research writing, representation, style, writing as method, writing form, writing structure

Creative Approaches to Writing Qualitative Research

IN 2005, Richardson and St. Pierre wrote,

> I confessed that for years I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary studies. Countless number of texts had I abandoned half read, half scanned.... Qualitative research has to be read, not scanned; its meaning is in the reading.... Was there some way in which to create texts that were vital and made a difference?
>
> (pp. 959–960)

How can researchers make their qualitative writing and work interesting? If qualitative researchers use the principles of creative writing, will their work be vital? What does it mean to use creative writing in qualitative research? In this chapter, we answer these questions by focusing on the *how* and the *why* of doing and using creative writing in quali-

tative research through the use of writing examples. We will discuss research method, writing forms, voice, and style as they relate to the craft of creative writing in qualitative research. Researchers use creative writing as a way to highlight the aesthetic in their work (Faulkner, 2020), as a form of data analysis (Faulkner, 2017b), and/or as a qualitative research method (e.g., Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Table 34.1 asks you to consider the kind of creative writing to use in your qualitative research depending on the goals you wish to accomplish, who your audience is, and what form best suits your research purpose(s). Use the table as a guide for planning your next research project.

Table 34.1 Creative Writing as Method, Analysis, and Representation

Considerations and goals
• What affect/effect do you want to achieve? • Who is your audience? • What do you want your audience to do, feel, and believe after experiencing your work? • How can you use structure in your work to be ethical? • Will you use creative writing as representation? Analysis? Method? • What kind of voice do you want to use? (first, second, third) • Are you interested in veracity? Reflexivity? Privacy? Social action? Theory?
Creative forms and qualitative writing
• Poetry: compression of “data,” multiple meanings, identity work, lyrical voice, create empathy • Narrative: storytelling, bring voice of participants forward, create empathy • Memoir and personal essay: life history, reflexivity, create empathy • Experimental forms (photo/video essay, lyric essay, collage/bricolage): use of multiple elements (sound, visuals, text, found objects), nonlinear narrative, cross-genre work, create empathy, queer methodology
Writing form and structure
• What structure will work best for your goals: braided narrative, lyric, poetic, fragmented narrative, collage, personal narrative? • How can you use creative forms to achieve your purpose? • How can you incorporate research and maintain the aesthetic value of the work? • Have you paid attention to the line, the music in the piece, form, aesthetics, voice, narrative truth?

• How is your (researcher, academic, personal) voice working in the piece?

Notes: We adapted Table 34.1 from Chapter 1 and material from Chapters 2, 4, and 6 in Faulkner and Squillante (2016).

(p. 1024) Writing Goals and Considerations

Using creative approaches to writing qualitative work can add interest to your work, be evocative for your audience, and be used to mirror research aims. Answering the questions we ask in Table 34.1 is a good starting point for a process that most likely will not be linear; you may try many forms of writing in any given project to meet your research goals.

You may use poetry to make your work sing, tell an evocative story of research participants, or demonstrate attention to craft and the research process (Faulkner, 2020). Faulkner (2006) used poetry to present 31 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Jews' narratives about being gay and Jewish; the poems showed subjective emotional processes, the difficulties of negotiating identities in fieldwork, and the challenges of conducting interviews while being reflexive and conscious in ways that a prose report could not. Faulkner

> wrote poems from interviews, observations, and field notes to embody the experience of being LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) and Jewish in ways that pay attention to the senses and offer some narrative and poetic truths about the experience of multiple stigmatized identities.
>
> (Faulkner, 2018a, p. 85)

(p. 1025) There were poems about research method, poems about individual participants, and poems about the experiences of being gay and Jewish.

You may write memoir or a personal or lyrical essay to show a reflexive and embodied research process. In the feminist ethnography *Real Women Run* (Faulkner, 2018c), Faulkner wrote one chapter as an autoethnographic memoir of running and her emerging feminist consciousness from grade school to the present, which includes participant observation at the 2014 Gay Games. Scenes of running in everyday contexts, in road races, and with friends, as well as not running because of physical and psychic injuries, are interspersed with the use of haiku as running logs to show her embodied experiences of running while female and to make an aesthetic argument for running as feminist and relational practice.

You may use a visual and text collage to show interesting and nuanced details about your topic that are not readily known or talked about in other sources in ways that you desire. For instance, Faulkner (n.d.) created Web-based material for her feminist ethnography on

women and running that presents aspects of the embodied fieldwork through sound and image. A video essay, photo and haiku collage, and soundscapes of running as fieldwork are used to help the audience think differently about women and running. The sounds and sights of running—the noise, the grunts, the breathing, the encouragement, the disappointment—jog the audience through training runs, races, and the in situ embodiment of running. In another example of embodied ethnography, Faulkner (2016b) used photos from fieldwork in Germany along with poems to create a series of virtual postcards that include sound, text, and images of fieldwork. The presentation of atypical postcards shows the false dichotomy between the domestic and public spheres, between the private and the public; they show the interplay between power and difference. In a collage on queering sexuality education in family and school, Faulkner, (2018c) uses poetic collage as queer methodology, manipulating headlines of current events around women's reproductive health and justice, curriculum from liberal sexuality education, and conversations with her daughter about sex and sexuality to critique sexuality education and policies about women's health in the United States. Autoethnography in the form of dialogue poems between mother and daughter demonstrates reflexivity. Social science "research questions" frame and push the poetic analysis to show critical engagement with sexuality literature, and the collaging of news headlines about sexuality connects personal experience about sexuality education to larger cultural issues.

You may use fiction or an amalgam/composite of participants' interviews or stories to protect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants, to make your work useful to those outside the academy, and to "present complex, situated accounts from individuals, rather than breaking data down into categories" (Willis, 2019). Krizek (1998) suggested that

> ethnographers employ the literary devices of creative writing—yes, even fiction—to develop a sense of dialogue and copresence with the reader. In other words, bring the reader along into the specific setting as a participant and codiscoverer instead of a passive recipient of a descriptive monologue
>
> (p. 93).

In *Low-Fat Love Stories*, Leavy and Scotti (2017) used short stories and visual portraits to portray interviews with women about dissatisfying relationships. The stories and "textual visual snapshots" are composite characters created from interviews with women. Faulkner and her colleagues used fictional poetry to unmask sexual harassment in the academy using the pop-culture character Hello Kitty as a way to examine taken-for-granted patterns of behavior (Faulkner, Calafell, & Grimes, 2009). The poems, presented in the chapbook *Hello* *(p. 1026)* *Kitty Goes to College* (Faulkner, 2012a), portray administrative and faculty reactions to the standpoints of women of color, untenured women faculty, and students' experiences and narratives of harassment and hostile learning environments through the fictionalized experiences of Hello Kitty. The absurdity of a fictional character as student and professor is used to make the audience examine their implicit assumptions about the academy, to shake them out of usual ways of thought.

The point of using creative writing practices in your qualitative research writing and method is that writing about your research does not have to be tedious. Reading research writing need not put the reader to sleep; using creative writing can make your research more compelling, authentic, and impactful. You can explain your lexicon to those who do not speak it in compelling and artful ways. The use of creative forms can be a form of public scholarship, a way to make your work more accessible and useful (Faulkner & Squillante, 2019). Some scholars have remarked on the irony of using academic language to write about personal relationships and use creative forms, such as the personal narrative, the novel, and poetry, as a means of public scholarship and for accessibility (Bochner, 2014; Ellis, 2009; Faulkner & Squillante, 2016). The goals with this work are to use the personal and aesthetic to help others learn, critique, and envision new ways of relating in personal relationships. For example, in *Knit Four, Frog One*, a collection of poetry about women's work and family stories, Faulkner (2014) wrote narratives in different poetic forms (e.g., collage, free verse, dialogue poems, sonnets) to show grandmother–mother–daughter relationships, women's work, mothering, family secrets, and patterns of communication in close relationships. The poems represent different versions of family stories that reveal patterns of interaction to tell better stories and offer more possibilities for close relationships.

Creative Forms and Qualitative Writing

Writers have a reputation for collecting material from everywhere and with anyone—especially in their personal relationships—and using it in their writing. This is analogous to fieldwork: immersing yourself in the culture you want to study and engaging in participant observation. We embrace the analogy of the writer as ethnographer because it makes the focus on the writing as method and writing as a way of life (Rose, 1990). We encourage you to get your feet wet in the field as a writer *and* ethnographer. An ethnographer writes ethnography, which is both a process and a product—a process of systematically studying a culture and a product, the writing of a culture. Since we are discussing creative writing as method, we encourage you to be an autoethnographer, an ethnographer who uses personal experience "to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 1). An (auto)ethnographer engages in fieldwork. A writer engages in fieldwork through the use of personal experience, participant observation, interviews, archival, library, and online research (Buch & Staller, 2014).

You may remember conversations and events that become relevant to your writing. You may write down these conversations and observations. Take photos, selfies, and draw (p. 1027) sketches. Sketch poems and collect artifacts. You may post Facebook updates, Instagram and tweet these details, regularly journal, and use that writing in your work. You may keep a theoretical journal during fieldwork and interviews and sketch your understandings in the margins. You may write poetry in your field notes. You may feel unsure

how to incorporate the research you do (and live) into your writing; poet Mark Doty (2010) offered helpful advice:

> Not everything can be described, nor need be. The choice of what to evoke, to make any scene seem REAL to the reader, is a crucial one. It might be just those few elements that create both familiarity (what would make, say, a beach feel like a beach?) and surprise (what would rescue that scene from the generic, providing the particular evidence of specificity?).
>
> (p. 116)

How to Use Creative Writing to Frame Research (and Vice Versa)

How you incorporate research and personal experience in your work depends on how you want structure and form to work in your writing. The way that scholars who use creative writing in their work cite research and use their personal experience varies: you may include footnotes and endnotes; use a layered text with explicit context, theory, and methodological notes surrounding your poems, prose, and visuals; and sometimes, you may just use the writing.

Some qualitative researchers use dates and epigraphs from historical and research texts in the titles of poems and prose (e.g., Faulkner, 2016a, Panel I: Painting the Church-House Doors Harlot Red on Easter Weekend, 2014) and include chronologies of facts and appendices with endnotes and source material (e.g., Adams, 2011; Faulkner, 2012b), while others use prefaces, appendices, or footnotes with theoretical, methodological, and citational points and prose exposition about the creative writing. Faulkner (2016c) used footnotes of theoretical framings and research literature to critique staid understandings of marriage, interpersonal communication research, and the status quo in an editorial for a special issue on *The Promise of Arts-Based, Ethnographic, and Narrative Research in Critical Family Communication Research and Praxis*; all of the academic work was contained in footnotes, so that the story of 10 years of marriage and 10 years of research was highlighted in the main text in 10 sections (an experimental text like we will talk about in the narrative section). In Faulkner's feminist ethnography, "Postkarten aus Deutschland" (2016b), we see dates included in poem titles, details about cities in poetry lines, and images and places crafted into postcards beside the text. Calafell (2007) used a letter format to write about mentoring in "Mentoring and Love: An Open Letter" to show faculty of color mentoring students of color as a form of love; the letter form challenges "our understandings of power and hierarchies in these relationships and academia in general" (p. 425).

Writing Form and Structure

Whether you desire to write about an interview as a poem, use personal essay to demonstrate reflexivity in the research process, or create a photoessay about your fieldwork, you must (p. 1028) ask yourself some questions before you begin: How will you shape this experience in language so that a reader can connect with it? What scaffolding will you

build to support it? How can you arrange your information to leave the correct impression, make the biggest impact? These are questions of form and structure. They are related terms, to be sure, but it is important to understand their distinctions.

When we say *form*, we can also mean *type* or *genre*. For example, essay, poem, and short story are all classic forms in creative writing. *Structure* refers to the play of language within a form. So, things like chronology, stanza breaks, white space, or even dialogue are structural elements of a text. Think of it like cooking: you have spinach, some eggs, a few tablespoons of sharp cheese. Choose this pan and you have made an omelet; choose that pot and you have soup. Pan or pot is a big decision. Fortunately, you have a big cookbook to flip through for ideas before you light the stove.

Narrative

To narrate something is to attach a singular voice to a series of actions or thoughts. But it is more than simply voice, isn't it? Imagine the great narrators of literature and film (e.g., Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Ishmael in *Moby Dick*; Ralphie in *A Christmas Story*; the Stranger in *The Big Lebowski*). They bring their personality, their point of view, their irritations and expectations with them onto the page or screen. Details are not merely flung forth from the narrator's mind or pen as a string of chronological or sequential happenings. This is no information dump. Rather, a narrative is a shapely thing: organized, polished, curated, its events arranged so that they will reach us, move us. Change us. Simply put, narrative is *story*.

> The evocative narrative as an alternative form of research reporting encourages researchers to transform collected materials into vivid, detailed accounts of lived experience that aims to show how lives are lived, understood, and experienced. The goals of evocative narratives are expressive rather than representational; the communicative significance of this form of research reporting lies in its potential to move readers into the worlds of others, allowing readers to experience these worlds in emotional, even bodily ways.
>
> (Kiesigner, 1998, p. 129)

In the following excerpt from Faulkner's (2016a) personal narrative written in the form of a triptych about her partner's cancer, she included scholarly research about a polar vortex, scientific information about the color characteristics of red paint, and historical facts about the church née house she lives in with her family to add nuance and detail to her experience (see Figure 34.1). She used library search engines, a goggle search, an interview with a city clerk, her academic background knowledge, and journal articles to find research relevant to social support, weather, and paint. Because Faulkner was writing about cancer, living in a former church, and home as supportive place, the triptych form added another layer and emphasized the role of fate and endurance and resilience in relational difficulties. A triptych is something composed in three sections, such as a work of art like an altarpiece. Constructing the personal narrative as a trilogy with sections—Panel I, Painting the Church-House Doors Harlot Red on Easter Weekend, 2014; Panel II,

Talking Cancer, Cookies, and Poetry, Summer Solstice, 2014; Panel III, Knitting a Polar Vortex, January 6–9, 2014—played on the idea of a church-house and story as an altarpiece.

Panel I. Painting the Church-House Doors Harlot Red on Easter Weekend, 2014:

(Wherein the author and her neighbors pretend that they lived through an unusually frigid winter, unscathed.)

My neighbors walk-by with their kids and dogs properly leashed while I paint the doors of my church-house Red. I'm the one who is painting because I've internalized the family oath of love as action and social support as doing. I get the irony that love is not verbal expression for this tenured communication scholar as I compare the old-barn-red color still clinging to the door frame trim with the pay-attention-to-me-now red that slops off my brush and spills down the outside of the gallon-sized can onto the front stoop. Holy Wow, this is brighter than I anticipated. I shouldn't have scoffed at the Ace Hardware employee who marvelled at the paint's brightness when he thumbed a splotch on the top of the can and asked me, "What are you painting?"

"The front doors." I didn't say the of course. When you live in a former church, the door as mouth metaphor means there is no other color to decorate a door. Red doors signify welcome if you follow Feng Shui, though I prefer the Scottish idea of paid-off-mortgage-red and superstitious church folk's screw-off-evil-red. My lurid door color says here is a place you can take-off-your-shoes-red. Red means you manage the messy art of containment. Something I had been doing since my husband Josh's cancer diagnosis and thyroidectomy during the polar vortex that created an apropos colder than normal winter.

Figure 34.1 Excerpt from "Cancer Triptych" (Faulkner, 2016a).

(p. 1029) The use of research layered the cancer story; it becomes more than a story of a cancer diagnosis. The story paints the picture of community, social support, and coping.

Memoir and Personal Essay

Memoir is a form that filters and organizes personal events, sifting through to shape and present them in an intentional, mediated, engaging way.

Note, too, what memoir is *not*: a chronological account of *everysinglething* that ever happened to you from cradle to grave. That form is called *autobiography*, and it is normally reserved for people who rule countries or scandalize Hollywood. Mostly, that is not us. Memoir is reflective writing, which tells the true story of *one* important event or relationship in a person's life. *Autoethnography* is a form, which also connects the self with the wider culture. Those who do autoethnography use it to highlight "the ways in which our identities as raced, gendered, aged, sexualized, and classed researchers impact what we see, do, and say" (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 35).

Besides autobiography, memoir is probably the form most of us think of when we hear *personal story*. But what is it about this form, in particular, that makes it a good choice for such stories?

From the perspective of the reader, a good memoir does many things. It renders a world using the same tools a novel might: with lush physical details, vivid scenes, a gripping plot, dramatic tension, and dialogue that moves the story forward. It also makes use of *exposition*—the kind of writing that provides important background information the reader will need to orient themselves within the story. All these elements combine to make for an immersive reading experience, the kind where the scaffolding disappears and the reader slips wholly into the world the writer has created.

(p. 1030) But memoir does something else that makes its form distinct from that of a novel or short story. Where for fiction writers we say they should “show, don’t tell,” for memoirists, that maxim becomes “show AND tell.” The memoirist is not only tasked with rendering an experience concretely through sensory writing for the reader, but also required to *explain*, in a direct way, the importance of that experience at every turn. We call this kind of language *reflection*. Think of it as the voice of the now-wise author speaking directly to the reader about their insights and revelations, having come through the experience a changed person.

Personal essay is a form that, like memoir, begins with the writer’s self and draws on experiences from their lives. Also like memoir, personal essay uses the tools of fiction—scene, summary, setting, and dialogue—to create a rich sensory world. The difference between these forms is that memoir uses personal experience to look *inward*, toward the self, and personal essay uses the same experience to look *outward* at the world.

For instance, let’s say you grew up as a middle child, with a successful older sister and a mischievous younger brother. Your memories of your childhood are filled with moments when you felt invisible in their midst, the classic middle child. There was that one summer when your parents were focused on your sister’s achievements as she applied to Ivy League colleges. Meanwhile, your brother had discovered the local skateboard community and spent his days on the halfpipe behind the grocery store. Most days he came home bleeding, but happy. This was also the summer you started writing poetry and you wanted to read your drafts to anyone who would listen. But your parents were—in your memory—preoccupied with worry about your siblings. They could not sit still long enough to listen to you. You felt neglected and ignored and the feeling has stayed with you throughout your life.

A memoir about this summer would explore your role in the family dynamic and your particular relationships with each player. It would investigate your own complicity in the situation—were they really ignoring you? Are you exaggerating the memory? Did you sometimes enjoy having that solitude, away from their support, possibly, but also away from their scrutiny? Did the experience of learning to rely on yourself lay an important foundation for your nascent adult self? Your memoir about this summer will delve deeply into these questions so that you can learn something important about yourself, and your reader can learn something important about the human condition by reading it.

Take the same material and cast it as a personal essay, however, and you could be investigating the cultural phenomenon of “middle child syndrome.” Perhaps you will interweave moments from that summer with research about birth order psychology to help you, and your reader, understand something important about middle children in general and, by extension, about the world in which humans interact.

Poetry

Poems, too, can narrate events and had the explicit job of doing so in many cultures for thousands of years. The oral tradition of poetry kept important stories vital for genera-

tions and passed historical, political, and sociological information from generation to generation.

Received forms like the *epic* (which covered many events) and the *ballad* (which generally celebrated one event) have been used by poets to spin complex tales, which celebrate and memorialize the stuff of human interaction: love, grief, politics, and war. Think of Odysseus's journeys as recounted in Homer's great works *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* or (p. 1031) of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as examples of each form, respectively. These forms have survived antiquity and continue, at the hands of the skillful poet, to grip and enthrall readers. Dudley Randall's 1968 poem, "Ballad of Birmingham," is a stunning and, sadly, still-relevant lament to racial violence in the American South. Derek Walcott's 1990 masterpiece, *Omeros*, is a modern epic that weaves narratives of colonialism, Native American tribal loss, and African displacement over 8,000 lines. Even more recently, the poet Marly Youmans's 2012 book, *Thaliad*, offers the survival story of seven children, one of whom is named Thalia, in a postapocalyptic landscape.

Beyond these traditional forms, though, contemporary poets use line and image and stanza to evoke story in less prescribed ways as well. Narrative poems in the 21st century employ many of the same tools that fiction or memoir writers do. They must use setting details to create a specific, sensual world for the poem. They must create engaging characters who interact with one another inside a dynamic scene. There can be dialogue, and certainly there will be dramatic tension—something to drive the story forward and keep the reader enthralled. Faulkner's (2016b) feminist ethnography, "Postkarten aus Deutschland," is an example of how a qualitative researcher can use narrative poetry (see Figure 34.2). Faulkner wrote a chapbook of poems from participant observation in Mannheim, Germany, like postcards that tell the story of participant observation and the time spent observing and writing down details of living, working, and playing in Germany. Faulkner used scenes of participating as a student in a German class, traveling with her family, and everyday experiences like running, spending time with friends, and shopping to add interest and veracity to the project.

Gefühle in Deutsch Klasse (Feelings in German Class)

1. Die Trauer (Sadness)
   I have two weeks left und schon I miss Mannheim,
   my life, and get all like weepy American
   as I scratch plus and minus signs on notebook lines
   next to feelings when mein Lehrer asks, negativ
   oder positiv? I pen the Gestalt wrong, all
   scribbles up and down, and slash out the sad
   signs my German is not prima or toll—
   or any other of my Lehrer's praise—but bad.
   At least I'm getting the gloom out of my way
   rubbing the feelings of nostalgia
   over my notes in an efficient display,
   better than being a middle-aged mute und traurig
   like the first Deutsch als Fremdsprache class all in German
   – no comparing to English = I'll miss Sebastian who+
   never gives in, explains German with more German.
2. Die Angst (Fear)
   I never give in, explain German with more German:
   This place is like a Wintertraum mit Grimm magic,
   not like boring Ohio where we only do mom-like
   chores and homework, and the dog gets ticks.
   I try to be a real Mannheimer,

like when mein Kind weint und klagt
that "I miss my dog" and "you love Germany
more than me," I speak a few words of Deutsch
arrive 10 minutes early to meet
my new German friend because I can't learn
how to speak an American and treat
the locals to an echter Akzent as I burn
through a walk in the city's alphabet street grid
to become more German than the Germans.

3. Der Stolz (Pride)
   I become more German than the Germans
   and don't feel Stolz in all of the American places,
   not about my weirdness in class, mein Kind or Mann
   who like that I can order their food in these spaces
   with Kellnerin draped in Dirndls und Lederhosen.
   Germans who are not proud of their nation
   or their selves but show pride in gut gemacht clothes
   that are more German than Germany. I get this
   feeling, share this fetish for all things Deutsch
   and Palatine, take my runs along the Rhein,
   go places no Mannheimer knows like Bacharach
   where no tourists creep along the winery
   vines like a tourist blight of red, white and blue
   as we dare to drink in all of these views.

4. Der Ärger (Annoyance): Shop Windows, Mannheim
   I dare to drink in all of these views—
   windows with wispy women mannequins,
   Dekolleté molded into Oktoberfest Dirndls,
   hung over Lederhosen panked out Männer,
   displays more authentic than the Mannheimers
   who sport suspenders und check-print shirts
   around town, a glass of trockene Riesling in one hand,
   a cigarette and a kid in the other, the dirty
   smoke refracted onto the facades of shop fronts
   and in my face as I stand and frown from the outside,
   choke on the effluvium of cost and fashion
   meiner that this is not Bavaria, outside
   in English, my body warped in a hoodie,
   hair frayed, jeans, disordered and strange.

5. Die (Un)Ordnung (The (Dis)Order)
   Disordered and strange, hair, jeans frayed,
   I cannot bring mein Kind in order
   as we drag along the Mannheimer Straße—
   Ist alles in Ordnung? Alles klar?—
   she darts like an expert frogger
   onto the street and knocks a bicyclist
   off his pedestal into the corner
   as we snake our way to Kindergarten.
   Pass Auf! He yells (and not
   Oui Pass! like a real Mannheimer).

Watch out! I yell and pull her back
to the sidewalk as the bicyclist
turns and snips: Schlaf gut Kind!
All of these Germans tell
us how to keep order
like the woman on the train platform
who demands, Do you speak German?
Because that man is taking video of your daughter.
Her last words, as she points to a suited man
with video-phone in hand, and turns away—
And I thought you should know—
mean I must clamp the fun,
bringe alle in Ordnung with mein Kind
who moves time during Bahnstreiks
by tanzen like a kleine pied piper of chaos
knocking strangers off board
the train of forgotten rules.

Figure 34.2 Excerpt from “Postkarten aus Deutschland: A Chapbook of Ethnographic Poetry” (Faulkner, 2016b).

(p. 1032) (p. 1033) Poets can create dramatic tension both through the sequencing of details and through word choice, or what poets call *diction*. It is a mistake to suggest that the only type of poem that can work in service of the personal is the explicitly narrative one. Not all stories require chronology or sequence. Some are best expressed in glimpses of place or time, in vivid flashes of insight. Where a memoir or a long narrative poem will move us through story across place and time, a *lyric poem* can slow us down to find the story inside a single moment.

The term *lyric* probably makes you think about music, and this is exactly right. In antiquity, lyric poems were those that expressed personal emotions and feelings and were usually accompanied by music, often played on a stringed instrument called a lyre. They were typically written or originally spoken or sung in the first person.

As poetry has evolved away from song, however, that term lyric has come to refer not to music played alongside the poem, but instead to the music *inside* it, in the way the poet employs sound devices like *alliteration, assonance*, and *repetition* of various types to create the appropriate mood (see Figure 34.3).

St. Michael's-by-the-Bay

New husband, old lover, I remember
breeze of butterscotch, clover honey,
golden maple—the rolling four-poster
and the salt-sweet taste of you as we lay,
all sun-burnished afternoon, above
the watchful wavering of Chesapeake Bay.
Arms and ankles all slip-knot and braid, we
did not sail over our harbor of sheets,
past breakers of mahogany, through picture
window waters, nor out onto screen porch,
the dock of twin rockers—a swaying
marriage of lattice-work and cane; the lilt
of late September breeze bracing us, tempting
to laggard gulls and mallards fat with corn—
waving over widow grass and sand, and out
over stone—to proffer our honeymoon
kiss, the ebb-tide end of day, to the pursed,
expectant mouth of that slow and augural bay.

Squillante (2012b)

Figure 34.3 Lyric poem.

(p. 1034) This relationship poem begins with a direct address to a “new husband, old lover” and a recollection of a shared sensual experience, which puts the reader into an intensely intimate space. A first read may evoke feelings of companionship, trust, love, even bliss. The poem’s imagery seems beautiful and comforting—“breeze of butterscotch,”

“sun-burnished afternoon,” “breakers of mahogany”—but a second, careful read will reveal something more. The “rolling four-poster” at once suggests sexual connection, but could also suggest instability or chaos. “Arms and ankles all slip-knot and braid” shows bodily closeness, certainly, but note the use of the word “knot” to point to something more complicated—a sense of being bound or trapped.

Further into the poem, we find language like “swaying,” “late,” “tempting,” “laggard,” and “augural,” which come together to form a mood of distinct unease. It is pretty clear this marriage is not going to last much beyond this “honeymoon kiss.”

The music of the poem can be found mainly in the repetition of long “a” sounds. They begin in the title with the word *Bay* and continue through *bay/taste/lay/ankles/braid/breakers/swaying/cane/bracing/waving* and return to *bay* in the final line. This effectively bookends the poem with sound. The strong repetition creates the effect of constraint within the lines and stanzas and also, by extension, within the context of the doomed relationship narrative suggested in the poem.

Faulkner and Squillante (2018) used an intersectional feminist approach to examine their responses to the 2016 U.S. presidential election and rape culture by creating a video collage composed of video, images, and poetry. Their womanifesta, “Nasty Women Join the Hive,” decentered White feminism through the use of reflexive poetry, repetitive images, and critical questions to invite other women to embrace intersectional feminism and reject White feminism and White fragility.

Experimental Forms

If memoir is the dance between showing and telling, the lyric essay is a flirtation, a suggestion whispered in a reader’s ear, a beckoning for them to come closer. That word, lyric, conveys the idea of music, and indeed lyric essays will place as much importance on sound as they do on sense. They have much in common with poems in this way. Lyric essays are less interested in explicit meaning making than they are in a kind of deep interiority. As with poems, their meaning arrives through the accrual of imagery and the layering of sound. They may offer an image or a scene (a pebble or a rusty nail), vivid and resonant, only to leap from it and land in something new (a strangely shaped root). They expect us to leap with them and invite us to by making use of structural elements like sections, asterisks, (p. 1035) subheadings, juxtapositions, and ample white space that draws us closer, asks us to fill in the gaps in a way that enriches and enlarges the meaning.

But be careful: A lyric essay is more than a chaotic selection of items on a table or memories on a page. Just like a narrative is polished and arranged, so are experimental forms. The writer must tune in to the particular frequency emitted by the memory or scene and consider how it will or will not play with the bit next to it. If you are working with the fragmentary and imagistic quality of the memories, a lyric approach may be a form that works best (see Figure 34.4).

Figure 34.4 "Pin the Solje on the Baby" (Squillante, 2009).

(p. 1036) Squillante (2009) wrote a section for each image, trying to capture resonant details. After these scenes were written, Squillante analyzed them to see what thread of connection might exist between them and then arranged them in such a way as to heighten the tension between them and suggest a kind of *associative narrative* that might convey the strangeness and poignancy of that trip for the reader. The piece begins with the eagle's eye view, almost literally: an enormous mountain top viewed from a plane's window creates in the speaker a sense of awe mixed with disorientation. This is someplace wholly new, wholly unfamiliar. The piece moves from the telescopic first section to a microscopic second section as the images become intimate and interior and much more explicitly about the uncertainty of identity. *Who am I in this new space*? Space refers both to geography and to family structure. The final section stays on the ground but uses a wide-angle lens to show a return to the awe and disorientation of the first and second sections now set in a larger context: *Don't we all feel this way sometimes?*

Lyric essays, with their sidelong glances, are useful vehicles for personal writing because they tap into our subconscious mind. They force us to think in terms of image and metaphor—those powerful knowledge-making tools wielded by poets. And, whereas a memoir will stare the subject down, scrutinize it until it gives forth meaning, a lyric essay will come at its subject laterally, from around the corner, in the periphery. It sneaks up on meaning in a way that is surprising and satisfying for both writer and reader.

One way to structure a lyric piece is to use numbers or some other kind of mark, such as an asterisk, to separate sections. We sometimes refer to essays that do this as *numbered* or *segmented* (e.g., Faulkner, 2016c; Squillante, 2015).

Another way to structure lyric essays is less about friction and more about a kind of layered fluidity that happens when sections build off each other, echo, break off, and return. We call these *braided essays*, and they mimic the way our stories often emerge—in separate (p. 1037) strands we must weave together to make sense of them. For instance, in JoAnn Beard's (1996) excellent personal essay, "The Fourth State of Matter," four separate plot lines merge to give the reader a portrait of a woman in stasis: a dying dog, a crumbling marriage, an infestation of squirrels, and a campus shooting that took the lives of four faculty—friends and colleagues of the author—and one student at the University of Iowa in 1991.

Brenda Miller's (2001) essay, "The Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay," is an instruction manual for the braided essay, while at the same time a wonderful example of the form itself. Miller weaves sections about sharing a loaf of challah—a Jewish braided bread—with her students as a way of teaching them the braided essay form, with sections that use the challah as a way to talk about her own family and cultural identity and sections that instruct the reader, using the voice of a recipe, on how to bake the challah themselves. Each strand itself could be said to have its own trajectory, but woven together, experienced as a whole, it takes on a deeper and broader resonance. A more sustaining, delicious meal. In the section below, Miller meditates on the baking process, but it is also obviously about the writing process:

> All good bread makers develop a finely honed sense of intuition that comes into play at every step of the process: knowing exactly the temperature of the water in which to proof your yeast, testing it not with a thermometer but against the most sensitive skin at the underside of your wrist, with the same thoughtful stance as a mother testing a baby's formula. You add the warm milk, the butter, the salt, a bit of sugar. After a while you stop measuring the flour as you stir, knowing the correct texture through the way it resists your arm. You take the sticky dough in your hands and knead, folding the dough toward you, then pushing away with the heel of your hand, turning and repeating, working and working with your entire body—your legs, your abdomen, your strong heart. Your work the dough until it takes on the texture of satin. You poke it with your index finger and it sighs against your touch.
>
> (Miller, 2001, pp. 19–20)

Doesn't that recipe-esque structure work beautifully here? It is at once familiar and comforting as well as delightfully surprising. Miller's choice to use the metaphor of baking—a strenuous, bodily activity—as a way to talk about writing, which is often thought of as only abstract and intellectual, is fresh and persuasive. Miller herself named these kinds of pieces "hermit crab essays," after the creature who borrows the shell of another alien form to make its home. Here, Miller's essay borrows the form of a recipe so that she can talk about all the ingredients that go into teaching, and it ends up being a perfect metaphor as well as an effective form for the content.

Remember the middle school pleasure in cutting out words and phrases from glossy magazines and arranging them in interesting, surprising, resonant-to-you ways on the page? It is entirely possible to do this through language as well, and the process, one we might term *bricolage* or *collage*, is yet another tool for approaching difficult or complicated narratives and interviews. In this mode writers generate work by excerpting and juxtaposing material from other sources. For example, Faulkner (2017a) used baby artifacts, photos, and text and made digital and paper collages, as in Figure 34.5.

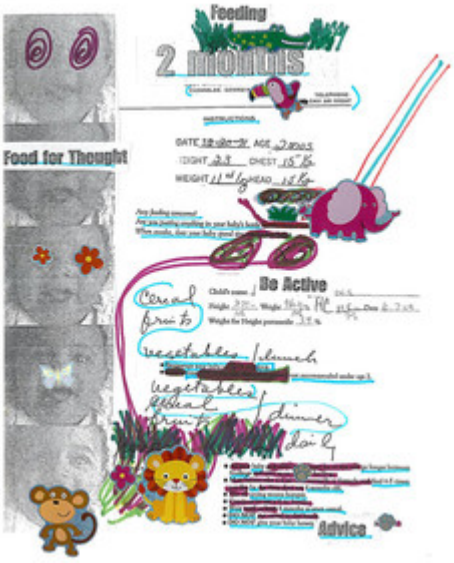


Figure 34.5 Feeding from "MotherWork: A Queer Scrapbook" (Faulkner, 2017a).

Faulkner (2017a) used a series of collage poems composed from family artifacts, feminist research, and systematic recollections as a type of baby scrapbook form to queer staid understandings of White middle-class mothering, to

> (p. 1038) critique and interrogate expectations and attitudes about what mothers should do, think, and feel. Good mothers in a pro-natalist culture should channel their creativity into things like making scrapbooks of their progeny. Spending time developing identities other than mother—such as poet, academic, and partner—makes fulfilling the normative role of the "good mother" impossible.
>
> (Faulkner, 2017a, p. 166)

(p. 1039) The feminist texts, poetry, images, and poetic analysis were a queer methodology, or what Halberstam (1998) calls scavenger methodology.

> A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds

> with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence.
>
> (p. 13)

Audience, Voice, and Point of View

We are always in dialogue with someone when we write: a text message to a friend, a letter to your great aunt, a term paper for your communication professor, a poem to your lover, an article to your editor. Even diary writing—that most personal of gestures—seeks to engage with an audience of the self. Talking to ourselves can be as persuasive and productive as talking with each other. Think of this like a research journal where you try out different voices and forms and creative writing. In fact, we urge you to keep a research journal wherein you experiment with form and voice while you write your qualitative research.

We believe that writing is a social act. We believe that writing can connect us and our research with the large world and our own small desires. When we write, it helps us to imagine someday readers of our words. Will they embrace them? Will they argue with them? Will they consider their own lives differently as a result of reading them? Will they remember them?

You will make different choices about form and possibly even content depending on who you imagine your audience to be. Sometimes it will be an abstract audience made up of "mothers" or "New Yorker readers," or "social scientists," and sometimes you will have a very specific face in mind as you write your research. Keeping your audience firmly in mind as you draft will make it easier for you to choose what information to include and what to (most definitely) leave out.

Beyond form and content, you may also find the need to adjust *voice* and *point of view* in your creative writing.

Say your son got a bearded dragon for his 10th birthday and that this dragon eats something like 80 live crickets a day.

Say your son is in charge of feeding the crickets to his dragon in the morning before he leaves for school and say, on one particular morning, in your rush to get him out the door, you do not see that the lid to the cricket cage has been left slightly askew.

Say you throw yourself into the shower so you will be on time for meetings with your students, and when you come out, you find 200 chirping creatures hopping about the living room, gleeful for their freedom (until the cats find them, anyway.).

When your son comes home, you must speak to him about this. You must make him understand that the dragon is *his* responsibility. That he must be more careful with its care. In this conversation, you will not be screaming (that happened immediately on exiting the

shower). You will have calmed down considerably by this point. But you *will* be using your "Serious Voice."

Later, when you recount the day's calamity to your husband, outlining the qualities of a proper living environment for crickets, dragons, and humans, he will, using his "Gentle (p. 1040) Voice," ask you to reconsider using your "Teacher Voice." After all, he has read the reptile manual, too.

The term *voice*, as we use it in writing, refers to an aggregate of qualities that create, on the page, an idiosyncratic sense of the writer's self. We sometimes use this interchangeably with the idea of *style*.

Voice is the thing that helps us identify one author from another. If I were to ask you to close your eyes and listen to me read examples of language excerpted from different works of literature, you would be able to tell quite easily which one was written by J. K. Rowling and which by Ernest Hemingway. Why?

It is more than simply "they sound different." They do, but it is worth noting the various elements that must work in concert to create that "sound" on the page. They include things like diction and word choice, sentence or line structure, punctuation, tone, use of dialogue, figurative language (or lack of), and even subject matter.

You have probably heard writers talk about "finding their voice" through the process of writing. The idea is that the more time you dedicate to your craft, the clearer the voice that sings from the page and the truer to the writer's self it will be. On the one hand, this makes perfect sense: the more we practice something, the better we become at it.

But on the other hand, here's the thing: we do not think you need to find your voice. We think you already *have* one. In fact, we think you have *many* voices. The trick is figuring out which one to use for your qualitative writing today.

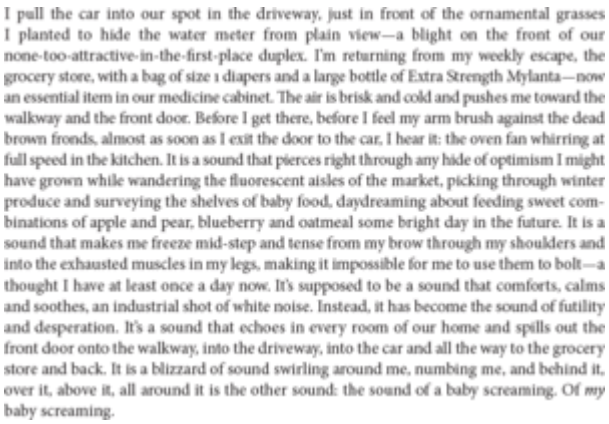
> To tell that tale, I soon discovered, I had to find the right tone of voice; the one I habitually lived with wouldn't do at all: it whined, it grated, it accused; above all it accused. Then there was the matter of syntax: my own ordinary, everyday sentence—fragments, interjecting, overriding—also wouldn't do; it had to be altered, modified, brought under control. And then I could see … that I needed to pull back—way back—from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure. In short, a useful point of view, one that would permit greater freedom of association … had to be brought along. What I didn't see … was that this point of view could only emerge from a narrator who was me and that same time was not me.
>
> (Gornick, 2001, pp. 21–22)

Related to the idea of voice is the term *persona*, or as Vivian Gornick refers to it, *narrator*. When we sit down to approach raw material from our research with the intention of shaping it into a story, we must first consider our relationship to that material, our positioning

with respect to it. We need to call on the correct persona (or, as Vivian Gornick calls it, the narrator) within us who can best tell the story of the research.

Beyond choosing a persona for your work, you will also need to choose a point of view through which to tell it. It probably seems fairly obvious that writing personal essays would require a certain closeness to the subject. It may feel most natural to you to adopt the *first-person* perspective, in which a confident "I" can proclaim itself and take ownership of the story on the page. First-person narrators can present as direct and sure or as vulnerable and raw. Consider the power of the first-person narration in Sharon Olds's poem, "The Race," a poem that describes the speaker sprinting through an airport to make the flight that will take her to her dying father's bedside. There is a breathless immediacy in the poem. We can feel the speaker's desperation and resolve, the ache in her legs and lungs as she runs toward the gate. This has to do with the careful selection of sensory details and with that (p. 1041) first-person narration that allows the poet to re-enter the experience fully to render it clearly for a reader.

Similarly, when Squillante (2010) was writing the personal essay "Cry, Baby," she was trying to work out complicated feelings about the experience of mothering her daughter through a difficult infancy and her own postpartum depression. It was painful material, but she needed to feel as close to it as possible to make sense of it (see Figure 34.6).

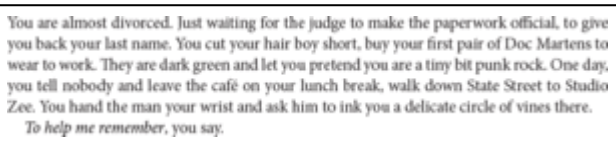


I pull the car into our spot in the driveway, just in front of the ornamental grasses I planted to hide the water meter from plain view—a blight on the front of our none-too-attractive-in-the-first-place duplex. I'm returning from my weekly escape, the grocery store, with a bag of size 1 diapers and a large bottle of Extra Strength Mylanta—now an essential item in our medicine cabinet. The air is brisk and cold and pushes me toward the walkway and the front door. Before I get there, before I feel my arm brush against the dead brown fronds, almost as soon as I exit the door to the car, I hear it: the oven fan whirring at full speed in the kitchen. It is a sound that pierces right through any hide of optimism I might have grown while wandering the fluorescent aisles of the market, picking through winter produce and surveying the shelves of baby food, daydreaming about feeding sweet combinations of apple and pear, blueberry and oatmeal some bright day in the future. It is a sound that makes me freeze mid-step and tense from my brow through my shoulders and into the exhausted muscles in my legs, making it impossible for me to use them to bolt—a thought I have at least once a day now. It's supposed to be a sound that comforts, calms and soothes, an industrial shot of white noise. Instead, it has become the sound of futility and desperation. It's a sound that echoes in every room of our home and spills out the front door onto the walkway, into the driveway, into the car and all the way to the grocery store and back. It is a blizzard of sound swirling around me, numbing me, and behind it, over it, above it, all around it is the other sound: the sound of a baby screaming. Of *my* baby screaming.

Figure 34.6 Excerpt from "Cry, Baby" (Squillante, 2010).

The first-person point of view can put your reader at ease and connect experiences. It is like a hand held out in acknowledgment and support: *this is my story; perhaps it will speak to you, too.* This is the goal of much of our qualitative research writing: to be evocative, to get the audience to act, to connect a personal story to larger cultural patterns, to represent your research participants in nuanced and sensitive ways.

It is not the only choice for writing, though. Consider the effect of the *second-person* narration in the excerpt from Squillante's (2012a) "Two Suicides" (see Figure 34.7).

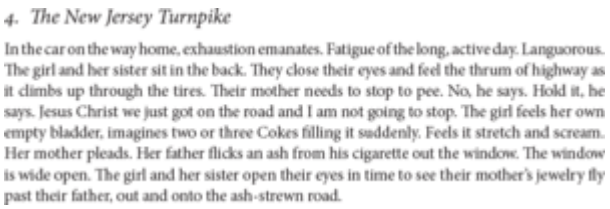

You are almost divorced. Just waiting for the judge to make the paperwork official, to give you back your last name. You cut your hair boy short, buy your first pair of Doc Martens to wear to work. They are dark green and let you pretend you are a tiny bit punk rock. One day, you tell nobody and leave the café on your lunch break, walk down State Street to Studio Zee. You hand the man your wrist and ask him to ink you a delicate circle of vines there.

To help me remember, you say.

Figure 34.7 Excerpt from "Two Suicides" (Squillante, 2012a).

(p. 1042) This essay wrestles with the complexities of friendship, love, divorce, and death—painful, personal stuff that questions more than it answers. Squillante (2012a) chose to use the second-person point of view throughout this piece because of the blurry sense of self that it creates, not *I* did this, but *You* did. This personal essay recounts transformative life times when a person does not feel like the person they had always known themselves to be; they experience themselves as an "Other." Third-person voice allows a distance for reflection; the effect is that of a wiser sibling-self whispering in the narrator's ear, offering commentary and reflection, direction and support.

Finally, though not as common, the *third-person* point of view offers the most distant stance in relation to your subject. The effect is observational, detached, almost ethnographic (see Figure 34.8). This may be a good point of view to use with your interview work and/or work that is sensitive.


4. The New Jersey Turnpike

In the car on the way home, exhaustion emanates. Fatigue of the long, active day. Languorous. The girl and her sister sit in the back. They close their eyes and feel the thrum of highway as it climbs up through the tires. Their mother needs to stop to pee. No, he says. Hold it, he says. Jesus Christ we just got on the road and I am not going to stop. The girl feels her own empty bladder, imagines two or three Cokes filling it suddenly. Feels it stretch and scream. Her mother pleads. Her father flicks an ash from his cigarette out the window. The window is wide open. The girl and her sister open their eyes in time to see their mother's jewelry fly past their father, out and onto the ash-strewn road.

Figure 34.8 Excerpt from "Self-Portrait with Rollercoaster" (Squillante, 2013).

Third-person perspective lets Squillante (2013) observe this moment from great remove, the way we hear of people who believe their spirits have temporarily left their bodies during medical trauma and claim to have hovered, watching, over their own corporeal fate. Using "the girl," instead of "I" as the organizing eye allows the suggestion of a kind of universality of experience: the moment we have all had when we recognize that our parents are capable of cruelty.

A final note on point of view: It can be used as a process tool as well as a tool for artifice. If, for instance, one is writing about trauma, a first draft in second or third person can act as a catalyst for necessary but difficult reflection and knowledge making. It can help to get us closer to the material and to feel safe(r) and more able to revise a later draft using that proclaiming, confident first-person voice.

Concluding Thoughts

We encourage qualitative researchers to consider writing, and creative writing in particular, a part of the research process. As you consider different forms and structure for your research, remember that revision is part of the process.

> Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard.
>
> (Zinsser, 2006, p. 8)

(p. 1043) But we do not end with this quote to frighten you away from adopting, adapting, and studying creative writing as method, as presentation, and as analysis. We ask you to consider writing part of your method and to study the forms you wish to use as you would study research method and methodology to reach your goals with your qualitative writing (e.g., Faulkner, 2017b).

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