

to hold the reader's interest and helps to make your creative nonfiction believable and real.

WRITING PROMPTS: Detail and Description

1. In this chapter, the sentence "My family had a big dinner" is compared to the detail-filled sentence "Aunt Grace swept out of her kitchen with trays of turkey, baked ham, whipped potatoes, plates of green beans and almonds, sweet potato and marshmallow casserole, fruit salad, green salad, sweet and sour pickle wedges, black olives, sourdough rolls, and so many desserts that we feared her antique dining room table would buckle under the heavy load." Take a similar distinctive memory from your own life and try to paint a full picture. Did your cousin Myra always wear crazy outfits? Show us. Did your brother drive like a maniac? Show us. Did you make a fool of yourself on the first day of soccer practice? Show us, in four or five specific and particular detail-laden sentences.
2. "The most common things can yield startling surprises when we give our attention to them," poet and essayist Rebecca McClanahan suggests. Find an object from your childhood—like the buckeyes in Scott Russell Sanders' essay or the dress in Jamaica Kincaid's "Biography of a Dress" (in the Anthology)—and examine that object closely from many angles. If possible, find that object and examine it firsthand. But even if that is not feasible, examine this object in your memory. Don't just describe this common thing, think about what it did, where it went, how people used this object. Contemplate what it meant to you, and to other people. Give some thought as to why you still remember it, all of these years later. Then write about it, looking for the startling surprises in common things.

Chapter Four

Building Blocks of Creative Nonfiction: Characterization and Scene

"Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive."

—BARRY LOPEZ

Careful description is important in nonfiction, but the need for strong detail is certainly not limited to holiday foods, herds of whitetail deer, and third-grade classroom walls. In fact, what will undoubtedly interest the reader most in the creative nonfiction you write will be the people involved. Human beings are inevitably curious about themselves, about others, and about the choices we make and the actions we take.

Unlike in fiction writing, in nonfiction the people you describe are real—they are alive or have lived. It will be helpful to your writing, however, to remember that these people are also characters, because they function as characters once you decide to add them to your essay. These people must be brought fully to life on the page or the writing will fall flat. Even in the personal essay, which is less like a conventional story, there is need for characterization: the reader must know the character of the author, the person who is reflecting on the page.

How do we get to know people in real life? Usually by their words and actions. This is true as well in creative nonfiction.

Characterization through Dialogue

Not every essay in this book, nor every exceptional work of creative nonfiction that you read, will include dialogue, but most will, especially in the categories of memoir and literary journalism. Dialogue is especially effective if the story

you are telling involves people, because so much of what makes a person distinctive is the words that he or she uses, and the ways in which particular words are used.

Dialogue can be one of the most challenging techniques for a beginning writer, or for any writer. The cadences and nuances of human speech are complex, peculiar, and often difficult to capture accurately on the page. So why do writers bother, if capturing accurate patterns of speech is so consistently hard? Let's begin by discussing some of the reasons.

You certainly have heard by now how rapidly Hollywood studios abandoned the silent movie once the technology became available to add actual human voices. Silent films were replaced by "talkies" and the film industry grew to such popularity that imagining a world where talking films did not exist is hard to do nowadays. Why did film viewers so readily embrace the change? There is good reason, and it applies to writing as well.

It is a simple truth that human beings are fascinated by the way people speak, by what they say and how they say it. If you want evidence, listen to casual conversations at the local coffee shop:

"What exactly did she tell you?"

"She said what?"

"How did he talk himself out of that?"

People are naturally fascinated by the words of other people, and even if they can't be there, they want somehow to "hear it for themselves."

Carefully chosen dialogue provides two advantages in any essay. First, dialogue lends texture to the narrative, an alternative to the author's voice, and an easy way to change the pacing and flow. But the second advantage, and the one of most importance to the writer of *nonfiction*, is that dialogue allows the readers to judge on their own, using their own standards and beliefs, what the characters are saying and what they really mean. "The truth is rarely pure and never simple," playwright Oscar Wilde once observed. Intelligent readers enjoy teasing out the complicated truth of what people say and the manner in which they say it.

This book uses the term *dialogue* rather than the journalistic term *quotes*, by the way, because too often writers have been trained to think of quotes as something boring, a bureaucrat's carefully worded but obscure explanation in a newspaper article about zoning regulations, or a politician's clever effort to form an answer that pleases everyone and offends nobody.

Instead, think of the words within quotation marks in your essay as an element that moves the story forward, reveals character, and adds flavor to your writing. Just as the real people you are writing about become characters once you commit them to the page, the real words they have spoken function as dialogue, by revealing who the people are in your writing, by advancing plot, and by adding detail. But unlike fictional dialogue, *you can't just make it up.*

To the best of your ability, and as honestly as you can, you have to give us the exact words, as they were spoken, how they were spoken, and when they were spoken.

How you manage to utilize dialogue honestly and well depends on what you are writing. If you are writing a direct observation piece, you have a few choices:

- Take along a tape recorder.
- Take careful notes as the event occurs.
- As soon as the event is finished, hurry off to a quiet place and transcribe what you just heard as accurately as you can, before it is all forgotten.

Notebooks and tape recorders work just fine for many stories that fall under the literary journalism heading. Where they don't, however, you will find that your memory is better than you think. The truth is, the more you use your memory, the better it gets.

As a rule of thumb, it is usually best to *not* use dialogue when great amounts of information need to be imparted. Long stretches of dialogue full of complicated facts and details tend to score very high on the boring index. Dialogue is a break in the story, a chance for the reader to take a breath, and also a chance to see our characters as real people (not as lecturers).

But what if you are writing about events that occurred ten or twenty years ago? This issue troubles many writers, beginning and experienced. In memoir—writing about events in our own lives long past—you have no choice but to rely on memory, and as we have discussed in earlier chapters, everyone knows that memory can be inexact.

Certainly you are not able to re-create with complete accuracy long passages of dialogue from when you were five years old. Chances are pretty good that you didn't have the foresight to run a tape recorder on the evening that your parents sat you down to explain that your little sister was going to the hospital for heart surgery. Though in some cases we have diaries and journals that remind us of how we felt, few of us record conversations in our diaries.

So can memoir have dialogue?

Well, it must, for all of the reasons stated previously:

- Dialogue helps to make the people in your creative nonfiction seem "real."
- The reader is interested to hear *how* your parents broke the news.
- The reader wants to experience the flavor of the speech, what was said, and (often of most importance) what was left unsaid.

Sometimes, when an event in our life was very crucial, highly dramatic, we *do* recall with startling clarity, even decades later, but not always. And not all memoir revolves around tragedy and startling moments. Sometimes, you

want to re-create a simple conversation you had with your grandmother on a breezy autumn afternoon on the back porch, a conversation that was not particularly momentous.

In these instances, remember, you must simply do your best, as honestly as you can. The first rule is, Don't fake it. Don't put words that you know are entirely fictional into your grandmother's mouth simply to make her seem more warm and generous than she actually was, or to make her seem even more disagreeable. Your obligation to the reader is to capture this woman's speech as accurately as possible. The reader will understand that you are not perfect in your recollection.

Some writers, however, choose to openly acknowledge a lack of perfect recall with a phrase such as this:

"These events are distant, but what I'm recording here is the truth of what remains in my memory."

It is perfectly fine to admit to failures of memory within the writing itself. The reader usually appreciates such honesty.

Still, if you spend time sorting through your memory bank, if you really try to go back into time and into your thoughts and feelings, you will likely find that you *can* remember the way your grandmother *often* spoke—her inflections, some of her favorite expressions, the way she lifted her cup of tea and glanced up toward her bedroom window whenever she referred to your late grandfather. The more you try to remember, the more you will find remaining in your memory. You can offer the reader an accurate summary of what you know was spoken about that afternoon, and a few snippets of how she spoke, to bring her character to life.

For an example of dialogue used effectively, read this essay:

A DRAMATIC DOGALOG

Art Homer

I'm standing outside the supermarket with Hooch, waiting for my wife to pick up a couple of things, when up walks about the fourth elderly woman in a row to say "What a pretty dog."

Thanks, I say. "He thinks so."

"What kind . . ." she begins, then corrects herself. "I mean what do you call this brand of dog?"

"He's a Golden Retriever."

"I like dogs . . ."

"I can see that," I say.

". . . but I'm a widow," she continues, ignoring my impertinence, "and my husband always said—we always lived on the corner of 55th up here. Well, people don't pay attention to the stop signs. They just go like I don't know. It's bad enough when they run over

the squirrels, but then the Humane Society has to come out and scrape up a dog, or maybe not so much a cat. Oh, if it were my dog I'd just feel so guilty."

"Well, they do take a lot of looking after." I scratch Hooch on the head. He's pulling a little on the leash, trying as he does to get downwind of the stranger the better to evaluate her. She has a broken blood vessel near the corner of her mouth which is pretty well covered up with makeup, except in the creases. It looks like a spider has hidden in her face.

"He isn't vicious is he?"

I try to sound reassuring. "No, he likes people, but he's a male, so with dogs he gets a little . . ."

"Because my husband was at work," she says as if I've interrupted again, "and he'd get wrapped around the stake and I'd be afraid to go out there and untangle him. *Rowr! Rowr!* Leaping at the chain. Hardly move, poor thing!"

"What kind of dog?" I ask.

"A school teacher, and he didn't get home for two hours. I was too afraid. It was a big dog I tell you, and vicious, not like Lassie on TV."

"A Collie, then," I say, feeling a bit more on solid ground.

"Yes, but black and brown, but the people come by with all kinds. Big and little, I don't know all the brands."

"Yes, well they have to be walked so they don't get bored and run away."

"I would like to have a dog, but are they little when you get them or do they come this size?"

"Well, dogs are animals . . ." I babble. "I mean, they start out . . ." I stop and try again. "We got Hooch here from the pound—so he was grown. We haven't had him since he was a puppy."

"I see. He's a beautiful dog—a beautiful, beautiful dog."

She went into the store. Hooch gave me a puzzled look, sighed, and lay down. "Good dog," I said. "Good dog."

Homer uses dialogue extensively to re-create the character of the elderly woman. As a result of this dialogue, he doesn't need to tell us that the woman is distracted or a very poor listener. We can "hear it with our own ears." He doesn't have to tell us that she is mainly holding a conversation with herself, a conversation focused on the worries that are floating around in her head. We see that clearly.

The author might have given us the necessary information in a summary statement: "She was very self-involved." We tend to believe the scene and believe our own conclusions far more, however, when the full detail is given. The woman seems real because she is right there, on the page, being herself.

Compare Homer's brief essay to a possible sentence that simply reads, "I met this goofy old woman who knew nothing about dogs." That sentence captures the facts, but none of the flavor.

The trick to using dialogue well in nonfiction is often selection.

As a first step, writers should attempt to hear the dialogue that takes place all around them. Just as seeing "with fresh eyes" is important when writing description, hearing with fresh ears is crucial to capturing human speech. Notice that unlike the cautious quotes offered up by candidates for city council, or the lectures delivered from careful notes by your history professor, everyday speech is marked by some surprising characteristics:

- In everyday conversation, people often don't speak in complete sentences.
- People don't always make sense. They contradict and interrupt themselves, and often wander off the topic. Though it is permissible to edit out some of the "ums" and "ahs" that often punctuate human speech, "cleaning up" the meandering way that we talk is usually a mistake. Don't force the human beings in your creative nonfiction to sound like robots.
- People often employ a range of responses to avoid answering when asked a direct question. They might answer a different question, or ask a question in return. "Why do you want to know?" or "Where were you last night?"

Take some time to really listen and make your own list of peculiarities in human speech. The imprecise and irregular ways in which we talk to one another almost always makes for a fascinating subject. At the end of this chapter, the writing prompts offer more ideas on how you can capture complex dialogue.

Characterization through Action

Certainly our words reveal who we are and why we act in certain ways. Listen closely, and often you can detect a confusion of purpose, or even hidden motivations, just underneath what a person has said. At other times, the formality of speech or the relaxed attitude tell us something about the person speaking. But certainly you have heard the old proverb "actions speak louder than words," and often they do. Nonverbal ways of communicating are basic to human nature and an essential component of how we form our opinions of others.

Imagine what transpires when someone new enters your arena—a new face in your circle of friends, your sister's new boyfriend, or your divorced uncle's new date at a family dinner. You may form an instantaneous impression, based on clothing, hairstyle, physical characteristics, even a "gut reaction," but if you are like most people, what you do next is watch and wait. "Let's see how

they act," you may think to yourself. "Give it a little while and we'll see what sort of person they really are."

This basic human instinct to form conclusions based on what you see "with your own eyes" functions no differently in writing. When a reader encounters a new character on the page—and this is true whether this character is fictional or a real person captured in nonfiction—the reader (probably without consciously thinking about it) reacts in pretty much the same way. "Let's see how this person acts. Then I'll make up my mind what kind of person she is."

For example, consider what conclusions you can draw about the grade school counselor in the following brief essay:

DRINK IT

Patricia Ann McNair

"Coffee?" Mrs. Coates asked. A peculiar, grown-up question. I said yes, the grown-up thing to do, and she poured the dark liquid into a paper cup marked with squiggly lines and set the cup in front of me. I was in sixth grade. I wrapped my hands around the cup like I'd seen women do who sit alone at the Tip Top, staring out the window, waiting. The cup was cold.

The counselor reached for one of my hands. "This is hard to say," she began. I'd been called down to her office over the intercom, pulled out of base 6 drills in Advanced Math. Mrs. Coates' eyes were moist. I looked at the oily film that swirled the surface of my coffee. Mrs. Coates cleared her throat. "Your brother Allen tried to jump out a window today." I knew the words made up a complete sentence, I recognized a subject and a predicate. Why, then, didn't it make sense?

"What?"

"He was being teased in class." My brother was a senior in high school, less than a month from graduation. "I suppose he got fed up, so he went to the window and threatened to jump." Mrs. Coates sniffled. My own nose began to run. "He's at Lutheran General now."

Five South, I thought. A mythical floor of the hospital where kids went when their parents learned they were doing drugs, when they Oded. When they attempted suicide. There'd be whisperings in the school hallways sometimes about a classmate—a popular cool kid: *You hear about Sam? Five South, man.* And it was like a badge of honor, like the stirrings of a legend. But my brother, high-strung and bespectacled, the target of teasing and jokes, was not popular. He was not cool. Allen was, however—then, and many, many times since—suicidal.

"Your mom will be here soon to get you." Mrs. Coates handed me a tissue. "Shall I wait with you?" I shook my head.

Alone in the office, I took a swallow of the cold coffee. It tasted like rusted metal, nearly impossible to keep down. One time when I was six or seven, I'd been painting with one of those long, skinny tins of watercolors. I filled a drinking glass with water to clean my brush. The color of the water became increasingly brown, and when I stirred it up, it developed a frothy head like root beer. Allen loved root beer, and—to be funny, I thought—I told him that's what this was. "Drink it," I said. He took a big swig, and, as soon as he tasted it, spit it out. He looked at me through his glasses, the effect of my betrayal in his eyes.

While I waited for my mother in the counselor's office, I remembered that look. I lifted the foul cup of oily cold coffee. "Drink it," I said. And I did.

The first bit of action that most readers notice is that this woman, Mrs. Coates, is offering a sixth-grader a cup of coffee. That is certainly peculiar behavior, and you might interpret it either of two ways:

1. Mrs. Coates is a particularly unprofessional school counselor.
2. She is set off-balance by the moment, not used to delivering messages such as "Your brother Allen tried to jump out a window today," and in her nervousness, she is acting awkwardly and inappropriately.

If you read on, you will see that the woman eventually reaches for one of the young narrator's hands in an effort to console her and offers the child a tissue. The adult provides basic information about the brother's suicide attempt and his current condition. Her eyes are moist and she is having difficulty speaking.

At this point, evidence may be building up toward conclusion number two. Mrs. Coates is trying, even if her efforts fall somewhat short.

But then she asks, "Shall I wait with you?" When the narrator, only eleven years old, shakes her head, the school counselor leaves the room. Would you expect a woman in that position to leave a sixth-grader alone after delivering such disturbing news?

You can form your own conclusion as to whether Mrs. Coates was doing her job well, though that is just texture and background to the essay, not the center of McNair's narrative. Less important than what conclusion you reach is that you are *given* the opportunity to decide for yourself. McNair doesn't tell us what she thinks, or instruct us on what we should think, about her sixth-grade counselor. Instead, she gives us the actions so that we might reach our own conclusion. Because the conclusion is one that we reach on our own, we tend to believe that conclusion much more firmly.

That's the point: to let the reader decide. Your job as writer is to provide the details which make that possible.

The essay also reveals much about the young McNair. The child accepts the cup of cold coffee because it seems the "grown-up thing" to do. She mimics the women she has seen at the Tip-Top diner, "staring out the window, waiting." What conclusions can you form about the youthful narrator from these actions? What is she feeling inside?

Does the brief dialogue, or the fact that there is so little dialogue, reinforce the opinions you form about the child and the adult in this essay?

It is, by the way, worth mentioning again that McNair likely does not have a "court transcript" memory of the exact words that were spoken that day. Instead, she is doing her best in this essay to capture the emotion in the room, the woman's nervous manner, and her own reactions to the counselor's words. A sophisticated reader understands that McNair is not working from detailed notes—in the way that we would expect of the White House reporter for the *Washington Post*—but the reader also trusts that McNair is attempting to give us the truth, and has thought hard about what really happened that day. *Here is what it was like*, she is saying to her reader. *Here is my best effort to recreate that experience, so you can experience it as well.*

In the end, McNair's brief memoir hinges on two moments: the flashback sentences, where we learn about a time the author tricked her brother into drinking dirty watercolor water, and the final moment, when she lifts "the foul cup of oily cold coffee" to her mouth and drinks it. The essay is about feelings of betrayal, about guilt, and about the inability of a sixth-grader to fully understand such horrendous family events as her brother's mental illness and suicidal tendencies.

But notice how none of this has to be explained. The details, the dialogue, and mainly the action hold the meaning.

One more aspect of excellent writing that McNair demonstrates in this essay has to do with rounded, rather than flat, characters. A flat character is all one way: the totally despicable villain or the completely helpless victim. Think of a one-dimensional cardboard cutout.

Mrs. Coates, though only a secondary character in a very brief scene within a short essay, is rounded, given more than one side. She *does* try to help the child, even if awkwardly. She *is* saying nice things. But like many of us, at times she probably didn't do her job so well, and this seems to be one of them.

Real human beings are not all bad and not all good. Even your heroes probably have annoying characteristics or selfish moments on difficult days. Conversely, those people who do things poorly, or act badly, almost always wish to be better at what they do, or more acceptable in society, but are unable to meet their own expectations for complex reasons. Fiction writers know this, and this aspect of human behavior is worth remembering in nonfiction as well.

Moreover, a character with depth and “roundness” is simply more interesting for the reader to encounter. A complex character gives the interested reader more to chew on and ponder.

(Remember that we are calling the real people you write about “characters,” even though they are *not* fictionalized. Approaching the people in your nonfiction as characters reminds you that your job, as author, is to bring them fully onto the page: how they look, how they act, their reactions to other people and events, the ways in which they move through a scene.)

This basic advice about rounded character applies to the dangers of stereotypes as well. Whenever you hear a writer characterize someone as “a slut” or “white trash,” you would do well to become very skeptical. If you have a good “crap detector,” it should beep loudly. Labels such as these are offensive, intolerant, and usually applied with malice. Even a so-called positive stereotype—“she was born in Korea, and thus she is obviously very good at math”—should give you pause.

Blanket stereotypes can be destructive in society and human relationships, but this is also a writing issue. As long as you think of your characters as destined to act a certain way simply because they come from a particular background or family situation, you will lack the ability to see the depths of a character or to truly understand someone’s world other than your own. The writer’s job is to attempt a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of every character—the ones you like, the ones you don’t like, and especially those you think that you can never really understand. To do this well, you must throw all of your prejudices and preconceptions aside. An open mind is a writer’s greatest strength, if that writer is after truth rather than mere cliché.

Scene: Letting the Facts Speak for Themselves

In each of the brief essays in this chapter, description, dialogue, and action combine to create a complete scene. In Jane Armstrong’s “Injection,” the basic scene is the author sitting alone on the edge of the bathtub, shaking as she tries to inject herself with an experimental treatment for multiple sclerosis. Eventually her husband enters, and offers help. In Art Homer’s “A Dramatic Dogalog,” the author is waiting outside a supermarket with his dog Hooch, when an elderly woman approaches him, full of questions and opinions. And of course, in Patricia McNair’s “Drink It,” the scene we have is the few minutes in the school counselor’s office, when the young narrator receives bad news about her brother.

What is a scene? A scene is the opposite of a still photograph. In a scene, detail, sensory information, and actions (including dialogue) combine to re-create a sense of movement. A scene is when real people in actual space take concrete actions for a set period of time.

In addition to a description of setting, and the names of the people in the room, a good scene often includes the actions (“she lifted the flower vase and moved it to the bedside table”), important facial expressions (“he winced when she mentioned his mother”), and often some sense of change (“she seemed to sink into her chair the longer they spoke”).

Describing how you feel about your childhood backyard is not a scene. Giving us a static description of your childhood backyard—“there was a sliding board over by the fence, and a stack of firewood by the garage”—is not a scene. But showing us a few moments one Tuesday afternoon when you and your little sister played with GI Joes and Barbie dolls in the dirt patch worn away by the swing set, letting us hear the dialogue, and ending when the skies open and the rain begins to pour, is a scene.

Another way to think of scene is to imagine a shooting script for a Hollywood film. Though the form is different, a good prose scene is cinematic, and if you were to hand that scene to a filmmaker, she would know where to place the actors, how to cast those actors, what the set should look like, what lines the actors would speak, and perhaps other details such as lighting, costuming, and ambient sound.

Revising for Scene

Writing a scene, remembering what happened in what order and determining how to construct phrases, sentences, details in such a way that it all becomes clear in a reader’s mind, is *much more work* than summarizing the action. It is far easier to simply give the readers a shorthand version of events and inform them what conclusion you want them to reach. Often it takes multiple drafts before you get to a clear first draft of a scene, a draft in which the moments come alive, and the action is easy to follow.

All of this hard work is worth it, however. Why? Because if you take the trouble to write the full scene, the reader really sees what occurs, and if the reader sees what occurs with his or her own eyes, it becomes real. And your reader is convinced.

A great way to revise for scene and detail, especially if you are writing memoir or literary journalism, is to utilize Lee Gutkind’s yellow pen test. Take your first draft, or whichever draft you are working to revise, and read through it with a yellow highlighting pen in your hand. (Any color will do, of course.) Each time you read a sentence or paragraph of summary—“my parents got divorced when I was in fifth grade and I was miserable because I had to change schools”—leave that section unhighlighted. Whenever you run across a scene, however, a portion of your draft in which there is action, when the reader is given a moment-to-moment description of an event as if it were happening right then, color that entire section with your highlighter. You might try this same exercise with an essay like Sanders’ “Buckeyes” or McNair’s “Drink It.”

If your essay is showing more highlighted sections than unhighlighted sections, you are on the right track. Many writers will aim for a 70–30 percent mix, though lively writing is never simply a mathematical equation. Usually, however, far more unhighlighted sections (summary and exposition, “telling” the reader) and too few highlighted sections (“showing the reader”) can serve as a warning. Your job of detail and description, bringing the scene to life, is not yet finished.

WRITING PROMPTS: Characterization through Dialogue

1. Spend time in the campus snack bar, at a coffee shop, or anywhere that people congregate and have conversations (close enough that you can overhear). Listen closely, and either take notes or—if you wish to be more discreet—remember well and then jot down some notes immediately afterward. Later, write a one-page scene in which you illustrate as accurately as possible what was said, how the people looked and acted as they were saying it, and how the conversation wandered from point to point. Don't worry now if your scene or the conversation you recount has any great meaning or significance—just try to capture the intricacies and unusual logic of normal human conversations. (Remember, human beings seldom speak in complete sentences. Hardly ever.)
2. Find a quiet place where you will not be distracted. Turn off the TV and the Internet, and ask your roommate to leave you alone for a while. Now attempt to think back to when you were five, or six, or somewhere around that early age. Take notes on a conversation entirely from your memory. Attempt, as best as possible, to remember how your best friend would snort when she laughed, or the way your Mom would twist the ring on her finger when she was worried. Try to capture the cadence of that person's speech. Don't worry if you are 100 percent accurate in what you recollect, but instead see how much you *can* remember. Notice how much of memory begins to flow off the pen when you really, really try to remember back. Take fifteen minutes with no other distractions to write down as much as you can—the words, the actions, the facial expressions, where it all took place.

WRITING PROMPTS: Characterization through Action

1. Phillip Lopate, an award-winning personal essayist, tells us that in creating characters of ourselves, a good place to start is your quirks. These are the idiosyncrasies, stubborn tics, antisocial mannerisms, and so on that set you apart from the majority of your fellowmen. Lopate also warns against coming across as absolutely average. Who wants to read about that bland creature, the regular Joe? Letting the reader know that you are willing to laugh at your own foibles, or at least look honestly at your own human limitations, is more interesting, certainly, but also creates a sense of trust. If she is honest about herself, maybe she is honest about others, the reader thinks. So be honest about yourself. Write a nonfiction scene in which we see what sets you apart, makes you other than the regular Joe or Jane. Shine a light on your idiosyncrasies, stubborn tics, or antisocial mannerisms. Make yourself into a character by showing that you are less than perfect. We all are.
2. Blanket stereotypes show shallowness of thought, and in that regard they are bad writing. Determining where you harbor an unexamined prejudice, however, is often an opportunity to tackle a highly worthwhile subject. Pick someone who doesn't live the way you think she should live: someone who doesn't keep her house clean, raises her children all wrong, can't hold a job, or somehow makes a mess of her life day in and day out. If that description, or some part of it, does not capture one of the unfathomable characters in your life, pick one that does—the friend who again and again sabotages relationships, the stoned slacker who wastes his considerable potential, or the unimaginative older sibling who always follows the rules and plays it safe. Then remember—no one wakes up in the morning and thinks, “I'm planning to make dumb choices today.” This person is likely trying to do well, even if she fails in your eyes. If you can make an honest attempt to understand the pressures that make such a person take actions which on the surface seem inexplicable or wrong, then you'll be able to write about that person. And that person is perhaps *exactly* the person you should be writing about.