

A Pandemic & Creative Non-Fiction

Rachel Wright

USING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO SPARK STUDENT CREATIVE NON-FICTION WRITING

Getting started during Distance Learning

Our last unit of work this academic year for Grade 11s (usually based at the campus of Shanghai American School, but this year, like so many other school students, working through Distance Learning), was a Creative Non-Fiction unit (CNF). Initially when we'd planned this unit back in October/November 2019, our Grade 11 (UK Year 12) teacher team had thought we would take "Shanghai 2020" as our broad-brush topic. Students would research an interesting Shanghai individual, or write up an event, place or activity that they considered reflected something unique and distinctive about the city we call home – Shanghai.

It became abundantly clear by early February 2020 that there would be no going out to see events or places in Shanghai for quite a while. As the pandemic took hold of the airwaves and broadband, it seemed like a natural step to harness it in the service of teaching; I'd seen some interesting starter activities posted to the inthinking website (a go-to for International Baccalaureate teachers) about coverage of the virus by the media and the impact of words like "superspreader". Kids were obsessing about it every day anyway, via Chinese social media and wechat (for those who stayed in Shanghai), or Instagram, or WhatsApp. There was a lot of fear, anxiety and misinformation going around. Maybe this could be a way to channel students' attention in a creative and productive manner – and help them hone their writing skills in the process? Some of my colleagues

were skeptical; they felt that rather than mitigate anxiety, it could make the situation even worse. I polled my class and a majority said they were happy to take the pandemic as a jumping off point for some of their own writing. I left the option open for students who didn't want to write about the pandemic, to choose their own topic (one out of 18 students ended up taking that route).

What is Creative Non-Fiction?

Creative Non-Fiction is not a genre that students come across with any regularity in our current curriculum (which borrows from the US Common Core), although it is a popular section in our school library. Books such as *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver, *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer or *I'll be gone in the Dark: One Woman's Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer* by Michelle McNamara all could be said to count as creative non-fiction. Non-fiction is a rather amorphous form, encompassing everything from travel writing with a descriptive bent (à la Bruce Chatwin – *In Patagonia*), to cultural fish-out-of-water syndrome (Jonathan Raban's *Notes from a Small Island*), to more information-heavy explorations ("Born to Swim" by Sushma Subramanian, 2019) or literary-type short stories ("Denial" by Jane Rucker, 2020). Some opinion columns would count as creative non-fiction (think Jeremy Clarkson ostensibly writing about a car, but in fact writing about himself). Think of all those 'fake' memoirs, from Robinson Crusoe and Davy Crockett

all the way up to James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and countless others, which seem to be non-fictional because they're heavily based on first-hand accounts, but aren't. Whilst some might argue that all writing contains subjective elements which deviate from a strictly factual narrative, we decided to make it clear to students that for this assignment, they couldn't make things up. That was the bottom line. I pointed them in the direction of creative non-fiction websites such as www.buzzfeed.com/ reader, www.hippocampusmagazine.com and <https://narratively.com> and asked them to think of how they would bring the creative aspect of non-fiction to life.

Books on writing creative non-fiction such as *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction--from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between* by Lee Gutkind, *Writing Creative Nonfiction* by Philip Gerard and *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings* by Linda Anderson show teachers and students how to approach the art of writing the genre. Lee Gutkind, on the website creativenonfiction.org, suggests this simple definition of how the creative aspect of non-fiction be interpreted:

The word "creative" refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy.

Incorporating elements of literary craft

So how would students go about using elements of literary craft in their writing? First off, I had them look at several examples of opinion columns to recognize how 'voice' works in writing (notoriously difficult for some students to identify and interpret). What kind of language does the first-person narrator of an opinion piece use, to create a certain mood and project their personality through their prose? After identifying a few key features, students had a go at their own opinion columns. An excerpt from one student who was consciously trying for a humorous tone, went like this:

Opinion Column: How has COVID-19 impacted my school experience?

Today is a Friday, but I stayed home all day. I stayed home yesterday, the day before yesterday, and the day before that. In fact, I've been staying home since the beginning of February, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A typical day of my "distance learning," which is what our school has decided to call their flawed, online learning program, looks something like this: I wake up at noon, do some work, go on YouTube for a few hours, then sleep at midnight. This routine has been my daily life for two months now, and I'm surprised I haven't even grown a centimeter taller with all the sleep I've been getting...

I also asked students to get into the habit of journaling on a regular basis, even if it wasn't for very long and even if they didn't know what to write. I told them journals could be anything – a drawing of something, a snippet of conversation they'd overheard from their parents, a tweet, a headline, a thought, anything. I was hoping that after several weeks of journaling students may have come across something that could be the germ of an idea for their CNF piece. Other exercises I asked them to try were creating a scene and developing a character – whether that was the character of the narrator (themselves or a version of themselves) or someone who featured in their piece. I encouraged them to use typical elements of literary craft such as dialogue, description, 'show not tell', but also to be factually true and to have a clear purpose to their writing. What were they trying to communicate to their readers? If their main character was themselves, then they could think about how to create a connection with their reader. If they were featuring other characters, they could think about how to use their stories to engage us. An example of a scene and character combined, appeared in an episode a student wrote on how the pandemic was affecting the homeless in California:

Santa Clara County is a ghost town. The last remnant of the once-bustling city is the people living on the streets who have nowhere else to go. Among the many homeless residents, Valerie sits in her tattered plastic blue tent that faces the imminent threat of collapse, wearing her once bright purple down jacket streaked with dust and sweat. Even without running water and electricity, her eyes are filled with courage and hope as she says, "If God wants me, He will get me".

Naturally, students commonly used themselves as a starting point to explore social isolation:

When I first heard of the COVID-19 outbreak I was devastated. I knew that I would have to be quarantined, locked up like a dog for the month. As a fitness enthusiast and a rugby player I was fuming over the fact that I wouldn't be able to pursue either of them for the next few months. Even worse I realized that I wouldn't be able to see my friends until the pandemic was over. The first week of the pandemic I laid on my bed feeling trapped and bored out of my mind. At one point I thought to myself that I would rather be in physics class, which is objectively the most boring class of all. Every minute I was locked inside made me wish that this pandemic would end as soon as possible. The second week of COVID-19 made me realize that I no longer needed to wake up early in the morning, instead of waking up at 6 everyday I woke up at 9:30. Not having to go to school and being constricted to a strict schedule allowed me to sleep in, and I will forever stand by the fact that sleeping in on a Monday is objectively one of the most satisfying things. I began to think that maybe being quarantined does have some benefits. Then I realized the best part of being socially isolated: the amount of freedom that I had. No longer did I have Math from 8-9:30 then English from 10-11:30 then Physics from 11:30-1. Instead I did what I wanted when I wanted. For

me, school could start at 8am or 8pm. I felt liberated. I had the most freedom I had ever had and soon I loved being in quarantine and I wasn't the only one. After talking to a few friends, I learned that many of us enjoyed being at home away from the stresses of daily life. I remember a BBC episode that I watched a few months ago about a group of people called hikikomori. The hikikomori are people who have chosen to withdraw from society and seek isolation. The hikikomori neither go to school nor work and don't interact with others outside of their family. I realized that I, along with many people around the world, lived much like the hikikomori. While the hikikomori chose to go into isolation and we were forced into isolation, both of us had enjoyed being by ourselves more than living with the rest of society.

By now, most students were starting to get ideas about what they might write about. Others needed more help so I put together a possible list of prompts:

- What I will tell my children
- One thing that will never be the same
- (Your name) at work: A DL student's report
- Mr/Mrs ??? (Choose someone who has been featured in the news and research them before telling their story and why it impressed you)
- What I never knew I missed about school
- Lockdown: The World Without Us

In the event, only one student used an adaptation of one of my prompts ("What I never knew I missed about school") – the other 17 came up with their own ideas.

The pitch

Prior to beginning their CNF first drafts, students were asked to pitch their idea for CNF to an editorial board (ideally it would have been our school Communications team who would publish a few of the most interesting ones in the Ascent campus magazine next semester, but initially it was their English teacher). Before they did their own pitch, students had already identified key features by examining the pitch for "Born to Swim", and answering these questions:

- What "question" is the author trying to answer?
- What text type is she proposing to write? (feature article/blog/opinion column/etc.)
- What kinds of research will she do and why?
- What unique perspective is she hoping to give on her topic?
- What kind of details about her story does she include in her pitch?
- Why does she think readers would be interested to read her piece?

For their own 3-5 minute pitch (an oral assignment, consisting of a video) students were instructed to give:

- An overview of the evolution of your idea
- A brief account of how you went about researching it and developing it

- A description of the details of your intended Creative Non-Fiction piece
- An explanation of what text type you have chosen as the vehicle for your writing (essay / opinion column / letter / journal / non-fiction story etc.) purpose, intended effects on the audience, etc.

They were told to think carefully about what unique 'angle' or perspective they were going to be taking in relation to their topic and reminded that the object was not to 'show everything I know on the subject'. We hoped that by reading around the subject they would deepen their understanding of the topic they would be writing about, and be able to make their pitch more detailed and convincing.

What I discovered was that many students were confused about the difference between different text types. Several started off by pitching a magazine feature article, only to end up writing a blog or opinion column. Which was fine – they had some flexibility to change things slightly from their pitch to the written product. But they had to stick with the idea they had pitched.

Writing drafts

Students were given a word count of 500-800 words for their CNF. We had some debate about this in our teaching team – we would have liked to have given the students up to 1,200 words, but we were also mindful that many were doing AP exams around this time (online and often in the middle of the night, Shanghai time) so we didn't want to add to their stress. I was privately hoping that a shorter piece might encourage students to really look at the organization of their pieces, and we did some work on how to write a strong opening and closing and how to experiment with the kind of analogy / parallel narrative in one of the pieces we'd examined ("Denial"). Several students ended up adopting this structure to lend interest to their writing. They then worked in small collaborative teams to give peer feedback on their first drafts using a checklist. After making revisions, they submitted a revised second draft to me, for more feedback. I remember, around this time, individual meetings with students on Microsoft Teams to discuss their work really picked up – and students who hadn't been participating in 'live' classes, or even doing much of the asynchronous work I'd been setting, suddenly engaged. This was a watershed moment in the months of hard slog that had been DL. So often, I'd felt like I was teaching in a vacuum. With live classes not mandatory (and therefore limiting what new material I could introduce), the difficulty associated with connecting to students in time zones around the world, the isolation many of them felt, the distractions of their new environments and AP exam prep on the go, only a handful of students with astounding self-discipline or interest had been showing up regularly to my weekly 'classes'. Now I got to talk to almost everyone for 15-20 minutes. Students revised their second drafts in light of my feedback and checked in with me to talk over their ideas for improvements. They then submitted a final draft for grading the following week. Prior to this, I had contacted our school Tech team to see

Grade 11 Creative Non-fiction: Writing in Lockdown

Our Cultural Values Impact How We Deal with COVID-19

In kindergarten, my teacher asked the class, "Who is an example of bad person?" I responded with, "Hu Jintao (the president of China back in 2008)." Of course, my statement was unfounded as my naïf self who just started reading the newspaper thought that all the economic and societal troubles I was reading about were due to the incompetence of the president. The room fell into dead silence as my teacher looked at me in shock. She told me I was wrong and that I will understand when I grow up as she started to pick on someone else. As I grew older, I experienced similar situations in the classroom: I would express an idea or belief that was different from the consensus and be told of how mistaken I was.

Due to these experiences, I finally felt like I belonged when I moved to an international school. We were told that it was good to be different and to always be free and express our thoughts because if everyone is expected to reflect the views of the group, sacrificing their independent thinking, how can there be innovation? I happily supported these individualistic values and rebuked the Chinese, collectivist values for a long time until the recent pandemic.

MARCH 31, 2020

BREAKING

NEWS: HOW WILL THE APOCALYPSE CHANGE THE WORLD?

Our trip to Taiwan was supposed to last a week. I never knew that a week has 69 days.

With the exception of a few streetlights, it is completely dark outside. The loud sounds of traffic have been replaced by a cacophony of toad croaks and cricket chirps. Although it may not seem like it, we got lucky, location-wise. In countries all over the world, public transportation is bereft of people, streets are missing noise, schools without the shrieking laughter of children on the playground, grocery stores wiped of stock.

The Situation is well contained here; there are a total of 7 casualties here, while casualties world wide are almost at 350,000. Life is almost normal. After monitoring our symptoms, we are still allowed in restaurants, in public transportation, and in shopping malls. Businesses have not yet been separated into essential and non-essential.

At this point, my family and I can only hope that The Situation stays this way.

At the start, in just the span of a few days, our whole lives changed to accommodate The Apocalypse.

if there was any way to feature a sample of students' work more quickly (designing, editing, printing and distributing the magazine Ascent would take time, and I was keen to put students' work on the pandemic out to the larger school community in a timely manner to capitalize on its currency). Tech came back and suggested the Office 365 app sway – a nicely designed text and image presentation format for writing, and relatively straightforward to put together. We might be able to add a link to our Creative Non-fiction sway in an online Newsletter sent out by Communications to the SAS community.

The whole unit of work had lasted roughly two months (March 26-May 29), but I think it was one of the more successful units I taught during DL – mostly because the students were engaged, they took ownership for their writing and the project connected in a very real way to their lives. One of the things I had often struggled with, in the past, was trying to design English class activities which empowered students to become 'ethical global citizens' (one of the key overarching values upheld by our school). One of the ways this is defined, is students "engaging in authentic opportunities to impact others positively". I felt that, by reflecting on the impact the pandemic had on their lives and publishing their stories to our SAS community, the students would be able to do exactly that.

Tips for introducing creative non-fiction writing to your students

- Get them into the habit of journaling and other creative writing exercises.
- Ask them to research a social issue of relevance to their life and or community which they would be interested in writing about.
- Decide what unique 'angle' or perspective they are going to be taking in relation to their topic and provide opportunities to talk over their ideas with their peers before and during writing.

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As I walk through the familiar cafeteria doors, I am transported to a different dimension; a world where a universe of flavors collide. I survey the room, attempting to take in all the different smells that are trying to invade my senses. Walking over to the little glass cabinet filled with food displays, my stomach rumbles as I think about what I'm going to eat today. Weird. I know right? Who fantasizes about cafeteria food? Well, your answer is me. After four months of eating different variations of pasta, tomato sauce, chicken, cheese and rice every day, getting the chance to eat some savory Sodexo Hainan Chicken Rice is like getting into Harvard and winning the lottery all in one sitting. Absolutely amazing. The sound of my fridge beeping impatiently drags me back, head-first, into this sad reality. A reality where eating out in a restaurant could be a potential death sentence.



Dr Rachel Wright is an English teacher at the Shanghai American School (Puxi campus). She teaches English across the High School – both US Common Core and IB English Literature. In her spare time, she coaches Forensics public speaking. Since February she has been living and working in Cirencester. She can be contacted at Rachel.Wright@saschina.org