

*It works for  
science topics too.*

# IMMERSION ESSAY

Linking Theme to Reflection and Imagery



Andrew Rusnak

# ASSIGNMENT

**Assignment #1:** Immersion/thematic experience. 1) Study *What Our Telescopes Could Not See*, Pippa Goldschmidt and *O-Rings*, Sarah Stewart Johnson from *The Best Science and Nature Writing 2014*. Your goal in this essay is to immerse yourself in an outside, “transcendent” experience, a hike in a remote place, a panoramic, picturesque landscape, a pond, beach, mountainside, somewhere that evokes, if not awe, than reflection. This is an experience you will need to record, take detailed notes on your reaction. 2) Then, come up with a theme that is relevant to your life, something you think about or contemplate, an insight that you have that you consider to have relevance not just to you, but to the human condition. Or not, it could be a question you have that is consistent, but as yet you are exploring a suitable answer. You may need to use your personal history or background, those times in your life that were “turning points” or unexplained, uncertain. In *What Our Telescopes See* it is political upheaval and its relationship to personal reflection and development. In *O-Rings* it is the “price” and high human “cost” of exploration based on calculated risk. 3) Write an essay that synthesizes the two elements you select into meaningful and guided observation/description, reflection, analysis. Integrate, blend your theme and your experience so the two nurture each other, so that they are linked and have direction. Techniques you can use to achieve this are analogy, metaphor, simile. This essay is a process of discovery, so what you end up “knowing” by the end of the essay is much more refined than what you started with. The reader discovers, takes the ride, with you.

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

## The Search for Meaning in Common Life

Creative nonfiction can be classified into several overlapping, oftentimes hard to define sub genres:

- Literary Journalism;
- Personal Memoir; and
- Essay.

# CREATIVE NONFICTION

## The Search for Meaning in Common Life

The many narrative prose forms preclude any definitive categorization:

- Travel writing;
- Science writing;
- Belletristic essay'
- Critical essay;
- Lyrical essay;
- Political commentary;
- Non-fiction novel;
- Profile & biography;
- Documentary;
- Case study; and
- Nature writing

# FICTION VS. NONFICTION? WHAT IS “TRUE” AND WHAT IS FALSE?

“Are they to be described as ‘writing’ in the sense of literature, or as ‘journalism’ [or essay]? I have never quite known where one begins and the other ends, and, as Professor Carey pointed out in 1987, the question is neither interesting nor meaningful—literature not being an ‘objectively attainable category to which certain works naturally belong’ but more or less what ‘culture controlling groups’ decide it is. Carey went on:

‘The question worth asking therefore is not whether reportage [or essay writing] is literature, but why intellectuals and literary institutions have generally been so keen to deny it that status. Resentment of the masses, who are regarded as reportage’s audience, is plainly a factor in the development of this prejudice ...But the disparagement of reportage also reflects a wish to promote the imaginary above the real. Works of imagination are, it is maintained, inherently superior and have a spiritual value absent from ‘journalism.’ The creative artist is in touch with truths higher than the actual, which give him exclusive entry into the soul of man. Such convictions seem to represent a residue of magical thinking.’”

—Ian Jack, from *The Granta Book of Reportage*



# FICTION VS. NONFICTION? WHAT IS “TRUE” AND WHAT IS FALSE?

## **At Random, off the shelves, passage 1:**

“Just before dawn the sky darkened. I was too exhausted even to sleep. Surrounded by darkness, I gave up trying to see the other end of the raft. But I kept peering into the obscurity, attempting to penetrate it. That was when I clearly saw Jaime Manjarres sitting on the gunwale, dressed in his uniform: blue pants and shirt, his cap slightly tilted over his left ear, on which I could clearly read, despite the darkness, ‘ARC Caldas.’”

**Fiction or Nonfiction?**



# FICTION VS. NONFICTION? WHAT IS “TRUE” AND WHAT IS FALSE?

## At Random, off the shelves, passage 2:

“I go to sleep alone, and wake up alone. I take walks. I work until I'm tired. I watch the wind play with the trash that's been under the snow all winter. Everything seems simple until you think about it. Why is love intensified by absence?”

Long ago, men went to sea, and women waited for them, standing on the edge of the water, scanning the horizon for the tiny ship. Now I wait for Henry. He vanishes unwillingly, without warning. I wait for him. Each moment that I wait feels like a year, an eternity. Each moment is as slow and transparent as glass. Through each moment I can see infinite moments lined up, waiting. Why has he gone where I cannot follow?”



**Fiction or Nonfiction?**

# FICTION VS. NONFICTION? WHAT IS “TRUE” AND WHAT IS FALSE?

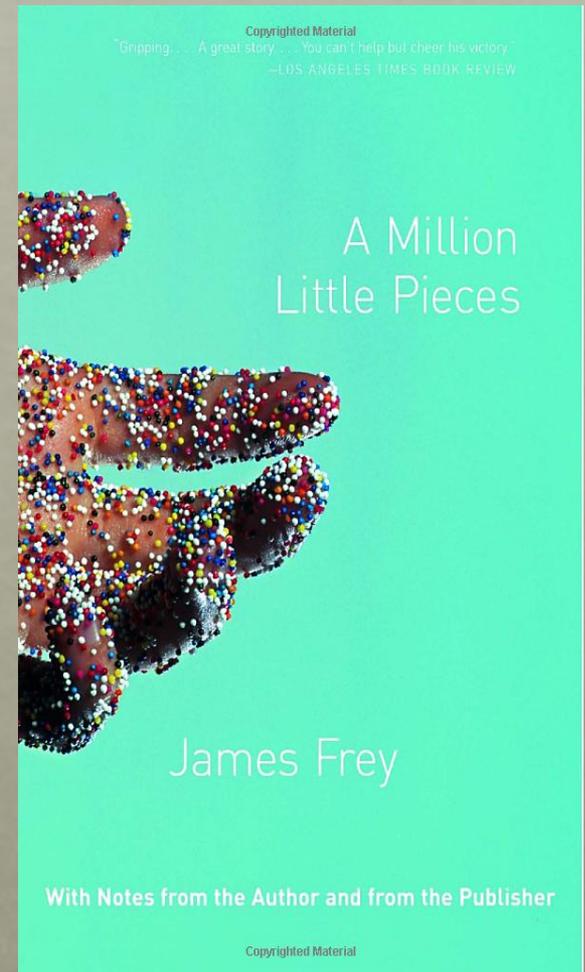
Passage 1: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's, *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*.

Passage 2: Audrey Niffenegger's, *The Time Traveler's Wife*.



# FICTION VS. NONFICTION? WHAT IS “TRUE” AND WHAT IS FALSE?

Is there a “real” difference? Remember the case of James Frey’s “*A Million Tiny Pieces?*” The book was selected and promoted by Oprah. Afterwards it was discovered that Frey had fabricated, embellished, exaggerated some scenes in his “real,” nonfiction book for dramatic effect. His isn’t the only case. There are many in journalism. Does this matter? Does it matter that a book is declared “fiction,” “memoir,” “journalism,” “autobiography?”



# FICTION VS. NONFICTION? WHAT IS “TRUE” AND WHAT IS FALSE?

“When Frey, LeRoy, Defonseca, Seltzer, Rosenblat, Wilkomirski, et al. wrote their books, of course they made things up. Who doesn’t? Each one said sure, call it a novel, call it a memoir, who’s going to care? I don’t want to defend Frey per se—he’s a terrible writer—but the very pornographic obsession with his and similar cases reveals the degree of nervousness on the topic. The whole huge loud roar, as it returns again and again, has to do with the culture being embarrassed at how much it wants the frame of reality and, within that frame, great drama.”



"I've just finished reading *Reality Hunger*, and I'm lit up by it—astounded, intoxicated, ecstatic, overwhelmed. It's a pane that's also a mirror; as a result of reading it, I can't stop looking into myself and interrogating my own artistic intentions. It will be published to wild fanfare, because it really is an urgent book: a piece of art-making itself, a sublime, exciting, outrageous, visionary volume."

—Jonathan Lethem

"Aphorism, science, poetry, history, dogma, philosophy, pronouncement, rant, cant, news report, act of faith, funkadelic exploration, literary criticism, one-man wiki, print-page blog, confession, anecdote, truth, and beauty—David Shields's book is that, and more. It tells us who we are and why we read and why the things we read exist and where it all might go to tomorrow."

—Albert Goldbarth

"This is the book our sick-at-heart moment needs—like a sock in the jaw or an electric jolt in the solar plexus—to wake it up. *Reality Hunger* will create sensations of like-mindedness in scattered souls everywhere. Shields has goosed the zeitgeist. The point of the polemic is his pugilistic and performative assertion of appropriation's inevitability: literary artists need to be given the liberties that have long been accorded to visual artists (ever since Duchamp)."

—Wayne Koestenbaum

"*Reality Hunger* seems to come from one author but in fact is a compendium of quoted passages from writers, poets, rockers, and whatnot—all of it traversing the disputed terrain of the real. It's cranky, generous, ridiculous, serious, and subtle; it's ambitious but with a nonchalant, throwaway feel, like a Lou Reed lyric. Its parts are so tightly strung together that you can't pick a single thread without involving yourself in the whole shivering web. Anybody who writes or thinks or breathes is already living inside the questions raised by *Reality Hunger*, which is one of the most provocative books I've ever read. It's perfect for now, for our time; it has that vitality. It's truly great. I think it's destined to become a classic."

—Charles D'Ambrosio

"David Shields's *Reality Hunger* is a rare and very peculiar thing: a wake-up call that is a pleasure to hear and respond to. A daring combination of montage and essay, it's crammed full of good things. Reading it, I kept thinking, "Yes, exactly, I wish I'd said that," and then I realized I had."

—Geoff Dyer

"I've just finished (for the first of what I know will not be the only time) *Reality Hunger*. Shields says things here that I have thought, wished I thought, wished someone would say. A sparky, brainy, passionate, often very funny, and never small-bearded or pinch-nosed book: agazian, demanding but generous and searching and self-debunking. I have written in the margins, underlined, and starred many passages and in general have ruined the book as a physical object."

—Patricia Hampl

REALITY HUNGER  
A MANIFESTO  
DAVID SHIELDS

# STORY

It's important to think of your essay as a story. You can use as much plot as you like, but the “beginning” and the “end” can be less focused on place than idea or character position.

Good writers and storytellers are always mulling over certain questions:

- Who is my intended audience?
- What am I trying to convey thematically?  
Dramatically?
- Why should anyone care? Where's the relevance? Does my story beat the “so what” factor?



# STORY

**From John Gardner's, *The Art of Fiction* (definitely appropriate for creative nonfiction [essays] and literary journalism):**

“The writer must create, stroke by stroke, powerfully convincing characters and settings; he/she must more and more clearly define his/her overall theme or idea; she/he must choose and aesthetically justify his genre and style.”

“The writer must complete equations, think out the subtlest implications of what he's/she's said, get to the truth. Not just of the characters and action, but also of form, remembering that neatness can be carried too far so that the work seems fussy, over-wrought, unspontaneous, anal compulsive, and remembering that mess is no alternative.”



# STORY

*“A writer publishes to be read; then hopes the readers are affected by the words, hopes that their opinions are changed or strengthened or enlarged, or that readers are pushed to notice something they had not stopped to notice before. All my reporting life, I have thrown small pebbles into a very large pond, and have no way of knowing whether any pebble caused the slightest ripple. I don’t need to worry about that. My responsibility was in the effort.”*

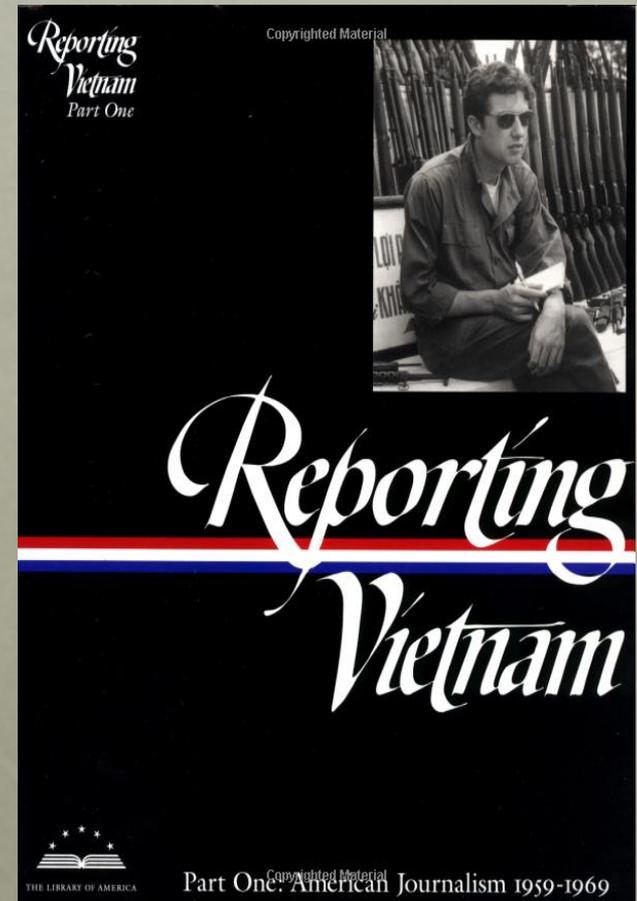
—Martha Gellhorn, from *The Granta Book of Reportage*



# STORY

*“Reportage [writing essays] tends to come, after all, from a different kind of personality; the kind that gives the initial process of finding out an equal, or even a greater priority to the later process of shaping the information discovered—the scene witnessed, the word spoken—into sentences fit for the page.”*

—Ian Jack, from *The Granta Book of Reportage*



# STORY

**From John Gardner's, *The Art of Fiction* (definitely appropriate for creative nonfiction [essays] and literary journalism):**

“First business of a writer is to make the reader see and feel what the characters see and feel ”

“In good fiction [and nonfiction], it's physical detail that pulls the reader into the dream, a dream which must have linearity or narrative profluence, be vivid and continuous.”



# THEME

*By theme here we mean not a message -- a word no good writer likes applied to his work -- but the general subject, as the theme of an evening of debates may be World Wide Inflation.*

John Gardner

Theme is critical to any successful literary essay. It helps carry and unify structure and idea. Theme is what drives you to write, the compelling idea. You do not want to introduce your theme directly, but by providing the context in which you are going to package it. The theme will emerge in various ways through content like descriptive passages, analysis, and action, and through technique such as rhythm, tone, syntax.



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# THEME

What main and minor points do you want to run consistently throughout your story? Sometimes a writer is obvious with some themes and hides others behind metaphor, symbol, and imagery and various devices that function to defamiliarize the reader. This can create levels of signification.

Maybe one of your themes is how, over the past 30 years or so, our economy has shifted from gritty blue collar, hands on jobs to more cushy office jobs, and how that has affected the culture of the family?

Maybe one of your themes is how, over the past 30 years or so, our economy has shifted from gritty blue collar, hands on jobs to more cushy office jobs, and how that has affected the culture of a family or a neighborhood? Themes work as the glue that holds a story together.



# THEME

After discovering what themes you want to pursue, think about how you want to convey them. There are obvious and then there are more hidden means. Ask yourself how do I as the main character engage and support the theme(s)? What are the implications of theme(s) as it/they relate(s) to the context in which you are writing it/them?

Do the metaphors, similes, symbols, and imagery reinforce a political, maybe discriminatory agenda or stereotype? For instance, does using war as a metaphor for love create the impression that men always have a distinct advantage because they are perceived more as the fighters of war? Do metaphors carry a political or moral agenda? Is the story in anyway allegorized?



# YOU ARE THE MAIN CHARACTER

In this immersion essay assignment you are the main character, it's first person "I." Your POV or point of view is "I." Usually our favorite part of reading stories is whether we can identify with a character and his/her experiences, emotions, actions, dialogue. This is generally referred to as empathy or vicarious experience. Most of us can probably remember influential characters from books and movies [and essays] we've read/watched in the past.

**I**



**Journalism**



# YOU ARE THE MAIN CHARACTER

“One of art’s purest challenges is to translate a human being into words.”  
—New Yorker editors, from *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker*.

“... a profile is a biographical piece—a concise rendering of a life through anecdote, incident, interview, and description (or some ineffable combination thereof)—...” —David Remnick, from *Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker*.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBRqTF0p1nw> An Introduction to First-Person Narrative  
- Fiction Focus, 15 min

# YOU ARE THE MAIN CHARACTER

When writing, ask yourself: How can I draw the reader into me as the main character and my experiences? What is significant about the way I introduce myself to the reader? Should I use descriptive detail that the reader can relate to? Should I introduce myself via action? Should I build expectations about how I might respond to certain situations in this experience? How is my personality similar to my reader's?

Do "I" as my character possess hero qualities and, if so, what are they? Can others relate to/identify with a character that is not like me? For instance, one that represents a difference in gender, race, ethnicity, culture, age group, religion? How do I check my own preconceived notions at the door and write in a neutral way OR leverage those notions that all readers may have?



# YOU ARE THE MAIN CHARACTER

How do I change or undergo metamorphosis in the course of the story I'm writing about myself? What causes change? An event? An insight? There is significant change and transition in everyone's life that influences/changes their outlook and behavior. How can I capture it and prevent myself from coming off as flat and immutable? How can I make myself exciting and interesting and curious and memorable? Remember, conflict is key. Present the conflict in a way that is relatable, the kind of conflict everyone goes through at somepoint, the kind of conflict we can define as part of the "human condition."



# YOU ARE THE MAIN CHARACTER

“More than money, what I needed was rest, at the very least to quell the misgivings I had been having about my role as a writer. On the transatlantic leg of the flight I had sketched out a bunch of alternatives: I mulled over writing in the urgent voice of a liberal reformer, or expressing a stoic world-weariness, or getting riled up and angry in an expose, or working toward a generous-spirited puff piece. These were all stories I thought about telling. And then on the plane from Frankfurt to St. Petersburg I was fated to sit beside a couple from Cleveland who’d come to Russia to adopt an eight-year-old girl.”

—**Orphans, Charles D’Ambrosio**



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# IMAGERY

Imagery can be simply defined as descriptive language. The intent is to appeal to the senses and, perhaps, memory. Sometimes imagery is embedded in figurative or inferential language, the use of metaphor or simile, for instance. Writers must be careful not to overuse imagery. Too much and not well-placed can create an imbalance. But it is used as a distinct tool in immersion essays as it lends to theme and reflection.



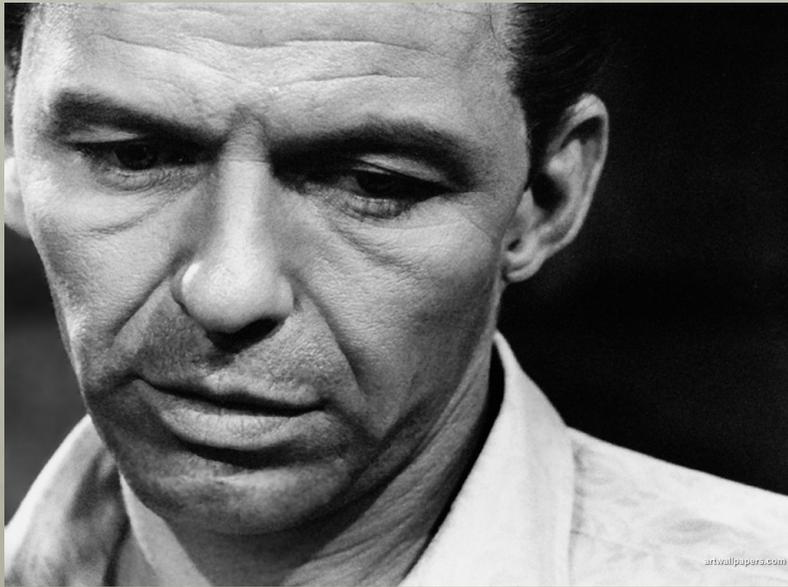
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X4LVTn4d> -O What is Imagery? Examples of Imagery From Great Writers, 5 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fMoBdz1E-o> Using Sensory Language, 5 min.

“The dead and pieces of the dead turn up in El Salvador everywhere, every day, taken for granted as in a nightmare or a horror movie. Vultures of course suggest the presence of a body. A knot of children on the street suggests the presence of a body. Bodies turn up in the brush of vacant lots, in the garbage thrown down ravines in the richest districts, in public restrooms, in bus stations. Some are dropped in Lake Hopango, a few miles east of the city, and wash up near the lakeside cottages and clubs frequented by what remains in San Salvador of the sporting bourgeoisie. Some will turn up at El Playon, the lunar lava field of rotting human flesh visible at one time or another on every television screen in America but characterized in June of 1982 in the *El Salvador News Gazette*, an English-language weekly edited by an American named Mario Rosenthal, as an ‘uncorroborated story ... dredged up from the lies of leftist propaganda.’”

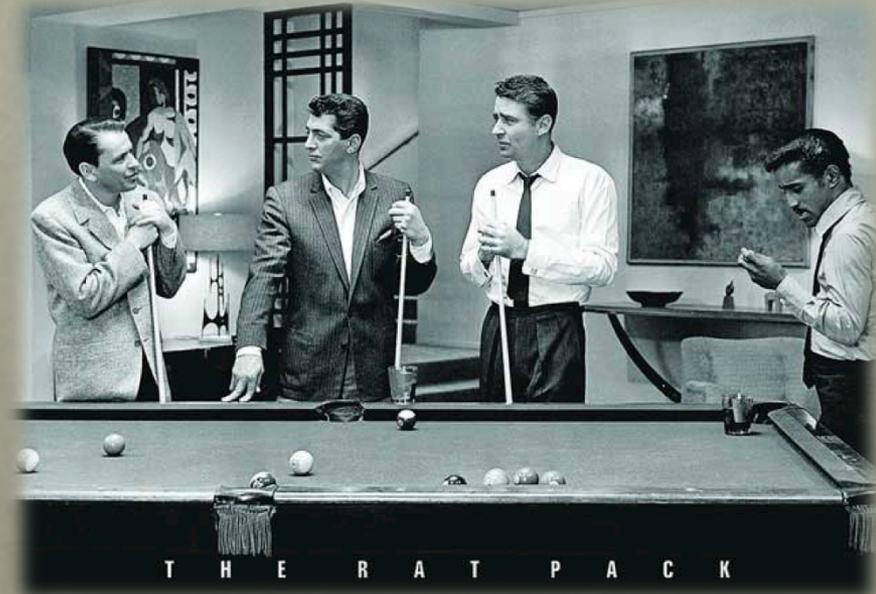
**Joan Didion, Salvador**





“Now Sinatra says a few words to the blondes. Then he turned from the bar and began to walk toward the poolroom. One of Sinatra’s other men friends moved in to keep the girls company. Brad Dexter, who had been standing in the corner talking to some other people, now followed Sinatra. ¶ The room cracked with the clack of billiard balls. There were about a dozen spectators in the room, most of them young men who were

watching Leo Durocher shoot against two other aspiring hustlers who were not very good. This private drinking club has among its membership many actors, directors, writers, models, nearly all of them a good deal younger than Sinatra or Durocher and much more casual in the way they dress for the evening. Many of the young women, their long hair flowing loosely below their shoulders, wore tight, fanny-fitting Jax pants and very expensive sweaters; and a few of the young men wore blue or green velour shirts with high collars, and narrow tight pants and Italian loafers.”



**Gay Talese, *Frank Sinatra Has a Cold*, 1966**

# SETTING

“The intent of a façade is exoteric but there are obvious problems with that. While in St. Petersburg, for instance, I stayed for several days at the

Moscow hotel. That particular exterior does the work of a façade, presenting a warren of windows so relentlessly uniform the eye is baffled and ultimately rejected; From a distance you can't quite locate the entrance. But, if from the outside, you can't find a way in, from inside, especially



walking down the hallways, you can't imagine a way out. The interior space is made of incredibly long, horrid corridors lined on either side with black doors, like answers to a question you'd long ago forgotten.”

—**Orphans, Charles D'Ambrosio**

# SETTING



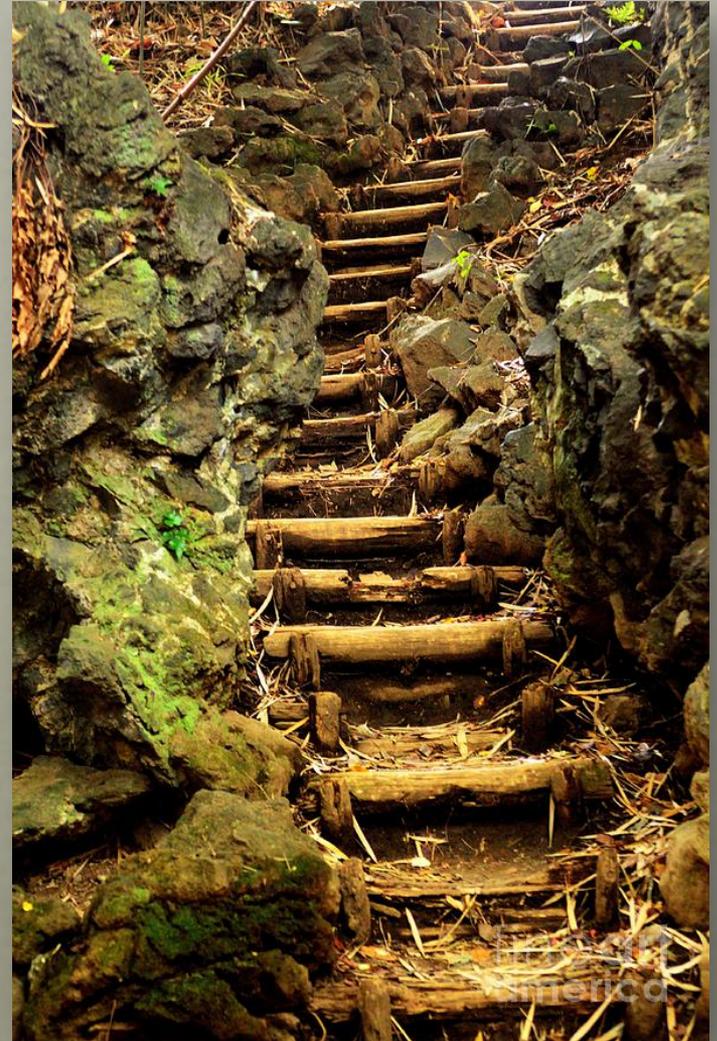
You can see how, in the previous passage, describing setting also can cross over to affect elements of tone, imagery, theme, style, etc ...

Recreate the chart below to be used for the next two images:

	Image 1	Image 2
<b>Touch</b>		
<b>Smell</b>		
<b>Sound</b>		
<b>Sight</b>		
<b>Taste</b>		
<b>Scientific Ideas &amp; Description</b>		
<b>Personal Life Ideas/Themes</b>		

# LINKING IMAGES TO THEME

What themes, linked to science and your personal life, might this image evoke?



# LINKING IMAGE TO THEME

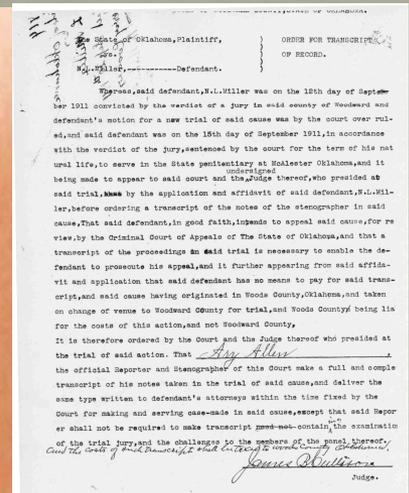
What themes, linked to science and your personal life ideas, might this image evoke?



# LINKING IMAGERY, THEME, REFLECTION (YOU)

Imagery is first observed through the senses and then spun into reflection and meaning, linking it to your theme.

Reflection is what brings imagery and the “I” (you as character) together with theme.



# LINKING IMAGERY, THEME, REFLECTION (YOU, THE PRESENT, OR, MAYBE THE PAST)

Sometimes the “you” in an essay comes across in direct, present tense observations and descriptions, and the reflection is on those. Sometimes the reflection will draw in a relevant memory. Sometimes the memory dominates the reflection from the start, a memory of an unsettling time, an explained or uncertain experience that has gone unresolved and the writer makes it relevant to present observations. It’s important to remember that there are no hard and fast rules for what percentage of what gets fitted where.



# ORGANIZATION/STRUCTURE

How do I want to structure or organize my essay/story?  
Do I want to follow a traditional linear pattern or is the beginning, middle, and end juxtaposed in an unorthodox way? Sometimes when this is done there is still a strong sense of linearity and sequence.

# ORGANIZATION/STRUCTURE

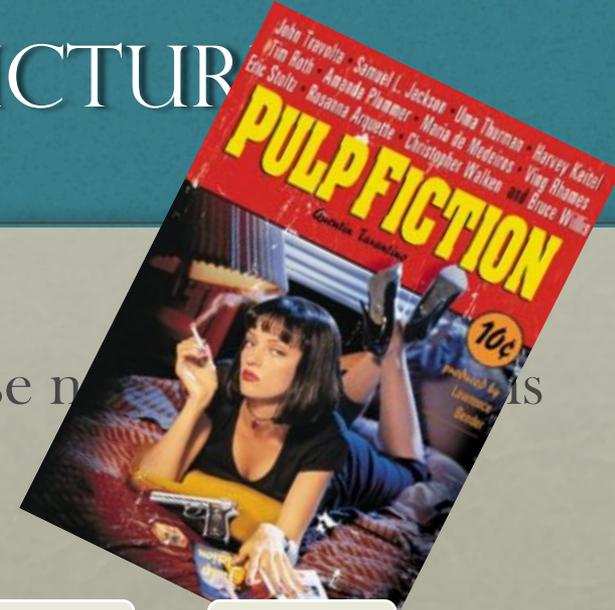
Many writers, story tellers, literary journalists, essayists use non-linear patterns for structuring their tales.



“Traditional,” linearly patterned/sequenced story.

# ORGANIZATION/STRUCTURE

Many writers, story tellers, literary journalists use non-linear structures for structuring their tales.



1



4



5



3



6



2

Story is sequenced in a non-linear manner, “jumps around,” but still projects the “illusion” of linearity. A good cinematic example is the film, *Pulp Fiction*. Even though “scenes” jump around in time, there is still an interconnectedness.

# tone



How do I want my story to “sound?” Is your narrative loud or soft? Deep or superficial? Punchy or contemplative? Should there be an adaption of tone/sound that is contingent on how you interpret the “character” of my subject? How would you describe someone’s or some place’s “personality” and then adapt a conducive narrative style?

# tone



“DURING the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.”

**Edgar Allan Poe**

**Use the following as a guide for this assignment. On a cover sheet at the beginning of your essay create this checklist. Complete it prior to turning in.**

Overall theme: \_\_\_\_\_

Sub theme: \_\_\_\_\_

Images Used:

1) To excite the senses and draw the reader into the details (3 examples):

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

2) To reinforce the theme. How did your images reinforce your theme? (3 examples)

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_

3) \_\_\_\_\_

Reflection: Provide 2 examples of where and how you used reflection, reflective digressions or comments to deepen the meaning of your essay and reinforce your theme:

1) \_\_\_\_\_

2) \_\_\_\_\_