Imagine the world of writing mapped onto but two continents. One of them—call it Terra Facta or Terra Argumenta—is the land of thesis and support, information and perspicuity, assertion and evidence. The other, call it Terra Imagina, is the land of fiction, from the prairies of drama to the foothills of fiction to the peaks of poetry. Now imagine student travelers, equipped only with that map, encountering Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Where are they? Nowhere. At best, they might think themselves in Terra Incognito, the early explorers’ designation for uncharted areas. Occasionally they marked “Here be monsters,” meant to dismiss inconveniently foreign lands.

In fact, these students are trekking the terrain of creative nonfiction: writing that is “true,” grounded in reality but aesthetically rich, factual writing meant to be savored rather than simply consumed or endured. W. Ross Winterowd called this “the other literature,” Ronald Weber “the literature of fact,” Robert Root and Michael Steinberg “the fourth genre.” You might be convinced that these writings are sufficiently innovative in terms of style and voice to be counted as literary. You might be less sure that they qualify as imaginative, which suggests fanciful or made up. And yet imagination is what’s required to turn plain reality into art and idea. Writing creative nonfiction means perceiving what details are worth telling, why they might matter, and how they might connect. Here’s a passage from *Candyfreak*, a combination of memoir and journalism about Steve Almond’s travels across the country visiting obscure candy factories:

*The bus hurtled on toward Omaha, where we took an hour break. The station there was bigger, full of ancient video games and vending machines, a bacterial snack bar, and crowded with people in an amped state of transit. The kids were running wild as a response to all the anxiety and their parents were overdoing the discipline—tears, recrimination, the white-hot building blocks of future arrests. On the grainy TV overhead, an anchorwoman was waxing eloquent about the next day’s election. Her demeanor suggested the basic message: isn’t democracy neat? (17); italics in original)*

Bacterial snack bars, amped transit, the juxtaposition of the station’s chaos and the anchorwoman’s cool shallowness: all signify imagination applied to plain fact.

In these few pages, I’ll suggest that we do a better job mapping this landscape for students, teaching them to travel those genres as both readers and writers. First, however, let me be clear what they—and us—would be getting into.

Although no one much likes the term *creative nonfiction* (some are bothered by defining something by what it’s not, others by a conviction that the idea is oxymoronic), it has emerged as the name of choice. In the past couple decades, dozens of college creative writing programs have added nonfiction tracks to fiction and poetry, so that at both undergraduate and graduate levels, nonfiction constitutes an academic growth area. Even if programs have embraced them recently, these genres have abounded for centuries. Behind Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love* or Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* stand George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*, or Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Behind David Foster Wallace and Susan Orlean
Four Genres, Common Qualities

Creative nonfiction (CNF) is rather an umbrella term for a host of loosely related genres. Memoirs narrate lived experiences, some focusing on single incidents, some on a series related by theme, others on long stretches of life. Memoirs can be as brief as a few pages or as long as a book. Not every memoir is literary, as sensationalized, ghost-written, celebrity tells-alls too often testify. Literary memoirs are marked by the craft of writing, the quality of thought and reflection, the author’s voice. Listen to Cris Mazza talk about being the first girl trombone player in her 1970s southern California marching band: “What teenager doesn’t want to get up on Saturday at four in the morning, get on a bus at six to get to a parade route at eight, spend four or five hours on a hot September day in a decidedly unsexy wool uniform and hat, soaking undergarments with sweat and causing the gnarly-est case of hat-hair ever seen” (qtd. in Bradway and Hesse 579; italics in original).

Essays, the iconic CNF genre, have a richer tradition than we typically—and flippantly—credit in using the term to describe any short nonfiction prose, including exams. In its French root sense, essai is “to try.” These works trace the mind at work, the shape of thought. Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary famously (and contemptuously) defined essays as “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.” The art of the essay is often to see how writers can infuse the plainest event or topic with interest, as in David Foster Wallace’s visit to a cattle barn at the Illinois State Fair: “Some of the cows looked drugged. Maybe they’re just superbly trained. You can imagine these farm kids getting up every day so early they can see their breath and leading their cows in practice circles under the cold stars, then having to do all their chores. I feel good in here. The cows in the ring all have colored ribbons on their tails” (“Getting” 106). Literary essays often have extensive narrative sections and thus share a side yard with memoirs; however, essays tend to have more reflective, analytic, and digressive/associative components. At one point Wallace observes, “Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness starts to become both physical and spiritual. It is not just people you get lonely for. You’re alienated from the very space around you, in a way, because out here the land’s less an environment than a commodity. The land’s basically a factory. You live in the same factory you work in” (“Getting” 91). With Wallace’s analysis comes the imagination to see a farm as factory, the farmer not as romantic individual but rather shift worker for some disembodied owner.

Literary journalism goes beyond straightforward report to artifacts that are as engaging for how they’re written as for what they say. Whereas “traditional” reporters efface themselves, literary journalists write themselves in, drafting distinct voices or including their own actions and thoughts. Either approach reminds readers that some particular person is responsible for the account. Luis Alberto Urrea’s Across the Wire, for example, is a gripping account of life among the poor on the Mexican-American border. Consider a short passage: “One of the most beautiful views of San Diego is from the summit of a small hill in Tijuana’s municipal garbage dump. People live on that hill, picking through the trash with long poles that end in hooks made of bent nails. They scavenge for bottles, tin, aluminum, cloth; for cast-out beds, wood, furniture. Sometimes they find meat that is not too rotten to be cooked” (qtd. in Bradway and Hesse 739). In the early 1970s, Tom Wolfe described features of “the New Journalism,” factual writing that used some techniques from fiction. They included constructing scenes that included “everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration,” and so on, and using realistic dialogue to establish character (32). Literary journalists often tell what their subjects are thinking or feeling, a speculative omniscient point of view that defies journalistic tradition. That’s true of Wolfe’s “nonfiction novel,” The Right Stuff, or Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood.

Place writing focuses on locations ranging from the exotic to the plain to render both what they are and what they mean. This is what Annie Dillard does with Tinker Creek, Edward Abbey with Arches National Park, or Colson Whitehead with New York City, combining portraits of geology, plants, people, or buildings with meditation, advocacy, or critique. Literary travel writing isn’t tourist guide informa-
tion on where to stay, eat, and buy a souvenir spoon. It evokes new places filtered through an artful inquiring mind, as in the work of Pico Iyer. Yet another tradition of place writing focuses not on the writer traveling but rendering where he or she is, making strange and interesting what might be dismissed as plain and familiar. This is Michael Martone writing about Fort Wayne, Indiana, or Becky Brady about Decatur, Illinois, or Louise Bradich about northern Minnesota’s Ojibwe country.

What commonly denominates these genres—and others, from profiles like John McPhee’s portrait of truck driver Don Ainsworth in “A Fleet of One” or Susan Orlean’s portrait of John Larocche in The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession, to cultural explorations like Jennifer Price’s musings on malls in Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America, or graphic nonfictions like Miriam Engelberg’s Cancer Made Me a Shallow Person: A Memoir in Comics or Joe Sacco’s Palestine—are several qualities:

- a strong voice and authorial presence, with the writer figured as a teller or a character
- (usually) a strong narrative quality
- language that surprises and delights—that calls attention to itself as language, rather than shying into transparency
- surprising juxtapositions of facts, ideas, and experiences that lead to fresh insights; an often digressive, associative quality that, nonetheless, we find well formed
- an insistent and celebratory sense that, while the author is writing about the world as it is and life as it happens, this truth is filtered through a consciousness whose goal is to make us pay attention and care

But why should English teachers bother? After all, on the “literature side,” fiction, poetry, and drama are virtually inexhaustible. On the writing side, straight exposition and argument are highly prized in classrooms and jobs and, with them, the ability to extract, analyze, and critique information or assertions.

**Why Teach Creative Nonfiction?**

We should teach creative nonfiction, first, to provide students a better map of the textual world. It may seem tidy, even pedagogically kind, to cleave the universe of discourse into fictive writing and nonfictive, then to represent nonfiction in narrow terms, as thesis and support, information and ideas presented rationally. And yet when bookstores, magazines, and websites are full of nonfiction that doesn’t exhibit those qualities, we risk seeming out of touch or hypocritical.

Mind you, I accept the value of introducing things simply: how to read and write standard things to build confidence. However, as Richard Braddock famously demonstrated 40 years ago, those topic sentences so vital to five-paragraph themes are remarkably absent from much professional prose, especially feature writing and longform journalism. So, at some point we need also to teach writing as it variously is, including the unruly genres. The argument that we confine high school students by teaching the range of nonfiction would be more compelling if we weren’t already having students deal with complicated fiction, poetry, and drama. They’re healthier and fuller for recognizing spectra of texts from objective to subjective, personal to impersonal, conclusive to speculative. If English classrooms have the reasonable aspiration to teach the reading and writing that students can or should encounter beyond our classrooms, then we ought to make a place for nonfiction written to delight and surprise, as well as texts meant transparently to contain “the point.”

That leads to my second reason for teaching creative nonfiction: We need to teach reading and writing for life beyond institutions. There are ineluctable pressures to be “practical” during economic recessions or during times of reductive testing. “Practicality” dictates certain practices: finding, summarizing, and evaluating information; writing to be read efficiently, in a narrow range of standard formats: term paper, memorandum, report, contract, and so on. These are no doubt important for success in school and work, and we’d be irresponsible to ignore them. However, there’s more to a reading and writing life than success at desks.

Some aspects of life are “obliged,” and so are the reading and writing acts associated with them. School. Jobs. Legal proceedings. Bad things happen explicitly if we don’t perform obliged readings and writings or perform them poorly. If we don’t write the assigned term paper, we fail. If we write a shoddy business report, we lose a client or a job. If we don’t read—or if we misread—the directions or
the contract, we fail the assignment or sign a bad loan that costs us the house. Other aspects of life are “self-sponsored.” Joining a particular club, taking up a particular hobby, even subscribing to a newspaper or going to the library are all self-sponsored activities. Beyond some hazy social-class pressures, one is free to pursue or ignore them without direct material consequences. So, too, with some reading and writing. The vast realm of Web 2.0 from Facebook to fan fiction is largely self-sponsored; people read and write (and produce videos, images, and sounds) there because they want to create and to connect with others. In his astute and waggish way, Dave Eggers captures this spirit in a series of anthologies entitled *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. The editorial team that assembles them is a group of San Francisco Bay area high school students.

Historically, schools oblige literary study, which isn’t a bad thing. Part of the justification has been that in studying literature, students develop generally transferrable reading skills and language facilities (for example, the knowledge of metaphor and irony). The same claim would apply to creative nonfiction as I’ve characterized it, with the further advantage of being “closer” to other kinds of nonfiction writing. Historically, we’ve also justified literary studies for reasons personal and social. Works that let us see “the real” imaginatively or “the imaginary” realistically open possibilities and create different kinds of understanding. These reading experiences matter not because they promise individual advancement. (Though they might help; Jennifer Wells cites CNF as useful for composing college applications.) Rather, they shape our civic, social, and personal lives, our senses of the world and ourselves in it. These reading and writing experiences are not formally obliged, but we individually and collectively are better for them. As serious entertainment, they variously console and disrupt, vicariously providing alternative experiences that develop empathy or perhaps revulsion.

That brings me to my third argument: CNF is especially valuable for teaching a kind of imagination that differs from pure fiction. Even if it deals with the world of fact, creative nonfiction demonstrates that this is a world rendered and shaped by someone. The author is always present, and his or her vision and imagination transform raw life into engaging artifact. Edward Hoagland once described the essay as existing on a line between “what I think and what I am,” the line between idea and identity (190). The author is veiled in much nonfiction, and that’s a good thing. If I'm reading directions to defibrillate a heart attack victim, I want quick, clear, and sure. If I want the town council to adopt a law, I emphasize its benefits, not the story of my trip to city hall. My point, then, is not that we should teach only creative nonfiction or even that creative nonfiction is somehow preferable to “regular” nonfiction. Rather, it’s that we should recognize the things for which creative nonfiction is particularly well suited.

Creative nonfiction reminds us that, while facts may be waiting for finding, interpretations are waiting for making. Even if facts are unassailable (the moon is a quarter million miles away; your mother and father got divorced when you were ten), what they mean and why they matter comes only when a writer invests them with significance. David Foster Wallace begins an essay by narrating the scene at a festival, which leads him to question the ethics of killing and eating lobsters. He could explore the question factually (and does, in fact, include considerable scientific research on animal pain), but it’s showing how he wrestles the issue that fully draws us in:

> Why is a primitive, inarticulate form of suffering less urgent or unconfortable for the person who’s helping to inflict it by paying for the food it results in? I’m not trying to give you a PETA-like screed here—at least I don’t think so. I’m trying, rather, to work out and articulate some of the troubling questions that arise amid all the laughter and salutation and community pride of the Maine Lobster Festival. The truth is that if you, the festival attendee, permit yourself to think that lobsters can suffer and would rather not, the MLA begins to take on the aspect of something like a Roman circus or medieval torture-fest. (“Consider” 252)

Festival as torture fest? (Lobsters as gladiators?) CNF reminds us that writers matter, all of us, in sorting out fact and experience. It’s not a question of finding “the right meaning” or “an important subject” but of representing and reflecting life as we make it. As writers narrate themselves into the text, they stand plainly as readers of their worlds. For students, these kinds of texts offer clearer views of how writers think than do works whose writers hide their traces and whose ideas
Imagining a Place for Creative Nonfiction

seem to spring from ether. From another angle, while it's possible to dismiss some fiction with "it's just a story," nonfiction has a stake in reality and thus taps the same force as television movies "based on actual events."

How to Read CNF

As for what to read beyond examples I've mentioned here, one might start with selections from any number of annual "Best American" nonfiction collections, including Essays (Gopnik and Atwan), Travel Writing (Bourdain and Wilson), Science and Nature Writing (Gropman and Folger), and Spiritual Writing (Zaleski). I suggest works by current writers about their experiences and the contemporary world, in language accessible to secondary and middle school students.

As for how to read CNF, many fiction strategies also apply to this genre, including reader response. Analyzing plot in nonfictions with strong narratives is valuable, and asking "What kind of person is writing this memoir or travel essay?" is similar to character analysis for short stories. So, too, is examining metaphors, allusions, style, and voice. Many strategies for reading argument or exposition also apply. Ask "What does the author wants us to feel or think, and how does he or she try?" though realize creative nonfiction rarely couches the answer in a direct thesis. Additionally, creative nonfiction often relies more on emotional and ethical appeals rather than straightforward proof. In terms of a venerable distinction, creative nonfiction shows more than it tells.

Still, some reading strategies are particularly useful for creative nonfiction. Here are a few.

Focus on Narrative

CNF holds wide possibilities for using narrative. Particularly in memoirs, the entire piece is sometimes a story. Still, even in most of them, the author occasionally steps back to reflect. When? What happens in those moments? Furthermore, as with almost any story, there's usually a mixture of summary (events related quickly) and scene (where the writer slows things down, with description or dialogue); what's the effect of these choices? Brenda Miller's "Next Year in Jerusalem" is a linear narrative of a nonreligious Jew's trip to the Middle East. At one point, Miller interrupts her story of a visit to a Syrian mosque:

Even in my discomfort, I knew I felt only a bit of what these women endured all their lives: numerous hands pressing them into a posture of shame, submission, invisibility. If my family had been Orthodox Jews, I would have been molded the same way, shunted away from the men, bundled into a scarf, taught to keep my gaze fixed on the ground. The shame of being a woman, the dangerous sorcery of the body concealed. I would have learned these things had I been a devout follower of my own religion. (599)

Other works mix story with information or idea, as in Maya Lin's "Between Art and Architecture," an essay about designing the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial. Sometimes writers start telling a story, digress to bring in additional information, and pick up the story later, in a framing device. Sometimes the story serves as a point of departure for a series of ruminations or ideas that lead elsewhere. Sometimes the story is just a pretext on which to hang ideas, as in much of Stephen Jay Gould's science writing.

Ask "Where's the Author?"

Some pieces of creative nonfiction are about their writers, who serve not only as narrators but also as the focus of the action, the main character. At the other extreme are works whose writers keep in the background, perhaps only rarely using the first person. Most works operate somewhere in between, the
writer occasionally taking the stage, telling what he or she did or thought, occasionally stepping into the wings. A useful reading strategy, then, is to ask where the author is at given times in the piece, why he or she might choose to move in and out of the spotlight, and what the effect is on the reader.

Trace Source Materials
All writing is about something. In contrast to novelists and poets who “make it all up” (though even they research a fair amount), creative nonfictionists deal with experience and information as they find it. Often they rely on memory or casual observation, but they also collect information systematically. Sometimes this happens through interview, a staple of many genres, especially journalism and popular science writing. Sometimes this happens through immersion. In his hilarious book Do-Over!, 48-year-old Robin Hemley re-creates inauspicious events from his past, from attending summer camp to going to the prom—only this time with a date. CNF writers do basic research in libraries, archives, and elsewhere. By asking how and why authors gathered the stuff about which they write, student readers and writers learn a good deal both about how specific pieces work and about writing in general.

Judge Texture
Some CNF is pretty straightforward. It stays on topic or on story, perhaps brilliantly but smoothly and predictably. Other works have a pronounced kink, their authors seeing how audaciously they can connect different experiences, topics, and ideas, like a diver attempting a triple inward somersault without belly flopping. Annie Dillard’s essay “Expedition to the Pole” tells a rather plain story of attending a folk mass at a Catholic church, but Dillard interrupts the narrative by juxtaposing information-rich sections about 19th-century polar expeditions that failed because their explorers were so inept. These interruptions are further marked by white space and headings, tossing the reader back and forth. (The technique is called a segmented essay.) Readers eventually realize that Dillard is constructing an elaborate metaphor likening careless worship to careless exploration. Reading for texture, then, means looking for places where writers get “off track” or introduce surprising elements, then asking to what effect.

Beyond Reading to Writing
When the Norman Mailer Writer’s Colony contacted NCTE to co-sponsor a writing contest for high school and college students in fall 2008, I was delighted that the inaugural genre was creative nonfiction (NCTE). Let’s hope this will encourage—and license—more teachers to add these genres to their repertoires, not only as artifacts of analysis but also as models and invitations for writing. Textbooks by Robert Root, Brenda Miller, Sondra Perl, Becky Bradway, William Zinsser, and many others offer practical advice and plentiful examples. Lee Gutkind’s Creative Nonfiction: How to Live It and Write It aims specifically at adolescents.

Having students write genres they’re reading helps them understand more deeply how they work. But the more important justification is developing a respectful sense of themselves as creators whose challenge is not only to be true but also interesting. In many ways, writing creative nonfiction privileges the self more than writing fiction does because it authorizes students to write themselves into the work: this is what I saw, what I thought. Can we invite them to view their neighborhoods the way a traveler might, one who finds it strange? Can students write a profile of a “plain” person, using interview and observation in a way that shows them as fascinating? Can they immerse in a group, activity, or scene (a team, a workplace, a club) and play new journalist in rendering that subject matter? Can they write about a reaction to a book or movie using detailed stories from their own lives to explore and explain their response? And for any of these, can they rearrange the parts, interrupt the stories, adjust the ratios of narrative to reflection, read and research to learn more and add texture?

In Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer, Peter Turcich muses, “Each of us stands at one unique spot in the universe, at one moment in the expanse of time, holding a blank sheet of paper” (236). We should share the maps of creative nonfiction, then invite students to imagine their own features within them, composing enticing topographies.

Note
1. For a collection of articles discussing multiple issues about creative nonfiction, including names and definitions, see a special-theme issue devoted to the topic, College English 65.3 (January 2003).