

The Personal & the Universal: Using Statistics in Creative Nonfiction

Introduction

One of the potential dangers of nonfiction workshops is that students will focus too intently in their own experience. This workshop will help creative writing students blend journalistic techniques with personal narrative, effectively balancing the personal with universal questions and concerns. Using Sybil Baker's *Immigration Essays* as a starting point for discussion and a source of inspiration with respect to craft, this workshop will offer students several effective techniques for employing statistics and other journalistic material in personal narrative. They will leave the workshop with a set of tools for situating personal narrative in a matrix of cultural and political issues.

The lesson will meet the following curricular objectives:

- Students will be able to situate personal experience in a larger social context
- Students will be able to generalize from specific facts and experiences, as well as supporting anecdotal claims about their communities with research
- Students will be able to integrate multiple types of textual evidence into a single piece of writing

Lesson Structure

Opening Journal: Have each student find three passages from *Immigration Essays* where the use of statistics or other journalistic material strengthens Baker's presentation of her own experience. Have the students mark the passages and record the page numbers. (Estimated time: 10 minutes)

Group Assignment: Have the students get into groups of three or four. Then have them discuss and present the examples they found. Some questions the students should consider: How would the text read differently if it were exclusively personal narrative? How do the statistics change our perception of the narrative? How do the statistics and other research seem to fuel Baker's creativity? Ask them to keep track of their findings to share with the class at a later time. (Estimated time: 10 minutes)

Class-Wide Discussion: Have the groups present their findings to the class. Some questions that you might ask the class include: What different types of work do these statistics and pieces of research accomplish? What different techniques does Baker use to integrate them into the narrative? Although we have considered a wide range of examples, what holds true across the board? (Estimated time: 10 minutes)

Writing Lab

Write down a statistic that you have encountered that blew your mind. Then write a micro-essay or the beginning of a longer essay that begins with that statistic. Feel free to transition

to personal narrative, social commentary, and other rhetorical modes as the essay unfolds.
(Estimated time: 10 minutes)

Discussion and Presentation of Writing Labs (10 Minutes)

TOTAL RUNNING TIME: 50 Minutes