

English Education Mentoring

# Belly Up to the Pond: Teaching Teachers Creative Nonfiction in an Online Class

Author(s):

**Roy F. Fox and Amy A. Lannin**

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“The best approach to frogs is on their own level. Leave the meadow its milkweed and August asters, and instead belly up to the pond’s bank in an inner tube. . . .” (Swain 250).

Roger Swain is living for a time with the frogs. This allows him to take the reader with him into the pond, seeing the bulging frog eyes, and feeling with his toes the endangered pond of these frogs. He steps into the pond to give his reader information. He drifts into the frogs’ lives to show the seriousness of the situation which is no longer just about his day with the frogs, but about their losing a habitat, as similar ponds around the country have become endangered. He wades into a murky area where he is not just a journalist, nor a novelist, though he creates drama and teaches a lesson. He’s swimming in the literary-journalistic waters of creative nonfiction.

## Introduction and Research Questions

Our swim in the pond was intended to let secondary teachers explore creative nonfiction and develop an understanding of this still under-used genre. Creative nonfiction weaves the writer’s experience with the information of the text. Writers have used this genre long before it was named. The relative newness of the term “creative nonfiction” added a challenge to our research project, since participants began with no background in reading, writing, or teaching this genre.

In the summer of 2002, our university offered an online course, titled “Swims with Words: Reading, Writing, and Teaching Creative Nonfiction” (referred to here as “CNF”). This was a new approach to teaching writing (online), as well as a new genre for all of our 18 participants. Before the course began, we designed our research project to explore how teachers develop their own understanding of a new genre, how their own writing develops, how their writing instruction changes, and how all of this happens through an online venue. In this paper, we wish to focus on how teachers form their concept of this genre. We expected the participants’ understanding of this genre—their mental models of CNF—to influence what they tried in their writing and in their teaching of writing.

## Description of the Course

The course title, “Swims with Words,” connected with the first assigned reading, “Swims with Frogs” by Roger B. Swain. This seven-week online writing course immersed students in reading and writing nonfiction texts so they could explore nonfiction’s value and its relation to other genres, and investigate its potential for their own writing and teaching.

The participants resided in four states: Montana, Georgia, Arkansas, and Missouri. Some students knew each other from previous online courses, as most of them were pursuing a graduate degree online, and this was not their first course. Participants included one science teacher, four special education teachers, one retired teacher, and ten language arts teachers. Lessons focused on elements of CNF, composition as traditionally practiced in schools, and alternative approaches to teaching writing. A partial list of course topics and readings appears in Appendix B. The instructor provided models of her own CNF writing and student samples throughout the course.

Students used the discussion board (a standard feature of Blackboard, the platform used *in the course*) mainly to explore pre-determined topics and reading assignments (Appendix B). The instructor placed students into groups of three or four for on-line writing groups. Groups arranged to meet at least three times online during the course. Students were required to submit written assignments to the instructor through a digital “drop box” To prepare written assignments for formal submission to the instructor, students emailed group members a copy of each CNF piece, so that members could read and respond to papers prior to online conferences.

## **Literature Review**

The larger question that frames this study is, “What is the nature of the creative nonfiction genre?” A second question is, “How are concepts, such as creative nonfiction, learned?” The final question focused on student writing: How do writers produce this genre, and how can we describe the stages of thinking that occurred within their writing?

### **Naming It: What Is Creative Nonfiction?**

Creative nonfiction writers provide factual information in creative ways. Creative nonfiction can be described as a hybrid genre that pulls in elements of fiction (literary techniques), the writer’s perspective, and factual information. Lee Gutkind (2002) defines creative nonfiction as “a concept that offers great flexibility and freedom, while adhering to the basic tenets of nonfiction writing and/or reporting. In creative nonfiction, writers can be poetic and journalistic simultaneously” (2).

When journalists immerse themselves in a topic, they become “silent observers” living within the topic and around the people to notice and observe. Gutkind illustrates this in the article, “The 5 R’s of Creative Nonfiction,” as he immerses himself within the work of a transplant surgeon. He is observing a woman’s heart transplant operation when the doctor asks him for help. The surgeons needed someone to go talk to the patient’s husband. Gutkind steps out of his role as observer and becomes a participant. Here is what he does as a writer and how he describes it: “ ‘Immersion journalists’ immerse or involve themselves in the lives of the people about whom they are writing in ways that will provide readers with a rare and special intimacy” (2).

Gutkind defines the essential elements of creative nonfiction as five “R’s”: real life, reflection, research, reading, and (w)riting. CNF is about real life experiences, and like journalists, CNF writers go to the places and people, immersing themselves in new experiences. “Reflection” means the writer finds a universal theme that goes beyond self

and connects with the reader. This idea also works with the third R: “Research,” through which writer seeks information to better understand the world. This information helps both the writer and the reader reach a new understanding. An example of such use of research in CNF is found in “Swims with Frogs”: “You don’t have to be a herpetologist to be aware that frogs and other amphibians are facing hard times—not just in ponds that have been intentionally or unintentionally stocked with fish, but all over the world. Since the 1970s, and especially in the last decade, researchers have noticed dramatic drops in amphibian populations in a wide variety of habitats . . .” (Swain 255). Swain weaves his description of swimming into the information about mixing fish and frogs together, teaching the reader about frog endangerment as fish eat the frog eggs. To better understand Gutkind’s definition of reflection for CNF writers, Swain stresses their need for a “curious mind and a sense of self” (3). The research “launches” the writer, and as the writer explores the subject, she steps into the reflection phase of writing. The fourth “R” is reading. Writers read the research carefully, immersing themselves in the topic and asking questions, trying to become experts. CNF writers also read the masters of CNF writing. The final “R,” according to Gutkind, is the “romantic” part: “(w)riting.” During this stage, the writer flows with ideas and then carefully crafts them into an essay.

Gutkind highlights elements of scenes as “the building blocks of creative nonfiction” (4). A scene includes action, dialogue, and detail about detail. Gutkind includes his scene of going into the surgeons’ lounge and drinking coffee, preparing himself to talk with the husband about the heart transplant surgery. Like the literary journalist, Gutkind includes drama, action, and dialogue. The scene allows the reader to experience the nervousness of the writer as the writer sips his coffee, rehearsing the words he will need.

As in the Gutkind example, scenes may not appear chronologically. The structure that a writer uses in an essay may move back and forth through time. This organizational structure may not appear until the writer has wrestled with the topic, the research, the writing, and the weaving of informational and personal elements, integrating them into a whole.

Naming “creative nonfiction” is not as easy as Gutkind makes it appear. In “Naming Nonfiction,” Robert Root wrestles with the definition and addresses the concern that the term and genre of “creative nonfiction” have not caught on. Root explains the problem of the term “nonfiction” by questioning how a word can be defined by stating what it is not. The problem lies in understanding what “nonfiction” means. By affixing the prefix “non” to a word, then the definition could represent the opposite of the base word. Is nonfiction the opposite of fiction? Not necessarily, since many fictional elements are found in nonfiction. “Creative nonfiction” is one way of defining a type of nonfiction. The adjective “creative” helps to explain how this type of writing differs from others, and keeps CNF writers within the creative, or literary, mode. Root wisely points out that lines of differentiation between genres are not rigid and strict, defining nonfiction as “the expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experiences” (2).

Nonfiction differs from other literary genres because it is directly tied to an individual’s perception of reality. Other literary genres represent “reality.” Root explains this further: “It’s that preoccupation with factuality, with preexisting reality, with a world outside the writer’s mind, that he or she has to interpret and represent, that separates it from the other ‘three genres’” (3). In creative nonfiction, the writer combines research, as Gutkind teaches, with reflection, all of this staying in reality. Where does the creative element arise? According to Root, CNF writers use literary elements such as dialogue, attention to setting, first-person narration, and creative use of language.

These uses of literary elements in nonfiction hardly constitute a recent practice, nor do

they form a “new” genre. Even though many teachers have not been exposed to what we are now most often referring to as “creative nonfiction,” this genre has thrived under several, often overlapping names: the “personal essay” (often considered a subcategory of the “essay” or “formal essay”); the “new journalism” or “literary journalism” or “literary nonfiction.” Many scholars credit Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) as being the “founder” of the personal essay genre, while others cite Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), Joseph Addison (1672–1719) and Richard Steele (1672–1729). The roots of CNF may extend more deeply into history, given that both Montaigne and Bacon cite the letters of Seneca the Younger (c. A.D. 3–65) as primary influences on their writing. In the past several decades, American and British writers such as George Orwell, E. B. White, James Baldwin, Truman Capote, and Gore Vidal have elevated and broadened the CNF genre, as have more contemporary authors, such as Joan Didion, Edward Hoagland, Annie Dillard, Richard Selzer, John McPhee, Lewis Thomas, Scott Russell Sanders, and Terry Tempest Williams.

## **CNF Guidelines**

As part of the creative nonfiction course, the instructor provided CNF guidelines (see Appendix A). These guidelines were developed by Fox, who extracted qualities of CNF from many sources, accumulated from his many years of reading, writing, and teaching CNF. For a paper to be creative nonfiction, information needs to strike a kind of balance between what comes from inside and outside of the writer. We can think of this as a research paper meeting a personal memoir. A second criterion is that writers become part of the piece, showing their thinking, or “movement of mind.” That is, writers allow readers to see how and why their thinking may shift, focus, or develop during the course of the piece. Third, instead of a closed ending, CNF pieces should be open, allowing for multiple interpretations. Fourth, while CNF writers may strictly follow chronological order, some CNF writers play with time and alter the sequence, while still keeping the parts in a coherent order. CNF uses “scenes” to show instead of tell by providing dialogue and abundant details. The final criterion, and the most difficult, is “resonance”: a repeating key image or idea instead of the literal transitions that move readers through a piece (next, then, therefore). As the course progressed, the instructor encouraged the students to refer to these guidelines when writing, in discussions, and during online group meetings.

While the term “creative nonfiction” may be new, and some of its elements atypical for nonfiction writers, CNF nonetheless likely provides a higher degree of student motivation and personal connection than other informational nonfiction works that students read and write. How do we, as writers and teachers, go about learning a new genre and then teaching it?

## **Knowing It: How Do We Learn CNF?**

A new genre, like a new concept, according to Lev Vygotsky (1987), is the ability to generalize correctly, keeping all traits within a category. Before we have conceptual understanding, Vygotsky would describe our understanding as a pseudoconcept. A lesser understanding of a concept is the “complex,” when anything similar is labeled the same (Smagorinsky 4). When we don’t understand something very well, we tend to make incorrect generalizations. The process of moving from a complex to a concept is slow and winding, not a straight, sequential path. Teachers try to teach concepts through direct instruction, but this approach is often ineffective. Peter Smagorinsky (2003), referring to Vygotsky, argues that “instruction in principles alone will not result in the development of a concept” (7). Vygotsky calls such instruction “impossible” and “fruitless” (Smagorinsky 7). If I introduce students to a new genre, such as creative nonfiction, I

might use direct instruction, providing a handout and lecturing on the elements and definition of creative nonfiction. This direct instruction presents the information, but many students will form a complex, rather than a conceptual, understanding. They may try to put imaginative writing within the category of “creative nonfiction” because it is “creative,” or they may describe an encyclopedia article as “creative nonfiction” because it is informative. Smagorinsky warns against this type of instruction: “The teacher who attempts to use this approach achieves nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism that simulates or imitates the presence of concepts in the child. Under these conditions, the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over by the child through memory rather than thought” (Smagorinsky 7).

To move beyond a complex, students may read some examples of CNF. The level of understanding may reach the pseudoconcept level when they start to see memoir and autobiographical writing as creative nonfiction. The learners are closer to seeing the full picture of CNF, but still missing some of the possible elements. To reach conceptual understanding, learners need to immerse themselves in reading, writing, and discussing CNF. As learners share their reading and writing of CNF, they further their understanding, asking and answering each other’s questions.

## **How Do We Look at Creative Nonfiction Writing?**

CNF writers move through a topic by reflecting, connecting ideas, and showing a movement of mind. To analyze participants’ movement of mind, or thinking, we used categories from Lee Odell’s “Assessing Thinking: Glimpsing a Mind at Work” (1996): dissonance, selecting, encoding, drawing on prior knowledge, seeing relationships, and considering different perspectives. Odell did not establish these categories for the study of CNF, but they provide a schema for analyzing how participants reason through a new genre. The categories include the following questions and considerations: 1) Dissonance questions focus on the problems, ironies, or whatever does not seem to agree or make sense. 2) Writers choose their information, and Odell refers to this as “selecting.” What topic did the writer choose? Within the topic, what information receives focus? 3) The words chosen and the figurative language used is encoding or representing. Is the language concrete or abstract? Is it emotional or distant? Is the language appropriate for the audience and purpose? 4) The fourth category of thinking is the prior knowledge that writers use. Do thinkers refer to earlier writing or reading experiences? Do they use this knowledge to understand something new? 5) When writers use cause-effect, compare-contrast, or if-then relationships, Odell describes this as “seeing relationships.” They are trying to figure “when and why things happen” and how things have changed (21). Writers also notice how things fit within a context or surroundings. 6) The last category is “considering different perspectives.” Is the writer able to see something in another way; is she aware of other ways of thinking? Writers put themselves in the position of the reader “trying to understand the knowledge, values, or needs with which that reader approaches their writing” (22).

Like Odell, James Moffett provides a model for analyzing forms of thought in writing. As we analyzed writers, we used Moffett’s schema to study a writers’ movement between synthesis and analysis: a synthesis of several parts working together for a whole, or an analysis of the parts themselves. For example, on the synthesis side is figurative language that stands for a larger idea. On the other side of this continuum is the literal language, where items stand for the individual parts. The writer can also move from describing detailed experiences to making abstract, conceptual generalizations. The ideas begin with sensory details and move to abstract reasoning. S.I. and Alan Hayakawa’s “Ladder of Abstraction” (1990) shows a similar movement, as writers present the concrete details and move up the ladder to include their more generalized

and abstract ideas.

When writers are aware of their language use and the choices they can make, this is considered by Moffett to be the highest level of use. The writer has grown “toward increasing consciousness of oneself as a language user and of the language alternatives one has to choose from” (Moffett 66). If we hold CNF writing to Moffett’s continuum of thought, where might the writer fall? Once a writer is able to understand the concept of CNF, they would be writing confidently within the continuum, moving from one end of the continuum to the other (from part to whole), and up and down (from concrete to general).

In “Paradigms and Processes,” (2003) Robert Root puts these ideas together. First, writers have to know their topic deeply, what Gutkind describes as making the topic part of real life and reflecting on it. However, just knowing a lot about a topic does not mean that a writer can put it effectively into words. There is more to it. That brings in the second part of the process: “genre knowledge,” a conceptual understanding. The genre provides the schema, or the format for the text. When the writer knows what to say, the genre may help show how to say it. But even knowing the genre is not enough to produce it. According to Flowers (as quoted in Root), the third area is “rhetorical problem solving”: using strategies “for generating ideas, for adapting to the reader, and for understanding and monitoring one’s own writing process” (11). The parts (topic and genre knowledge) develop into “rhetorical problem solving,” a holistic view of the writing process (Root 11).

## Methodology

The data from the study included transcripts of all aspects of the online course. Transcripts were printed and analyzed from all 28 discussion boards, 20 virtual conferences, and the instructor’s emailed responses regarding students’ papers. We collected drafts of all five CNF writing assignments completed by the students, and two writing lessons they prepared. We triangulated data by studying student writing, discussion board transcripts, and interviews. As we read all of the information, we selected two students for closer analysis. These students represented different understandings of CNF and differing abilities to read, write, and discuss it. We interviewed each participant over the phone for approximately 90 minutes.

We started by focusing on one of the students and her understanding of CNF, as was demonstrated in all 28 discussion boards, three virtual conferences, instructor emails, four creative nonfiction writing assignments, and the phone interview. This student, Jenny, teaches at a rural school; she lives in the country and has four young sons. Jenny teaches ninth grade honors English, French, and basic English. Her summer in “Swims with Words” was her first summer of online coursework toward a graduate degree. She had internet access at home and worked on the course from her living room, mostly in the early hours of the morning.

We analyzed Jenny’s participation in discussion boards by examining the sections in which she discusses her understanding of CNF. The first read-through produced comments from all 28 discussion boards. We then narrowed our study of Jenny’s discussion board participation by choosing representative comments from early in the course, the middle of the course, and toward the end. We analyzed Jenny’s incorporation of the elements of CNF, Odell’s categories of thinking, and Moffett’s continuum of thought. At the end of the analysis, we tracked Jenny’s development along Vygotsky’s stages of concept development to see Jenny’s mental model of creative nonfiction and her ability to present it: Could she name it, did she know it, and could she produce it?

## Results/Discussion

We began reviewing Jenny's mental model of CNF by exploring her comments from discussion boards and within virtual conferences with her online writing group. Then we analyzed Jenny's writing to determine how it compared to the established criteria for CNF (Appendix A).

### Jenny's Mental Model of CNF: Discussion Boards

At the beginning of the course, most of the students had never heard of "creative nonfiction." Early in the course, Jenny tries to define CNF:

I am beginning to see that "creative nonfiction" is a genre of its own without strictly definable boundaries. . . . The way (the writer) presents his purpose is where the creativity comes in. If the writer doesn't set forth a purpose, I think the reader will struggle finding meaning in the piece. Am I off base here? Doesn't CNF have to have some sort of purpose—or can it be merely an exercise in writing. I think that's where I'm having trouble with my own CNF writing. Am I just writing personal reflections or am I supposed to teach, inform, describe, explain—have a mission?

Jenny is hesitant to define CNF, and is confused about how CNF would differ from other forms of writing, demonstrating what Odell calls dissonance in her thinking. She explores where the creativity comes in for writing to be "creative nonfiction." As she tries to develop a mental model, she questions her thinking. Jenny demonstrates that she "sees relationships" because she compares her writing to what she is learning about CNF, as she attempts to figure out if she is writing CNF (Odell 21). Overall, in Jenny's early discussion board responses, she is unsure how to define CNF but is considering its characteristics, that is, moving from whole to part.

During mid-course discussion boards, Jenny works through the elements of CNF to try to better understand it. She uses models of writing, comparing them with what she is learning about CNF through the discussion boards and course readings. Her thinking, according to Moffett, is analytical, as she tries to make sense of the parts of "creative nonfiction," such as the use of scenes.

As I am discovering and exploring this new-to-me genre of CNF, I continue to see that creative nonfiction writers expand the rules—even make their own rules. And it's good what they do—it's better.

One of the things the instructor pointed out to me about my first CNF piece was that I might want to work in some "scenes" and put them in the present tense. I wasn't sure what she meant at that time or how to go about doing that, but after reading more selections and going back and examining those I'd already read the "lights" began to come on. Almost every one of the writers we have read uses the present tense at some point or other in his or her piece. . . . Is writing in the present, like our writers have done, a key element of CNF?

Here, Jenny sees breaking rules as a valuable practice. In early discussion board posts, Jenny had held onto traditional practice and wanted student writers to fit their writing into a recognizable mold, such as the five-paragraph essay. She wanted student writing to follow established rules. As she read examples of CNF, she did not see these writers following a thesis-first approach or sticking to chronological order. Her thinking again

encounters dissonance, and she continues to see relationships, this time by comparing her writing to CNF pieces assigned as part of the course.

The concept of “scenes” in writing was new to Jenny and many of the students. The instructor often wrote responses to students, asking for scenes to be developed. Jenny was not familiar with using scenes in writing. She learns about scenes by going back to previous reading assignments, such as “Swims with Frogs.” As Jenny analyzes these scenes, she notices that the writers use present tense. She then wonders if present tense is an element of CNF. In later discussion board posts, Jenny’s writing changes from longer paragraphs to short paragraphs, somewhat like scenes. In writing this thread, Jenny has reviewed previous discussion board posts and includes some of her former thoughts and questions, answering these with a new mental model.

Tsk, Tsk, Tsk: Wake up, Jenny!

“ . . . the five paragraph essay . . . ” How many times did I cling to it in my discussion prompts and responses?

Stafford says, “If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I’m off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started . . . ”

No wonder I sit and grade mounds of essays that all sound virtually the same. My outlines and strict formats do nothing but foster my thinking. Where are the students’ thoughts? Still locked, waiting for the chance to be explored and then analyzed and organized.

“Will my lower-level students be able to grasp the concept of CNF? I’ve got to give them direction. They need a road map.” Whose road map? Mine? Let them create their own road maps.

Shame on me. How many years have I wasted—not offered my students opportunities to explore their own worlds and minds? Shame on me.

Jenny is aware of her dissonance and reprimands herself. Her choice of words carries similar emotions: shame, waste, and “wake up!” The discussion board provides one way to analyze how Jenny develops a mental model of CNF.

## **Jenny’s Mental Model of CNF: Virtual Conferences**

From on-line small groups, called “virtual conferences,” we were able to capture dialogue about creative nonfiction and participant writing. Later in the course, Jenny’s group of three completed their third and final writing conference. Jenny is still forming her understanding of CNF, and the others in her group have not progressed as far.

Jenny: Have y’all had time to read Wanda’s piece in “Course Documents”? She did it—she wrote CNF.

Mitch: Yes, but what did you think the central theme was, dogs? Hectic life?

Jenny: Her purpose was to describe what it’s like to adopt a greyhound. She gave background information, lots of information.

Mitch: I think that has been my problem, I am looking for the GRAND

CENTRAL THEME, but it can be simple.

Jenny: and she interspersed it with scenes from her own experiences with greyhounds . . . Her purpose wasn't to communicate an idea—it was TO TEACH about greyhounds—Okay, this might help—envision CNF as a magazine article—not an essay.

Mitch: back to journalism. I think when I see the word creative, I forget the word nonfiction.

Jenny: I don't think there is anything wrong with writing long streams of personal introspection (I've done enough of it . . . )

Mitch: As long as it helps to progress your central idea.

Jenny: Gutkind: “. . . writers write too much about themselves without seeking a universal focus so that readers are properly and firmly engaged. Essays that are so personal that they omit the reader are essays that will never see the light of print.”

Mitch: You may think about teaching a course like this.

During Jenny's online conference, she refers her group to another student's writing that had been printed in the online course documents. The instructor had presented this essay about adopting greyhounds as an example of CNF. As the group experiences dissonance with understanding CNF, Jenny steps into the role of teacher for her group, walking them through the CNF example to show how the writer gave her personal story with the information about greyhound adoption. Jenny refers her group to an earlier course reading, Lee Gutkind's "Five R's of Creative Nonfiction," to help answer her group's and her own questions.

## **Jenny's Mental Model of CNF: Essays**

Jenny's four pieces of CNF resulted from four writing assignments and tied into the course readings. For example, students read CNF pieces that were strong on setting and then wrote a piece focusing on setting. We examined Jenny's mental model of CNF, as demonstrated in her writing, and have used the CNF guidelines to explain what we noticed. Jenny made revisions that corresponded with the guidelines of CNF, such as showing instead of telling, including the use of present tense verbs; balancing information from inside and outside the writer; and connecting concrete and abstract language.

## **Use of Scenes not Dependent on Time**

Jenny's first assignment is a personal narrative about her childhood home based on the assignment to write about a natural setting. She begins: "Mine was a jubilant childhood, one crammed to overflowing with laughter and adventure and discovery." In six pages, Jenny presents chronological retellings in past tense to describe the place and ends the piece by discussing a more recent visit. The instructor recommended that Jenny include actual scenes. Jenny did not know what the instructor meant. Later in the course, Jenny discovers how scenes work, and her new introduction begins differently:

The Indian paintbrushes are distinct, vibrant with their crimson petals spreading out at the end of pencil straight stalks. 'Mommo, did the Indians

really use these as paintbrushes?’ I ask, staring at the feather-like centers of the red flowers.

This reformulated version includes mostly scenes, with only occasional reflective paragraphs. The writer uses present tense with dialogue, instead of the descriptive past tense summaries she wrote in the first draft. She alters the chronological order, but the separate sections do not connect, creating some confusion. She ends with a larger, metaphorical view of the hill as “an embodiment of my childhood.”

In her second version, Jenny includes a scene about her more recent visit when she takes her children to the hill:

‘Mom! We’re finished. Come look. It’s really cool,’ says Rick as he waits for me to come out of the door and down the steps. There it is in the little patch of woods that borders our sparse grass—a bright blue tarp, roofing walls of corrugated tin on a frame of pine two by fours.

Jenny has moved the writing into the specific experience, and by doing so shows the implicit meanings of her special hill and memories.

In Jenny’s first draft, she was not yet able to define “creative nonfiction.” She hadn’t discovered scenes or any of the other elements of creative nonfiction. By her next draft, she had been through several discussions about the definition of CNF, emails from the instructor about using scenes, and several examples of published CNF. Jenny’s second paper is based on the assignment to consider point of view in a medical topic. She writes about the birth of her first child. She organizes the first draft as a diary, beginning each section with the date and time. The piece follows her through the labor and delivery, and she uses dialogue and present tense. The first version does not read like the other CNF pieces in the course because it is one continuous scene. Jenny seems to be generalizing the notion of scenes, and the bigger message is not clear. In her revised piece, which she titles “I’m Tough: An Honest Exploration of Childbirth, Inner Strength, and Informed Choice,” Jenny pieces together scenes with outside information about childbirth. This splicing of narrative with informative writing makes the piece less dependent on time and connects her experience to a universal theme.

The third assignment was to create a lesson plan that promotes descriptive writing. Jenny wrote about her grandparents’ home, which she describes by showing scenes from her past. She fulfills the descriptive writing assignment by creating vivid details: “Legs that were rubbery the last time we stopped to go to the bathroom move like pistons, and we’re across the lawn in seconds.” Jenny starts with a scene and then jumps to the past with “I remember . . .” This piece was not revised, though the suggestions were made to create more scenes and a clearer message to the overall piece. In this piece, she does play with chronological order. The scenes she recreates seem to jump from one to the next as they are remembered, not in the order they happened.

Jenny’s last assigned writing was about her decision to teach. The assignment was to focus on an episode or concept, using as an example an excerpt from Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Jenny creates scenes to show herself as a teacher and weaves in old college journal entries to provide a flashback to the days when she had not yet decided on a career, and was contemplating work as a missionary. This “step back” not only shows the difficult choices she made on the path to deciding to become a teacher but also creates a picture of herself in the present, as a teacher. She presents her past journal entries in italics, in order to connect them with more current scenes.:

“Maawwwmm! Aren’t you coming?” calls Sammy from his bedroom.

“We’re waiting!” echoes Rick. “We can’t go to sleep till you say the prayer.”

“I’ll be right there. Just let me finish grading this one paper.” Sammy stealthily creeps through the kitchen and into the living room where I’m sitting in my chair with papers sprawled on the ottoman in front of me. “Here, sit with me until I’m finished and then I’ll take you to your room. You can play with my hair.”

December 2, 1989

I just read Romans 12:1–3—“present your bodies a living sacrifice . . .” I heard you whispering to my heart that presenting my body as a living sacrifice doesn’t mean making that ONE HUGE COMMITMENT—like going to serve as a missionary. I’ve been thinking that that is the way I can present myself as a living sacrifice, but that’s not what it means. It means every minute, every second, every breath belongs to you.

Jenny intersperses numerous scenes between the journal entries and Bible verses, all of this working together to show her decision-making process and reflections of that memory. By the end of the piece, she presents herself as a successful teacher, by including the journal entry of her decision to teach, and follows with a scene showing her affirmation as she prepares a speech for her students’ graduation.

Though Jenny did not begin using scenes, her revisions and subsequent drafts in all four CNF papers demonstrated an attention to scenes not dependent on time sequence. Early on in the course, Jenny also discovered the importance of incorporating outside information into her writing.

## **Balancing Information from Inside and Outside the Writer**

In Jenny’s first two papers, the information that she presents comes from her memory. As she revised her second CNF paper about the birth of her son, which was written one month after the first draft, she begins with an account of a conversation with her sister, then provides a general paragraph about childbirth, along with a specific paragraph about other cultures’ practices for labor and delivery. Then she incorporates her dated entries into the paper. In working with this draft to include more information from outside of herself, she intersperses many informative paragraphs, such as those discussing labor inductions, medications, and the role of fathers. Jenny conducted research for this version of her paper. Most of the outside information is spliced in to connect with the experience of her italicized diary accounts. However, the secondary information is not integrated into her experience, and the information becomes too much at times. Jenny’s language and presentation changed between her informational and personal writing. She uses italics and more emotional language for her personal scenes of labor. She uses regular text and a more formal, third person voice in the informational sections. These two voices alternate throughout the nine pages.

After the first assignment, Jenny demonstrated an awareness of the CNF guidelines. She became aware of her use of chronology, and of the need to provide outside information when possible. The use of scenes seemed to be her most important discovery.

## **Showing, Not Telling**

The fifth CNF guideline shows the range of writing from a lower end, where the writer tells by summarizing and generalizing, to a higher end of this continuum, where the writer shows ideas and events through dialogue, metaphor, and details. As part of her third assignment, Jenny creates a descriptive writing lesson and writes a sample descriptive paper to fulfill her assignment. Jenny writes about her grandparents: the death of her grandfather, her grandmother's remarriage, and the subsequent loss of an important place. She ends with a poem written during the time of this conflict, "Finding Home Again." When Jenny writes about her grandmother's remarriage, her emotions are heightened, and her language is general: "Emotion poured out on the page—much like it had done on the day he died—splashing from my pen and my eyes." Earlier, her language is more specific, as she recreates a scene of her grandfather:

Pa mechanically twists the copper bracelet that has left a permanently smudged gray shadow in its favorite spot on his wrist. . . . 'I tell you what, I'll never forget the time that feller tried to give me a ticket. Now, I believe a body ought to own up to somethin' he's done wrong, but I wasn't about to take that ticket. Ain't no way I was goin' as fast as he said I was.'

Jenny moves between abstract statements that tell the meaning and significance, and specific scenes to show the experience.

In Jenny's final CNF paper about deciding to become a teacher, she shows the movement of her mind by the journal entries that she includes: "I'm scared right now. I'm scared because I don't know where I will be at this time next year." This line also demonstrates her use of emotional and more abstract language, contrasted with her very specific language in one of her scenes:

Rob comes through the closed bathroom door, setting his name badge from work on the counter, and sees me sitting in front of the laundry hamper with my knees pulled close to my chest and my head burrowed between them.

Like the scene above, Jenny incorporates present tense scenes with details and often with dialogue. Her first writing of CNF provides only glimpses of dialogue through brief one-liners. She tells, rather than shows, by giving a past tense summary of memories and descriptions of a hill she played at as a child. From the revision of that piece through all other drafts in the course, Jenny uses scenes to show, recreating dialogue, using present tense, and providing more details.

## Limitations

This study is limited in its scope, since only one student is analyzed and within a relatively brief scope of time. Further study is needed to compare these results to other students in the course and other similar courses, including online courses that function within longer or more dispersed time frames. One of the authors of this study served as a student and as a teaching assistant during the course, which may have "biased" her perceptions in analyzing data long after the course was completed. A final limitation of this study is that it was based on data from an online course. Therefore, it may not be readily generalizable to face-to-face interactions.

## Conclusions

In the following sections, we will discuss some tentative conclusions from this project. In the final section, "Final Thoughts and Implications," we will explore "larger" issues that have grown out of this work, as well as from experiences in working with our entire

online program along with broader experiences in teaching and learning.

### **1. Reading, Writing, and Talking Help Jenny Consistently Move Forward in Understanding CNF**

When we asked Jenny about her experience learning CNF, she responded that the way she learned about “creative nonfiction” was through reading examples of CNF from the assigned text, reading student writing, reviewing the instructor’s feedback to her own writing, and talking with other students on discussion boards and in virtual conferences. Other data sources confirm this conclusion.

Many of the participants in this creative nonfiction course were not confident in their writing abilities, and did not see themselves as writers. The instructor provided writing assignments to help students find a starting point for CNF writing. The course did not begin with the instructor telling students what they needed to know about CNF. Instead, the instructor put students in the position of reading, writing, and “talking” about CNF and then figuring out what it was. Jenny’s consistent reading, writing, and talking throughout the course enabled her to steadily move forward in developing her understanding of CNF. Jenny could not only demonstrate a clear understanding of CNF in her discussion board posts, but she could also increasingly effectively demonstrate CNF techniques in her class papers.

Jenny’s forward movement is also aided by her articulation of a few relatively clear “Eureka” moments during certain reflection periods. Other students may indeed experience such moments, but the degree to which they express them (especially in an online course) is unknown and merits further study. We believe that teachers who have had less experience with “written reflections” or “using writing as a way to discover what one knows or does not know” would certainly place a lower value on such activity and hence would be less likely to verbalize or articulate such seemingly “small” moments. Such teachers may regard “a-ha” moments as irrelevant or “off task.”

### **2. Jenny Develops an Understanding of CNF by Flexibly “Moving” between Parts and Wholes.**

Jenny demonstrates learning by moving back and forth between part and whole concepts. She reads CNF examples that demonstrate the “whole” of CNF, and then, through writing (in her assigned papers, as well as her informal “writing to learn” discussion boards), she, focuses on specific elements, or “parts,” of the understood CNF guidelines.

Jenny began writing her first CNF assignment not knowing what creative nonfiction writing was. Her first piece was a memoir during which she tells instead of shows. Her writing does not analyze the parts, and using Moffett’s model of thought in discourse, she is stuck in the middle, “abstracting by memory” in a chronological ordering of memories, though not re-created in scenes. Since Jenny did not know the conventions of the CNF genre at that time, she did not yet know how to move her writing forward: “. . . genre knowledge is an important part of composing because it assists writers in predicting the format of the text” (Root, Paradigms 10). She becomes aware of the “creative nonfiction” genre and how to write it. Her revision is aided through the instructor’s comments and through comparing her writing to CNF examples.

As Jenny struggles to define CNF in early discussion board posts, she demonstrates Vygotsky’s concept outline. She does not have the concept of CNF, and her understanding seems to reside between the pseudoconcept and complex stages. She tries to determine if CNF is personal reflection or if it is “to teach, inform, describe,

explain—have a mission” (early discussion board). Jenny is thinking “systematically and categorically” to learn her concept, which is what Smagorinsky describes as necessary for concept development (Smagorinsky 5). She places CNF into a category and determines what traits make up this genre. Thus she is trying to achieve what Root calls “genre knowledge,” because, even though she has the “topic knowledge” to write about what she knows, she realizes she doesn’t know how she wants to write in order to produce CNF (Paradigms 10).

In her fourth paper, Jenny moves from concrete experiences, such as meeting a student in the grocery store, to more abstract reflections that show that she is thankful to be a teacher. She examines the parts of her experiences in college journals and scenes of teaching, putting these analyzed parts into a whole. Jenny writes CNF in her latter and revised papers, a final test of her understanding of the whole or the genre. Her revisions include elements of CNF, and subsequent drafts all possess many CNF elements: scenes, details, movement of mind, and organization not dependent entirely upon chronology. Much of her writing, though not all, includes outside information, open endings, and resonance.

Toward the end of the course, Jenny moves from the analytical thought in which she is working through each element of CNF, and begins synthesizing, putting the pieces into a whole understanding of CNF and applying her understanding to her instruction. Her understanding of CNF and writing instruction have moved forward, and she is ashamed of where she had been in her thinking and practice. Jenny no longer questions her understanding of CNF. In fact, she is confident about her CNF knowledge to the point of writing a discussion board post that includes elements of CNF.

Additionally, Jenny and her group struggle with the element of research or “outside information,” as described in the CNF guidelines mentioned earlier (Appendix A). They draw relationships by comparing CNF to magazine articles and then contrasting these to personal introspection and memoir. As the group members categorize different genres and purposes for writing, they take another step in forming their mental models. Jenny quickly develops a pseudoconcept of CNF. Earlier in the course, she had believed that personal experience and reflection are what make “creative nonfiction.” She moves to a different understanding when she learns what scenes are—another element to make the writing creative. Nevertheless, it takes still more time for Jenny to see that her writing needs outside information.

By the last virtual conference, she is able to describe the need for research. She has achieved the concept, according to Smagorinsky. She also displays genre knowledge when she analyzes her last writing: “I didn’t revise the last piece because it didn’t fit what CNF is” (phone interview). She realizes that piece did not include research. Since it was not a CNF piece, she does not include it in her final drafts for the course. She is also aware of her own knowledge, what Root calls “metaknowledge” (Paradigms, 11). She is able to see her own mental model of CNF develop, as she describes during our phone interview with her:

I think when the light went on for me, I don’t know why I missed what I was doing. I don’t know—I did all the course work. At the beginning, we read the “5 R’s”: I read through it all, but it never sank into me, the research part of it, and that’s the nonfiction part. I guess that part missed me. But toward the end, I think it was a (fellow student’s) paper on the greyhounds, and (the instructor), she suggested we read that. I read it, and it was like a light went on, “That’s what I’m not doing.” The nonfiction part has got to have some informational purpose, and it’s not just a personal reflection, it’s informational. That’s when the light went on for me, when I saw what she had done.

While most of Jenny’s concept development moved in a part-to-whole direction, we should note that she also recognized when just the opposite direction was needed, demonstrating her flexibility for inductive and deductive thinking, depending upon the context. One instance of Jenny beginning with a whole concept occurs in her online small group, when she steps into the role of teacher or mentor, helping her group understand CNF. She is confident of her mental model, and she is able to help other participants as they share the details or “parts” of their confusion. Jenny does not have someone explaining this genre to her; she struggles through her own understanding of it, using the online discussions, the reading materials, and emailed correspondence with the instructor.

### **3. The Inductive Nature of the Course Itself Seems to Help Jenny Develop a Conceptual Understanding of CNF.**

Overall, Jenny’s steady movement forward in conceptual understanding is in part “driven” by the inductive structure of the course. At the outset, we wanted students to “figure CNF out on their own” through engaging in much reading, writing, and talking. Jenny accomplished this admirably.

Except for one article about CNF and another chapter about writing in general, the students read examples of CNF—by professional writers, as well as by their instructor. Instead of writing what they thought “creative nonfiction” was (which occasionally occurred through the discussion board), the students wrote CNF pieces. The students learned “by doing with a recognized ‘master’ or ‘connoisseur’ better than by studying or reading about abstract principles” (Lunsford 260). This inductive approach was built into the course and not necessarily an approach that students would have enacted on their own. Nonetheless, Jenny took full advantage of inductive thinking and applied it to other learning experiences within the course.

## **Final Thoughts and Implications**

Overall, the “good news” from our limited investigation is that teachers can indeed learn and apply new, complex concepts in an online venue—something that many professionals continue to doubt. On the other hand, we believe that the “bad news” is that such online courses—even when they are done responsibly and effectively—are so time-consuming and language-intensive, that they can overwhelm faculty and students alike.

We remain in an era of transition with online teaching and learning. The number of organizations offering online courses is mushrooming. Many students and teachers tend to regard Internet courses as quick, easy, and often low-cost enterprises: the teachers may cut and paste face-to-face class syllabi onto their Internet courses, and students may sign up for too many classes at a time, believing their content to primarily consist of quick summaries to read or skim before completing an objective test over the material. For the teaching of writing, literature, and many courses in the social sciences and humanities, nothing could be further from the truth. Regardless of the larger economic and social contexts of online learning, this study should encourage English teachers.

These results seem to support Lunsford’s, Odell’s, and Smagorinsky’s theories of how writers develop and how students learn new concepts. As well, these results seem to reinforce the broader foundational ideas of Moffett and Hayakawa. Future research needs to address how these participants changed their classroom instruction and examine how, and if, their students’ writing changed.

Jenny demonstrates the implications of learning by doing. If writers develop in similar ways, regardless of their age and experience, then Jenny's model of learning reflects Lunsford's model of the developmental writer. With direct instruction, Jenny might have memorized terms and definitions, but might not have developed a more complex understanding of CNF as a practice. As Jenny read examples and posted to the discussion board and virtual conference area, she explored what different CNF elements represented. She then practiced these elements in her own writing. She worked from pieces of information and experiences to create a whole, conceptual understanding of CNF.

Our writing classes need to be structured to allow students at all developmental levels to learn by experience. Students need to read strong examples of the genres we teach, they need to experience writing the genre in a nurturing environment, and they need many opportunities to talk about what they are reading and writing. As Swain reminds us, "whether created by glacier or bulldozer, these are special waters, attracting many voices. We who swim with frogs need to add our own."

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## APPENDIX A

## CRITERIA FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION\*

LOW	HIGH
Most info from <i>outside</i> the writer (Informative and Transactional)	Most info from <i>inside</i> the writer (Personal Memoir)
Static thinking, done deal; writer presents the final judgment	Movement of mind; writer <i>unfolds</i> her thinking and changes, becomes part of the story
Closed ending: only one interpretation possible	Open ending: two or more possible interpretations (ambiguity)
Tells story in chronological order	Shows <i>scenes not</i> dependent on time, yet fit together
Tells (reports, summarizes, generalizes)	Shows (dialogue, metaphor, details, and details about details)
Literal transitions ( <i>next, however, therefore, second, third, finally, etc.</i> )	Resonance (key image, word, phrase recurs, sometimes in ironic ways)

\* Roy Fox -- Writing, Reading, Teaching Creative Nonfiction --University of Missouri-Columbia

## Appendix B

### Course Readings

Online resource: Creative Nonfiction: The journal devoted exclusively to the creative nonfiction genre. "From the Editor: The 5 Rs of Creative Nonfiction" by Lee Gutkind

<http://www.cnf.edu/thejournal/articles/Issue06/06editor.htm#top> [3]

Students received a packet of print articles at the start of the course. The articles were organized into topics for the assigned lesson. Below are some of these articles:

#### Setting

Swain, Roger. (1995) "Swims with Frogs," in *The Best American Essays of the Century*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

White, T. H. (1957) "The Snakes Are About." In John Kieran's *Treasury of Great Nature Writing*. Garden City: Hanover House.

#### Point of View

Selby, Roy C. (1984) "A Delicate Operation." In *Fields of Writing: Reading Across the Disciplines*. Ed. Nancy R. Comley et al. New York: St. Martin's Press.

### **Chronology**

Breen-Bond, Patricia. (1986) "Running in the Rain." In *The Committed Writer: Mastering Nonfiction Genre*. Eds. Harry H. Crosby and Duncan A. Carter. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

### **Description**

White, Bailey. (1995) "Native Air" in *Sleeping at the Starlite Motel and Other Adventures on the Way Back Home*. New York: Vintage Books.

### **Concept**

White. E.B. (1997) "Progress and Change." In *One Man's Meat*. Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House.

### **Episode**

Angelou, Maya. (1984) "Graduation." In *Fields of Writing: Readings Across the Disciplines*. Ed. Nancy R. Comley et al. New York: St. Martin's Press.

## **Appendix C**

### **Excerpts from Jenny's Creative Nonfiction**

Setting: CNF #1  
Draft 1

#### **The Hill is Where the Heart Is**

Mine was a jubilant childhood, one crammed to overflowing with laughter and adventure and discovery. Having three sisters was my insurance against loneliness, and living in the foothills of Colorado's San Juan Mountains offered me a permanent connection to the outdoors. The hill behind my grandparent's house (and our house, too, since we lived just below our grandparents) was one of our favorite places to play. "The hill," as we referred to it, would be a small mountain by Arkansas standards, but in Colorado it was only a bump in the landscape that rose gradually from the edge of Poppo's hay field and barn lot to connect to other rises in a long chain of increasingly taller foothills that formed a border between the Pagosa Valley and the rugged San Juans encircling the town of Pagosa Springs and the houses, ranches, farms, and resorts, spread throughout the valley.

\*\*\*

Setting: CNF #1  
Revision #1

#### **The Hill is Where the Heart Is**

The Indian paintbrushes are distinct, vibrant with their crimson petals spreading out at the end of pencil straight stalks. "Mommo, did the Indians really use these as

paintbrushes?” I ask, staring at the feather-like centers of the red flowers, my favorites of the multitude of wild blooms that spring up every spring and summer to add their bright tones to the chorus of colors that blur their voices together and define the visual boundaries of our hill.

She chuckles that chuckle that belongs only to her—the one that I would know even if I heard it in a room full of chuckling grandmothers, “They surely might have. They used everything they could get their hands on.” She stops and reaches down to pull up some Texas Bluebells. They come up roots and all, showering dirt. She shakes out more dirt and adds this prize to the wad of color she holds in her other hand. I follow her as she continues her trek up the hill, stopping every now and then for more blooms. Soon I hear my sisters calling to me from the fort.

“Hey! I’m comin’ just hold your horses.” She’ll pick up some more and then plod back down to her house and arrange them in a quart jar in the center of her kitchen table, but me, I’m finished with the flowers. I’m going to play . . .

\*\*\*

Point of View: CNF #2

Draft 1

Tuesday, March 30, 10:30 P.M.

Okay. I’m all packed and ready to go. I’ve laid out the clothes I’m going to wear in the morning—socks and shoes, too. I double-checked my list. Rob put the CD’s I wanted—*Eric Clapton Unplugged*, Floyd Cramer, and Amy Grant’s *Heart in Motion*—in my bag. I saw him do it. The house is clean. The laundry’s done. The boys are sleeping, even though they’re excited about tomorrow. . . . Mom called and said she’d be there around 8:00. Everything’s set. Rob is snoring beside me. Why can’t I go to sleep? I know I need to rest. Tomorrow will be a long day. . . . I better go to the bathroom again. Maybe I won’t have to get up in the middle of the night to go. If I do, I’ll never get back to sleep. “Honey, turn over. You’re snoring.” Go to sleep. Just close your eyes and take long, deep breaths. Stop thinking. You’ve got to be at the hospital at 6:00 in the morning.

\*\*\*

Revision: CNF #2

I’m Tough: An Honest Exploration of Childbirth, Inner Strength, and Informed Choice

“Jenny, you did talk to Dr. Jones about the epidural, didn’t you?” asks my older sister Meg.

“Yes, I did, but I still think I want to try it without one.”

“Well, you might be able to do it, but I was just afraid if you didn’t plan for one you wouldn’t be able to get it if you decided you wanted it.”

*Listen to her, Jenny, she’s been there before . . .*

“I told him . . .”

“You know if you are at a certain point they can’t give you one.”

“I told him . . .”

“And you need to make sure you sign that consent form when you check in tomorrow morning,” she continues.

“I will. I’ll be fine . . .”

Childbirth is a normal, natural process—a universal process as old as time, but a process, nevertheless, shrouded in mystery and sometimes fear. From the moment a woman who has never “unshrouded” the mystery learns that she has conceived, she begins to ponder that process. *When and how will it start? How long will it last? How will I deal with the pain? Just how bad is it going to hurt?* These are only the beginning questions. Many women, in an effort to dispel their fear and anxiety, plan for labor. They search for options by asking questions of their obstetricians or of women who have gone before them. They may even consult numerous books and magazines devoted entirely to dealing with the pain of labor and childbirth. Today, an expectant mother may even find answers to her questions in the comfort of her own home by simply logging on to her computer. The seemingly-infinite world wide web contains a myriad of websites dealing exclusively with pregnancy and childbirth. America’s modern woman can and may arm herself against her fear by learning as much as she can about the road that lies ahead.

In some cultures the planning for labor and delivery begins on the day of the wedding. According to custom in China, a husband carries his bride over a span of burning coals when entering their home for the first time to ensure she will pass through labor successfully. The brides of Malta, an island in the Mediterranean, plan their wedding date around the weather. Heavy rain on the day of the wedding promises the bride that she’ll have an easy birth with her first child. According to old island tradition, the best months for marriage are January, April, and August.

\*\*\*

CNF #4  
Draft 1

### Life-Lesson

Every Sunday morning on the way to church, I have to force myself not to look. Train my eyes on the orange clay dirt road in front of me. It’s as if my brain can’t or won’t make peace between the truth I see with my eyes and the vision that permeates my heart. Pa died on October 15, 1995, and my grandmother remarried on September 28 of the next year. She sold their place to my Uncle, clip-clapped the soil off her hands, and moved in with her new husband.

\*\*\*

Pa’s recliner sits in the middle of everything—to mark where the kitchen stops and the living room begins. No walls separate the two rooms. He’s sitting there now. Not reclined, but on the edge, his arms and hands in constant motion to help him tell whatever story it is he’s telling now. My baby sister Dana sits with him, crammed up against the arm of the chair and smiling like a kewpie doll. Pa mechanically twists the copper bracelet that has left a permanently smudged gray shadow in its favorite spot on his wrist. “You didn’t get stopped between Santa Fe and Espanola this time, did ya? I tell you what, I’ll never forget the time that feller tried to give me a ticket. Now, I believe a body ought to own up to somethin’ he’s done wrong, but I wasn’t about to take that ticket. Ain’t no way I was goin’ as fast as he said I was.”

“Now, Jed, you know the only reason you didn’t get that ticket was because he got called

on the radio.”

“No, Kathy, he wouldn’ta give me that ticket. I ‘bout had him figured out.”



[4]

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