



Tessa Fontaine

## The Limits of Perception: Trust Techniques in Nonfiction

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After a bad concussion altered my vision, I became aware not only of the limitations of my new visual world, but also, surprisingly, of how limited my pre-concussion senses had been. Like this: humans process twenty images a second; dogs process fifty. Mice, and other prey animals, have eyes on the sides of their heads that allow them to see nearly 360 degrees around them. Birds see the same color spectrum as humans, as well as ultraviolet. Black bears can detect smells twenty miles away and, in addition to electric eels, lots of sea creatures, including sharks, can sense electricity. Understanding my limited perception gave me a new sense of wonder as I walked around and imagined what I could not see, taste, feel, hear, know, or understand. They felt like layers of invisible worlds. How inclusive, then, to imagine writing about the world outside our own limitations.

Even beyond our sensory constraints, writers always encounter unknowns, from small-scale memory failures to questions of cosmic enormity. A creative nonfiction writer frequently smacks up against the limits of her perception, of known truths, faced with what she does not know. There are many reasons this might happen—the writer was not present, the records are gone or never existed, the questions are too big, etc. Many of these gaps can be explored and made richer through speculation and invention.

Invention seems antithetical to the project of truth-telling, and for good reason. Willy-nilly invention without a framework or clear cues to the reader is the kind of irresponsible nonfiction writing that people love to hate. I like the title of one of Mary Karr's chapters in *The Art of Memoir*: "The Truth Contract Twixt Writer and Reader." Though of course no actual contracts are signed, there's a necessary

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set of rules, or cues, or techniques—whatever term you might use—that establish the core truth of the project, and the circumstances in which the writer might move toward imagination. In my memoir *The Electric Woman*, my cue was the refrain “story goes.” I recount many stories fellow sideshow performers told me, stories I had no way of verifying, stories told within a show where truth mattered less than how good the story was. After a new performer regaled me with the story of his rubber ribs, for example, I included the story he wanted me to know, framed by my refrain: “Story goes: Snickers was born triple jointed in every joint. He had thirty-six birth defects. Spent his first four years in the L.A. Children’s Hospital” (64). I wanted the performers to choose which stories they told me, and how they told them—giving them agency over their narratives. And even when the stories didn’t come from performers themselves, I found “story goes” to be a useful device, as in the tale I recounted about a famous sideshow performer from the late 1800’s. “Story goes: Sidonia the Hungarian Baroness began sprouting a beard just after she gave birth to a little person” (99). This story, one I’d heard growing up and then confirmed through research, was likely intended to build Sidonia and her family’s mythology as performers. But because the reader is already familiar with the refrain “story goes,” I feel comfortable sharing it as truth regardless of its unconfirmed historical accuracy. “Story goes” became a way of framing stories with the language of a performative storytelling tradition, a way of saying to the reader, *listen to this tale*.

I wasn’t inventing the stories that followed my trust technique, but in many of the wonderful examples that follow, the writer is. The most important practice for establishing trust when veering outside the facts is to be a diligent, intentional researcher. Any of the methods I explore below will fall flat if the speculation is not plausible and carefully researched. Speculation must never be used to deceive a reader; rather, it can be a way of enhancing larger truths. And, as I think the examples below demonstrate, speculation is almost always used as a means of understanding character more fully.

In this essay I’ve identified five approaches for speculating, inventing, and engaging the unknown. With each of these approaches, I’ve paired a writing prompt to encourage immediate sampling of the

technique. Many of these overlap at the edges, but I think they're worth identifying independently in order to examine the individual effects.

### Approach #1: Perhaps

This approach, first identified in Lisa Knopp's well-known essay "Perhapsing," provides a framework for speculation by giving the reader cue words like "perhaps" and "maybe," so that the reader may enjoy the richness of the writer's imagination without sacrificing that crucial trust contract. Knopp uses example sentences from Maxine Hong Kingston and Susan Griffin to show how those writers presented information that might, or might not, have been true.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior*, her mother recounts a tale about her father's sister in China. She became pregnant, although her husband had been away for years. The implications in their small village were severe, and on the night she gave birth, she killed herself and her baby in the family's well. Kingston's father and his family were shamed. They demanded that the story stay secret. There was no way for Kingston to write about this part of her family with the information she knew about her aunt's life—the silencing of the story had been purposeful. How then could Kingston accomplish writing a fuller story, that included her aunt's tale, with empathy? She chose to find the limits of known facts, and then, using those as an anchor, to reach a little bit beyond with well-researched speculation. "Perhapsing," then, became a countermeasure against erasure. Here, she imagines an interior life for her aunt, and the man who impregnated her:

*Perhaps* she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or *perhaps* he first noticed her in the marketplace. He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex. *Perhaps* he worked in an adjoining field, *or* he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand *must have* surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told. (6, italics mine)

The use of “perhaps” here accomplishes a few things. First, it reinforces the contract with the reader—she understands, through this trust technique, the boundary between known facts and speculation. Later in the chapter, Kingston uses other cues, like “It could very well have been...” and “she may have been,” words and phrases synonymous with “perhaps” that continue to alert the reader to the act of invention while still allowing for this previously silenced story. It also foreshadows the way Kingston moves through stories throughout her memoir, with memory and myth both used as modes of understanding. Second, as Knopp suggests, “the use of speculation in this context can be seen as a political act... [Kingston] is not participating in the punishment her aunt has gotten by being written out of the story entirely.” Kingston’s use of speculation allows for a widened lens. Through this technique, she no longer has to rely on a partial and biased story created by members of her family and perpetuated as fact. The use of perhaps makes space to push against the idea of a single story, and to welcome other voices into the ongoing creation of a family’s (or community’s, country’s, government’s, relationship’s) story. It is an act of empathy. As such, it should be treated with the ethical caution this kind of writing requires, which, again, relies on deep research and careful attention. Although it might seem that speculation allows for imagined possibilities outside the realm of research, just the opposite is true. Speculation needs to be grounded in the factual for it to work at all. Kingston is well aware of this, and as a result, her speculation is well-researched and plausible, a requirement for this kind of “perhapsing” to ring true.

**Writing Practice:**

1. Write down the name of a person you have been angry with in the past.
2. Using Kingston’s “perhaps” example, write at least 5 sentences that begin with “perhaps” to think through things from their point of view.

## Approach #2: The If/Then Alternative

“The If/Then Alternative” is an extension of “perhapsing,” but a form of invention that journeys even further into fanciful imagination, into, even, the realm of the impossible. Whereas “perhapsing” allows for plausible imagined possibilities, “The If/Then Alternative” sets up an avenue for the implausible, the impossible, the visionary—a gateway into an imagined world. “Perhapsing” invites empathy for stories that could be true, but “The If/Then Alternative” invites imagined possibility-spaces for stories that could not be true.

Amy Leach’s “Goats and Bygone Goats,” from her collection of essays *Things That Are*, begins with this:

It is too bad that sound waves decay. *If* they did not, we would still be able to hear melodies by Mesomedes, and Odo of Cluny playing his organistrum. We would hear extinct toxodons, and prehistoric horses wearing pottery bells, and dead bats chewing crackly flies. The world, full of past sound, would be like the sky, full of past light. The world would be like the mind, for which there is no once. (13, italics mine)

Leach begins with a declarative statement about the known world (“sound waves decay”) and a correlating judgement (“it is too bad”). The following lines explore what would happen if this true thing (“sounds waves decay”) were not, in fact, true. If the known world were not as we know it. If sound waves did not decay, Leach writes, then these are all the things I image hearing. By listing what is *not* there, things that aren’t, our reading experience is framed within an if/then architecture, and we are allowed to imagine the sounds of all these things simultaneously pulsing through the air, right alongside Leach. We are given a clear portal into the writer’s mind, allowed to travel intimately alongside her musings. But they are not random musings; the negation here is important. For a nonfiction writer, “The If/Then Alternative” allows her to clearly state what is true (“sound waves decay”), and then to posit an alternative, a negative

space. The reader feels grounded in what is true, which allows for a fictional exploration of what is not. As readers, we receive a gift: a glimpse into a writer's interior landscape made up of what is invented and imagined. As DeMisty Bellinger-Delfield writes in her essay "Exhibiting Speculation in Nonfiction: Teaching 'What He Took,'" speculation gives writers "the ability to *discover* in nonfiction instead of depending on introspective stories" (italics mine). And yet, the discovery, too, relies on research and facts. Leach's musings are wonderful to read because they depict sounds that are real, that take place in the past; actual sound waves that have decayed. Any reader of great nonfiction knows that we read for the mind of the writer, her filter, her experience, her judgement, her reflection, her intelligence, and her imagination, as much, if not more, than we read for the recounted experience itself.

### Writing Practice

1. Write down something that comes to an end. Amy Leach used sound waves. You might think about nature, animals, relationships, lives, natural phenomenon, etc.
2. Write: It is too bad that....[the thing you wrote that comes to an end]. If it/they did not,....[invent it!]. In other words, use the if/then framework to follow your imagination. Invent an alternate reality.

### Approach #3: Negation/ The Black Hole

In Jamaica Kincaid's memoir *My Brother*, she reckons with her estranged brother in Antigua after he is diagnosed with AIDS. Throughout the book, she tries to understand her relationship to her brother, a man she hasn't spent much time with in years. This quest becomes the central question. There are no easy answers, and instead of giving us an easy reconnection narrative or epiphany, Kincaid sustains this question throughout much of the text. (Cue Roland Barthes: "Literature is the question, minus the answer.") But how, in a genre built on what is known, does this work? I come to think of this kind of impossible question, the kind we obsess over, that haunts us, that drives many of us to write personal

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nonfiction, as our own unique black holes. Like black holes, they suck us in, and we do not understand what is at their center. This technique writes directly into the center of that unknowing, that negative space. Kincaid approaches the question of her relationship to her brother with that same consuming not-knowing. She writes out many of the things she does not understand:

*I did not think* I loved him; then when I was no longer in his presence, *I did not think* I loved him.

Whatever made me talk about him, whatever made me think of him, *was not love*, just something else, *but not love*; love being the thing I felt for my family, the one I have now, *but not for him*, or the people I am from, *not love, but a powerful feeling all the same, only not love.*" (50, italics mine)

Kincaid does not know what she feels about her brother, though she defines it as “something else,” and “a powerful feeling.” She can’t articulate exactly what the feeling *is*, so she uses a word we normally associate with family, “love,” as an idea to press against, to negate, to invoke almost as an incantation. It is through her negation (“not love”), and repetition of that phrase, that we are able to circle around a question too big to answer. And, as Gwendolyn Edward identifies in her essay “Beyond Perhapsing: ‘Split-Toning’ Techniques for Speculation in Nonfiction,” sometimes a “writer’s language will shift and become noticeably different in the places where he or she takes liberties or where genre-bending and speculation/ imagination occurs.” Here, Kincaid’s language circles in on itself, questioning the words themselves we associate with family. We are in the gravitational pull of something perhaps too complicated to answer, to know, and so we articulate what we do *not* know. She does not “perhaps,” she does not speculate; Kingston leaves the center blank. Whatever enters a black hole cannot escape once it passes the event horizon; likewise, a nonfiction writer’s mind can turn over a question for years, forever, maybe, without manufacturing a satisfactory answer. And yet, this center space is extremely valuable for a nonfiction writer. Herein lies many of the obsessions that drive our projects. The event horizon, or boundary of the region after which nothing can escape, might be an actual event in a writer’s life, a relationship, a question about the world, or the self. And were we not pulled by a gravity that sometimes feels inexplicable, it’s

likely our projects would fizzle out. There is honesty in admitting the unknowable center space. It's another trust technique the nonfiction writer can use to say look, here are some things I know, and here are some things I don't.

### Writing Practice

1. Consider a complicated emotion you have about someone, a part of your past you do not understand, a piece of research that has completely stumped you, or some other large question with no easy solution. You guessed it: we're mining your black holes.
2. Begin exploring one of these black holes/big questions by making some lists. What do you *not* feel about this person? What don't you understand about yourself? What don't you know about something you're researching, or what can you not make sense of? Each entry in the list should start with a negation. Write out what it isn't. Instead of trying to find an answer or define what something is, acknowledge the hole at the center, the not-knowing, and write around and around and around the question.

### Approach #4: Inhabiting Another Point of View

In her essay "What We Have Lost Because We Did Not Know to Ask," published in the online journal *Speculative Nonfiction*, Inara Verzemnieks writes about her great-uncle Harijs after a stroke has erased much of his memory. Instead of omitting how Harijs might experience his environment and past, Verzemnieks imagines the world as he might see it now, post-stroke, as he inhabits a very different brain and body. The essay begins:

Harijs positions himself by the kitchen window and tests whether it is true that after nine decades, he now sees what no one else can. Outside, the last of the summer storks plow corkscrew paths through the sky and in the distance, the neighbor's dog rises on two legs and begs the mailman to



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polka. It's the absence of what he once thought he knew that he now tracks, like the sun's corona, visible only during an eclipse. Is the sky really still the sky if all the clouds are gone? Why can't a dead birch leaf also be a fallen apple? If I am 16, then why are my hands withered and spotted, like fruit left too long in the sun? (Verzemnieks)

Verzemnieks does not use cue words, as Kingston's "perhapsing" example gives us, or an if/then conditional, or an investigation of the unknowable through negation. Instead, she chooses to write from within a close 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view that delivers an interior landscape she can't possibly know. And yet, in addition to its beauty, her portrait elucidates empathy. In the essay's next paragraph, Verzemnieks writes that "the line between what belongs in the past and what exists in the present blur[s]." She inhabits and enacts that blurred temporal line through her choice to slip into Harjis' point of view, so that we as readers also experience that blurred line from the inside. The line between narrator and character is muddied; Verzemnieks does not separate her own distinct voice from that of the person she is writing about. Through her lens, Harjis observes the world outside the window, noticing facets of the natural world that seem different post-stroke. Can one thing, the sky, really be the sky if its most recognizable attributes, the clouds, are gone? The question stands in for something much larger: are we still ourselves if a significant way we've identified ourselves—our memories, say—are gone? The text lets the reader inhabit shifting questions of identity (dead birch leaf also as apple) and time (16 with withered hands), all within a space of invention.

Inhabiting another point of view can be ethically precarious. It is easy to do damage to another person's story or identity by making too many assumptions, failing to do research, or neglecting to have conversations about wishes, intentions, and boundaries. As is true in each of the inventive techniques, this technique, too, needs to be grounded in research. Verzemnieks addresses it in a short craft reflection that follows her essay in *Speculative Nonfiction*. She writes:

Even as the very notion of trying to capture reality became complicated by his loss of memory, I had the benefit of all those trips to Latvia over the years, all my notes, and all our many previous interviews, which I could combine with careful present-day observation and conversation to create a portrait of Harijs right now, at this moment and time in his life.

In order to accurately and ethically slide into his point of view, Verzemnieks calls upon the many years she spent traveling to Latvia to spend time with her great-uncle and great-aunt, during which she came to know them quite well. She goes on to articulate the role that speculation can take in the creation of character, not as something diametrically opposed to research, but as something necessarily intertwined. She further writes: “No writer of nonfiction can truly know the inner consciousness of those we are writing about, and this is where the art of speculation becomes inextricable from research, from careful, in-depth reporting.” We are hungry to understand other people and ourselves—this is perhaps the most significant reason we read. And yet, a nonfiction writer doesn’t have the ability to freely invent motive, conflict, histories or dreams for a character the way a fiction writer might. But still, in order to try to understand other people, particularly people with limited or altered communication, an empathic portrayal might require more information than we have. That was true for me when I wrote about my mom, who’d suffered a massive stroke and lost the ability to talk and walk. To write only what I could observe for the six and a half years she lived like that would have defined her by the ramifications of her disease. Instead, I wanted to depict a rounded, complicated character. Inventive techniques allowed me to.

**Writing Practice**

1. Explore a scene or story from your memory by reimagining it from an alternate perspective. Write the event from the point of view of a passing bystander, another person close to the event, a pet, or even an inanimate object. When choosing your narrator, pay attention to how objective they would have been, what they would have paid attention to, and what sort of background knowledge they would have had about the scene.
2. Many of these will necessitate research, as Verzemnieks' portrait of Harjis did. What kind of research might you need to do to visit this alternative point of view? If you're inhabiting a housecat, say, how does a cat's vision work? Hearing? When does your housecat pay attention to you?

**Approach #5: The Not-Knowing as Structure**

Plot is created through conflict—in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins must destroy the one ring of power, but Sauron desperately seeks it; in *Jaws*, a shark begins attacking people on a New England beach, but the mayor won't close the beaches for fear of revenue loss. Conflict does not always have to be between characters, however. The absence of facts or information about a story is itself a conflict—the writer wants the facts, or knowledge, or understanding, but the writer cannot find it. The writer must therefore take a journey to find it. In this kind of writing, the story of not-knowing—the very limited perception itself—becomes the narrative. This approach is different from the “negation/black hole” in Kincaid's example, because Kincaid's organizing principle is not the physical quest she undertook to understand her relationship. However, in Alice Walker's essay “Looking for Zora,” the author journey's to Zora Neale Hurston's hometown to meet people who knew her, learn about her life, and find her grave —“the Zora Hurston expedition,” she calls it, forms the essay's narrative backbone. The story of undertaking the research acts as the piece's structure; the not-knowing becomes part of the story. Some of

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the invention occurs at the structural level: how will the writer create a path through this unknown? Where will she physically journey to learn about Hurston? The essay begins as Walker flies into Eatonville, Florida, Hurston's birthplace, and meets a scholar who is also conducting research on Hurston. Walker writes:

We have written to each other for several weeks, swapping our latest finds (mostly hers) on Zora, and trying to make sense out of the mass of information obtained (often erroneous or simply confusing) from Zora herself—through her stories and autobiography—and from people who wrote about her. (74)

Here, Walker sets the reader up with the expectation that there is much information still to be uncovered, and that a narrative thread we'll follow will include making sense of information about Hurston.

Because finding Hurston's grave is a primary narrative quest introduced early in the essay, it is unsurprising that the essay ends shortly after Walker locates Hurston's grave and commissions a marker to commemorate the great author. The central conflict is the quest. Will our narrator be able to find out more information about Hurston, and will she find her unmarked grave? And within that, the emotional resonance emerges: what is Walker's connection to Hurston, and why does she take this journey? Hurston is both a real person with a real grave in this town, and a mythic character for Walker, an idol who she knows only through books. Narrative propulsion is created as we, alongside our narrator, gather clues or reach dead ends in the quest to find Hurston's grave and learn more about her. The essay's emotional resonance swells within the framework of the research quest and its eventual conclusion—Hurston buried in an unmarked field of weeds. Through a plethora of information before she arrives, and a dearth of information once she's in Eatonville, Walker must choose which threads of the mythic heroine's life to follow, and these speculative choices also create the structure of the piece itself. The picking and choosing of biographical information is an act of invention—Hurston is created for Walker by what she learns and chooses to incorporate, a version of invention present in every piece of nonfiction. Walker's journey of

inventing Hurston's characterization becomes the narrative—we want to know more, we arrive in a place that might teach us more (Eatonville), we learn more, and we create our own character from fragments of the myth. The invention of the other becomes the structure of the essay.

### **Writing Practice**

1. We all create myths. About ourselves, about other people who are important to us, about events. We all have obsessions. List a few things you are obsessed with, or things that have become mythic to you. Choose one to explore.
2. Dive deeper into your obsession, or uncover that myth. Frame the piece with the journey/uncovering itself as the narrative frame. Begin with a description of how you are actually beginning your research, how you are beginning to think through this obsession/myth/question. Let your journey as a writer guide the structure of your exploration.

### **Conclusion**

My vision still has not returned to what it used to be. This is incredibly frustrating. But it has also opened up a new way of thinking for me, a sense of how much bigger the story is at every moment right here, in our nonfiction world. And it has caused me to seek examples of other writers' quests into the unknown. What I love about all of the examples in here is that they offer the reader a sense of intimacy. We are allowed even further into the brain of the nonfiction writer as she carefully invents past the edges of the known. We enter a possibility-space for previously silenced stories, an invitation for empathy. And what a gift for us, to be able to write and read about characters who are allowed a story, what a pleasure to dwell inside questions that refuse easy answers.

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