

# Writing Creative Nonfiction: Revising Your Work

**Roxane Gay**



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## REVISING CREATIVE NONFICTION

The following checklist may be used for revising your own creative nonfiction prose, may be helpful in offering useful critique to your peers or even when discussing published

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### MEANING OR ABOUTNESS

What is the piece about? State what you think the essay is about in one sentence.....

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.....

Is the essay's "aboutness" SHOWN not TOLD? Are specific illustrations and examples provided instead of just an overview of what happens?

Is the leap of significance made for the reader?

### TENSION

Where does the tension in the essay lie?

Are there several kinds of tensions at work?

Are there tensions left unresolved?

### TIME

How has the writer treated the movement of time?

If there are varying time periods, does the writer move the reader through it smoothly, effectively?

### SENSE OF PLACE

Is the setting rendered in sensory detail? Do the details heighten the atmosphere?

Are they authentic, believable?

Does the author's treatment of the setting enhance the reader's understanding of what the essay is about?

### CHARACTERS *(the same litmus test as fiction and this includes the first person (I) of the nonfiction essay)*

What complexities do they reflect?

What details of the lives move you?

Identify details, actions, speeches that enhance the essay's sense of character.

### DIALOGUE

Identify dialogue in which the characters' voices seem especially in tune with who they are.

Is there any dialogue that doesn't ring true or seem believable? Forced?

Does the dialogue work on multiple levels to MIC? Move the story, inform the reader and characterize?

Too much dialogue?

Too little dialogue?

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### **DIALOGUE**

Is the tone of the essay consistent?  
Do the words, sentences, rhythms used hit the same note?  
Do the words, sentences, etc. suit the time, place, situation?

### **SCENE**

Consider the way in which the writer has used the fictional element of scene.  
Is each scene fully rendered? Any missed opportunities?  
Any parts of the essay that would be better enhanced by the use of scene?

### **COMPOSITION LOGIC/NARRATIVE STRATEGY**

What is the logic behind the way in which the writer has presented the world of the essay?  
Is there another sequence or structure that might be better suited to the material?

### **EMOTIONAL OUTLINE**

Is there an emotional thru-line?  
Is the emotion in synch with the movement of the story?

### **TRANSITIONS**

Where are they?  
How do they work to make the story of the essay vivid and continuous?  
Are there places that need stronger transitions?

### **THE OPENING**

How does the first line, the opening paragraph prepare readers for what the essay will be about?  
What promises does it make to the reader?  
Does the opening break the contract with the reader?  
What evidence of the “about” is found at the beginning?

### **THE END**

In what way does the essay come full circle?  
Is the ending satisfying?

### **CLARITY OF PROSE**

Do the sentences actually say what you mean?  
Any awkward sentences, paragraphs?

### **TITLE**

Is it effective? Appropriate?  
How could it be better?

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Use these questions to formulate your critiques and to revise—feel free to vary from these questions as they are designed to simply get you started and to be a guide.

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**SOME OTHERS TO CONSIDER:**

Did you like the essay? Why or why not?

What works well? What does not?

Were you genuinely interested in what happened in the essay? Why or why not?

Are there grammatical errors, misspellings?

Is there awkward language or metaphors that don't work?

Are there parts of the essay that retard movement or have no purpose?

Can the essay be trimmed?

Expanded?

Is this the most effective order of scenes?