30 Ideas About Writing Nonfiction

The poet, essayist, and critic Elisa Gabbert offers 30 ideas around making your nonfiction interesting.

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As told to Elisa Gabbert, 3312 words.

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[Adapted from a lecture I delivered as the Malamud Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at Oregon State University in April 2025.]

1. Structure in the first place is for the writer. A piece of writing begins with thoughts—ideas, images, themes, sometimes sentences or paragraphs, already written, and almost complete unto themselves. But they are not complete; they are parts of a not-yet-existent whole. At this stage, nothing is inevitable. Everything is contingent. Your work as a writer is a series of decisions that determine an effect: which parts to include on the page, in which order. These decisions, which don't always feel like decisions, are all you can control, if there's anything you control.

2. Structure is a spatial understanding of the order of ideas in a piece of writing, the order you decide on. Finding a structure, a system to organize your thoughts, is often the breakthrough that allows you to write. Before you begin, everything looks like a decision. But choosing a structure makes multiple decisions. It simplifies most of your decisions, because fewer paths forward are available. Let's say you decide on a diary structure, a piece of writing assembled from short, dated entries, reflecting on recent happenings or changes in thinking. We move through time in bursts, in the dispatch tense. This solves the problem of how much the beginning of the piece of writing knows. An entry written in January can't know what will happen in December. (This may of course cause other problems, but if you stay with the structure, it limits your solutions.) Or let's say you're writing a meditation on clouds, and you decide on a seasonal structure. You can organize all your ideas, your pages of notes and quotes about clouds, into four sections, or movements, of roughly equal weight. The structure reveals where you're short on, or have excess, material. More importantly, the structure helps you see the order of thoughts in terms of time. It imposes a universal system of meaning. It nearly constitutes a method: structure and process are closely entwined. The structure suddenly makes the writing possible.

3. This is the appeal of a writing prompt: It’s a readymade idea or, often, a readymade structure. You get to skip a whole level of the process (so that you can write). It can make writing faster, like typing over writing longhand. But, then again, faster is not always better. And most of the time, in the wild, you have to do that work yourself.

4. I dislike the term “braided essay,” because it suggests a readymade structure, like a villanelle or a sestina. But every “braided essay” is bespoke—the weaving of two or more disparate themes into one coherent essay is not a solved problem, and a pattern of alternation doesn’t do much work in itself. There’s no way out of the (interesting) work of finding a structure for your own material, a motivated organization. If anything these structures are more complex and require more thinking.

5. Some structures are more visible than others. While writing it may be useful to signpost the structure as much as possible, with numbers and labels, as in THIS IS THE PART WHERE I TELL YOU ABOUT MY CHILDHOOD OBSESSION WITH SNAILS. The structural apparatus allows you to write. But later, you always have the option of removing the visible labels, the scaffolding. You could, for example, write an essay as a list, then remove all the numbers, as I have not done here. You can even remove all the section breaks in a long piece of prose without changing the underlying structure that motivated white space in your document (a shift in tone, a change of subject, a turn). The structure can be as explicit as the text or else can be implicit, a subtext, subliminal. Both can give you interesting effects.

6. I can never begin the writing—THE WRITING writ large—until I have an idea of the structure. The thought of this lecture was nagging and burdensome to me, an abstract thing I had to do, until I had the idea to compose it as a list. I immediately started to write it. I usually think of lists as lazy, but sometimes, laziness is what allows us to work.

7. I also need, in order to begin, a strong sense of tone. I have to know the tone of the first sentence. I mean, of course, the tone as in the attitude, that balletic word, but it's useful that *tone* has a sonic meaning too—the sentence has to sound good. It also has to start to set a mood—I'm in some kind of mood, and the tone is a kind of conveyance, it makes the mood infectious. It has to start to build momentum: I want to write the next sentence.

8. There is probably nothing more useful to my writing than procrastination. The longer I can think about the subject, the better. It solves so many problems. I have more available thoughts (they accumulate, like interest) to select and arrange. I can come to the page with pre-existing insights. A small set of insights is usually enough to build an essay around, and typically, the insights arrive in an order; they make most sense in an apparent order. That order is a fundamental layer of the structure. What else needs to happen on the page so that the reader gets the insights in that order, when they're ready to receive them? (They should be ready, yet surprised.) When I put off the writing as long as possible, not the thinking and preparation but THE WRITING writ large, the structure begins to suggest itself.

9. The best essays are on subjects you've been thinking about, or questions you've been asking, for years, if not all your life. Your mind has already developed a structure of thinking around these questions: the triggers, the patterns, expansions, reversals. The order of insights. So much work is already done. When I start with this knowledge, the work of writing sentences and paragraphs is usually very pleasurable. It's not exactly that they're all already lined up in my mind, as some writers describe the process, as though they're simply taking dictation—just typing what they've already written in their head. That's partially true. More so, I find that I can bring my ideas into higher resolution through the act of writing the sentence. I don't discover what I think,

but I understand my own thinking better, more clearly, when I get the language right. The diction, the tone, the syntax—these are decisions that sharpen resolution.

10. When I'm writing about something new, either new to the world (a new book, for example) or to me, I often find it helpful to anchor that new thing to something else I've had the opportunity to think about for longer. This strengthens and adds complexity to the newer thinking, with older, more deeply rooted thoughts. Like adding wine to sauce.

11. Putting off writing also helps solve the problem of authority. Authority, in writing, is mysterious—we seem to recognize it instantly, but talk about it like it's some elusive technique, like a level of rhetoric that could be applied in editing. How is it achieved? I've come to think authority comes from actually believing what you say. That's it: You just have to really believe it. Somehow, we can tell. I don't know why, but we see it when writers are lying. The longer you wait, the longer you think, the more time you have to convince yourself of your own ideas (or to realize they're wrong). Oddly, the fictive or imagined can have authority, as in, *I thought my mother must be thinking XYZ*. (The authoritative imaginal: what it takes to convincingly play a doctor on TV?) Authority is not just a matter of *facts*, whatever facts are. Nor do subjective opinions, or statements with the outward formal properties of opinions, automatically carry authority.

12. What are facts? Facts are statements that are verifiable via other sources. (You might say that facts are what fact-checkers check, the way physicists say that time is what clocks track.) But are those sources verifiable? How deep do you go? These aren't always simple questions. Sources contradict each other, not to mention themselves. Sometimes, questioning the factiness of facts, their true stability or verifiability, gives your writing *more* authority.

13. Tone, like authority, has to be earned. It comes from long thinking and deep understanding of your material, a complex relationship with your material. This gives you conviction, and an emotional position from which to

write: you know how you feel. This may be why I feel such reverence for memoir written in old age. No tone is more earned.

14. Tone is not fully stable. A longer, more complex piece of writing can withstand more shifts in tone; they can make it more textured and interesting. Consider *Lost Highway*, which Zizek once described as "the ridiculous sublime." At times it's absurdly funny, like the scene where Mr. Eddy runs a driver off the road and threatens him at gunpoint for tailgating; at others, it's purely nightmarish. Mixed tones in writing, in any art, sometimes look at first like a lack of control, but every Lynch film is like this. He structures it in. Structure can make shifts in tone more possible, by putting us in quite a different time (now it's Christmas), different space (behind the curtains), or different level of reality altogether (a dream or fantasy, the inside of the chocolate factory). When you go to a second location, the sun moves, it changes the mood.

15. Tone is similar to mood, but different. Tone is local, in the language; mood is more emergent, atmospheric, arising from multiple elements—the tone from sentence to sentence, the surface-level subject, the themes that may be right on the surface or deep underground. These are all decisions you can try to control, as you manage information. We can think of the structure as conceptual space, and the mood as the feeling of being inside that space. Part of that feeling is pacing—thinking through the writing's material in the time that the structure encodes. Often, a longer piece is a slower mood.

16. The space of a piece of writing necessarily has scale, levels of scale, like a physical map, or a model of a building. There's a size that it is, and there's a size it represents. A short work can have massive scale, if the material is packed very densely. In longer works, the scale can suddenly change, or collapse like a telescope. You can spend many pages, thousands of words, on a day, and then cover a year in one sentence. You can always pull more time out from time, with attention.

17. I know I keep using the word *interesting*. Once, during an on-stage interview, I said that my goal as a critic is the same as when I write any type of nonfiction: I'm trying to be interesting. After the event, a couple of people from the audience came up to talk to me. One of them said she liked that remark—she found its simplicity clarifying. The other one looked a bit vexed by the word. He asked me what I meant by *interesting*. I said I meant just what it sounds like. Everyone knows when they're interested in something. You sit up a little, you pay more attention, you feel more awake—a little more alive. He still seemed perplexed, and wondered if I really meant *meaningful*. I considered for a moment, then told him no. The word *meaningful*, to me, is less meaningful. It doesn't set as high a standard.

18. Part of the project of psychoanalysis is finding ways to "redescribe" our feelings and experiences so that we can live with them. In this light, we don't need to solve all our problems (they may not be solvable), as long as we can make our problems *interesting*. It's not for the benefit of the analyst, though the analyst may enjoy the work. It's for the subject of analysis, to make *their* life better. We can think about writing nonfiction this way, as a process of redescribing our lives as material, of making our own lives more interesting to us. I think that feeling everybody knows, of heightened attention, of wanting-to-think-more-about-it, can transfer. That's much of what "good writing" is—it's writing with the semi-magic power to convey more-aliveness. This isn't just about how we process our painful or shameful experience or trauma, however. It works for a book report. It works for anything.

19. “Good writing” is always surprising in some way. We’re surprised when the writing subverts our expectations, whether they’re conscious or unconscious. You don’t want to sound like an algorithm; you don’t want the next word to always be the first or second or third most likely word in that sequence. Likewise for the next sentence and the next paragraph. But you wouldn’t want every move or transition to be surprising, either. This just creates an expectation of incoherence. Non sequiturs at length are not surprising.

20. The moments when you’re stuck as a writer are strategic opportunities to make things more interesting. When you can’t solve a problem to your own satisfaction because the obvious solution is boring, too boring to write or to read—this is a chance to surprise yourself with the next word or sentence, with a structural change or conceptual leap. Even tiny problems can present these opportunities: The “right” word, for example, doesn’t *sound* right, and in searching for another word that makes a more elegant sentence, I find an unexpected and more expansive meaning.

21. Similar to surprise, variation is usually a part of “good writing.” There’s a sentence fragment in Gore Vidal’s memoir *Palimpsest* that I think about a lot. I don’t even remember what the sentence fragment is, off the top of my head, just that it’s a fragment, two or three words, in a paragraph about a long journey he took by ship as a child, a paragraph made out of sentences otherwise syntactically complete. That fragment is so *emotional*. I can picture where it lies on the page.

22. I may use variation as a guiding principle. I may notice I’ve been using the same kind of opening over and over, or notice all my sections are the same length, etc. This is all completely fine, to a point. Any form or structure can be endlessly varied (think of John Berryman writing his hundreds of Dream Songs), and it’s good to reuse your forms, to learn what else they can teach you. But if I get a little bored by myself, it’s helpful to try a variation, some completely different way to start or to end or to move the piece forward. This isn’t merely decoration, like going back and adding more metaphors. This is useful as a principle *in* the writing. A different formal strategy will surface up different material, it will change the way I think. It makes the work interesting again.

23. I haven't used the word *style* much, not because it isn't an interesting word to me. It's an interesting, capacious, and capricious idea. (In the 1983 documentary *Style Wars*, a young graffiti artist tells his mother he doesn't do what he does for fame or posterity, he does it for other artists, like a poet.) But style is diffuse. If a sentence has tone and an essay has mood, style is diffused across multiple works, the pattern of choices that appear across an oeuvre. It's basically a writer's personality. That doesn't mean style can't change. (Personality can change.)

24. If the Style of a writer, with a capital S, is diffuse, it's odd that small decisions add so much style. Punctuation adds style. A joke adds style. Repetition, aphorism, wild exaggeration: style, style, style. A good title always adds style. Good writers defend small decisions, because style is defensible idiosyncrasy.

25. Titles are very important, to my mind. They attract us or repel us; they can elevate a piece or almost ruin it. Too often, they add nothing. A good title tells us, but only in part, how to think about a piece. "Us" here, as aways, is inclusive of the writer. Sometimes it helps me to write *toward* a title. I titled this lecture before I began it—it gave me the structure as well as the subject, allowing me to write. Titles, like form, are often aspirational.

26. An implicit theme almost never makes a good title. Telling the reader the underground theme too soon cheats them out of a feeling, a good conspiratorial feeling, of slowed understanding. (However! An idea that is almost never good can on occasion strike as genius.) An explicit theme, the surface-level subject, is an easy, blameless title. It adds nothing, usually, but at least takes nothing away. A good title, though, may be interesting in itself. It adds style. The writer Emily Gould once remarked online that *Conflict Is Not Abuse* and *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* are both such good titles because you learn a lot just by thinking about the titles, without even reading the books. I found that very funny—but as a rule it would set a nearly impossible standard. It's usually enough for a title to be evocative, to make us (the writer and the reader) want to think about the work that it's attached to, to imagine its shape. (How many times did you hear "THE POETICS OF SPACE," as a phrase, and think about the words, before you read the book?)

27. There is often a point, when I'm writing a piece, that I come to a stubborn decision. It's usually a sentence or a paragraph that nags me, that doesn't seem quite right, but if I take it out, the piece doesn't feel right without it, either: a flawed part that can't be removed. The longer the piece, the likelier it is that I will run into this problem, that I'll confront the unsolvable. The only way forward is to call the piece finished and move on, but truthfully these problems continue to bother, exerting small weight on my psyche, sometimes for years.

28. Sometimes the thing that I most want to say has almost nothing to do with the essay at hand, its subject or even its underlying themes. It is barely related, and yet I'm convinced that the essay at hand is the right place to say it, maybe *because* it has nothing to do with the thing I want to say. The architect Robert Venturi has said, "Contrast supports meaning." Maybe certain truths feel most true to me against a nearly random background, because they're so true, they would be true in any context.

29. I don't like when books try to justify themselves before they start (just start, please) and I don't like when books start to end too long before the ending.

30. It's difficult to end. There are fewer good ways to end than good ways to begin. Writing is a way of painting yourself into a corner. There are things you can try not to do once you've made it to the corner. You can try not to do a big phony announcement of an ending, you can try not to ask a fake question. (We see when you know the answer, we see when you're lying!) The solution is always different, but sometimes, you just stop in the corner. Sometimes, you have to find a window and climb out.

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