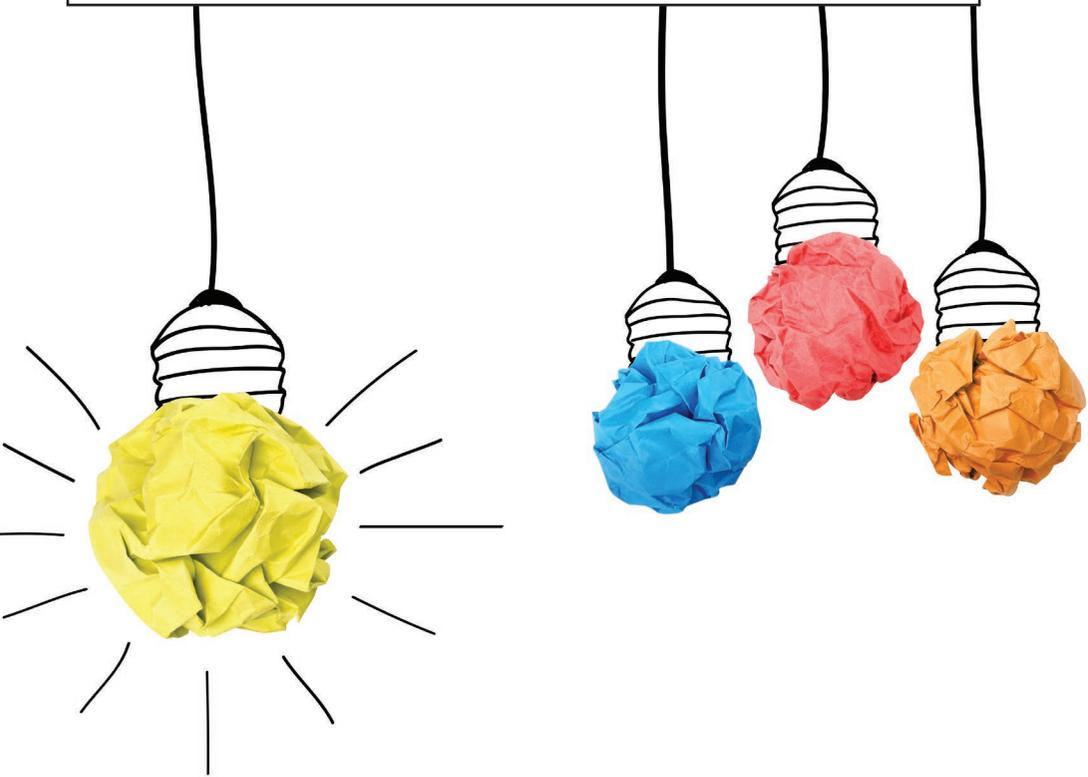


Writing the Personal

Getting Your Stories onto the Page

Sandra L. Faulkner and Sheila Squillante



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Writing the Personal

TEACHING WRITING

Volume 1

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**SENSE PUBLISHERS
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PRAISE FOR *WRITING THE PERSONAL*

“In this innovative and inspiring book, Faulkner and Squillante offer practical advice about writing personal stories. I especially appreciate their discussion about unanticipated reactions to published works, issues to consider when writing about others, and the numerous examples that show how writing is a social (and not strictly individual) act. Throughout, Faulkner and Squillante also include writing prompts that will be of great use for both beginning and advanced writers, as well as courses that foreground writing techniques and processes.”

– **Tony E. Adams, Northeastern Illinois University**

“In this book, writers are invited to think of writing the personal “like cooking,” and indeed there is a lot on the boil in this fun, evocative and chock-full pot of writing approaches and advice.

The authors draw appropriately on their own histories and lives to demonstrate and to story the personal while actually living the personal, including poetry and images from Faulkner’s ethnographic trip to Germany, Squillante’s fictionalised account of workplace bullying, and image-poetry of/by the two co-authors. They use a dialogic approach that supports the content and addresses the universal challenge: ‘*How do you make time to write?*’ This may be the fundamental question as you consider writing the personal.’

At the end of every chapter, the authors provide writing exercises and questions to assist both the experienced and new personal writer. And they usefully link the forms and concerns of writing the personal with the scholarly lineages they derive from and into which they speak. A focus on techniques including layering, interviews, historical research, fictionalisation, collage, as well as structural and formal considerations makes this a useful book to read straight through or equally to dip in and out of according to your—alright we’ll say it—personal tastes. However you come to the recipes offered in this clever cookbook, you’re sure to enjoy the feast inside.”

– **Stacy Holman Jones and Anne Harris, co-authors of *Writing for Performance***

“*Writing the Personal: Getting Your Stories onto the Page* provides a compelling, no-nonsense look inside the intricacies of the writing process. Anyone interested in how the human experience translates into sentences, paragraphs, and stories would do well to study the advice, examples, and helpful exercises provided. Faulkner and Squillante are skillful, honest, and generous teachers of the craft.”

– **Dinty W. Moore, author of *The Mindful Writer: Noble Truths of the Writing Life***

“Sandra L. Faulkner and Shelia Squillante offer a much needed text that helps demystify the art of writing the personal. The authors not only carefully work through key concepts, questions, and ethics associated with writing the personal, but also through performativity show this labor by interweaving their own experiences and writings. The writing questions and exercises at the end of each chapter are invaluable resources for writers and teachers alike. Faulkner and Squillante seamlessly collaborate to each bring their unique and varied writing backgrounds and academic credentials to this text to create a unique and invaluable book.”

– **Bernadette Marie Calafell, Ph.D., Full Professor, University of Denver, author of *Monstrosity, Performance and Race in Contemporary Culture***

“*Writing the Personal* is the ideal book for anyone interested in exploring his or her life through writing. Authors Sandra L. Faulkner and Sheila Squillante are funny and down-to-earth, but they are also seasoned writers and teachers. They provide inspiration as well as practical tips and exercises to help readers develop both a writing habit and a clearer understanding of what it means to write the personal. It is a must-read for any writer serious about deepening her understanding of craft.”

– **Kate Hopper, author of *Ready for Air* and *Use Your Words* and co-author of *Silent Running***

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“St. Michael’s-by-the-Bay” *Prairie Schooner* Vol. 76. No. 2. Summer 2002.

“On Maui, In Praise” *Clackamas Literary Review* Vol. 5, No. 1. Spring/Summer, 2001.

“Both/And: Notes Toward a Multi-Genre Craft Class” *Essay Daily* Spring, 2015 <http://www.essaydaily.org/2015/05/sheila-squillante-on-using-asterisks.html>

“Pin the Solje on the Baby,” *PANK* No. 2. 2009.

“Two Suicides,” *Superstition Review* Issue 10. Fall, 2012.

“Four Menus,” *Brevity* Issue 25. Fall 2007.

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Faulkner, S. L. (2014). Bad Mom(my) Litany: Spanking cultural myths of middle-class motherhood. *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies*, 14(2), 138–146. doi:10.1177/1532708613512270

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“To be a person is to have a story to tell.”
– Isak Dinesen

WRITING CONSIDERATIONS

(Writing is)

WRITING IS

Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard. (Zinsser, 2006, p. 8)

Our goals with this book are to provide a map into the art of writing the personal, to acknowledge that writing is work that requires practice and focus on craft, but that paying attention to and practicing the craft makes us better writers. Attention to craft fosters trust in the process of writing, and perhaps even enjoyment and catching that writing high. You may find writing to be hard work. You may consider writing easy and revision difficult and prefer a different metaphor than work for the writing process. You may decide to focus on the art of writing. Sandra finds writing makes her miserable and not writing makes her miserable. Sheila sometimes wishes she could trade her computer for a brick oven, and when asked what she mosts wants on her birthday, will answer, “a full day to write.” However, we believe in learning and practicing writing as a craft. This belief has not made writing easier, but considering craft as fundamental allows us to sustain our writing and the ephemeral vision of writing as art. We may even learn to write ourselves out of the misery metaphor; to bake up language and stories as compelling as warm bread. We invite you to work and dream along with us as we map out the trajectories and landscapes of writing the personal.

To help us accomplish our goals, we use this chapter to set up important considerations for those wanting to write the personal. We begin our work with a brief introduction of what “writing the personal” means and the labels and forms of personal writing. Then we move on to a general discussion of the art and craft of personal writing. We introduce the topics of writing goals, structure, voice, process, ethics, and research with a focus

on writing decisions based on audience (see Table 2). At the end of every chapter, we provide writing exercises and considerations to get and keep you writing.

Labels and Forms of Writing the Personal

What does writing the personal mean? What makes something personal? We think of the personal as akin to self-disclosure; private information about the self that another can not discern from your nonverbal cues – disclosures about what you really feel about family members, your work, politics, and your neighbors (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003). Do I write about my affair? What about shameful experiences of sexually transmitted infections? Do I tell about a sexual assault? What makes information personal is that it touches core areas of our identities, it makes us feel vulnerable, it has the potential to benefit and harm our relationships. We decide whether to tell others private information based on our motivations, gender, cultural background, and a risk-benefit analysis (Petronio, 2002). We ask questions – verbalized, written, and silent – about what revealing private information will cost us and our relationships. What will we gain by revealing or concealing private information? On one hand, revealing personal information may heal the wounds of relating and increase rewards and overall relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, revealing personal information may cost us through stigma, loss of face, and role and relationship risks. If, for instance, you write about being ambivalent about motherhood, you risk condemnation and evaluations of being a crappy mother. You may also receive support for your views and gain a deeper appreciation and self-awareness of what motherhood means to you. Likewise, if you write about your difficult relationship with your dead father, the one who family members have idealized, you risk being labelled disrespectful, ungrateful, or worse. On the other hand, writing through difficult emotions can make it easier to be honest in your writing and in your relationships (see Chapter 5 on ethics and personal writing).

You may decide that writing about the personal and disclosing is important for your mental health, your relationships, and your work. You could write about personal information because you want to get emotional support, you need to understand a particular experience, and you need to write your way to a new story (Poulus, 2008).

Once you make a decision about writing the personal, you may need to label this writing (see Table 1). At times we need labels when we are deciding

Table 1. Labels for personal writing

<i>Label</i>	<i>Tradition</i>
Autoethnography	Anthropology
Autobiography/Biography	English/Literature
Collage/Bricolage	Cultural Studies
Creative nonfiction/personal narrative/memoir	Journalism/Literature
Epistolary (diary/journal/letter writing)	Literature
Poetry (lyric, narrative, experimental)	English/Literature

what to do with our writing and with what writers and bodies of literature we want to converse.

What label you choose for your writing depends on what you want to do with the work—publish in a specific outlet, keep private, or show a few others. The label may be important for placing your work and often determines how it will be evaluated. Though, you may find that your work is a hybrid of personal writing forms. You may resist the labels and choose instead to talk about your writing process and goals.

Writing Decisions

Where does one begin a writing project focused on the self? Or perhaps a better question for you to consider is: What questions do I need to ask before, during, and after my writing project? We offer a list of questions that highlight important topics for your consideration when writing personal stories in Table 2. You may ask yourself these questions during all stages of the writing process from conceptualization to writing to editing to review and reflection. You may also notice that this is a good preview of the book’s contents.

Writing Stories

At this point in our introduction, we recognize the irony of not having listed time as a consideration in the writing process; especially given the difficulty we both found wrestling time from our lives to write this book. *How do you make time to write?* This may be the fundamental question as you consider writing the personal. You may have an established writing habit already. You may be motivated to write, but you can’t find space in your already scheduled

Table 2. Considerations for writing the personal

<i>Considerations</i>	<i>Questions</i>
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your goals with the writing? • What affect/effect do you desire to achieve? • What do you want your piece to do?
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is your audience? Whom do you want to reach? • Where do you want to place this piece? • What do you want the audience to do, feel, and believe after experiencing your work?
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you able to write this piece now? • Should you write this piece? • Who is implicated in the writing? • How can you structure this piece to be ethical? • How can you write about friends and family ethically? • Can you use a writing form that allows for both veracity and privacy?
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What structure will work: braided narrative, lyric, poetic, fragmented narrative, collage, personal narrative? • What label best fits your work: autoethnography, autobiography, memoir, personal narrative? • Should you include research in your writing? • How can you include research in your writing to achieve your purpose and establish veracity? • How can you incorporate research and maintain the aesthetic value of the work? • How can you use structure to achieve your goals?
Craft	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you paid attention to the line, the music in the piece, form, aesthetics, voice, narrative truth? • How is your voice working in the piece?
Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should your piece be evaluated? • How will you know if you have achieved your goal(s) for the piece?

day to write. We also understand that you may need an explicit discussion of why Sheila and Sandra? Why are these women writing this book on writing? You may wonder what kind of authority we have on the subject, why Sense Publishers and Patricia Leavy, the series editor of *Teaching Writing*, cut us a contract.

We offer the formal cover-jacket biographies:

Sheila Squillante (MFA, The Pennsylvania State University) is a poet and essayist living in Pittsburgh. She is the author of the poetry collection, *Beautiful Nerve* (Tiny Hardcore Press, 2015), as well three chapbooks of poetry: *In This Dream of My Father* (Seven Kitchens, 2014), *Women Who Pawn Their Jewelry* (Finishing Line Press, 2012) and *A Woman Traces the Shoreline* (Dancing Girl Press, 2011). She has published work widely in print and online journals like *Brevity*, *The Rumpus*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Prairie Schooner*, *MiPoesias*, *Phoebe*, *Cream City Review*, *TYPO*, *Quarterly West*, *Literary Mama*, *South Dakota Review* and elsewhere. She is associate director of the MFA program and assistant professor of English at Chatham University.

Sandra L. Faulkner (Ph.D., The Pennsylvania State University) is an Associate Professor of Communication and Director of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Bowling Green State University. Her interests include qualitative methodology, poetic inquiry, and the relationships between culture, identities, and sexuality in close relationships. She has published over 20 articles in journals such as *Qualitative Health Research*, and *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, and her books *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse* and *Inside Relationships: A Creative Casebook on Relational Communication* with Left Coast Press. Her poetry memoir, *Knit Four, Frog One*, was published in 2014 (Sense Publishers). Her poetry appears in places such as *Gravel*, *Literary Mama*, *TAB*, and *damselfly*. She authored three chapbooks, *Hello Kitty Goes to College* (Dancing Girl Press, 2012), *Knit Four, Make One* (Kattywompus, 2015), and *Postkarten aus Deutschland* (Liminalities).

As you can see, we have published and made careers with our writing. However, what these formal renderings of our qualifications leave out is the back-story of how we juggle life and writing, how we manage to teach

and learn about the writing process, and the spirit behind a list of writing considerations, how we get things done, published, how we think about audience, what we don't write. In short, we do not want to leave out our writing stories, how we teach writing through charts and by example. Laurel Richardson (1997) talks about writing stories as the story behind the work – the meta-writing – and at times, the more interesting part of our work.

In this spirit, we share our challenges of finding writing time and our struggles to teach about writing the personal. Sandra presents an interview she did for an online group of Mother Writers (www.motherwriters.com). She has written in other spaces about her ambivalence about the mother role, the difficulty with adjusting to and integrating the role mother into her list of identities, and her interrogation of middle-class expectations of mothering (Faulkner, 2012a, 2014a, 2014b). How she finds the time to write and what it means to be a (mother)writer is the writing story we present here. Making writing a habit and part of your daily practice is key for living a writing life (Rose, 1990). Thus, we note the centrality of time in writing.

Mother Writers

Sandra Faulkner

June 22, 2015

1. *Describe your life in the context of writing, parenting and your responsibilities.*

I have a five-year-old daughter who wonders why I am always working on my computer. Being an academic mother who writes means that I am *always* at the computer, writing, editing, reading student work, and answering email. Except during dinner and bedtime. That time is marked as non-work time, though it can be difficult to enforce my own rule because of the tendency for blurred boundaries between academic and non-academic time, between what constitutes academic work and partner and mothering work.

I love living in a college town where I can walk to work, my daughter's school, and the local shops. It makes commuting a non-issue, and I get lots of walking and running time to work out writing ideas and revisions in my head.

Figure 1. How do you make time to write?

2. *How do you integrate creative writing into your parenting/work responsibilities?*

I have managed to meld my creative writing into my work writing, so that they are the same. The culmination of this marriage is my first full-length book of poetry, *Family Stories, Poetry, and Women's Work: Knit Four; Frog One*, that was just published by an academic press. I present this as social science + poetry = poetic social science.

There are lots of poems co-authored with my daughter in the collection.

Because I am a relational scholar, writing and researching about relationships is what I do. I feel lucky to get paid to read and write and teach. And, I am happy to be able to incorporate this critique of the mother role into my work life, too.

Having a partner who does more than half of the hefty emotional and physical labor of raising our daughter means I have the space to write. I do find that I must get up before the household wakes to write. I do not have the energy to do it at night, and I need the solitude and clear mind of early morning. The dog gets up with me and sits beside me, so I guess I am not exactly writing solo.

3. *What's awesome about being a mother who writes?*

My daughter knows that I write. She is learning to love language, too. I am better at writing about my emotions and challenges than talking about them, so writing has been important for me to wrestle with the mother role and ambivalence about parenting. Writing makes me a better mother.

4. *What's challenging about it?*

Finding time to write in solitude is the most challenging because that is not possible most of the day. I have to get up before my child and partner, which means I have to go to bed early. Shutting off the I-should-be-doing-anything-else-but-writing noise is also difficult. Being willing to risk failure is also hard to endure given that for me, parenting is a back and forth extreme dialectic between feeling competent and feeling like an utter failure.

5. *What's your advice for other mothers who write?*

Find a support group of other women who write, or at the least one other writer. I started a meet-up group to get me in the habit of finishing writing projects. I also set deadlines (e.g., submission deadlines, writing group deadlines) because they help me complete projects. If you don't have time to meet in person, google hangouts are a good way to talk writing. You could also start a running or hiking group that talks writing; the more things you can do at once that help your writing, the better.

6. *What else would you like to add on this subject?*

Be kind to yourself. Be impatient with the difficulty of finding time to write and don't quit.

Figure 1. (Continued)

Teaching Writing

Sheila's writing story is best captured in how she teaches writing. You will notice that we spend much time in this book on teaching through example using our own writing to capture our philosophy of writing practice and craft as doing.

Both/And: Notes Toward a Multi-Genre Craft Class

I've just gotten my course assignment for the fall: The Craft of Creative Writing, which I am to teach as a multi-genre class, including both poetry and creative nonfiction.

At first blush, this seems apt. I am, according to my CV, *both poet and* essayist.

If it appears in print, does that mean it's true?

[wink]

Am I truly equipped to teach the basics of both? My department clearly thinks I am though my academic background—my degree – is in poetry. My book and chapbook publications are in poetry. I had never written an

Figure 2. On using asterisks like bread crumbs

extended piece of prose anything until graduate school where I learned to write memoir. My first teacher was a Famous Formidable Memoirist (FFM ©) who taught as a VAP in my MFA program for a short time.

The learning environment was both bristling and rigorous.

I have to pause here and tell you something: I chose those two words—*bristling* and *rigorous*—for a reason. I could have said any number of other words to get at what I mean.

But I didn't because it wouldn't have *sounded* as good.

See? I'm a poet. I can't help it.

*

I have to figure out how to approach this class. First step, Facebook, naturally. So I prostrate myself to the hive, who buzzes enthusiastically, delivering texts that can be read as both/and. Interstitial. Prose poetry. Lyric essay. Maggie Nelson. Anne Carson. Charles Simic.

The hive has a brilliant glowing brain and wow, so much more experience than I (it feels like) with creative nonfiction. I am deluged and feel like drowning might be a good way to go.

*

I don't precisely know what I'm doing. I feel this way a lot as a writer. Maybe also as a person. Sometimes I feel tender toward that vulnerability.

I say, *I am a poet*. Or, *I am an essayist*.

My job is vulnerability.

But sometimes I feel like I'm drowning in it.

*

One of the things I learned first about writing memoir was that in order for my reader to trust me, I had to be honest both with and about myself:

If I'm going to teach, I need to better buzz around the hive.

Background doesn't much matter. Keep writing.

One of the first things I learned about writing poetry was that the individual word matters:

Figure 2. (Continued)

Maybe if I just call myself “writer?”

I could have said “overwhelmed” up there, but then you wouldn’t have seen the wave crest hugely behind me.

*

Do you see what I’m doing with these segments? I tend toward them these days. They mimic the way my brain buzzes and glows. Which is to say, associatively. I don’t expect the FFM would approve. I think she would demand more connective tissue. I’ve demanded as much of my own students. My colleagues and I talk about how students seem to want to write in experimental forms before they learn how to write a traditional narrative.

Like it’s a bad thing.

Maybe I think it is, too, but that could be because it’s how I began.

But then again, I’m forever telling my poets to “just write it” and stop worrying about narrative.

There are many kinds of narrative. Many ways to begin.

What does “traditional” mean?

*

Charles Simic once described his composition process like this:

My poems (in the beginning) are like a table on which one places interesting things one has found on one’s walk: a pebble, a rusty nail, a strangely-shaped root, a corner of a torn photograph, etc...where after months of looking at them and thinking about them daily, certain surprising relationships which hint at meanings appear.

So, juxtaposition. Parataxis. The friction and frisson between words, images, ideas.

The *hint* of meaning.

Oh, I like this very much.

Ask my students how many times I’ve trotted this one out to talk about composing not poems, but essays.

Figure 2. (Continued)

*

I don't precisely know where I'm going with this. I'm using asterisks like bread crumbs.

*

The FFM taught me that I had to know what I was writing toward before I began to write it. She insisted on wisdom. It was my job to be confident. She'd have had no patience for Simic's hinted meanings. Essentially she wanted a thesis statement:

When my domestic life was all chaos and crumble, my crappy food service job kept me focused and moving forward.

I wrote a thesis like that once.

When my memoir writing was all over the place, my thesis statement kept me focused and moving forward.

I still write like this sometimes.

*

I always pictured the wisdom I was writing toward as a sparkling, golden gem—maybe amber like at the end of “The Fourth State of Matter”, which I did not read in her class.

Imagine it glowing, dangling at the bottom of the light cord above your computer.

Pull to illuminate.

*

Amber as image.

Amber as metaphor.

Hey there, poet.

*

Beard's essay taught me braiding, though I didn't know it was called that at the time. Then, Brenda Miller taught me the word for it in “A Braided Heart: Shaping the Lyric Essay.” She also showed it to me—the word I use with students is “enacted”—on the page itself by describing teaching

Figure 2. (Continued)

the form to her own students. What a smart, beautiful essay that is! What a helpful piece of pedagogy!

*

I spent an hour the other day annotating Sei Shonagon's "Hateful Things." I'm a sucker for a good, chewy list and a take-no-shit female voice.

I did this because I've been considering including it in the nonfiction part of the class, and annotating helps me see the scaffolding so I can help the students scale it.

In poetry, I call this going "line-by-line."

Same difference.

Dig in.

*

I wouldn't call Shonagon's piece a memoir, though it does have the flashes of the insight and reflection the FFM would require:

A carriage passes with a nasty, creaking noise. Annoying to think that the passengers may not even be aware of this! If I am travelling in someone's carriage and I hear it creaking, I dislike not only the noise, but also the owner of the carriage.

I wouldn't call it a lyric essay, either, though the poet in me was delighted to find so many moments of pure music:

forever spreading out the front /of their hunting costume/or even tucking it up /under their knees

Note the line breaks, mine.

*

From a 10th century text we can learn about structure (she begins and ends with a leave-taking); about juxtaposition (a sneezing person sits up against dancing fleas); about perspective (some sections are as intimate as a snore, others zoom up and out to give us a crow's eye view); about motif (the way noises—a dog's bark, a baby's cry, a creaky carriage – interrupt almost-moments); about the recurrence of characters ("A man who has nothing in particular to recommend him," shows up twice) and

Figure 2. (Continued)

about what I think is one of the hardest things to teach in both poetry and creative nonfiction: ambiguity.

Shonagon’s speaker (who is most of the time “One,” but some of the time “I,”) notes how hateful she finds it when a lover “sings the praises of some woman he used to know” while he is in her presence. “Very annoying,” declares One. That confident voice all the way through.

But then, the parenthetical, the moment of honesty with and about herself:
(Yet sometimes I find that it is not as unpleasant as all that.)

*

Both annoyed *and* tantalized.

Both hateful *and* pleasant.

Both tradition *and* experiment.

Both sentence *and* line.

Both poet *and* essayist.

See you next fall.

Sheila Squillante

<http://www.essaydaily.org/2015/05/sheila-squillante-on-using-asterisks.html>

Figure 2. (Continued)

What our stories demonstrate is the centrality of time, flexibility, and openness to the writing process and your instincts about writing. The questions we urge you to answer right now:

- How do I make writing a habit?
- How will I overcome writing obstacles?
- How will I make time to write?

We wrote this book to dialogue about these fundamental questions.
See y’all next chapter.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR YOUR WRITING PRACTICE

1. Imagine you are being interviewed about your writing. Answer the following questions about time and writing that we posed in this chapter:

How do I make writing a habit?

How will I overcome writing obstacles? For example, finding time, balancing work and family obligations, crafting a first draft without my inner critic?

How will I make time to write?

What time of day is best for me to write?

What things and conditions do I need to write? An espresso shot, two pencils, music?

Post the answers to your questions in a prominent place in your writing area.

2. Use the considerations for writing the personal we list in Table 2 to conceptualize a writing project. You may wish to select one consideration to begin.
3. Writing Exercise: Commit to a fifteen-minute block of writing time for a week. Make it the same time and place every day (e.g., lunch, before bed, before breakfast, at the coffee shop, your back porch). During that time begin with the prompt “I remember...” If you get stuck, begin with the prompt “I don’t remember...” Don’t worry about full sentences or clear narrative. Fill the page.