

On Craft and the Writing Life: A Reading List from the Faculty of The Rainier Writing Workshop

Rick Barot:

Heather McHugh, *Broken English*

Essays that brilliantly explore the geniuses, conundrums, and questions generated by poetry: Dickinson's dashes, Celan's dark mysteries, lessons from the Yoruba, and more.

James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line*

A concise and practical meditation on the poetic line. Longenbach's exploration of the "annotated" line and the "parsed" line is wonderfully insightful.

Ellen Bryant Voigt, *The Flexible Lyric; The Art of Syntax*

Whether writing on syntax, Shakespeare's sonnets, adjectives in Plath, image in Bishop, or the difference between structure and form, Voigt brings great rigor and generosity to it all.

Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry*

A terrific primer on all the ways that sound is profoundly consequential to the effect that a poem has on a reader. Pinsky also gets high marks for his accessibility.

Stephen Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order; Next Word, Better Word*

These two books are a whole education in writing poems and being a poet. Some essays go very deep into craft, others beautifully articulate the values that poetry sustains.

Helen Vendler, *Coming of Age as a Poet; The Breaking of Style*

Maybe there's a problematic air around Vendler these days, but she is inarguably a master of the close reading, whether it's Dickinson or Graham or Yeats—every poet she looks into, in fact.

Allen Grossman and Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer*

The long-going conversation between Grossman and Halliday is probably as high-minded as you can get in regards to poetry's origins, its uses, its place in the world now.

Marianne Boruch, *Poetry's Old Air*; Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*; Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason*; W.S. Di Piero, *Shooting the Works*; Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers*; Zbigniew Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*; Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey*; Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*

A happy stack of prose by poets—not craft books per se, but books that immerse you in the thinking and writing that poets can engage in when they're away from writing poems.

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Suzanne Berne

E.M. Forster, *The Art of the Novel*

Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*

Edith Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*

Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer*

John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*

Sven Birkerts, *Then Again: The Art of Time in Memoir*

James Wood, *How Fiction Works*

Wallace Stegner, *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*

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David Biespiel:

James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*

Describes the necessity of failure in the creative process.

John Fowles, *A Tree*

Dramatizes the imagination's struggle between yield and the wild.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

A study of the house as a repository for imaginative concentration.

Walt Whitman, "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*"

Articulates an argument about the struggle a poet has to shuttle between solitude and engagement.

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Barrie Jean Borich:

Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir*

Writing the Memoir is a clear and direct guide to both the breadth and craft of contemporary memoir writing. The craft instruction text clearly explicates basic and necessary skills, such as the difference between scene, summary, and reflection in narrative forms (usefully, for instance, renaming reflection "musing," terminology that really helps students comprehend the role of reflection in all nonfiction prose). In addition, her section discussing the need for the memoirist

to determine the narrative NOW of the story is illuminating to students seeking to determine where to place their narration in relation to time and memory. And finally Barrington does laudable work acknowledging women's memoir, first by accurately linking some of the contemporary subgenre to Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being* and thereafter by referencing a gender-and-sexual-identity-balanced array of texts as illustration all the way through.

Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard, Editors, *Writing Creative Nonfiction*

This was one of the first creative nonfiction teaching anthologies and includes both creative nonfiction works and craft essays. Some of the craft essays collected here— pieces on nonfiction positionality, the narrator as character, and sustaining the work of book-length projects, as well as Brenda Miller's famous introduction to the braided essay —are essential discussions that have not been reprinted in newer anthologies. This is also the only craft anthology that discusses biography writing. This book might be out of print but used copies are widely available.

Bich Minh Nguyen and Porter Shreve, Editors, *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye*

This anthology is not the most recent but the volume includes a wide array of authors whose work helped form our current understanding of nonfiction, and is to this day one of the most culturally diverse collections available.

Sven Birkerts, *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then Again*

This book—part of the Graywolf craft series— explores the difficult and central problem of time in memoir, and is particularly strong in the area of how and where to begin a book-length narrative.

Becky Bradway and Douglass Hesse, *Creating Nonfiction*

A strong contemporary teaching anthology that stands out in its inclusion of both graphic memoir and a category the editors call "city writing."

Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction

This fascinating array of essays about the fluidity of nonfiction form includes works by many well-known contemporary nonfiction writers, and the accompanying web site features play and experiment from an even wider array of authors.

Other important texts for nonfiction writers are *Tell It Slant* (particularly for the breadth of forms discussed) and *The Situation and the Story* (on finding an essay or memoir's deep subject) both of which are described in greater depth in other sections of this book list.

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Fleda Brown:

Ellen Bryant Voigt, *The Flexible Lyric*

Sydney Lea, *A Hundred Himalayas: Essays on Life and Literature*

Dinty Moore, *The Mindful Writer*

Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

Marianne Boruch, *Poetry's Old Air*

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Kevin Clark:

Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion*

Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words*

Willa Cather, *On Writing*

Stephen Corey and Warren Slesinger, Editors, *Spreading the Word: Editors on Poetry*

Alice Fulton, *Feeling as a Foreign Language: The Good Strangeness of Poetry*

Steve Kowitz, *In the Palm of your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*

Lucia Perillo, *I've Heard the Vultures Singing: Field Notes on Poetry, Illness, and Nature*

Kevin Clark, *The Mind's Eye: A Guide to Writing Poetry*

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Stephen Corey:

Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*

Notably practical and poetic at once, and meant for all writers. On page one, in "Writing off the Subject," he says, "At all times, keep your crap detector on. If I say something that helps, good. If what I say is of no help, let it go. Don't start arguments. They are futile and take us away from our purpose. As Yeats noted, your important arguments are with yourself. If you don't agree with me, don't listen. Think about something else." At around the midpoint of the collection, in "Ci Vediamo," he begins with "I'll tell you some stories. I won't press the point, but I hope these stories demonstrate some of the problems involved in writing." At book's end, speaking of teaching and other day jobs, he concludes that "no job accounts for the impulse to find and order those bits and pieces of yourself that can come out only in the most unguarded moments, in the wildest, most primitive phrases we shout alone at the mirror. And no job modifies that impulse or destroys it."

E. M. Forster, *The Art of the Novel*

Sometimes the classics are classic for good reason. From Forster's famous "bounce the reader into it" onward, this compact book reminds us all—not just novelists—of the basics we need to know and be able to practice before we can purport to press back against them.

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Oliver de la Paz:

Stuart Frieber and David Young, *Models of the Universe: An Anthology of the Prose Poem*

I use this book frequently in my prose poem classes because of its international flavor. My biggest issue with the text is that it's very male and I need to supplement the book with women who are practitioners of prose poetry.

David Lehman, *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*

I use this book in my prose poem classes as well. It's a lot more inclusive, with a greater diversity of writers, but it doesn't quite hit the right contextual notes in terms of the history of the form. Still, it's a solid anthology.

Joshua Marie Wilkinson, Editor, *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*

A number of contemporary poets participated in this anthology and provided fascinating exercises for classrooms as well as opinions, thoughts, and reflections on poetry. It's a very eclectic collection of writers which makes it all the more fascinating.

Robert Skelton, *The Shapes of our Singing*

If you can get a copy, fantastic. It's out of print now since EWU Press has shuttered. What makes this an excellent book is its exhaustive number of forms organized according to country/region of origin. My only quarrel with the book (and it's a big one) is that Robin Skelton contributed *all* the poems in the book.

Stacey Lynn Brown and Oliver de la Paz, Editors, *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Persona Poetry*

Though I am a co-editor, I do use it for courses I teach and it's also instructive on how to use persona as a writing strategy to tackle historical ideas, politically touchy topics, and family dirt. The book categorizes different authors' attempts at personas in history, pop culture, religion, myth, and other categories.

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Greg Glazner:

Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town*

In his humble, accessible, and humorous style, Hugo suggests that the sounds of words and the ambiguity of landscape can serve as vehicles for letting surprise and psychological richness into poems.

Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*

Especially strong in its considerations of rhythm, this tour-de-force ranges widely and delves deeply into many aspects of poetry.

Federico Garcia Lorca, "Theory and Play of the Duende"

This essay rids the mind of the illusion that powerful poetry can be made through craft alone. Essential reading.

Edward Hirsch, *The Demon and the Angel*

This book is the ideal companion piece to "Theory and Play of the Duende." It updates and expands upon Garcia Lorca's essay.

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Kevin Goodan:

Jane Hirshfield, *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry*

Jane Hirshfield examines the roles of hiddenness, uncertainty and surprise as they appear in poetry and other works of literature, in the life and psyche of the writer, and in the broader life of the culture as a whole.

Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*

With passion, wit, and good common sense, the celebrated poet Mary Oliver tells of the basic ways a poem is built—meter and rhyme, form and diction, sound and sense. Drawing on poems from Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and others, Oliver imparts an extraordinary amount of information in a remarkably short space.

Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing*

The Triggering Town is Hugo's classic collection of lectures, essays, and reflections, all "directed toward helping with that silly, absurd, maddening, futile, enormously rewarding activity: writing poems."

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Adrienne Harun:

Madison Smartt Bell, *Narrative Design*

Bell uses published stories by well-known writers and unpublished work by others to illustrate how to look at fiction as a writer, breaking down craft elements such as use of time, plot, dialogue, characterization, and design. This book offers an intense primer on close reading and the *craft* of writing.

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction*

Silber examines modes of time in a multitude of sources, clearing up a great deal of confusion along the way and also offering a helpful vocabulary and a wealth of possible avenues to explore when shaping and pacing a narrative line.

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext*

Like Silber's *Art of Time*, Baxter's slim volume on subtext elucidates an aspect of craft that's often misused or misunderstood or overlooked altogether.

Charles Baxter, *Burning Down the House; The Half-Known World*, Robert Boswell

Reading these essays by Baxter and Boswell is akin to attending the best of craft lectures or reading alongside a master. Brilliant and thought-provoking, they are the farthest thing from how-to guides, but offer a tremendous amount of insight into the writing and reading processes as well as much inspiration.

Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*

A classic argument for the value of rhetoric as well as illustration in storytelling – i.e., the need for “telling” as well as “showing.” Booth delves into forms of narration, emphasizing the ways in which a writer's vision makes use of a necessary rhetorical stance in concert with a more objective narrative distance.

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Lola Haskins:

Lola Haskins, *Not Feathers Yet: A Beginner's Guide to the Poetic Life*

A big sister book. Contains, besides chapters on getting started, revision, publishing, assembling a collection, and so on, practical advice on how to know a poem is finished, how to find a writing group, how to live with a non-writer, whether or not to formally study writing, and how to handle rejection. Lists of exercises accompany each chapter.

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Jim Heynen:

Josip Novakovich, *Fiction Writer's Workshop*

Complete with exercises to accompany discussions and examples on an array of topics of interest to the fiction writer: Setting, Character, Plot, Point of View, Dialogue, Scene, Voice, and more.

Alice LaPlante, *The Making of a Story: A Norton Guide to Creative Writing*

The jacket accurately describes this book as “a fresh and inspiring guide to the basics of creative writing—both fiction and creative nonfiction.” It not only clearly defines and explains all matters of the craft; it also includes excellent examples from the best in old and contemporary writing.

Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

After a fairly lengthy biographical section, King goes on to talk about the craft of writing. He covers some of the basics that are obvious to most, but he also covers such matters as style and

is quite old-fashioned in his insistence on “knowing the rules.” The book is worth reading just to get to the section where he writes about daily practice and productivity.

Sherry Ellis, *Now Write: Fiction Writing Exercises from Today's Best Writers and Teachers*

Examples from 87 writers who teach on topics such as Point of View, Character Development, Pacing, Setting, and Description. Each writer presents a writing prompt with sample response.

John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft For Young Writers*

“The next best thing to a graduate workshop in fiction writing. Drawing on examples from Homer to Kafka to Joyce Carol Oates, Gardner unravels the mysteries of plot, sentence structure, diction and point of view.” Book-of-the-Month-Club News.

Carol Bly, *Beyond the Writers' Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction*

The book challenges traditional workshop approaches of critical feedback in favor of empathic listening. She combines techniques from social work, psychotherapy and neuroscience with traditional techniques of fresh metaphor, salient dialogue, lively pace, and learning from literary models. Complete with what Bly calls “Elegant Exercises.”

Betsy Lerner, *The Forest for the Trees: An Editor's Advice to Writers*

Not really a book on craft, but—while this powerful and delightful book may not help the aspiring writer solve the day's writing problem--it will help any writer better understand the editing and publishing world and how best to deal with it.

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David Huddle:

Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*

Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*

Madison Smartt Bell, *Narrative Design*

Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*

David Huddle, *The Writing Habit*

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Dinah Lenney:

Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*

In this smart little book, Gornick makes an invaluable and initially surprising distinction: what is “the situation,” according to her, is what we generally think as the story. Whereas “the

story," by her definition, is the why and wherefore, the meaning and insight that elevate anecdote, and give the work shape and heft.

Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*

As entertaining as it is indispensable. Prose breaks down her book into eight sections—words; sentences; paragraphs; narration; character; dialogue; details; gesture—and so demonstrates (shows and tells!) how to pay attention to craft at no sacrifice to readerly enjoyment. Plus, her book list is wonderful.

James Lord, *A Giacometti Portrait*

This is an account of a period of time in which the writer sat for a portrait by the famous artist, his friend—the result is a book that has much to say about courage, endurance, craft, process, and what it means to be in for the long haul.

Judith Kitchen, Editor, *Short Takes: Brief Encounters with Contemporary Nonfiction*

The third volume of a wonderful series in which some 75 writers approach all manner of subject and theme: the only constraint is length. It's astounding (inspiring, too) how varied the pieces are in voice, style, and structure, and how, collected, they illuminate the possibilities of the genre.

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Rebecca McClanahan:

Robert Atwan, Editor, *The Best American Essays 6th College Edition*

Note: this is NOT one of the annual anthologies; it is one of the college editions. Excellent introductory material by Atwan as well as model essays. Highly teachable.

William Zinsser, Editor, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*

Nine writers (Ian Frazier, Annie Dillard, Frank McCourt, and others) discuss their writing processes and the hurdles and rewards of memoir writing.

Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*

Basic text for beginning to advanced memoirists; especially helpful is the appendix on legal considerations.

Philip Gerard, *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*

A great overview for all nonfiction writers, especially those just beginning in the genre.

Robin Hemley, *A Field Guide for Immersion Writing: Memoir, Journalism and Travel*

Examines the three major types of immersion writing, provides writing exercises, includes models for immersion writing as well as discussion on the legal and ethical issues surrounding the genre.

Phillip Lopate, Editor, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*

A generous sampling of the personal essay form, from Seneca and Montaigne through Didion and Rodriguez, with a comprehensive introduction by Lopate.

Dinty W. Moore, *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*

Includes instruction in the basic building blocks of the genre, narrative and alternate structures, process-oriented issues (revision, etc.) and a selection of model works integrated within the text.

Robert Root, *The Nonfictionist's Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction*

Explores the deepest questions about the genre and demonstrates how to shape nonfiction texts that aspire to the condition of art.

Robert L. Root, Jr. and Michael Steinberg, Editors, *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers Of/On Creative Nonfiction*

Divided into three sections: model essays, essays on the writing process, and articles/essays about the genre.

Sue William Silverman, *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*

Especially helpful to writers tackling difficult subjects and/or those subjects with potential to affect society at large. Demonstrates how writing is a powerful tool for confronting and understanding past events, and for providing shape and meaning to personal stories.

Mark Kramer and Norman Sims, Editors, *Literary Journalism*

Excellent sampling of some of the best American literary nonfiction writers, with helpful introductory material.

David Starkey, Editor, *Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief*

Filled with direct instruction, brief models of writing (nonfiction, poetry, fiction, and drama) and helpful exercises, this book is especially useful for those who teach students of various skill and interest levels.

Barbara Lounsberry and Gay Talese, Editors, *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality*

Focuses on literary journalism, with excellent examples from writers such as Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and Joseph Mitchell.

Michael Martone and Lex Williford, Editors, *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Work From 1970 to the Present*

Fifty works of creative nonfiction, ranging from memoir to journalism to hybrid to criticism.

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Kent Meyers:

Mark Doty, *The Art of Description*

A book that explores, in clear, elegant language the relationship between description of the exterior world and the evocation of interior states and the ways the two mirror each other. While focused on poetry, the book is great for fiction and non-fiction writers also.

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Brenda Miller:

Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, *Tell it Slant: Writing, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*

This comprehensive textbook covers the basics of powerful writing in creative nonfiction, as well as a survey of various forms and techniques. A website offers more resources, such as sample syllabi.

Brenda Miller and Holly J. Hughes, *The Pen and the Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World*

This book offers contemplative and writing practices to enable writing in everyday life.

Elizabeth Jarrett Andrew, *Writing the Sacred Journey: The Art and Practice of Spiritual Memoir*

This book offers concrete ways to approach writing about spirituality, religion, and the ineffable.

Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones*

This classic book on the fundamentals of writing practice remains one of the best inspirational texts on trusting the writing process.

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Scott Nadelson:

Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

The essay "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" included in this collection is particularly important to me, laying out the fundamental paradox of narrative—its need to be concrete, its aim to express the abstract.

Charles Baxter, *Burning Down the House*

All the essays in this collection are valuable, but in particular "Counterpointed Characterization" and "Stillness" are pieces I return to often.

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext*

I'm particularly compelled by Baxter's chapters on desire—"Digging the Subterranean"—and

inflection—“Inflection and the Breath of Life.” The latter explores how we can use the surface texture of fiction to suggest its depths, and the former what those depths contain.

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction*

Especially in a moment when the dramatic scene—the illusion of real-time—is valued above all other kinds of time in fiction, this book serves as an important reminder of all the ways a writer can manipulate time—compress it, slow it down, fragment it, distort it.

Frank O’Connor, *The Lonely Voice*

O’Connor’s chapters on Isaac Babel and Katherine Mansfield are strange and best to be avoided; but his introduction, along with his chapters on Gogol and Chekhov, are some of the sharpest assessments of the nature of the short story I’ve ever read.

Lee Upton, *Swallowing the Sea*

A book more about process than craft, it celebrates the ambition necessary to risk innovation. To be read anytime a writer is feeling nervous about making a leap.

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Ann Pancake:

Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction*

A fun-to-read yet practical and wise book that discusses elements of craft, fundamental story shapes, and “don’t do this”’s, while still respecting the wild and ineffable essence of fiction writing in a way the orderly rigidity of typical “craft” books often don’t.

John Gardner, *On Becoming a Novelist*

Drawing on twenty years of teaching experience and his own novel-writing process, Gardner offers plenty of nuts-and-bolts advice, but more importantly, explores vexing philosophical and psychological questions about being a novelist and writing novels that many of us face on the long-distance novel run. Gardner captures the heart of his book better than I can in his own preface, when he describes his intended reader: “an intensely serious beginning novelist who wants the strict truth (as I perceive it) for his life’s sake, so he can plan his days and years in ways beneficial to his art; avoid false paths of technique, theory, and attitude; and become as quickly and efficiently as possible a master of his craft.” A generous and original book, a work of art itself.

John Steinbeck, *Working Days: The Journals of Grapes of Wrath*

These are the journals that Steinbeck kept while he drafted *Grapes*, and they document in stunning and illuminating detail his own internal travails as he wrestled with this formidable project. The journals are an amazing resource for all kinds of reasons, not least as a reminder of how even a writer now considered “brilliant” battled relentless self-doubt as he drafted a novel now considered “classic.”

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Marjorie Sandor:

Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer*

FP makes us think differently about the questions we ask in workshop, and of our stories: she asks, "Who's the listener." This leads to a whole new way of thinking about craft.

Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art, and Artists*

These are the journals of a great symbolist painter, Redon. Reading outside one's own art form, and listening to the daily notes and lived experience of someone from another time and place is inspiring and refreshing and while not necessarily practical, makes me feel better about the day-to-day.

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Sherry Simpson:

Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*

Gornick examines the work of well-known essayists and memoirists to explore how nonfiction stories evolve and expand from the personal to the universal.

Susan Bell, *The Artful Edit: On the Practice of Editing Yourself*

A comprehensive but accessible examination of the philosophy, significance, and best practices of revision that draws on interviews with authors and examples from published work.

Stephen Koch, *The Modern Library Writer's Workshop: Guide to the Craft of Fiction*

A practical, thoughtful, and inspirational handbook that is as much about "why-to" as "how-to." Very useful for nonfiction writers, too.