

Getting Started with Nature Writing

By [Katherine Hauswirth](#)

FREE CONTENT Excerpt: Module 1 and Appendix 2

(see <http://fpnaturalist.com/on-nature-writing/> for instructions on purchasing entire e-book (19 pages, including space for exercises))

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Module 1: What Kind of Nature Writer Will You Be?

The desire to write, whatever the topic, is spurred by any number of motivations. Have you thought about why you are interested in nature writing, and what type of nature writing might suit you best?

Do you have a favorite nature writer, or a favorite piece of literature that's tied to nature? The way people define "nature writing" varies greatly, so how you personally define the term is something to consider, too. There's literature that's heavily scientific and fact-based, pieces and volumes with a more philosophical bent, poetry, memoir, environmental-/conservation-focused writing, adventure stories—the list goes on ad infinitum! This module mentions myriad examples of various approaches to nature writing, with links to several, but any thorough Internet search or stroll through the library will bring up more ideas to ponder.

You can hardly pick up any book in this vein without finding some allusion to Henry David Thoreau and his revered book [Walden](#). Some say that Walden is the gold standard for nature writers; others might argue that it's been overplayed. Whatever side you lean towards, it's worth looking at the book to see what all of the fuss is about. So many people relate to the first line—*"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."*—and also to the dream of living alone in the woods.

Thoreau's not the only one who went off on his own. Annie Dillard is another writer who went solo in nature, producing the much beloved *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Here's an [excerpt](#). And poet Mary Oliver, considered by many to be quite reclusive (although she argues [here](#) that she's just selective about those with whom she spends her time), very often writes about time in the natural world. Here's a [link to a handful of her poems](#).

Of course, nature can be found everywhere, and many make the point that WE are nature, too so there's no need to go to a hermitage to get the writing done. I've always admired Robert Finch's piece [Death of a Hornet](#), describing a scene right in his study. And large chunks of Charles Siebert's book [Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral](#) take place in Brooklyn—he doesn't draw a line between the nature "out there" and our everyday lives (here's a [link to the first chapter](#)).

Some nature books are entirely factual—the type often used for reference, like *The Outer Lands*, a natural history guide to a select group of islands in the Northeast, or the numerous Peterson field guides. Other books, and even niche publishers, specialize in describing nature for an audience of child readers. EB White, most famous for his children's tales, showed a tremendous respect for the natural world within fantastic stories about talking spiders and trumpet-playing swans. Many reads carry a message of conservation, like Rick Bass' *The Book of Yak*. And other authors—take for example Barbara Kingsolver and Wallace Stegner—weave a deep sense of natural places into both fiction and nonfiction beautifully. Nature reads as a character in its own right. Here's an excerpt from Stegner's *Wolf Willow* (written in 1961):

"The plain spreads southward, an ocean of wind-troubled grass and grain. It has its remembered textures: winter wheat heavily headed, scoured and shadowed as if schools of fish move in it; spring wheat with its young seed-rows as precise as combings in a boy's wet hair; gray-brown summer fallow with the weeds disked under; and grass, the marvelous curly prairie wool, tight to the earth's skin, straining the wind as the wheat does, but in its own way, secretly.

. . . The people are mystical, egocentric, perhaps poetic. . . but not humble. . . At noon the total sun pours on your single head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long. It was not prairie dwellers who invented the indifferent universe or impotent man. Puny you may feel there, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed. This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall."

Many writers choose an overriding central theme. John Elder's exploration and presentation of nature in *Reading the Mountains of Home* centers on a Robert Frost poem. Diane Ackerman's *Dawn Light: Dances with Cranes and Other Ways to Start the Day* explores many places, thoughts, and moods, but all having something to do with the theme of sunrise. Here are some small excerpts from *Dawn Light*, and you can see that nature plays a big role, but not the only role. As with many writers, the emphasis is on Ackerman's relationship, her perceptions related to things like the aspen tree:

...the silence of other paths one might have taken, the silence of recluse firmaments glimpsed through a telescope, the silence between one's hands cupped in prayer, the silence that water striders leave in their wake, the silence of a yolk-yellow sun running atop the horizon at dawn, the silence that we package into seconds and minutes, the minute silence of all packages... the silence of quaking aspen leaves viewed through a window, the silence of wandering thistledown, the silence of igneous rock, the silence of mirrors, the silence held by the b in the word doubt, the infinite silence reflected in all silences, the silence of an inactive volcano, the silence of the heart's stilled motor.

...Through a window I see quaking aspens fidgeting silently (the glass baffles noise) in a dumb show of shivering leaves. Surely my death will dawn like that: first the aspens will flicker; then the scene will fade to black and white; leaves will spin even faster in the wind, but silently, and I will have been.

There are many nature writing volumes that take the form of a diary or devotional, and these can double as daily doses of inspiration for the budding (or experienced, for that matter!) nature writer. Among them: [A Walk Through the Year](#) by Edwin Way Teale; [Twelve Moons of the Year](#) by Hal Borland, [Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady](#) by Edith Holden, and [Backyard Almanac: 365 Days of Northern Natural History](#) by Larry Weber (several are out of print or hard to find but worth the hunt!)

This introduction has thus far centered on books, and, of course, books are not the only format for nature writing. There's a bevy of fine periodicals that publish writing on nature, and not all of them can be defined as "nature publications"—sometimes the writing they showcase just happens to include writing on nature themes. To get some sense of what's out there, [here's a link](#) to a search on the free *Poets & Writers* magazine Website for literary publications that include nature/environmental-themed work.

Of course, one of the beauties of being a writer is that you don't need to confine yourself to one philosophy, one approach, one location, or one publication type. So the questions in the exercise below aren't meant to box you in; they are just a tool for exploring the general direction in which you might want to head when you start out on your nature-writing quest. It's also quite valuable to think about the reads in the nature genre that you have most enjoyed, and whether you are hoping to emulate them in some way.

Exercise

What nature writer(s) and/or works do you admire most? Why?

Write at least 3 sentences on what the “mission” of your nature writing will be. Do you want to alert people to environmental concerns? Create a pathway to spirituality? Simply foster appreciation or a sense of connection? Convey humor? Try to go farther than just stating what you want to do—why do you want to do it?

Do you prefer to write (circle one in each pair):

Poetry or prose?

Short or long form?

Fact or fiction?

Appreciation or activism?

For adults or children?

Blog or book?

Browse through the nature books you own, the various examples cited here in Module 1 as well as in Appendix 1, and/or other books/pieces you have downloaded, checked out from the library, or otherwise acquired. Find the one that appeals most to you, whether you have read it entirely or not, and circle (or make notes about) the parts of the piece or poem (or a section of the book) that appeal to you most.

Read back the areas you circled or took notes on—what is it about these words that resonated with you? Write 2 paragraphs: the first one should reflect on the detail offered and how it is presented, and why it appeals to you. The second should talk about whether and how you hope to emulate aspects of the piece, what you might do differently from the writer, and what you hope to accomplish if you keep at it. The accomplishment described should include what the finished format might be like (blog, book, magazine article, poem, etc) and what it would intend to give to the reader. If you feel ready, start a first draft, even if it’s just an initial stanza or a pair of sentences.

Appendix 2. Words of wisdom from Connecticut nature writers (brief interviews)

Part of my process in creating this book was reaching out to local nature writers I know and admire and asking them about their own favorite writers, their journey, and any advice they might want to share. I am deeply thankful for these contributions.

Judy Benson

Nature writing genre or specialty: Environmental journalism/essays

Bio: Health and environment reporter for The Day of New London, CT, since 2003. In 2006 named the New England Press Association Journalist of the Year, and have received numerous first place awards for health and environmental articles from the NEPA, the New England Newspaper and Press Association and the Connecticut chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Attended a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship at MIT and the New York Times Institute on Environmental Reporting. In 2015 earned a Master of Science degree in natural resources/water resources from the University of Connecticut. Chosen for the Connecticut Audubon Society's Artist in Residence program at Trail Wood in the summer of 2015. While most of my work is traditional news feature articles, I have recently branched out into creative nonfiction essays as well. Articles can be found at: www.theday.com; also Connecticut Woodlands magazine: <http://www.ctwoodlands.org/about-us/connecticut-woodlands>

Favorite nature writer(s) and nature writing work(s): Aldo Leopold, David Suzuki, Edwin Way Teale, Peter Matthiesen (*The Snow Leopard*)

Favorite nature-related quote and/or quote about writing, generally:

"...there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—"

-- From "Morning Poem" by Mary Oliver

First nature writing adventure and lessons learned: Among the first stories I did when I took over the environment beat for The Day was about a botanist from the Netherlands who came to southeastern Connecticut every summer to study salt marshes. Through the experience of following him on his field research, I not only learned firsthand about these unique and important ecosystems, but also experienced his passion for appreciating and preserving these transitional landscapes. Many times since then the interactions with experts who have devoted their careers to studying natural places have not only expanded my knowledge but also my conviction that sharing information and reflection about the environment with the public is an important public service.

Tips on successful nature writing: Often the best pieces are those that begin from an initial spark, develop gradually and change significantly through revision. Not every word is precious. Find thoughtful readers to give you feedback and be open to their suggestions. Carry a small notebook along during time in the outdoors, but don't feel as though you have to fill it every time – it's just a good habit so it's there when the moment comes along.

Ann Courcy

Nature writing genre or specialty: I write about getting children and families outside to connect with nature. I write book reviews, gardening tips, and stories about my experiences in nature with my own children and the children I teach.

Bio: I write, teach, and live with nature around me, it is my place. I write a blog called [Barking Frog Farm](#), where I write about my adventures and ideas about nature. Deep River is home to me, my husband Dave, and my 3 children, William, Aurora, and Stephen.

Favorite nature writer(s) and nature writing work(s): Peter Brown Hoffmeister - *Let Them Be Eaten by Bears*; Marci Chambers Cuff - *This Book Was Tree*.

Favorite nature-related quote and/or quote about writing, generally:

“I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more.”

—John Burroughs

“It is not half so important to know as to feel when introducing a young child to the natural world.”

—Rachel Carson

First nature writing adventure and lessons learned: This wasn't my first writing experience, but it was a significant one. I was writing a blog post: “Chase or Follow?” There is a peacock that lives on the ground of Schoolmates Preschool. One day he was walking by the playground, so the kids ran up to see him. He promptly ran away. As I started my blog post, I thought I was going to make a case against chasing things. But as I wrote the post it felt incomplete and extreme. I walked away from the piece, internally I wrestled with the idea of following vs chasing. Then all at once, I got my truth. After that, I sat down, remembered my truth, and finished the post. It's still one of my favorites, because it taught me to trust in the words, the timing, the processes, and my role as writer.

Tips on successful nature writing: I almost always have a camera with me. I take lots of pictures—colored leaves, soft green moss, tracks in mud, and kids on rocks, kids on trails, kids holding worms, kids outside enjoying nature. These images are my jumping off point. They start my writing.

David K. Leff

Nature writing genre or specialty: The confluence of nature and culture. The power of intense (transfigured) observation to enrich life and increase its vibrancy. Poetry, essays, non-fiction books.

Bio: David K. Leff is an essayist and poet and the author of three volumes of poetry, four nonfiction books and a novel in verse. He spent over a decade as deputy commissioner with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection responsible for fish, wildlife, parks, forests and natural resources. He is the town historian and town meeting moderator of Canton, Connecticut and served his home community for 26 years as a volunteer firefighter. www.davidkleff.com

Favorite nature writer(s) and nature writing work(s): Thoreau, John Burroughs, Robert Francis, William Cronon, John Stilgoe, Ted Kooser, William Least Heat Moon, Rennie McQuilkin, Heine, Donald Hall, Emerson, E.O. Wilson, Aldo Leopold, Edwin Way Teale, Rebecca Solnit, Robison Jeffers, Gary Snyder, etc, etc. Writers must read.

Favorite nature-related quote and/or quote about writing, generally:

“To the extent that each person can feel like a naturalist, the old excitement of the untrammelled world will be regained. I offer this as a formula of reenchantment to invigorate poetry and myth: mysterious and little known organisms live within walking distance of where you sit. Splendor awaits in minute proportions.”

—E. O. Wilson, *Biophilia*.

First nature writing adventure and lessons learned: At age 16, keeping a journal on an Appalachian Trail trip with troubled urban teens I learned that I wanted to describe the juxtaposition of personality and place and the landscapes I saw, but was inadequate to the task. The experience taught me that I had to work hard to preserve experience in words.

Tips on successful nature writing: Keep a pen and paper in your pocket wherever you go. Keep a journal. Look at those things no one else notices.

Eric D. Lehman

Nature writing genre or specialty: Travel and Nature

Bio: I am director of creative writing at the University of Bridgeport, a writer for *The Wayfarer* magazine, and the author of eleven books on history, travel, and nature. *Afoot in Connecticut: Journeys in Natural History* was nominated for the Pushcart Prize and *Becoming Tom Thumb: Charles Stratton, P. T. Barnum, and the Dawn of American Celebrity* won the Victorian Society of America's Henry Russell Hitchcock Award, and was chosen as one of the American Library Association's outstanding university press books of the year. You can find more about me at ericdlehman.org.

Favorite nature writer(s) and nature writing work(s): Peter Mattheissen, *The Snow Leopard*

Favorite nature-related quote and/or quote about writing, generally:

"Nature is not a place to visit. It is home."

—Gary Snyder

First nature writing adventure and lessons learned: The first time I wrote about nature was at age 10, when a school trip took me to the nearby Nolde Forest in Shillington, Pennsylvania. We walked on the trails and then were asked to write in our small notebooks and describe what we saw. Instead of describing the whole walk I began to write details about one rotten pine log, and what I imagined to be inside. Of course, I was told that I had done the assignment incorrectly. Later, as a teenager, I rebelled against this commentary and thought I was right to use my imagination. But now, as a travel and nature writer I know that I was partially wrong, that I should be accurate when describing nature, if accuracy is required. But the teacher was wrong when telling me not to focus on one detail. Sometimes, by zeroing on a log, or a wildflower, or a squirrel, we can discover a new way of seeing.

Tips on successful nature writing: I find that many beginning writers overdo the description that comes with forays into nature, making it too beautiful and elaborate. It is important not to forget the ugly parts – they provide contrast. The simple flower in the concrete crack is always more appealing.

About the author

Katherine Hauswirth's nature writing arises largely from long walks in Connecticut. Her work focuses on connection and contemplation inspired by the natural world. She has been published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Day*, *Orion online*, *Whole Life Times*, *Connecticut Woodlands*, *Shoreline Times*, *Seasons*, and *The Wayfarer*. Her blog, [First Person Naturalist](#), is a reflection on experiencing and learning about nature. Katherine's writing has been awarded with artist residencies at Trail Wood (Connecticut Audubon's Edwin Way Teale memorial sanctuary) and Acadia National Park in Maine. A native New Yorker, she moved to the Connecticut River Valley 20 years ago. She is increasingly enamored of her adopted hometown, Deep River, where she lives with her husband and son. Look for Katherine's debut, [The Book of Noticing: Collections and Connections on the Trail](#), spring 2017.