

**THIS GUIDE CONTAINS:**

- 3 lessons
- Links to essays and excerpts
- A list of Works Cited, with hyperlinks
- Additional Recommended Resources

**TIME FRAME:**

- 1-3 class sessions

**TARGET AGE:**

- Grades 10-12

**DISCIPLINE:**

- LANGUAGE ARTS

# A Study Guide from Chicago Humanities Festival 2009 SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

## NARRATIVE NON-FICTION with *Lawrence Weschler*



LAWRENCE "REN" WESCHLER is Artistic Director of the Chicago Humanities Festival. He was a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine for twenty years and is the author of twelve books including *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* for which he was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. He is currently Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at New York University, where he also directs the New York Institute for the Humanities.



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**FROM THE GET-GO . . .**  
**Weschler asserts that careful reading is the key to good writing.**

When advising teachers on teaching narrative non-fiction writing to their students, Ren Weschler focuses on the important role that reading plays for any student hoping to become a writer. Believing that good writing can't be taught, he recommends instead that teachers show good writing to their students in hopes that they will understand how to apply similar strategies to their own work. In terms of non-fiction, Weschler asserts that, because of the inevitable subjectivity of the writer, every non-fiction piece is in itself a fiction that uses form, voice, freedom, and irony to help convey its message. Weschler also underscores how, contrary to common sense, writers who write very specific details about their subject are able to have a more universal impact on their readers. He also emphasizes the importance of the pre-writing process—that ninety percent of a writer's time is spent honing the question. Once a writer figures out the essential goal of his or her piece, the actual writing becomes much easier, but proper time must be allotted to refining that goal if a writer is to be successful.

## **1. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS**

**PURPOSE:** This exercise emphasizes the marriage of structure and purpose—that good writing is more than having something interesting to say. Using great pieces of literature to demonstrate technique and style can be inspirational to students, especially if they view writing as accidental or unplanned.

- First and foremost, make sure that your students know how to “read aggressively”—to annotate and to take notes about what they are reading. Depending on the age and ability of your group, it may be helpful to read some pieces as a class to demonstrate. There are also some good texts that discuss this practice; for example, Francine Prose wrote a book called *Reading Like a Writer* that has helpful ideas for reading in this more critical way.
- The teacher should pick a text that s/he enjoys and in which s/he sees significant intention on the part of the author, specifically related to the structure of the piece. (“The Control of Nature: Los Angeles Against the Mountains” by John McPhee and “A Reporter at Large: Canal Street” by Ian Frazier—both in *The New Yorker*—are two of Weschler’s recommendations.)
- Have a discussion about the piece that walks your students through the choices that seem most significant. Be sure to take the time to talk about the effects of such choices. Why would an author choose to do that? How does it affect his or her purpose? Help them to look for patterns that the students could eventually categorize as the author’s style.

- Ask them to make similar choices in their writing. Choose writing assignments—both large and small in scale—that give students the opportunity to play around with similar techniques. For example, if you read a piece that has a powerful metaphor that is central to the writer’s argument, have them write pieces that explore similar uses of metaphors.
- Finally, give students time to peer edit their work, and focus that workshop time on highlighting and strengthening those choices that are similar to the original strategies used by the professional writers.

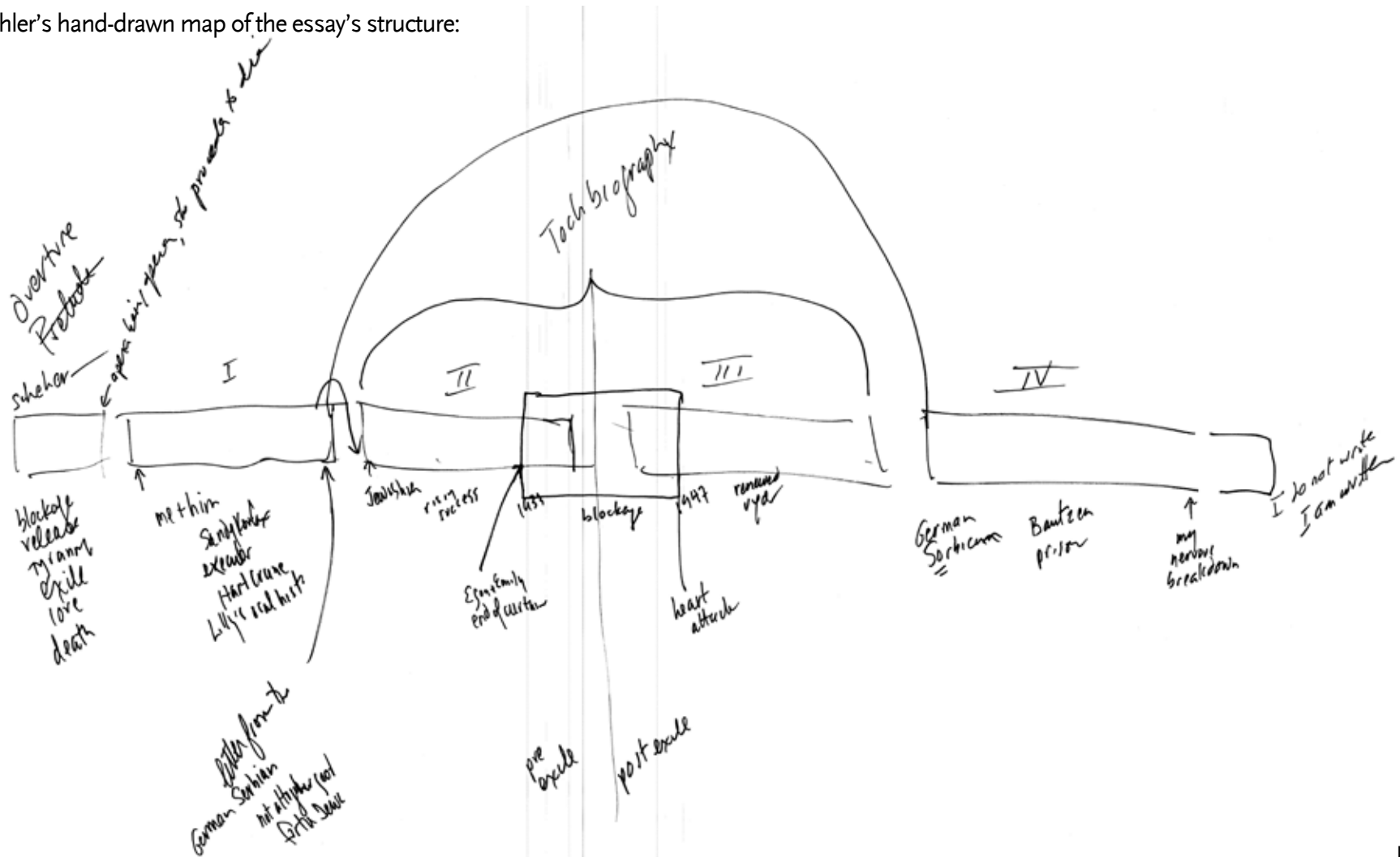
### **HELPFUL HINT**

This level of structural analysis can be very helpful to teachers whose students are stuck in the five-paragraph essay mold. If students can see the planning that went into a more sophisticated type of essay and understand how paragraphs form in a more organic manner, it can help them to write more sophisticated pieces.

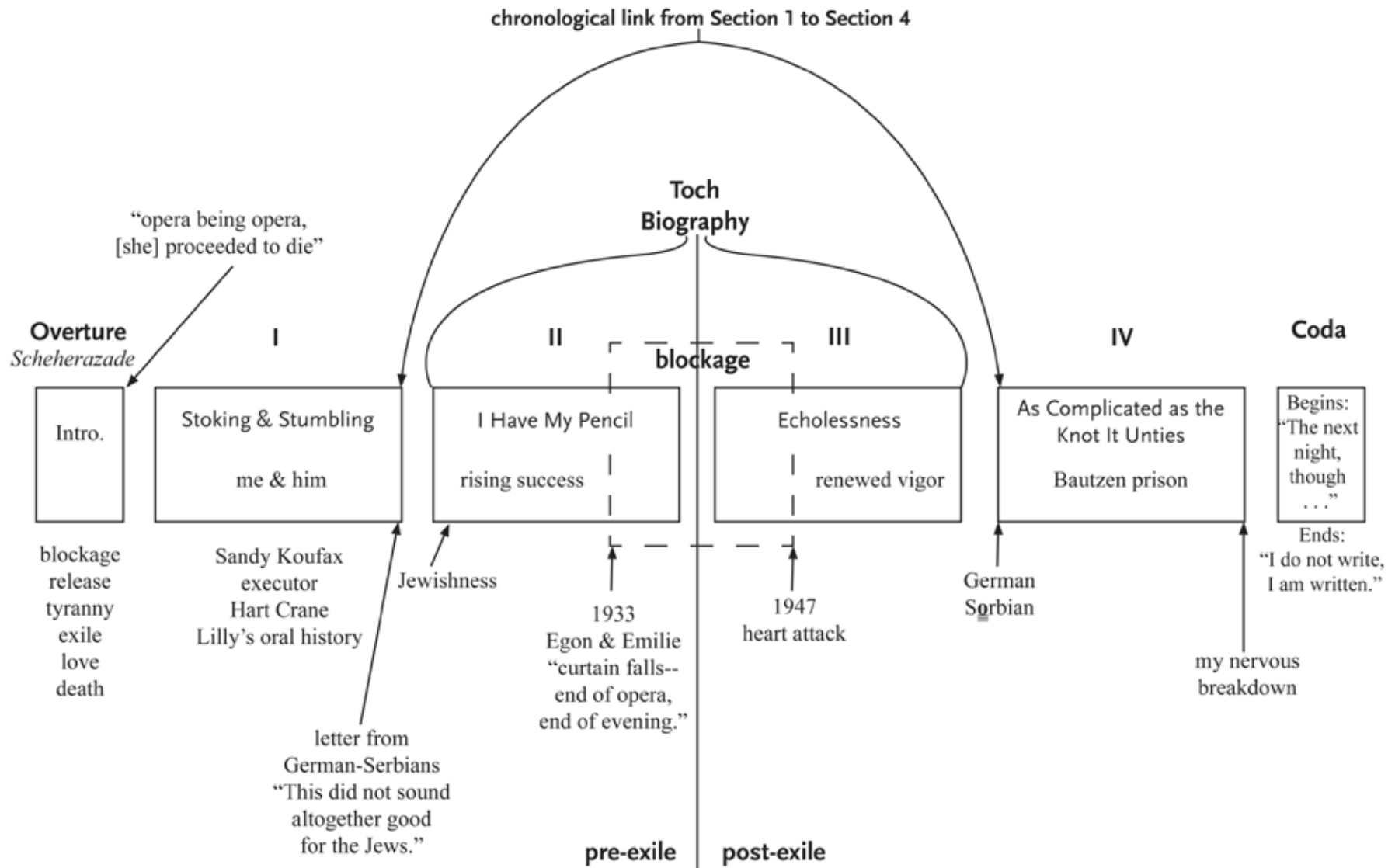
## 2. THE ARTIST AT WORK

In 1996, Weschler published an essay called “My Grandfather’s Last Tale.” (See citation below.) Weschler’s grandfather was Ernst Toch, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning composer who emigrated from Austria to California in 1934. Weschler tells the story of Toch’s work in Europe and the U.S. and embeds that history within this essay in which he recounts his trepidatious encounter with a theater company that is remounting one of Toch’s operas. Using several of the techniques mentioned above, Weschler outlines the structure of his essay. The structural metaphor is the symphony: an overture, four sections, and a coda. Each of these partitions has an analogous section in Weschler’s essay. Sections 2 and 3, the biography of Ernst Toch, serve as a purposeful (and, in this case, historical) digression. Further, these diagrams function as a literal “map” through time and the act of composition.

Weschler’s hand-drawn map of the essay’s structure:



Weschler's diagram translated for clarity. The section names are included here for those readers who may want to follow the map while reading the essay. Words in quotation marks are drawn directly from the text.



## TAKING IT FURTHER

Teachers may want to consider forms familiar to their students to help develop original structures for their essays.

For example, the pop song:

Verse #1  
Chorus  
Verse #2  
Chorus  
Bridge  
Verse #3  
Chorus

## SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS (SIT)

Each year, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers the Summer Institute for Teachers (SIT). This three-day workshop is designed for educators interested in personal and professional growth with lectures, workshops, and discussions from presenters who work in professional fields related to the yearly topic. The 2009 SIT theme was Creative Writing: Innovative Approaches to Writing & Reading in the Classroom. Presenters included cin salach on POETRY, Lawrence Weschler on NARRATIVE NON-FICTION, Stuart Flack on PLAYWRIGHTING, Josh Elder on GRAPHIC NOVELS, Natalie Moore on JOURNALISM, and Bayo Ojikutu on FICTION.

This lesson plan and comprehensive bibliography were developed by SIT's Master Teacher, Greg Wright, from Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, and CHF staff based on Mr. Weschler's presentation at the 2009 Summer Institute for Teachers.

## 3. WRITING THE PURPOSEFUL DIGRESSION

**PURPOSE:** Weschler provides this great metaphor: contrary to what makes immediate sense, water flows more smoothly through a rough pipe than a smooth one. A rough pipe breaks up the eddies that can slow down water flow in a smooth pipe. Similarly a story that is too smooth or too direct allows our minds to wander, while a story that at times seems to get off track requires our focus so that we can make sense of the digressions. This activity helps students to set up those digressions so that they avoid telling the story too quickly or too smoothly.

- Have students map out the main arc of the narrative they plan to write.
- Within that arc, have student make note of places where they could insert a digression.
- For each digression, have students answer three questions: What about the main storyline will make for a logical start to this digression? What event or idea will bring us out of the digression back into the main story? What connection either immediately or later on in the story can the digression add to the piece as a whole?
- Have the students remap their storyline to include the digressions for which they can answer all three questions. Emphasize that a good author knows how to cut aspects of a story that don't properly fit.
- Have students use this map to write their narrative.

## WORKS CITED

- Frazier, Ian. "A Reporter at Large: Canal Street." Available in *The New Yorker*, April 30, 1990, pp. 80-102; or in <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=1990-04-30#folio=088>; or *Gone to New York: Adventures in the City*. New York: Picador, 2006.
- MacPhee, John. "The Control of Nature: Los Angeles Against the Mountains." Available in *The New Yorker*, September 26, 1988. Pp. 45-78; or at <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=1988-09-26#folio=044> (This URL requires a subscription to *The New Yorker*. Note that an internet search for this essay may direct you to [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1988/09/26/1988\\_09\\_26\\_045\\_TNY\\_CARDS\\_000350203?currentPage=2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1988/09/26/1988_09_26_045_TNY_CARDS_000350203?currentPage=2), which contains only about 5% of the original Frazier essay.); or in *The Control of Nature*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1989, p. 189.
- Weschler, Lawrence. "My Grandfather's Last Tale." Available in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1996, pp. 86-106.; or at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/96dec/toch/weschler.htm>; or in *Vermeer in Bosnia: Cultural Comedies and Political Tragedies*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005. Pp. 205-233.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE** **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Frazier, Ian. *Great Plains*. New York: Picador, 1989.
- Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Sham-bala Publications, Inc., 1986, 2005.
- Lamott, Annie. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.
- Lerman, Liz and John Borstel. *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*. Available at: <http://www.danceexchange.org/performance/criticalresponse.html>
- Logue, Christopher, *War Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Logue, Christopher, *All Day Permanent Red*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. (Both Logue books are translations of Homer in slim volumes.)
- McSweeney's, especially Issue #31 (March 2009) on Form.

Postman, Neil, "Future Schlock" from *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education*. New York: First Vintage Books, 1992, pp. 162-174.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Teachers and Writers Collaborative:

[www.twc.org](http://www.twc.org)

Teachers & Writers Collaborative (T&W) seeks to educate the imagination by offering innovative creative writing programs for students and teachers, and by providing a variety of publications and resources to support learning through the literary arts.

Toch, Ernst. *The Shaping Forces of Music: An Inquiry into the Nature of Harmony, Melody, Counterpoint, and Form*. New York: Criterion Music Corp., 1948. OR New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977.

Weschler, Lawrence. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Weschler, Lawrence. *A Wanderer in the Perfect City: Selected Passion Pieces*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

## **ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL**

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, to enjoy, and to support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities—at a low ticket price—depends in part on the generosity of its committed and enthusiastic supporters. [www.chicagohumanities.org](http://www.chicagohumanities.org)