

## THE NEST WRITING EXERCISE

This is an exercise in structure. It can work with any type of writing, but the example below is from a personal narrative essay I wrote a few years back.

Here is how the exercise works:

Choose any piece of writing for which you'd like to explore the structure, order, and movement. Divide your story into sections. A section could be a paragraph, a scene, or a portion with a single focus. See if you can come up with at least five but not more than ten or twelve sections.

Each section shouldn't be too long (most will be less than a page).

Number the sections according to the order they appear in the writing. Then try to summarize in one sentence what happens in each section, what the main focus is, or what each section is about. Write those sentences down in the order that they follow in the story.

Take a look at the list of sentences as representing the structure of your piece the way you initially wrote it. What do you notice about this structure?

Now cut up these sentences so that the sentence describing each section is on its own piece of paper. Then play with the structure by moving some of the sections around and see what happens. (Note: while you could do this on the computer, I find that it has a greater impact if you actually print out the sentences and cut them up, so that you were working with actual pieces of paper you can physically move around.)

See if you can move some sections around, and what the effect might be. Perhaps some of the sections could be combined or cut? Maybe you've noticed something that needs to be added? Consider even dramatic changes, such as moving the last section to the beginning.

There are two goals to this exercise. The first is to examine the structure of your piece to see if there might be changes you could make in the order of the telling that might improve the writing. But the second goal is to simply play with structure: to see what happens to the effect of the piece overall when sections of it are moved around.

Below are sentences describing the nine sections of the personal narrative essay I wrote. It's about how my mother had an irrational fear of snakes, and an incident that happened when I was five or six.

Print the page with the nine sentences, cut them up, and play with the structure. See what you can come up with, and most importantly, consider how the piece might change if you change the structure.

1. This part tells how my mother had an irrational fear of snakes.
2. This part tells how my mother reacted when she saw a snake.
3. This part tells what I, as a child, thought about my mother's fear of snakes.
4. This part tells about the day my mother almost touched a snake she thought was a stick, that then slithered underneath the front steps of our house.
5. This part tells about how my father and grandfather decided to tear apart those steps to look for that snake.
6. This part tells how my father and grandfather tore apart those steps, and I, although too young to help, got to watch.
7. This part tells how my father and grandfather found a whole nest of snakes under the steps and killed them all.
8. This part tells how I loaded some bloody bits of snake onto my plastic shovel to carry in to the house and show my mother all the snakes were dead.
9. This part tells how my mother reacted when I brought her the shovel full of snake bits.