

# Pulling in to Branch Out: Using the Hermit Crab Technique in Your Writing

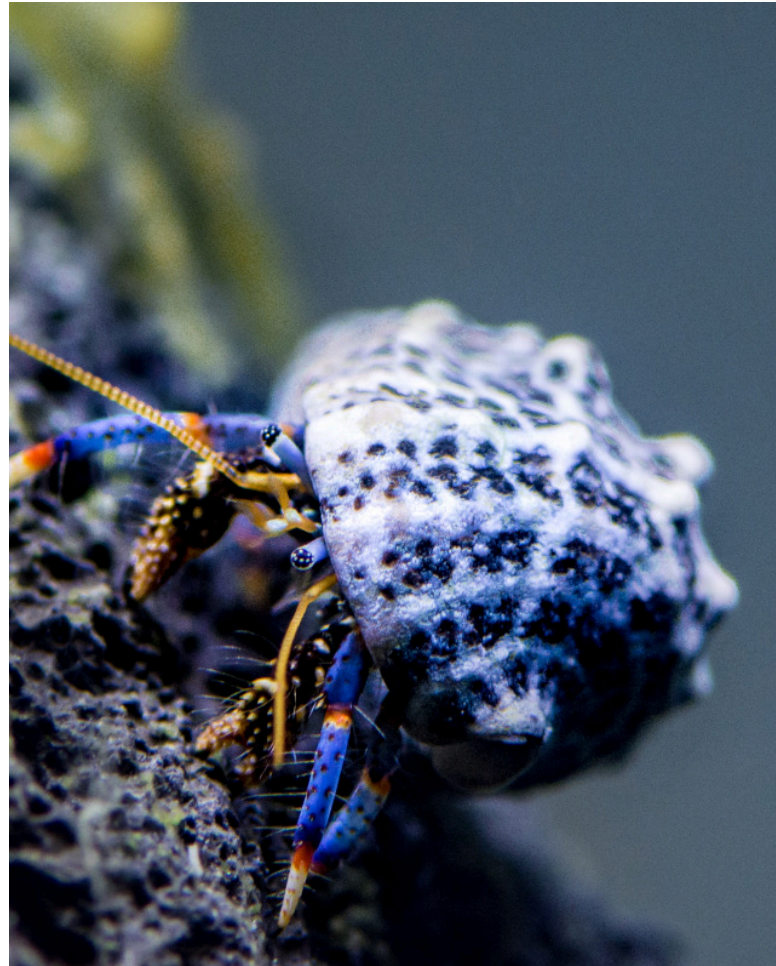
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# What is a Hermit Crab Essay?

- Term coined in Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*
- A form-precedes-content technique for writing
- Uses a recognizable form (along with its conventions) as a kind of shell for the nonfiction content (often memoir)



# Benefits of the Technique

- Provides critical distance between writer and content
- Sparks imagination
- Offers new perspective
- Restores feeling of writing as play or puzzle
- Deepens connection between form and content
- Allows for evolving communication technologies
- Suggests an “assembly” model of composition

- Inhabit the form with the voice of the form
- Ask yourself why you are using the form
- Think about how to make it not about you, but something bigger
- How do you end the thing? A lot of hermit crab essays just end, stop, without ever reaching something grander or crescendo.

**Brenda Miller's Advice for Writing Hermit Crab Essays**

# Some Examples

- Dinty Moore's "Son of Mr. Green Jeans: An Essay on Fatherhood."  
Abecedarian
- Laurie Easter's "Solving My Way to Grandma"  
Crossword Puzzle
- Amorak Huey's "Liner Notes for the Debut Album From the Band We Never Formed"  
Liner Notes
- Sonya Huber's "Shadow Syllabus"  
College Course Syllabus
- Sarah McColl's "Ok, Cupid"  
Dating Profile Q and A
- Bill Wasik's "What Would Journey Do?"  
Christian Daily Devotional

# From “What Would Journey Do?”

You’ve all seen the “W.W.J.D.” bracelets and T-shirts that remind teens and adults alike about a good rule of thumb for living a holy life. Many, however, ask themselves these questions: Does Journey know about my battles with the enemy of my soul? Do they understand the fierce temptations that challenge me? Do they have any clue what I am going through—the sorrow, the sadness, the depression that overflow my cup? I’ve been betrayed by a friend, a lover, someone very dear—does Journey understand?

I am here today to tell you that Journey DOES understand. Because, my friend, Journey has been there before.

# From “What Would Journey Do?”

*SITUATION ONE: Gregg and Heather have a picture-perfect marriage. The two are young and wildly successful—Heather is a bank-credit analyst, Gregg a top loafer salesman at a department store. But Heather’s job requires her to work long hours, and Gregg often feels neglected. If she really loves me, he wonders, why is she away from home so much?*

# From “What Would Journey Do?”

It’s the quintessential modern struggle: a two-income family, overworked, always pressed for time. You may wonder how Journey, who walked the Earth so long ago, could relate to a problem like this. But did you know that Journey faced precisely this same dilemma—*nearly twenty years ago?*

In *Frontiers 5*, 0:48, they tell the story of a musician, always on the road, and the woman he’s left behind: “They say that the road ain’t no place to start a family. But right down the line, it’s been you and me. And lovin’ a music man ain’t always what it’s supposed to be. Oh girl, you stand by me. I’m forever yours faithfully.”

*Faithfully.* It’s clear that Journey intends a double meaning to this term: faithfulness to the absent spouse, yes, but also faith in Journey—and their power to heal broken relationships.



# From “What Would Journey Do?”

- *Devotional meditation*: How secure is my faith in Journey? When is it strong? When does it falter?

# Let's Brainstorm

- Take a few minutes to write a list of forms—be as inclusive and wide-reaching as you can. If you'd like, I'd encourage you to add an idea or two to the chat area. (You might inspire someone else!)
- Choose one or two of the forms you listed (or someone else suggested) and think about story or content ideas that might pair well with those forms.

# Let's try it again

- Write a list of topics that you are afraid or reluctant to write about. (If it is very painful, just write down a word or phrase that reminds you what you were thinking about.)
- Pick a few of these topics and imagine fitting them into a formal “home.” Which forms might pair well with the content and offer you the “protection” offered by a hermit crab essay?

But Kristin, I don't want to  
write memoir.

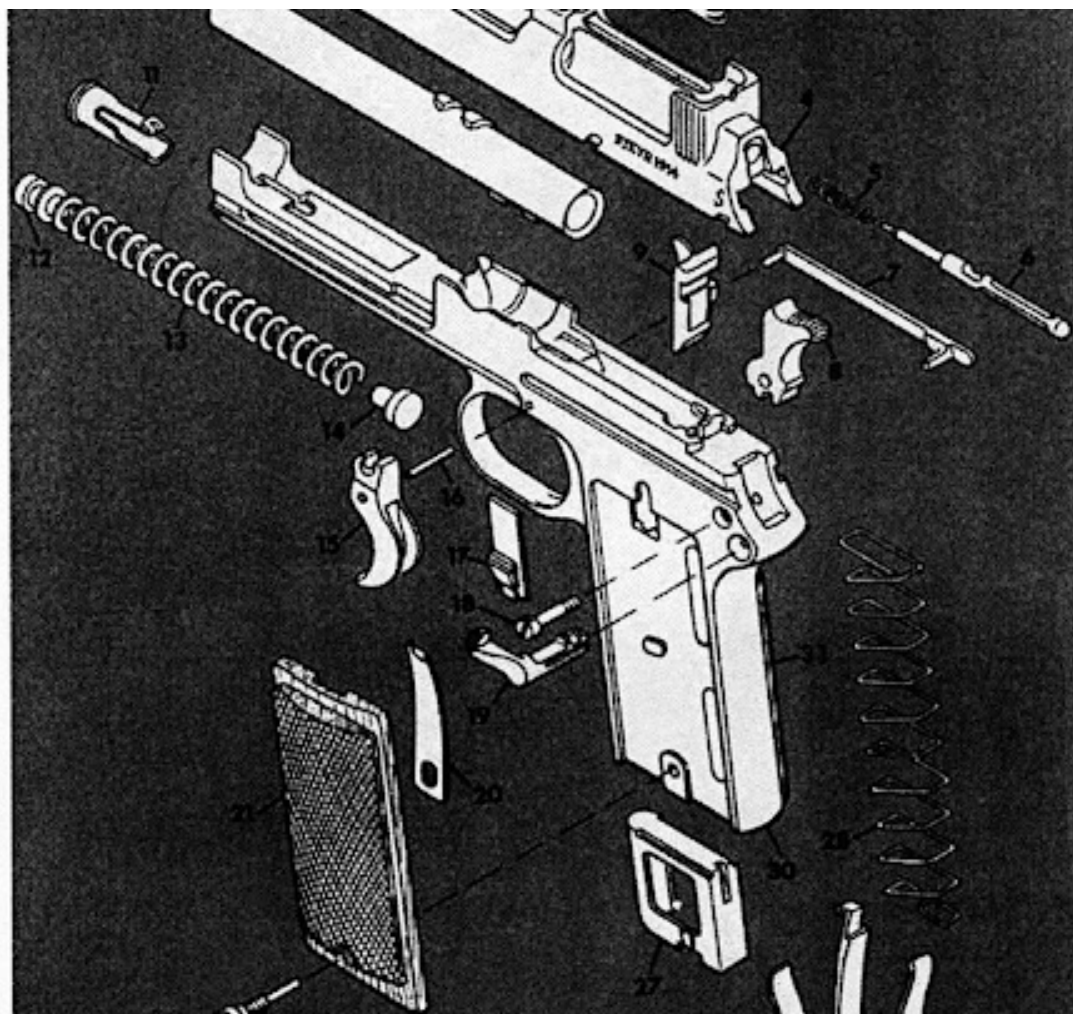
# Other Uses for the Technique

- **Character Study:** When you are fleshing out the background of a fictional character, consider writing a timeline of that character's life or a daily to-do list that would be typical of that character.
- **Adding Dimension to Fiction:** Consider integrating text messages, letters, voicemails, love notes between characters into a novel. Or get crazy. In John Updike's novel *The Centaur*, Updike ends with an index. The index (both in terms of the topics and the way they are arranged) emphasizes themes in the novel.
- **Dealing with Narrative Problems:** Stuck with how to solve a problem in the narrative? Consider using a different form to explore the plot. For instance, write a newspaper story describing events in the novel. Or write a dialogue between a minor character and a friend of that character about an event that happened between the minor character and a main character.

# So for Fun:

- Consider a fictional character. It can be one of yours. Or it can be a character from literature, film, television. Consider a “normal” day in the life of this character. Imagine the character begins his/her/their day by writing a to do list (yes, even Jack Reacher needs to pick up dry cleaning now and then). What items would be on that list? What would the character prioritize?

# Dustin Parson's "Drop Off"



## Drop Off

1. I'm not allowed to walk my son to his classroom. 2. In the effort to assert more independence, children 3. negotiate the hallways themselves, 4. sliding their bags and coats into cubbies. 5. Imagine legs like springs 6. sitting too long, 7. tension like 8. a hammer, 9. parents skulking to cars. 10. First grade a barrel 11. negotiating the rifling. 12. I used to guide him 13. through the twisting halls 14. until our memories 15. triggered 16. the same turns. 17. Do they not want us 18. wandering the halls? 19. A plague of parents grasping 20. at any purchase. 21. I am exploding the gun 22. I fear walks in instead of me. 23. I cannot continue a fear of the dark halls I cannot see. 24. When he walks, the sidewalk 25. blows him to the doors. 26. He is small now, 27. he doesn't turn to wave. 28. It is cool for September. 29. What use are the glass doors 30. to his school except to let 31. the light in.

# Further Reading (Craft)

- “The Essay as Bouquet” by Suzanne Cope for *Creative Nonfiction* <https://creativenonfiction.org/writing/hermit-crab-essays/>
- “The Shared Space Between Reader and Writer: A Case Study” by Brenda Miller for *Brevity* <https://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/the-shared-space/>
- *Tell it Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction* by Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola



# Further Reading (examples)

- “We Regret to Inform You” by Brenda Miller for *The Sun*  
<https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/455/we-regret-to-inform-you>
- “The Heart as a Torn Muscle” by Randon Billings Noble for *Brevity*  
<https://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/torn-muscle/>
- “On Shells” by Chelsea Biondolio  
<http://www.essaydaily.org/2016/07/chelsea-biondolio-on-shells.html>
- “The Professor of Longing” by Jill Talbot for *Diagram*  
[http://www.thediagram.com/13\\_3/talbot.html](http://www.thediagram.com/13_3/talbot.html)
- *The Shell Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Forms* Edited by Kim Adrian