

# Talking to Strangers

## Writing Nonfiction, English 135, Section 1

### Spring 2014

**Somebody gets into trouble then gets out of it again.  
People love that story. They never get tired of it.  
— Kurt Vonnegut**

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#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Your mama warned you not to do it. But then she didn't think you'd perfect talking to strangers into an art form and become a profile writer based on your wily interview techniques and creative literary portraiture. This semester English 135, an advanced writing workshop in Creative Nonfiction, will be devoted to the mastery of these two skills, which have applications in any discipline. We will learn how to interview subjects, document our conversations, then take the information we garner and transform it into profiles publishable in a variety of media. (Prerequisite English 71.)

#### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- ❖ Master a subgenre of nonfiction writing: the profile
- ❖ Develop the skills of a thoughtful editor
- ❖ Become an active part of a literary community, through writing, editing, discussion, attending events and becoming a participant in our class dialogue

#### **TEXTS**

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Handouts of profiles from a variety of publications, supplied by the instructor and the students

A good quality grammar handbook, dictionary and thesaurus

In lieu of buying a textbook this term, we will be exploring the spectrum of profile writing by reading the form from many different texts. I will supply some examples and each student is asked to copy a profile from a source of interest, e.g. *Time*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Rolling Stone*, the *New Yorker*, etc. You will need to bring 26 hard copies of the article to class to distribute, and if possible post to our class blog for future reference.

**Don't say "the old lady screamed."  
Bring her on and let her scream.  
— Mark Twain**

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## **GUIDELINES**

In order to be successful in this course there are some simple guidelines to follow. First among these is to come to class prepared to participate. This means having done the assignments, read the material, and arriving equipped with questions, comments, and observations. In this class we will learn a great deal from each other, so discussion and creating a community of writers/critics is an integral part of the process. We will be looking at writing from many perspectives, so your ideas count.

The second guideline is to think and plan well ahead of assignments. Begin from day one to anticipate your schedule, subjects for papers, research sources, etc. And third, if you have any questions that you need further assistance with, please feel free to consult me during my office hours; that's what they're for. Think of my office as an extension of the classroom where we can discuss any aspect of the course: material you don't understand, topics, problems, articles you're working on, ideas you wish to develop, strategies you'd like to try. I give priority to students who have made appointments; otherwise meetings are on a first-come, first-served basis. I am available via email, but only for brief questions; this medium should not be considered a substitute for an in-person conversation.

## **WORKSHOP**

You will learn to critique other authors' work, which is a very different skill than being a talented writer. The trick is to 1) praise what's good 2) ascertain what's wrong with a piece 3) offer positive criticism and suggestions on how to fix it—while realizing the individual style and goals of the author may differ from your own. You will be divided into small workshop groups and will remain in these groups for the whole semester. Editors should write a critique for each workshop submission of at least 200 words in length which addresses the piece as a whole and return to the author with the draft.

## **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

You will be writing in four levels of increasing length and complexity. The first, completely informal level, is your in-class writing exercises. The second is classmate profiles of 500-700 words in length; these will offer opportunities for you to practice your interviewing skills—completely free of risk—as you will be given credit for merely completing the assignment. The third category is the drafts of your profiles that you will workshop in class. The fourth category is the final version of the assignments which will be graded for overall quality. Naturally, all papers must be nonfiction, i.e. true stories about real-life individuals.

## **ATTENDANCE**

Required, because English 135 depends on your participation each class. You are allowed two unexcused absences before your grade can be dropped, and students who come in after roll call will be considered absent. If you are ill, or are presented with an emergency that will cause you to miss more than one class, please contact me as soon as possible.

## **CLASS ETIQUETTE**

Please observe the following: no eating during class, no laptop use, and of course, no cell phone use.

**No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.  
No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.  
— Robert Frost**

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## GRADES

Your final grade will be comprised of the following:

College of H&A profile (300-600 words)	20%
Non-campus profile (1000-1500 words)	20%
Final Assignment (up to 5000 words)	20%
Class Participation	20%
Short Assignments	20%

Grades are meant to reflect, quite simply, the quality of your work. Eighty percent of your grade will be based on your writing, and your assignments will be judged on their creativity, clarity, content, and the quality of the prose. Since this is an upper-division course, it is a given that you have a fundamental mastery of the proper mechanics of standard written English, like punctuation and grammar. Misuses of these will count against your grade. When I finish reading a piece I should feel that you, as a writer, had something important to say—not that it was a waste of my time.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** One of the vital aspects of this course is learning how to manage and schedule the different aspects of a writing project, especially ones involving research. For this reason, deadlines are extremely important. **The grade for any paper handed in late, whether for the draft workshop, or the final, will immediately be reduced by one letter grade.** In other words, if you receive a C on a paper, but handed in late work, your final grade on the assignment will be a D. **Students must complete and turn in all three major papers in order to PASS the class.**

Grading Guidelines:

A paper: has a creative approach, polished prose free of mechanical problems, keeps the reader's interest, is organized logically, flows smoothly, impresses the reader with the author's ethos and command of the subject, was delivered on deadline, properly formatted, within the appropriate word count range.

B paper: has all the above except may contain one or two minor areas for improvement.

C paper: C is considered "average" by departmental policy. Usually a C paper offers lackluster creativity and/or content and needs further refinement at the prose level.

D paper: is either substantially shorter than the required word count, or has so many problem areas that it is difficult to follow because it contains poorly-crafted content or a plethora of mechanical problems. It is below the standard of writing acceptable for an upper-division undergraduate course.

F paper: is a failure to achieve the majority of requirements outlined above for an A paper.

## DEPARTMENTAL GRADING POLICY

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure. In English Department courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of the ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

**A biographer has to be so many different kinds of things  
that no human being could possibly achieve.  
You've got to be a detective, you've got to be a drudge,  
tracking down every possible fact you can;  
at the same time you've got to be insightful as hell...  
— Scott Donaldson**

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#### **PAPER FORMAT**

All material handed in should follow the same guidelines as those for submitting professional manuscripts:

- typewritten, double-spaced, black ink with copy dark enough to be easily read
- one-inch margins on all sides
- text on one side of the paper only
- 12-point type in a highly-legible font, preferably Times New Roman or Courier New
- your name and the assignment title single-spaced in the upper left-hand corner of the first sheet
- title centered on the first page
- pages numbers included
- pages stapled or paper-clipped together

#### **SJSU ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY**

Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University, and the University's Academic Integrity Policy require you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty are required to report all infractions to the office of Judicial Affairs. The policy on academic integrity can be found at <http://www2.sjsu.edu/senate/S04-12.htm>. The SJSU rules against plagiarism are set forth in the SJSU Catalog, which defines plagiarism as the act of representing the work of another as one's own (without giving appropriate credit), regardless of how that work was obtained, and submitting it to fulfill academic requirements. Plagiarism at SJSU includes, but is not limited to: (1) the act of incorporating the ideas, words, sentences, paragraphs, or parts thereof, or the specific substance of another's work, without giving appropriate credit, and representing the product as one's own work. It is the role and obligation of each student to know the rules that preserve academic integrity and abide by them at all times. This includes learning and following the particular rules associated with specific classes, exams, and/or course assignments. Ignorance of these rules is not a defense to the charge of violating the Academic Integrity Policy. All instances of violating the Academic Integrity Policy will be reported to the Dean of Student Services.

#### **CAMPUS POLICY ON COMPLIANCE WITH AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT**

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities register with the Accessible Education Center to establish a record of their disability.

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**Everybody just wants to be heard.**

— **Oprah Winfrey**