

Nonfiction Workshop - Spring 2014

English 242, Section 1

**This is a craft. This is an art form.
I'm writing stories, just like fiction writers,
only I use real names.
—Gay Talese**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

"All of a sudden, in the mid-Sixties, here comes a bunch of these lumpenproles, no less, a bunch of slick-magazine and Sunday supplement writers with no literary credentials whatsoever in most cases—only they're using all the techniques of the novelists, even the most sophisticated ones—and on top of that they're helping themselves to the insights of the men of letters while they're at it—and at the same time they're still doing their low-life legwork, their "digging," their hustling, their damnable Locker Room Genre reporting—they're taking on all of these roles at the same time—in other words, they're ignoring literary class lines that have been almost a century in the making." So writes Tom Wolfe in *The New Journalism* describing the origins of the humble genre we commonly refer to today as creative nonfiction—and this relatively new cultural phenomenon has in its fifty years of existence gone on to dominate the literary marketplace and the public imagination.

Creative Nonfiction (CN) is also referred to by a host of other titles: the New Journalism, Literary Journalism, Narrative Nonfiction. More accurately each of these monikers represents a subset of the genre as it has evolved down through its lifespan. This semester we will be exploring the roots of this mercurial art form, looking at how history and culture molded it into the material we read today. To this end presentations looking at the roots of creative nonfiction will be added to our course blog, which will serve as a valuable resource for those taking the MFA exam.

Our primary goal, however, will be writing it—leaving our own contribution to this body of literature. In addition we will be discussing how to publish our work and exploring the top offerings in the field today as showcased in *Best American Essays*.

REQUIRED READING

The Best American Essays 2013; ed. Cheryl Strayed

OPTIONAL READING

2@SJSU: An Anthology of Flash Nonfiction from San José State University;
eds. Jan McCutcheon, Steve "Spike" Wong

**What happened to the writer is not what matters;
what matters is the larger sense that the writer
is able to *make* of what happened.**

—Vivian Gornick

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 242

- To understand the roots of the creative nonfiction genre
- To improve your skills as nonfiction writers
- To improve your skills as editors
- To prepare you for the MFA exam for nonfiction
- To acquaint you with the methods of professional writers

WORKSHOP

Students will be asked to workshop at least two pieces over the course of the semester on any topic of creative nonfiction. Submissions may be essays or book chapters, but should range from 1,500 to no more than 5,000 words. *If book chapters are submitted for workshop, please preface with a brief summary of the work and tell us where this sample fits in.* I encourage students to submit at least one stand-alone essay.

During the workshop process students will learn to critique each other's work, which is a very different skill than being a good 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 one's own. Students will bring paper copies of your writing projects to class; the work will then be distributed, critiqued at home, and brought to the following class for discussion. Editors are asked to offer line edits on the page and at least a paragraph of typewritten comments that address the overall tenor of the work; please bring two copies of the latter, one to return to the author, and one for me.

SHORT ASSIGNMENTS

We will also do short, two-page writing assignments on a specific topic each week. These will serve to generate ideas for longer works, and to help us develop techniques for writing concisely. Short assignments also give the opportunity to experiment, as they will be graded simply on quantity (the fact you've done the assignment) rather than quality. Students should hand in ten two-pagers over the course of the term; you may choose which weeks to omit according to your preference.

CREATIVE NONFICTION PRESENTATION

Each student will give a ten-minute talk on an element of the history and evolution of creative nonfiction, from its roots to today. Some examples might be: a report on Tom Wolfe's groundbreaking book *The New Journalism*; contributions of one of CN's progenitors, e.g. Joan Didion or Hunter S. Thompson; the cultural influences which shaped creative nonfiction, e.g. the Vietnam War or television; current trends in CN today.

MARKET PRESENTATION

Each student will give a brief presentation on how to submit to one of the publications featured in *Best American Essays 2013*. This project will teach us how to research markets for our work by reading samples, studying the publication and reviewing their submission guidelines. You should post a written

synopsis to our class blog giving us details, i.e. everything we need to know to submit work. By the end of the semester we will have a collection of potential markets for the work you've produced in class.

**Literary journalism couples cold fact and
personal event, in the author's humane company....
The process moves readers and writers,
toward realization, compassion,
and in the best of cases, wisdom.
—Mark Kramer**

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

Points will be subtracted for improper formatting.

CLASS ETIQUETTE

Students are welcome to disagree with one another during class discussions; however, all our dialogue must be conducted with respect for each individual's opinions and work. In addition, the following practices are forbidden while class is in session: the use of laptops or cell phones.

OFFICE HOURS

Please feel free to visit me during my office hours; it's a good idea to make an appointment, otherwise I work on a first-come, first-served basis. Email is meant for brief questions and I encourage you to use it sparingly; this is not an online course. If you are absent, please contact one of your classmates to find out what you missed.

ATTENDANCE

Required, because English 242 depends on your participation each day. You are allowed one unexcused absence 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.

**The true test of a creative nonfiction writer
is to attract and capture readers who do not have a
built-in fascination or connection to a subject or narrator.
—Lee Gutkind**

GRADE REQUIREMENTS

Grades are meant to reflect—quite simply—the quality of a student's work. Final grades will be calculated thus:

50% workshop submissions (see grading guidelines below)

20% 10 two-page assignments (on the number completed)

10% verbal and written critiques (on the student's dedication to helping his or her peers)

10% creative nonfiction presentation (on the quality and delivery of information)

10% market presentation (on the quality and delivery of information)

There are no examinations for this 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 topic, was delivered on deadline and within the appropriate word count.

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 a graduate 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.