

# Nonfiction Workshop - Fall 2016

## English 242, Section 1

**When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself,  
'I am going to produce a work of art.'  
I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose,  
some fact to which I want to draw attention,  
and my initial concern is to get a hearing.  
— George Orwell**

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

How does the real world flatten onto a page? In this course we'll look at how nonfiction authors draw from the world around them to use that material as the life's blood of their writing. In this vein, we'll take field trips and experiment with a variety of techniques ranging from the journalistic to the novelistic. We'll also discuss the fundamentals of creative nonfiction, providing fresh perspectives for newcomers and seasoned veterans alike. Participants are welcome to bring in portions of their theses for workshop. And of course, by popular demand, our no-stress experimentation with the ubiquitous two pagers will continue.

### **REQUIRED READING**

*The Orchid Thief*; Susan Orlean

*Just Mercy*; Bryan Stevenson

*The Best Travel Writing, Volume 11: True Stories from Around the World*; eds. James O'Reilly and Larry Habegger

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 242**

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

**To translate knowledge and information into experience...  
that seems to me the function of literature and art.  
— Joseph Campbell**

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**WORKSHOP**

Students will be asked to workshop at least two pieces of your choosing over the course of the semester. Submissions may be articles, 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. Pieces submitted for workshop should be complete and polished...not drafts with bracketed phrases like [clever conclusion to go here].

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 your 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. As these assignments are not graded, I will not be providing comments on them, merely reading them for content.

**PRESENTATIONS**

Each student will give a ten-minute talk on a facet of literary craft or on an author's history related to our required reading. In this presentation you will analyze the author's craft, e.g. their use of voice, structure or point of view, or perhaps their way of dealing with dialogue or controversial material.

**LITERARY EVENT REVIEWS**

In order to begin analyzing stagecraft in anticipation of your professional career—which will require you to do readings to promote your writing—students will be required to attend two events hosted by the Center for Literary Arts (CLA) or Reed Magazine during the course of the semester. Afterward you should write a two-page review of the experience. (Event details are available at [www.litart.org](http://www.litart.org).) Please plan accordingly to suit your schedule.

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**Words are a lens to focus one's mind.  
— Ayn Rand**

**The writer isn't made in a vacuum. Writers are witnesses.  
The reason we need writers is because we need  
witnesses to this terrifying century.  
— E. L. Doctorow**

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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
- indented paragraphs (the appropriate format for print essays, *not* double spacing between paragraphs)
- 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 attendance is fundamental to English 242's course objectives; for example, students are required to interact with others in the class in our goal to create a literary community. 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.

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**The only time I know that something is true  
is the moment I discover it in the act of writing.  
— Jean Malaquais**

**Since great writers communicate a vision of existence,  
one can't borrow their methods.  
The method is married to the vision.  
— Norman Mailer**

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### **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)

20% verbal and written critiques (on the student's dedication to helping his or her peers)

5% presentation (on the quality and delivery of information)

5% literary event reviews

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.

Note that pluses or minuses may be added to grades that are in between two letter grades.

### **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.

### **UNIVERSITY POLICIES**

The link below contains university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>