

Writing Nonfiction English 135, Spring 2016

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Course Description

In this course, we will read, write, and discuss non-fiction in many of its forms. As an English class, this course will involve reading and discussing classic and innovative examples of nonfiction. As a creative writing course, it will require that students write their own original pieces, which will be respectfully critiqued and revised.

Learning Objectives

- ❖ Explore four subgenres of nonfiction: the personal essay, travel writing, profiles and feature articles.
- ❖ Learn to read like a writer, with an appreciation of a piece as a whole, but an eye for craft and mechanics.
- ❖ Develop the skills of a thoughtful editor.
- ❖ Become an active part of a literary community, through writing, editing, discussion, attending events, and participating in our class dialogue.

Required texts and supplies

- ❖ Class reading pack and occasional handouts—these must be brought to class with extensive notes so you are prepared to discuss technique and craft and are able to point to specific passages in the reading.
- ❖ A notebook for journaling, writing exercises, and note-taking. Get a journal that is slim and small enough for you to take everywhere—including to class—and is easy to write in while standing. I'd recommend a stenographer's notebook.

Participation and Classroom Etiquette

Classroom sessions will involve a discussion of the reading, craft strategies, in-class exercises, critiquing one another's writing, and the occasional reading quiz. Participation accounts for 10% of your grade. This means having done the assignments, read the material, and arriving equipped with questions, comments, and observations. If you are absent, it is *your* responsibility to find out what you missed. Missing more than one class will affect your participation grade.

Turn in your writing on time, even if you're not happy with it. If you know beforehand that you will have trouble with a deadline because of a conflict or family obligation, speak with me well in advance.

In order to be a talented writer who understands the craft, you must be a voracious reader. The readings assigned for class deal with sensitive topics, including, but not limited to: race, gender, violence, sex, and politics—in other words: real, lived experiences. If you are unprepared to read

and discuss this material, this may not be the class for you. Students are expected to treat these topics and one another with sensitivity and empathy.

This community of respect applies when we workshop as well. Don't hold back when it comes to offering constructive criticism, but do remember that our goal is to learn from one another, not to take cheap shots.

I am an unusual breed of professor, in that I *strongly encourage* students to bring snacks to this three-hour monster class. We will take a mid-point breather for bathroom breaks and snacking, and internet addictions. However, during class, you must put your phones and computers away unless you have a documented disability which requires the aid of technology.

Written Work

You will write in four of the major creative nonfiction forms. These must reflect an understanding of the assignment. Naturally, all papers must be nonfiction, i.e. true stories.

Your work must be turned in on time. It should be type-written, double spaced, with page numbers and one-inch margins. Please use Times New Roman, 12-point font, black ink. Include a bold, centered title, with your name, the date, and the assignment title single-spaced in the upper left-hand corner of the first page. Staple or paper clip your pages. Points will be subtracted for improper formatting.

You will revise your work based on the feedback you get from in-class critiques. You are also welcome, but not required, to schedule a meeting with me to discuss pitches, outlines, or drafts before an assignment is due. However, do not wait until the last minute to set up a meeting.

In addition to writing nonfiction, you must cut your teeth as a critic and editor. For each story workshopped, you will **bring in a marked up copy of the draft, and write a page-long (double spaced) critique, detailing what does and doesn't work in the story.** Bring two copies of these critiques to class on the day of the workshop—one for the writer and one for me.

Additionally, at some point during the semester, you must attend a Center for Literary Arts event, and write a one-page response paper on what something that was said or read by the author. This is intentionally open-ended. The purpose of the assignment is to have you listen carefully to the work of others and engage with it critically and/or personally.

Your written assignments are as follows:

Personal Essay: Write a personal essay focused around one interesting, lived experience (the “what”), placing this story within a larger context outside of yourself (the “why”). From the first paragraph, it should be clear what the themes of the essay will be, yet the story should surprise and delight in the way it explored and complicates those themes. Be sure that the story has plenty of texture and a strong voice. This is the only assignment for which you are required to use the first person.

Profile: For this assignment, you must not only have your subject's consent, but you must interview and shadow this person. You must also interview *at least* two other people who know

the subject well, preferably in different ways (professionally/personally, for example). It is best if your subject is someone you didn't know well prior to working on this piece. You must write objectively, but fairly. You are expected to hit all the marks required of you in the personal essay assignment (ie: writing with texture, a strong voice, and a sense of a larger "why," and the movement and narrative of a story). When you turn in the piece to me, please email it to your subject as well (CCing me), and ask them to read it over for accuracy and email me if there are any glaring errors. Failure to send this email will affect your grade on this assignment.

Travel Essay

Go somewhere you have never been before. If you are planning to travel for spring break, great! But a town you haven't been to, a low-grade tourist attraction, or a sporting event will also do nicely, so long as it is completely unfamiliar to you. Go by yourself and turn off your cellphone. Completely immerse yourself. Talk to strangers (get their names). Take copious notes. Remember that texture is tantamount to travel writing, as is coming to terms with the place. Write a travelogue about your experience that hits all the marks described above.

Feature Article

Write about a phenomenon, drawing on the skills you've developed during the semester to give your reader a sense of your topic's importance, where/how it takes place, and the people affected by it. This will require conducting multiple interviews, researching its historical significance, going out into the field and getting texture, and giving your reader a sense of the stakes. In other words, this assignment is a culmination of everything we've worked on this semester.

Journaling

This is vital to focusing your eye as a writer. You need to train your writerly eye; take in your surroundings and notice how people talk and the way they carry themselves. Some ideas for notebook entry topics: Story ideas and sketches, plot outlines for assignments, random descriptions, character quirks, three things you noticed today that struck you as unusual, overheard dialogue, free write (write for fifteen minutes straight, without stopping or worrying about whether you're making sense), what I wish I'd said –vs.-what I did say, descriptions of an object or phenomenon, a running list of words or images you like, what your five senses told you at some point during the day. Try to stay concrete in your descriptions. These are your field notes on the world around you, not a series of Zen koans. While a little autobiography is fine, try to think of this as a journal not a diary, and keep in mind that I will read it (that's not to say "keep it clean," but if I see something that concerns me—for example, evidence of harm to yourself or others, I will be duty-bound to contact campus services about it).

And of course, you must use your notebook for the final three writing assignments. Even if you use a tape recorder for interviews, you must take notes on what people say (as backup) and also how they say it, how they look, what they are doing, what their surroundings are, etc.

Try to write in your journal at least five times a week. This isn't as daunting as it sounds. You don't have to fill a complete page every time. One line counts as an entry (though not every entry should be one line). Bring them to class for notes and in-class exercises. I will check these notebooks regularly.

Finally, please note the date, time, and where you are when you're writing each entry. Time and place will help you learn a little about yourself as a writer. You may find that you work best when you're riding on the bus, or that you channel a gruffer voice at 3 a.m. The date helps assure me that you are doing this work throughout the semester.

Grades

Your final grade will be comprised of the following:

Personal Essay 20%

Travel Essay 20%

Profile 20%

Feature Article 20%

Class Participation 10%

Journal, critiques, and reading response paper 10%

Your final grade will reflect your steady application to the art of writing and to the art of reading like a writer/critiquing, the devotion you bring to using your journal regularly, your preparation for and participation in class, and your *timely* completion of writing assignments. While creativity is a must for this class, you must also follow the assignment instructions.

I will grade individual pieces of work and give ample feedback. If you are unhappy with your grade on any of the first three assignments, *and the assignment was turned in on time*, you may do a revision/additional draft. Your final grade for that assignment will be the average of the two. However, working on a voluntary revision is not an excuse for falling behind on other coursework.

Your writing 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.

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, it will be reduced by one grade for each calendar day it is past due.** For example, an A paper due on a Monday but turned in on a Wednesday will receive a B+. If extenuating circumstances apply, you must contact me before the due date in order to request an extension. **Students must complete and turn in all four papers in order to PASS the class.** Your work is considered late if it is turned in after I call attendance, or if it is sent via email after the time deadline given on the syllabus. **In addition to bringing a printed copy to class, you must also upload all assignments to turnitin.com via Canvas.**

Grading Guidelines:

A paper: has a creative approach, polished prose free of mechanical errors, 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 time.

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 too short, 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.

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 the 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 DRC to establish a record of their disability.

Very Tentative Schedule

(Absolutely subject to change)

1. January 28

Introductions, Discuss Orwell, O'Connor

Homework: Read "Notes of a Native Son"; "The Empathy Exams"; handout

2. February 4

Discuss texture and structure

*Homework: Read "The Line Between Fact and Fiction"; handout; **Start thinking about your personal essay topic***

February 10—Ann Packer reading at 7 p.m.

3. February 11

Discuss less conventional personal essay forms, vows of journalistic chastity.

*Homework: **Write a personal essay draft, email to classmates by midnight on 2/13; Email critiques to writers, CB by the beginning of class on Thursday***

4. February 18

Personal essay workshop

*Homework: **Personal essays due in hard copy, and via turnitin by at the beginning of our next class;***

5. February 25

Introduction to the Profile

Homework: Read "One-Eyed Matador"; "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold"; write two short pitches for your profile piece, Email to CB by midnight on 2/27

Think about: How many people these writers talked to, what kind of research was involved.

6. March 3

Mechanics of the profile, pitching ideas

Homework: Read "The Wilderness Campaign"

March 8—Cristina Garcia reading at 7 p.m.

7. March 10

Unconventional profiles

*Homework: **Write profile draft, email copies to your workshop group by midnight on 3/12***
Email critiques to writers, CB by the beginning of class on Thursday

8. March 17

Workshop

*Homework: **Profiles due in hard copy, and via turnitin by at the beginning of our next class,***
"Commemorative Eel Cakes"; Handout

9. March 24

Introduction to Travel Writing

*Homework: During spring break, **have your travel experience, take copious notes.** Read “Shipping Out”; “In the Waiting Room”; handout*

March 31-Spring Break, no classes

April 6—Andre Dubus reading 7 p.m.

10. April 7

Discuss readings, travels.

*Homework: **Write draft, email copies to workshop group by midnight on 4/10***

Email critiques to writers, CB by the beginning of class on Thursday

April 7—Andre Dubus interview, 7 p.m.

April 13—Steinbeck Fellows reading, 7 p.m.

11. April 14

Workshop

*Homework: **Final draft of travelogue due in hard copy, and via turnitin by at the beginning of our next class; Read “Bolivia’s Wrestlers”; “The Internet Shaming of Lindsey Stone”***

12. April 21

Introduction to a feature article

*Homework: **Email pitch for final feature to CB by midnight on 4/23; Read “Fatal Distraction”***

13. April 28

Discuss readings, brainstorming

Homework: Read “The Case for Reparations”

May 5—5 p.m. Juan Felipe Herrera reading, 5 p.m.

14. May 5

Discuss Coates, Career Freelancing Tips

Write draft, email copies to your workshop group and CB by midnight on 5/14

Email critiques to writers, CB by the beginning of class on Thursday

May 9—Paul Douglass and Julia Markus reading, 7 p.m.

15. May 12

Feature Workshop

Tearful Goodbyes

May 19 ***Final draft of feature must be emailed to CB, and filed on turnitin, by 5 p.m.***