

San José State University
English Department
English 135, Creative Nonfiction, Fall 2017

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Office Hours:	T/TH: 1:30-2:30
Class Days/Time:	T/TH: 10:30-11:45
Classroom:	BBC 221

Course Format:

This is a discussion/writing intensive course. Students will also read extensively about the practice of creative nonfiction and read examples of the genre.

Course Description

Creative nonfiction is a booming field. The term includes a wide range of prose: memoir, travel writing, biography, science writing, nature writing, personal and lyrical essays, feature writing. In this class we will explore that range. The goals of this course are to help you improve your writing; to practice research, interview and observational skills; to recognize the strengths of published work; and to discuss your own and others' prose. But first and foremost it is a writing course

In the first part of the semester, you will turn in 9 short pieces, one per week. You will post these by the day and time indicated on the syllabus, read your group's essays before class (5 in each group), and workshop pieces on dates indicated on the syllabus. In class, you will provide each member of your group with a one-page written critique of their essays as well as oral suggestions on the work. By the beginning of November, if not before, you should have ideas about a longer piece you wish to write—it may grow out of one of the short pieces or you may develop a new idea or work on a longer work in progress. Each student will meet with me to discuss your longer prose work—these too will be discussed in workshop at the end of the semester.

You will also read several examples of creative nonfiction, both essays and longer works.

Course Learning Outcomes

The goal of this course is to introduce students to a variety of approaches to creative nonfiction. At the end of the course, students should:

- a. Recognize and appreciate various genres of creative nonfiction: travel writing, memoir, food writing, reporting, sports, science, portrait. Satisfied by course readings.
- b. Appreciate longer works of creative nonfiction and attend readings of published writers who come to SJSU. (Note: 4-unit enhancement)
- c. Practice writing short pieces in several genres, with the goal of appreciating the challenges of each. Satisfied by writing assignments throughout the semester.
- d. Improve his/her own writing by working on clarity, precision, interest, voice, etc. Satisfied by essays written throughout the semester, revisions and final long essay.

Required texts

Creative Nonfiction, Philip Gerard

On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction, William Zinsser.

On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, Stephen King

Barbarian Days, William Finnegan

Course reader: Maple Press

Course requirements and assignments

Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend a minimum of twelve hours per week preparing for and attending classes and completing course assignments. This course will have integrated into the syllabus the following 1-unit enhancement:

Collateral reading: Each student is expected to read carefully a long work of nonfiction, *Barbarian Days*, and attend the William Finnegan reading on Wednesday November 8 (7pm) as well as scheduled workshops that week.

A. Class participation, 20%: This grade is determined by written and oral comments on your peers' writing during workshops, a writer's journal which will be checked during workshops, and discussion of prose readings.

Readings: Read all assigned material carefully and be prepared for unannounced quizzes on the material.

Discussion: Since this is a collaborative class, attendance is key. Please attend each class, arrive on time, post weekly writing by times noted on syllabus, and come prepared to discuss writing by your peers as well as assigned readings.

Commentaries on group assignments: Please read your peers' essays with care and prepare a one page commentary on each, noting strengths and suggestions for improvement. **On workshop days, please made 2 copies of all commentary and hand in one copy on workshop days, give one copy to the writer.**

Attend William Finnegan reading and workshop (note requirements for a 4-unit class)

Writer's journal: Please keep a journal and bring your journal to **each workshop session**. Your journal will contain scraps of dialogue, your observations, ideas for essays, thoughts, responses to books you read, ideas to research—comments on websites like Creativenonfiction.org, etc. I will check journals periodically and may ask you to comment on something in your journal during class.

B. Short creative work for class workshops (9—one written in class, 8 outside class), 50%. On dates indicated on the syllabus, please post assignments by the date and time posted on the syllabus. Unless otherwise indicated, each assignment will be 3-5 pages, or 750-1250 words. Please post by the times indicated, giving your peers ample time to read your work. Work not submitted on time to your group and to me will be noted as late—and final grades adjusted accordingly. Each student will write 9 short pieces.

Use this format for heading:

NAME_ASSIGNMENT 1_TITLE

C. Final essay, 1750-2500 words, 15% Please schedule a conference as soon as you have an idea about your longer piece.

D. Portfolio and final assessment, 15% The portfolio will be turned in at the final exam and will include the following:

- a. 10 short pieces, original + any substantial revisions of weekly work (marked clearly as revisions—you may choose to revise one, some, or all. The final portfolio is based on quality, not quantity).

- b. Longer essay + revisions after workshop, revisions clearly marked. Each student will have at least one conference with instructor to discuss your work. Please bring writer's notebook to the conference.
- c. Review of one SJSU reading/campus read event (other readings with instructor permission). Please read Zinsser, Chapter 18.

Final Exam or evaluation

The final exam is a portfolio of your work for the semester, with revisions of at least 3 submitted essays and a review of Finnegan's reading.

Grading Information

Please type and double space all work and include page numbers. For each essay submitted, in addition to your peers' comment, you will receive a written comment from me, with suggestions and a number grade, using the rubric below:

4: Excellent work on the assignment, a superior piece of writing: thoughtful, original, imaginative, substantive. The point is supported throughout the essay. Language is sharp, style elegant. Sentences are powerful, varied. The work is error free—no spelling or punctuation errors or grammatical errors. Posted by Wed. noon.

3: Good work, successful completion of assignment and solid writing. The reader's attention is held throughout. This essay may lack some of the elegance, heft, vision, clarity of a 4 essay. The central idea is clear but may not be supported or developed throughout. Transitions may need some work, structure might need tightening. Some minor punctuation or grammatical errors. Sentence structure contributes to overall vision of the work, but may need to be tightened or varied.

2. Completed assignment, but the work may lack depth, precision, keen observation. It meets the guidelines for the assignment but does not go beyond expectations in any way. The point may be too broad or insufficiently supported. There may be spelling and grammatical errors, but not so many that they are distracting. It lacks originality, significant purpose, or point of view.

1. Unsatisfactory work. Lacks insight, originality. It may be too short, too general. Sentences may be clumsy.

Grading: 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 this course, as in all English Department courses, I will comment on and grade the quality of writing (grammar, organization, clarity, specificity, etc.) 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.

Determination of Grades

Final grades for the course are determined by participation in all writing workshops and all class discussions, reading of all assigned material, submission of all essays on time, and submission of a final class portfolio.

Classroom Protocol

Please come to class on time. Please read all assignments, listen respectfully to your classmates and contribute to class discussions. Please read your peers assignments carefully and come to class with at least one page of thoughtful notes on the writing of each person in your group.

University Policies

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs’ [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>”

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Course Schedule

August 24: Introduction: What is Creative Nonfiction? Why keep a journal?

[**Monday August 28 by 5:00: Assignment 1 due:** Select one assignment from “Thinking about Memoir” (2 pages)] (SLG, 3)

WEEK 1

August 29: On Writing: Gerard, Chapter 1, Zinsser Chapter 7, 11; **PDFs sent to class:** Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook,” Fadiman “Inset a Carrot” and Theroux, “If you want to Keep a Journal” (SLG 1,3)

August 31: Workshop on Assignment 1. Zinsser, Chapters 1,2. (SLG 1,5)

WEEK 2

September 5: PLACE. What makes one place different from another? Why does it matter? Zinsser, Chapter 13; Reader: Wallace Stegner, “At Home in the Fields of the Lord,” from *The Sound of Mountain Water*. Barry Lopez, “Stone Horse.”

Assignment 2, PLACE: Write about an important place in your life and what happened there. (SLG 1,3,5)

September 7: Gerard, Chapter 2; Reader: John Steinbeck, “My War with the Ospreys”; John Haines, “The Writer as Alaskan: Beginnings and Reflections.” E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake” (SLG 3)

WEEK 3

[**Monday September 11 by 5:00pm: Assignment 2, PLACE, due:** Write about an important place in your life and what happened there.]

September 12: Workshop on Place. Zinsser, Chapter 3,4.

September 14: PLACE AND PARTICIPATION: Zinsser, Chapter 5, 6. Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction”; Annie Dillard, “Nightwatch”

Assignment 3, Sensual details: Go into nature after dark, alone, and record what you experience with as many senses as possible, considering: kinesthetics, balance, directional sense, vibration in earth, air pressure, vertigo, peripheral vision, the olfactory landscape, air temperature, wind speed and direction, height or depth, pain, air currents, water currents, gravity, light, harmonics. Taste things. (SLG 3)]

WEEK 4

September 19: Zinsser, Chapters 9, 10. Brian Calvert, “How to Face the Ecocide.”
<http://www.hcn.org/issues/49.12/essay-climate-change-confronting-despair-in-the-age-of-ecocide>

[Wednesday, September 20 by 5:00 pm: Assignment 3, PARTICIPATION, due]

September 21: Workshop on Assignment 3, Participation. Zinsser, Chapter 8. (SLG 1,3)

WEEK 5

September 26: FOOD: Gerard, Chapter 7. Reader: M.F. K. Fisher, “The first oyster”; “Let the Sky Rain Potatoes,” and “Fifty Million Snails” (SLG 1,2, 3,5)

[Wednesday, September 27 by 5:00 pm: Assignment 4, FOOD, due. Two pages about a meal with more than food in it. Any research required? See Gerard Chapter 3]

September 28: Workshop on Assignment 4, food. Gerard Chapter 3.

WEEK 6

October 3: What about “I”? Gerard, Chapter 8; Zinsser Chapter 20. Reader: Philip Lopate, “Writing Personal Essays: On the Necessity of Turning Oneself Into a Character,” Philip Gerard, “Taking Yourself Out of the Story: Narrative Stance and the Upright Pronoun” (SLG 1,3)

October 5: Small group discussion: King sections 1-38, *On Writing*.

WEEK 7

[Monday, October 9, Assignment 5, “I” Two pages about ...]

October 10: Workshop on Assignment 5. King, “What Writing Is” and “Toolbox” *On Writing*

October 12: Memoir: Family and home. King, complete *On Writing*. Gerard, Chapter 9; Zinsser, Chapters 14, 24; Reader: R. Glendon Brunk, “The Rage of Men”

WEEK 8

[Monday October 16 by noon: Assignment 6, Memoir. FAMILY due: write about your family] (SLG 3)

October 17: Workshop on Memoir, FAMILY. “Lying,” Lauren Slater;

October 19: Interviews/portraits: Zinsser, Chapters 12; Gerard Chapter 4. Wallace Stegner, “Letter, Much too Late,” in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. [**Assignment 7: The art of the interview.** Select someone older than you are by at least a decade and interview that person about what was the greatest risk they took in life.]

WEEK 9

October 24: Reader, Jane Kramer, “Cowboy”; Gay Talese, “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold”. (SLG 1,3, 4)

October 26: In class writing workshop based on interview, Assignment 7. Turning the interview into a portrait. Bring your interview notes *only* to class.

WEEK 10

October 31: Travel. Zinsser, Chapters 13. Gerard, Chapter 5; Reader: “McPhee reveals how the pieces go together” and John McFee, “Travels in Georgia.” (SLG 1, 3, 4)

November 2: *Barbarian Days*

WEEK 11

November 7: *Barbarian Days*. Gerard Chapter 6.. (SLG 1,3,4)

Wed. November 8: Reading at SJSU, William Finnegan

November 9: *Barbarian Days*: (SLG 1,3,4)

WEEK 12

[**Monday November 13 by noon: Assignment 8: TRAVEL due:**](SLG 3)

November 14: *Barbarian Days*. **Workshop on Assignment 8, Travel.**

November 16: Revision: Gerard Chapters 10, 11. David Foster Wallace, “[Shipping Out,](https://harpers.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/HarpersMagazine-1996-01-0007859.pdf)” <https://harpers.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/HarpersMagazine-1996-01-0007859.pdf>

Select one piece, #s 2-8 to revise.

[Monday, November 20 by noon. Revisions]

WEEK 13

November 21: Workshop on Assignment 9, Revision. (SLG 3) Zinsser Chapters 22, 23.

November 23: THANKSGIVING

WEEK 14

November 28: **Assignment 10: Long piece:** Place, Food, Memoir, Portrait, Travel. Workshop on longer piece. Zinsser, Chapter 21. (SLG 1, 3,4)

November 30: Workshop on longer piece. Zinsser, Chapters 25. (SLG 1, 3,4)

WEEK 15

December 5: Workshop on longer piece. Zinsser, Chapter 15. (SLG 1, 3,4)

December 7: Workshop on longer piece. Zinsser, Chapter 19. (SLG 1, 3,4)

December 18, 9:45-12:00. Final exam (SLG 1, 3,4)

Suggested Reading, a very incomplete list, just a few of my favorites...

Memoir/Autobiography

Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness, William Styron
The Liar's Club, Mary Karr
A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, Dave Eggers
The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother, James McBride
Running in the Family, Michael Ondaatje
One Writer's Beginnings, Eudora Welty
The Glass Castle, Jeannette Walls
The Kid, Dan Savage
The Road to Coorain, Jill Ker Conway
This Boy's Life, Tobias Wolff

Biography

Composing a Life, Mary Catherine Bateson
Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice, Janet Malcolm

Nature

Blue Meridian, Peter Matthiessen
Arctic Dreams, Barry Lopez
The Practice of the Wild, Gary Snyder
Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, Terry Tempest Williams
Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, Kathleen Norris

Travel

Blue Latitudes, Tony Horowitz
A Russian Journal and Sea of Cortez John Steinbeck

Journalism

The Road to Wigan Pier, George Orwell
Confederates in the Attic, Tony Horowitz
May you Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India, Elisabeth Bumiller
Hell's Angels, Hunter S. Thompson
"Act Five," Episode 218, *This American Life*. And others.

Humor

Me Talk Pretty One Day, David Sedaris
When You are Engulfed in Flames, David Sedaris
Into the Woods, Bill Bryson (and travel)