

# Creating a Book-length Narrative in Nonfiction or Fiction

## English 242, Section 1, Fall 2017

**If there's a book that you want to read,  
but it hasn't been written yet,  
then you must write it.**

**— Toni Morrison**

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

So you want to write a book? Many people dream of it...but few succeed. Creating your first book-length narrative can be a daunting prospect. In this class we will take your idea for a memoir, novel, or biography and proceed through the steps necessary for completing a manuscript. We'll work through the phases of summary, outlining, and drafting chapters, which we'll workshop in class. In addition, we'll examine notions like choosing a model book, finding universal appeal, creating dramatic tension, and weaving themes throughout the text. Projects may be nonfiction or fiction, but note that our process will not be suitable for collections, which by nature are episodic.

**Success in this course is based on the expectation that students will spend, for each unit of credit, a minimum of 45 hours over the length of the course (normally 3 hours per unit per week with 1 of the hours used for lecture) for instruction or preparation/studying or course related activities including but not limited to internships, labs, clinical practica. Other course structures will have equivalent workload expectations as described in the syllabus.**

**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: learning the methods of professional writers.**

By the end of the semester you will have created a professional book proposal to sell the project you are working on in class, following the advice in Jeff Herman's how-to text.

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

- To improve your skills as creative writers
- To improve your skills as editors
- To learn the methods for organizing and writing a book-length work
- To acquaint you with the methods of professional writers
- To create a literary community

**The best advice on writing was given to me by my first editor, Michael Korda, of Simon and Schuster, while writing my first book. 'Finish your first draft and then we'll talk,' he said. It took me a long time to realize how good the advice was. Even if you write it wrong, write and finish your first draft. Only then, when you have a flawed whole, do you know what you have to fix.**  
— Dominick Dunne

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### **REQUIRED READING**

*Daily Rituals*; Mason Currey

Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors and Literary Agents 2017; Jeff Herman

### **WORKSHOPP**

Students will be asked to workshop at least the first two chapters of your book over the course of the semester. 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 writing assignments on a specific topic each week. These will serve to generate ideas that may be incorporated into your book, 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 "model book," a work which serves as an inspiration for *your* book. In this presentation you will discuss the author's techniques which you are mimicking, e.g. their use of voice, structure, or point of view, or perhaps their way of dealing with dialogue or controversial material. If you've written a thesis proposal, you probably listed several works that could be used as a model book.

### **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). 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 your schedule accordingly.

**Take your broken heart, make it into art.**  
**— Carrie Fisher**

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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 your contributions are 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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**I can't understand why a person will take a year or two  
to write a novel when he can easily buy one for a few dollars.**  
**— Fred Allen**

## GRADE REQUIREMENTS

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

- 40% 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)
- 10% book proposal
- 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/>

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**I have no taste for either poverty or honest labor,  
so writing is the only recourse left for me.  
— Hunter S. Thompson**