

The Writer's Journey
Creative Writing: Nonfiction Workshop
English 242, Section 1 -- Spring 2018
Instructor: Don George

ENGLISH 242

Professor Don George

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Office hours: Wed. 2:00-3:30 p.m. & by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

For me, nonfiction writing is a way to create a three-way connection between yourself, your experience in the world, and your reader. I have been a travel writer and editor for almost four decades, and my goal in this workshop is to pass on the lessons I have learned – from both sides of the writer-editor relationship -- about how to make this connection as compelling and complete as possible. The workshop will focus on craft, with special attention devoted to structure, development, takeaway, and the writing process. I will also cover how to prepare for a trip, take notes in the field, and determine your story after you return. In addition, the class will include discussion of outlets/markets for travel and other nonfiction writing, and advice on how to work with editors. Class assignments and activities will include reading and discussing exemplary travel stories, writing exercises, and critiquing each other's submitted work. My goal is to inform, entertain, and inspire – and as a writer, that should be your goal too. I will do my best to teach you what I've learned in four decades, and I expect you to do your best to pour your heart, passion, and intelligence into your work and into your critiques of your classmates' work. Writing requirements: In addition to writing exercises, students will be required to create at least three substantive nonfiction articles: one essay of from 750-1000 words, one narrative piece of from 1,500 to 3,000 words, and one piece of your choice, of from 1,000-3,000 words.

REQUIRED READING

The Way of Wanderlust: The Best Travel Writing of Don George, by Don George

How to Be a Travel Writer, by Don George

The Kindness of Strangers, edited by Don George

OPTIONAL READING

The Best American Travel Writing 2016, edited by Bill Bryson

An Innocent Abroad, edited by Don George

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR ENGLISH 242

- To understand the travel writing process
- To deepen your understanding of the spectrum of travel writing, from essay to narrative
- To hone your skills as nonfiction writers
- To hone your skills as editors
- To acquaint you with the methods of professional writers

WORKSHOP

Students will be asked to workshop three major pieces of travel writing over the course of the semester. One of these will be a short essay of 750-1000 words, one will be a narrative article of 1500-3000 words, and the third will be a piece of the student's choice, of from 1000-3000 words. We will work on these pieces in the workshop; the drafts you submit should be complete and as polished as possible. The final pieces you turn in to me should represent your best work.

During the workshop process, in addition to reading and refining/editing their own work, students will also learn to critique each other's work. Being a good critiquer is a special skill different from being a good writer. The key to successful critiquing is to identify and praise what is working successfully in a piece, identify and analyze what's not working successfully in a piece, and offer criticism designed to help the writer improve the piece, keeping in mind that the individual style and goals of the author may differ from one's own. Students whose pieces are due to be workshopped the following week should bring 16 copies of their work to the previous week's class and distribute them. Students should critique and line-edit classmates' work at home, and come to the class prepared to share their critiques and comments. Each student should prepare a one- or two-page analysis/critique of each piece being workshopped that week and bring two copies to class, one for the author and one for me.

SHORT ASSIGNMENTS

We will also write five one- to two-page assignments on a specific topic during the semester. These will be graded simply on quantity (the fact that you've done the assignment) rather than quality. As these assignments are not graded, I will not be providing comments on them, merely reading them for content.

MARKET PRESENTATION

Each student will give a brief presentation on how to submit to a publication which publishes travel. [Note: *Best American Travel Writing 2016*, which is one of the recommended reading books, is an excellent source for ideas.] This project will teach us how to research markets for our work by reading samples, studying the publication, and reviewing their submission guidelines. Each student will 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.

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
- page 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

Attendance is required, because English 242 depends on your participation in each class. 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.

GRADE REQUIREMENTS

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

60% workshop submissions (see grading guidelines below)

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

10% five one- to two-page assignments (on the number completed)

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.