

# Writing Nonfiction

## English 135, Section 1 – Spring 2020

**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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Office hours: Wednesdays 3–4:00 p.m.  
Class schedule: Tuesdays & Thursdays 12:00-1:15  
Classroom: Sweeney Hall 229  
Prerequisite: English 71

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

English 135 is an advanced 4-unit writing workshop in Creative Nonfiction (also referred to by some as the New Journalism, or Literary Journalism). You will read a variety of forms of the genre and learn a great deal about topics other than literature—which is the beauty of nonfiction. During the course of the semester you'll write a personal essay, a travel story, a profile, and a feature article. The various pieces you write will leave a nonfiction record of your world as you see it today, examining your own life, the physical planet, the people you share it with, and hopefully look at some of the forces that are driving them all.

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- ❖ Explore four subgenres of nonfiction: the personal essay, travel writing, profiles, and feature articles.
- ❖ Develop the skills of a thoughtful editor.
- ❖ Become an active part of a literary community, through writing, editing, discussion, attending events and becoming a participant in our class dialogue.

### **TEXTS**

*Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction (2nd edition)*; ed. Sondra Perl, Mimi Schwartz Reed, Volume 151, the California edition  
Links to random works which I will distribute

**The secret to getting ahead is getting started.**  
**— Mark Twain**

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**GUIDELINES**

In order to be successful in this course there are some simple guidelines to follow. First among these is to come to class prepared to participate. This means having done the assignments, read the material, then arriving equipped with questions, comments, and observations. In this class we will learn a great deal from each other, so discussion and creating a community of writers/critics is an integral part of the process. We will be looking at writing from many perspectives, so your ideas count.

The second guideline is to think and plan well ahead of assignments. Begin from day one to anticipate your schedule, topics for papers, research sources, etc. And third, if you have any questions with which you need further assistance, please feel free to consult me during my office hours. I am available via email, but only for brief questions; this medium should not be considered a substitute for an in-person conversation.

**WORKSHOP**

You will learn to critique other authors' work, which is a very different skill than being a talented 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. You will be divided into small workshop groups and will remain in these groups for the whole semester.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

You will be writing in four levels of increasing length and complexity. The first, completely informal level, is your in-class writing exercises. The second is short assignments of two pages in length; these will offer opportunities for you to experiment with different ideas and styles—completely free of risk—as you will be given credit for merely completing the assignment. The third category is the drafts of your full-length essays that you will workshop in class. The fourth category is the final version of the four major assignments, which will be graded. These should be 1,500-2,500 words in length and will be graded for overall quality. Naturally, all papers must be nonfiction, i.e. true stories.

**ATTENDANCE**

Required, because English 135 depends on your participation each class to function as a literary community. If you are ill, or are presented with an emergency that will cause you to miss more than two classes, please contact me as soon as possible.

**CLASS ETIQUETTE**

Please observe the following: no eating during class, no laptop use, and of course, no cell phone use.

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**Writing, which is my form of celebration and prayer,  
is also my form of inquiry.**  
**— Diane Ackerman**

**The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy.  
The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear,  
confiding everything from gossip to wisdom.**

**— Phillip Lopate**

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## **GRADES**

Your final grade will be comprised of the following:

Personal Essay	20%
Travel Essay	20%
Profile	20%
Feature Article	20%
Class Participation	10%
Short Assignments	10%

Grades are meant to reflect, quite simply, the quality of your work. Ninety percent of your grade will be based on your writing, and your 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. There are no exams for this class.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** 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, will immediately be reduced by one letter grade.** In other words, if you receive a C on a paper, but handed in late work, your final grade on the assignment will be a D. **Students must complete and turn in all four papers in order to PASS the 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 an upper-division undergraduate course.

F paper: is a failure to achieve the majority of requirements outlined above for an A paper.

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

**Literary journalism helps sort out the new complexity.  
If it is not an antidote to bewilderment, at least it unites  
daily experiences—including emotional ones—  
with the wild plenitude of information  
that can be applied to experience.  
— Mark Kramer**

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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
- 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.

#### **UNIVERSITY POLICIES**

Per University Policy S16-9 (<http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S16-9.pdf>), relevant information to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, dropping and adding, consent for recording of class, etc. is available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' Syllabus Information web page at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>. Make sure to review these university policies and resources.

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**Political language is designed to  
make lies sound truthful and murder respectable,  
and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.  
— George Orwell**