

San José State University Department of English and Comparative
Literature English 135: Writing Creative Nonfiction
Fall 2025

Prof. Keenan Norris

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Class Days/Time: T/TH 1:30-2:45PM Sweeney Hall 411

Office and Office Hours: T 11:30AM-1:30PM FOB 128

*"Life is sufficient unto life if it is lived and felt directly and deeply enough, and I would warn that we must beware of those who seek, in words no matter how urgent or crisis-charged, to interpose an alien or dubious curtain of reality between our eyes and the crying claims of a world which it is our lot to see only too poignantly and too briefly."—
Richard Wright in a 1944 letter to the artist Antonio Frasconi*

Course Description

This course is a creative writing workshop course in nonfiction. In this class, you will learn how to build nonfiction articles and stories from initial proposals to final polished drafts (and public readings). The key to your success in this workshop, and as a writer in general, is serious and constant work. So plan to be part of a “community of writers” this semester, constantly reading, writing, revising, and giving extensive feedback to other writers throughout the semester.

Department Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)

As stipulated by the English and Comparative Literature Department’s Curriculum Committee, students who earn a B.A. from this department will demonstrate the ability to:

- read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, or rhetoric
- show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American, and World Literature
- write clearly, effectively, and creatively, and adjust writing style appropriately to the content, the context, and nature of the subject
- develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively
- articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Pedagogical Approach

This course operates in a seminar/workshop format, with much more class conversation than instructor lecturing. You are expected to come to class prepared to participate every single class day. You are responsible for reading the following information online at <http://www.sjsu.edu/english/comp/policy/index.html>

- Course guidelines
- Academic policies (academic integrity, plagiarism, ADA and AEC policies)

- Estimation of Per-Unit Student Workload • Recording policies
- Adding and dropping classes

Required Texts

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin

Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City by Jane Wong

Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets (selected chapters) by Svetlana Alexievich

The Book of Delights by Ross Gay

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: extensive self-directed reading outside of class and consideration of that reading through a series of short blog posts.

Major Writing Assignments

*There will be three major writing assignments in this class. These will be as follows:

Two creative non-fiction essays of whatever type the student chooses (i.e., memoir, travel essay, etc.)

One interview-based essay

*Complete instructions for these essays can be found on Canvas

Literary Event Response Papers

You will write two Literary Event Response Paper assignments of a page or more.

Reflection papers on required reading

You will write three free-write reflection papers of a page or more about the assigned readings.

Workshop Participation

You will submit about 9,000-10,000 words of polished, revised prose this semester. All of your major writing assignments should be at least 2,000 words long, with some of them being longer so you can reach your 9,000-word minimum requirement. One of the assignments must include some sort of research, and only one may be written solely from personal experience. All of the projects may be written in first, second, or third person, or a combination of points of view. You must do the assignments in at least two different genres (i.e. profile, biography, opinion editorial, critical essay, narrative essay, etc.).

Active participation in the workshop portion of the class is mandatory.

*All assignments and projects (except those completed in class) must be typed, double-spaced, use a normal font (12pt. Times New Roman), and be submitted in the proper format (i.e. a query letter, a manuscript, etc.).

*All assignments are due on their announced due dates. Late work will be penalized one full letter grade for each class day that the project is late.

Grading Policy and Breakdown

Total grade is out of 250 points:

- Writing Assignment #1: 50 Points (Query/Proposal: 10 Points, Final Draft: 40 Points)
- Writing Assignment #2: 50 Points (Query/Proposal: 10 Points, Final Draft: 40 Points)
- Interview Project: 50 Points (Query/Proposal: 10 Points, Final Draft: 40 Points)
- Participation: 50 Points
- Literary event response papers: 20 Points
- Reflection Papers: 30 points

Determination of Grades

The Department of English and Comparative Literature reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined by the SJSU Catalog (Grades-Letter Grading).

Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A+/A/A- = excellent; B+/B/B- = above average; C+/C/C- = average; D+/D/D- = below average; F = failure.

Within any of the letter grade ranges (e.g. B+/B/B-), the assignment of a + or - grade will reflect stronger (+) or weaker (-) completion of the goals of the assignment.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>A+</i>	<i>97 to 100%</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>93 to 96%</i>
<i>A-</i>	<i>90 to 92%</i>
<i>B+</i>	<i>87 to 89 %</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>83 to 86%</i>
<i>B-</i>	<i>80 to 82%</i>
<i>C+</i>	<i>77 to 79%</i>
<i>Grade Percentage</i>	
<i>C</i>	<i>73 to 76%</i>

<i>C-</i>	<i>70 to 72%</i>
<i>D+</i>	<i>67 to 69%</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>63 to 66%</i>
<i>D-</i>	<i>60 to 62%</i>

Departmental Policy on Grading Written Assignments

Grades issued will adhere to the following SJSU academic standards of assessment:

The “ ‘A’ Range” essay will be well organized and well developed, demonstrating a clear understanding and fulfillment of the assignment. It will show the student’s ability to use language effectively, to construct sentences distinguished by syntactic complexity and variety and narrative distinguished by its development and its emotionally, comedically or intellectually compelling nature. Such essays will be essentially free of grammatical, mechanical, and usage errors.

The “ ‘B’ Range” essay will demonstrate competence in the same categories as the “ ‘A’ Range” essay. The chief difference is that the “ ‘B’ Range ” essay will show some slight weaknesses in one of those categories. It may slight one of the assigned tasks, show less facility of expression, or contain some minor grammatical, mechanical, or usage flaws.

The “ ‘C’ Range” essay will complete all tasks set by the assignment, but show weakness in fundamentals (usually development), with barely enough specific information to illustrate the experience or support generalizations. The sentence construction may be less mature, and the use of language less effective than the “ ‘B’ Range ” essay.

The “ ‘D’ Range” essay will neglect one of the assigned tasks and be noticeably superficial in its treatment of the assignment – that is, too simplistic or short. The essay may reveal some problems in development, with insufficient specific information to illustrate the experience. It will likely contain grammatical, mechanical, and usage errors that render some sentences incomprehensible.

The “F” essay will demonstrate a striking underdevelopment of ideas and insufficient or unfocused organization. It will contain serious grammatical, mechanical, and usage errors that render some sentences incomprehensible.

This course must be passed with a C or better as a CSU graduation requirement.

Note that “All students have the right, within a reasonable time, to know their academic scores, to review their grade-dependent work, and to be provided with explanations for the determination of their course grades.” See University Policy F13-1 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/F13-1.pdf> for more details.

Workshops

Workshops are the heart of this course. You are expected to be prepared for every workshop, and you are expected to be prepared to talk in class every day. A substantial portion of your grade comes from workshop participation and absences will affect your

workshop grade. 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, please refrain from using your cell phones during class.

Participation

Students are expected to attend class regularly and to thoughtfully engage in class discussion. Be open to relating to the work in various ways. This includes through your lived experience, previous reading, the way you respond to a character, like-able or not, or to a particular, unexpected turn of phrase—all of which you can adapt to your own writing. Allow your work (and yourself) to undergo a positive change. Thoughtful peer feedback and self-reflection is vital to succeeding in the course.

Attendance at Literary Readings

You are required to view (online or in-person) two readings by prose writers. Bay Area readings are listed in the Sunday editions of the *San Jose Mercury News* and *SF Gate*, and in *Metro*. After attending each reading, you will write a brief response (1-2 pages). Readings and writer talks the world over are now available to us 24/7 via Zoom. In your response papers, you may respond to any aspect of the reading, for example the speaker, the venue, the material performed, or the Q&A with the audience.

Late Assignment Policy

It is important that you turn in and workshop your stories/essays when you say you're going to. This is your most important responsibility. Late work will not be accepted if no prior arrangement has been agreed upon with the instructor.

Attendance

Students are expected to attend class sessions regularly. Students who do not do so will not pass the class.

Course Procedure

The course will include lecture, workshop and discussion on the assigned readings. A large aspect of the course is conducted in workshop format, which requires active student participation. Students who do not participate in the workshop aspect of the class will not be able to pass the class.

Workshop Etiquette

Workshop is a place for respectful and constructive criticism. It is also a place where students practice articulating what makes narrative non-fiction creative writing distinctive, interesting, and compelling to read. The author should take notes and remain silent as their work is being discussed. Spoken and written commentary from

peers must always be directed at the work, not the writer. Personal attacks and offensive or inappropriate language will not be tolerated. Students who cannot follow these guidelines will be dismissed from the course. If you receive any offensive comments on your work, please let me know as soon as possible so I can address the problem.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the intentional or unintentional illegal appropriation of "ideas or writings of another as one's own" (Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary). As a rule, you should document word-for-word quotations from a source, ideas from a source that you simply put in your own words, tables, charts, graphs and statistics.

*Any student caught plagiarizing any assignment will face appropriate disciplinary action.

Learning Environment

This course calls for and will provide a safe, secure learning environment where students can express their ideas, theories, opinions and views in a civil manner. All State, Federal and District codes protecting students' classroom rights apply in the on-line format and will be observed and enforced. For example, there will be no use of derogatory language (racial, sexual, etc).

Student code of conduct (SJSU classroom and campus policies)

Students are responsible for maintaining a respectful environment in the classroom. San Jose State is committed to maintaining a safe education and working environment free of discrimination, harassment and sexual violence. Policies are available online at: <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/policies/> http://notalone.sjsu.edu/policy_information/index.html

Per Title 5, the university prohibits "[activities] that substantially and materially disrupts the normal operations of the University" and "conduct that threatens or endangers the health or safety of any person within or related to the University community, including physical abuse, threats, intimidation, harassment, or sexual misconduct." Please keep this in mind as you submit work for this course. The work you create in this class should aspire to resemble in quality the work we read. The work should be literary and character driven (this class is not the place for cat poems, romances, fan-fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, and the like.) I will not tolerate any work that is gratuitously violent, pornographic. If you aren't sure about your work, see me before distributing it to your classmates.

Academic Integrity

Your commitment, as a student, to learning is evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University. The University Academic Integrity Policy S07-2 at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S07-2.pdf> requires you to be honest in all your academic course work.

Faculty members are required to report all infractions to the office of Student Conduct

and Ethical Development. The Student Conduct and Ethical Development website is available at <http://www.sjsu.edu/studentconduct/>.

Campus Policy in Compliance with the American Disabilities Act

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, please contact me as soon as possible. [Presidential Directive 97-03](http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD_1997-03.pdf) at http://www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/directives/PD_1997-03.pdf requires that students with disabilities requesting accommodations must register with the [Accessible Education Center](http://www.sjsu.edu/aec) (AEC) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/aec> to establish a record of their disability.

Accommodation to Students' Religious Holidays

San José State University shall provide accommodation on any graded class work or activities for students wishing to observe religious holidays when such observances require students to be absent from class. It is the responsibility of the student to inform the instructor, in writing, about such holidays before the add deadline at the start of each semester. If such holidays occur before the add deadline, the student must notify the instructor, in writing, at least three days before the date that he/she will be absent. It is the responsibility of the instructor to make every reasonable effort to honor the student request without penalty, and of the student to make up the work missed. See [University Policy S14-7](http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S14-7.pdf) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/senate/docs/S14-7.pdf>.

Student Technology Resources

(The following is subject to change due to pandemic-related restrictions, which are likely to fluctuate. The following represents only a best case scenario.)

Computer labs for student use are available in the [Academic Success Center](http://www.sjsu.edu/at/asc/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/at/asc/> located on the 1st floor of Clark Hall and in the Associated Students Lab on the 2nd floor of the Student Union. Additional computer labs may be available in your department/college. Computers are also available in the Martin Luther King Library. A wide variety of audio-visual equipment is available for student checkout from Media Services located in IRC 112. These items include DV and HD digital camcorders; digital still cameras; video, slide and overhead projectors; DVD, CD, and audio-tape players; sound systems, wireless microphones, projection screens and monitors.

SJSU Peer Connections

(The following is subject to change due to pandemic-related restrictions, which are likely to fluctuate. The following represents only a best case scenario.)

Peer Connections, a campus-wide resource for mentoring and tutoring, strives to inspire students to develop their potential as independent learners while they learn to successfully navigate through their university experience. You are encouraged to take advantage of their services which include course-content based tutoring, enhanced study and time management skills, more effective critical thinking strategies, decision making and problem-solving abilities, and campus resource referrals. In addition to offering small group, individual, and drop-in tutoring for a number of undergraduate

courses, consultation with mentors is available on a drop-in or by appointment basis. Workshops are offered on a wide variety of topics including preparing for the Writing Skills Test (WST), improving your learning and memory, alleviating procrastination, surviving your first semester at SJSU, and other related topics. A computer lab and study space are also available for student use in Room 600 of Student Services Center (SSC). Peer Connections is located in three locations: SSC, Room 600 (10th Street Garage on the corner of 10th and San Fernando Street), at the 1st floor entrance of Clark Hall, and in the Living Learning Center (LLC) in Campus Village Housing Building B. Visit [Peer Connections website](http://peerconnections.sjsu.edu) at <http://peerconnections.sjsu.edu> for more information.

SJSU Counseling Services

(The following is subject to change due to pandemic-related restrictions, which are likely to fluctuate. The following represents only a best case scenario.)

The SJSU Counseling Services is located on the corner of 7th Street and San Fernando Street, in Room 201, Administration Building. Professional psychologists, social workers, and counselors are available to provide consultations on issues of student mental health, campus climate or psychological and academic issues on an individual, couple, or group basis. To schedule an appointment or learn more information, visit [Counseling Services website](http://www.sjsu.edu/counseling) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/counseling>.

Final Examination/Evaluation

In lieu of a final exam, you will turn in a substantial revision of one of your workshop essay submissions. Examples of changes that might be included in a substantial revision include adding or deleting a character, changing the point of view, inserting a new scene, and altering the ending of the story. It is not enough simply to correct the spelling and grammatical errors of the first draft. To earn a high grade on the revision, you must alter the story in some significant way. The revision is due the last day of class, but can be submitted earlier if the student wishes to workshop the piece and can find space in the class schedule for that.

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.

Fall 2025 Course Schedule

Please note that this schedule is subject to change. You will be notified ahead of time of any changes

Week 1

Welcome and Introduction to the Course.

The Many Genres of Nonfiction.

Complete Writing Assignment Zero: Form workshop groups.

Prep: Think about your first project. Prepare your pitch.

For Tuesday: Read *The Fire Next Time*

Week 2

Building the Work

Pitch/Proposal meeting.

Draft of pitch.

Workshop pitches.

Reading: *The Fire Next Time*

First Pitch due (Sunday)

Week 3

Prep: Work on Writing Assignment #1, which follows from the pitch. Research: Gathering Information. Workshop first paragraphs.

Thursday: Read Bourdain, “Under the Volcano”

Reflection essay on *The Fire Next Time*: due Sunday night

Thursday: Read Jean Guerrero's “How I Crossed the Border Back to Myself”

Week 4

Rough draft for Writing Assignment #1 due Mon. 3PM. Groups read drafts, make notes for full-class workshop. Full-Class Workshop

Writing Assignment #1 due Tues. midnight

Reading: *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City*

Week 5 (*Class will be held online*)

Meet with Your Workshop Groups

Prep: Brainstorm Interview Profile/Q&A essay

Writing exercises: Observation exercise; Meditation writing exercise

Reading: *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City*

Week 6

Reading: *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City*

Author Visit: Jane Wong

Prep: Bring pitch rough drafts to class for roundtable discussion

Submit pitch by Thur. midnight

Week 7

For Tues.: Read "Remarks From An Accomplice" and "On Ivanushka the Fool and the Magic Goldfish" from *Secondhand Time*; work on Interview Profile/Q&A essay (see Canvas for assignment instructions)

For Thur.: Read "On the Lonely Red Marshal and Three Days of Forgotten Revolution" (page 107) and "A Man's Story" (195) from *Secondhand Time*

Week 8

For Thur.: Complete essay rough draft, workshop essay rough drafts

For Thur.: Read "A Woman's Story" (page 205) and "On a Loneliness that Resembles Happiness" (page 337) from *Secondhand Time*

Week 9

Reading for Tues.: Read "A Woman's Story" (page 205) and "On a Loneliness that Resembles Happiness" (page 337) from *Secondhand Time*; for Thur.: "On Wanting to Kill Them All and the Horror of Realizing that You Really Wanted to do it" (page 350) and "On the Darkness of the Evil One and The Other Life We Can Build Out of This One" (page 434) from *Secondhand Time*

Week 10

For Tues.: Read Kiese Laymon's "Crystal Visions" essay
Short reflection paper (1 page) on *Secondhand Time* due.

Thur.: Read "The Life We Pay For" by Tina Ontiveros (on Canvas)

Week 11

Tues.: Read the Preface and ten or more essayettes from Ross Gay's *Book of Delights*

Thur.: Read ten more essayettes from Ross Gay's *Book of Delights*

Week 12

Tues.: Read Rebecca Solnit's "Men Explain Things to Me"

Thur.: (*Class will be held online*)

Week 13

For Tues. read Roxane Gay's "Peculiar Benefits"

For Thur. read Esme Weijun Wang's "Why My Novel Uses Untranslated Chinese"

Meet with Your Workshop Groups, Workshop Revisions

Prep: Finish Revisions/Third Essay

Week 14

For Tues.: Read ["Building a Community of Love"](#)

Finalize Revisions/Original Essay.

Full draft of reflection essay (2 pages) on your writing and *The Fire Next Time*, *Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City*, *Book of Delights* or *Secondhand Time*.

Week 16

Finalize Revisions/Original Essay.

Full draft of reflection essay (2 pages) on your writing and *The Fire Next Time*, *Book of Delights* or *Secondhand Time*.