

ENGLISH 4761, FALL 2009
Creative Nonfiction Writing
T/TH 12:30 – 1:45
Coleman Hall 3159

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and by appointment

“If you can’t annoy somebody, there’s little point in writing.”

-- Kingsley Amis

Purpose of the Course

This course is designed to help students craft various short non-fiction pieces such as personal reminiscences and descriptive narratives. This class encourages writers to discover what they want to express, to develop the focus of their material, to organize their work effectively, and to manage stylistic aspects such as tone and voice.

Books and Materials

The Art of Creative Nonfiction by Lee Gutkind
The Art of the Personal Essay by Phillip Lopate
Writing True by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz

Requirements

1. Read the assigned material by the assigned date and participate in class discussions and occasional in-class writing exercises.
2. Participate in workshops: 1) Submit at least two essays for class critique; 2) critique the work of classmates in an insightful and constructive manner.
3. Submit a portfolio of creative work at the end of the semester. The portfolio will include all four of your essays, including revisions. Your portfolio may also include in-class writing you’ve revised and typed up.

Grade Breakdown

Writing Portfolio: 80%
Attendance/Participation 20%

Writing Portfolio

In creative writing courses, grading is a necessary evil. Writers develop at their own pace, and teachers may be partial to certain styles or genres. I have found through experience that a specific grade on every written piece of work sometimes discourages writers. Often they look at the grade and forgo the comments. Or, if their grade is a B+, they ask themselves, “Why not an A-?” We will talk in class about grading procedures. Portfolios, where one grade is given at the end for your entire creative output, work to your advantage.

Attendance/Participation

Since the format of this class is primarily workshop, participation is extremely important. In addition, many of the ideas used in your essays will be generated in discussions or in-class writing. I realize, however, that emergencies do occur. Excused absences are those outlined in the student catalogue: “illness, emergency, or university activity.” Unexcused absences are pretty much all others—oversleeping, hangovers, finishing papers for other classes, out-of-town trips “because I’m homesick.” Unexcused absences will lower your attendance/participation grade.

Workshopping Procedure

A large part of this course will be devoted to the workshop, a method widely used in creative writing courses of all kinds. This is how it works: You make a copy of your piece for every member of the class. You hand it out to students the class day **before the essay is to be workshopped**. You read your essay out loud. Class members have a few minutes to write down additional comments, questions, and suggestions for revision. (Most of the written critique should have taken place outside of class.) Class members discuss strengths and weaknesses (you remain silent.) At the end of discussion you respond to the critique and have the option of asking for more feedback on specific sections that the class may have overlooked. Feel free to take notes on what is said in order to help you revise.

The idea of class critique makes some people nervous. You may feel uncomfortable at first. Over the course of the semester, however, you will begin to find the comments and suggestions of the class and the instructor invaluable.

Guidelines/policies for criticism:

- 1) We’ll begin with a more general opinion of the work. Example: “My sense is that you’re trying for a tone of ironic humor throughout the piece. I think that, for the most part, you’ve succeeded, though the ending seems too flippant.” Or: “I like this piece, especially the dialogue, but feel that it’s too long.”

We’ll then move on to more specific comments. Example: “There’s a lot of repetition of the word ‘interesting’ in paragraph three.” Or: “You have a tendency to overuse commas.”

- 2) Be honest. False praise does not help the writer in any way and compromises your role as critic.
- 3) Criticism should not be mean-spirited or vengeful. And it goes without saying that sexist, racist, homophobic or otherwise inappropriate comments will not be tolerated.
- 4) When it comes to taking criticism, be open-minded, but remember that what you revise—what you leave in, add, leave out—is ultimately your decision. Some remarks will resonate more clearly than others for you.

NOTE: When you turn in a workshopped essay, please also submit 3 student copies with what you feel is the most helpful feedback and constructive criticism. At the end of the semester, the 3 students who’ve been submitted the most as effective critiquers will get prizes and extra participation credit.

CLASS SCHEDULE

#1	08/25	Introductions/In-class writing
	08/27	Read Chapters 1 and 3 in <i>Writing True</i> Read Brian Doyle, “Being Brians,” in <i>Writing True</i> , 227
#2	09/01	Mini-workshop (bring three copies of your piece to class)
	09/03	Workshop – Essay 1 (or in-class writing)
#3	09/08	Workshop – Essay 1
	09/10	Workshop – Essay 1
#4	09/15	First assignment due Read David Sedaris, “Let it Snow” (208) and Charles Simic, “Dinner at Uncle Boris” (271) in <i>Writing True</i>
	09/17	Read Chapters 4 and 10 in <i>Writing True</i> ; read Chapter 3 in <i>The Art of Creative Nonfiction</i>
#5	09/22	Workshop – Essay 2
	09/24	Workshop -- Essay 2
#6	09/29	Workshop
	10/01	Workshop
#7	10/06	Workshop
	10/08	Second assignment due Read Nora Ephron, “A Few Words about Breasts” (200) and Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” (210) in <i>Writing True</i> Also, Robert Benchley, “My Face” (511) in <i>Art of the Personal Essay</i>
#8	10/13	Workshop – Essay 3
	10/15	Workshop – Essay 3
#9	10/20	Workshop
	10/22	Workshop
#10	10/27	Workshop
	10/29	Workshop
#11	11/03	Third assignment due Read Shonagon, “Hateful Things” (24), Kenko, “Lessons in Idleness” (30), and Ginzburg, “He and I” (421) in <i>Art of the Personal Essay</i>
	11/05	Read Toth, “Going to the Movies” (280) in <i>Writing True</i> ; In-class writing
#12	11/10	Workshop – Essay 4
	11/12	Workshop – Essay 4
#13	11/17	Workshop
	11/19	TBA

THANKSGIVING BREAK

#14	12/01	Workshop
	12/03	Workshop
#15	12/08	Fourth assignment due
	12/10	Talk about publishing; read Appendix 2, 3, and 4 in <i>The Art of Creative Nonfiction</i>

NOTE: I may make minor changes to this syllabus in order to suit the needs of the class. Changes will always be announced in advance.

FINAL PORTFOLIOS DUE: Tuesday, December 15th, 5:00, in my office
(You may turn them in earlier if you like)

NO FINAL EXAM in this class