

Eastern Illinois University

The Keep

Summer 2020

2020

Summer 6-15-2020

ENG 4761-600: Advanced Nonfiction Writing

Daiva Markelis

Eastern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_summer2020

Recommended Citation

Markelis, Daiva, "ENG 4761-600: Advanced Nonfiction Writing" (2020). *Summer 2020*. 8.
https://thekeep.eiu.edu/english_syllabi_summer2020/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the 2020 at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Summer 2020 by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

ENGLISH 4761: Advanced Creative Nonfiction Summer 2020

Daiva Markelis
dmmarkelis@eiu.edu
(217) 549-8352

IMPORTANT COURSE INFORMATION

Online Access: This 8-week course will be conducted asynchronously through D2L, beginning June 1st and ending July 26th. At minimum, you will need a stable internet connection, an EIU user ID, password, and email account, and a computer.

Technical Assistance: A D2L/technical support widget ("Help for Students") is included on the course homepage. For D2L support, call 1.877.325.7778 (toll free and available 24/7), or use email support on the D2L welcome page. If you are experiencing issues with D2L, review the "D2L Performance Checklist" in the "Help for Students" widget. If you have technical questions about software, hardware, network issues, EIU Net ID and password, or Panthermail, contact EIU Technology Support at 217.581.4357, or submit a help request at <https://techsupport.eiu.edu/>.

Instructor Access, Response Time, and Office Hours: Email is the best way to get in touch with me. I try to answer emails as quickly as possible—my goal is to respond to all emails within 24 hours. Also, I would be glad to confer via Collaborate Ultra, available in D2L, or by telephone at (217) 549-8352. You can also try to reach me at (217) 348-9230. My summer schedule is quite flexible. We can work together to find a time convenient for both of us.

I will provide feedback for assignments via D2L or email. Within D2L, feedback typically shows up in Grades or in the Dropbox. For the major essays, I will leave feedback no later than 48 hours after the submission deadline.

University Policies and Resources

(1) Academic integrity - Students are expected to maintain principles of academic integrity and conduct as defined in EIU's Code of Conduct (<http://www.eiu.edu/judicial/studentconductcode.php>) Violations will be reported to the Office of Student Standards.

(2) Students with disabilities - If you are a student with a documented disability in need of accommodations to fully participate in this class, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (OSDS). All accommodations must be approved through OSDS. Please stop by Ninth Street Hall, Room 2006, or call 217-581-6583.

(3) The Student Success Center - Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center (www.eiu.edu/~success) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to 9th Street Hall, Room 1302.

(4) Please visit the Writing Center if you need help with any aspect of writing, including organization, development, verb tense, sentence structure, and comma use. This semester, Summer 2020, all consultations occur online using Microsoft Teams, Collaborate Ultra, or other available platforms. Please visit <https://www.eiu.edu/writing/> to make an appointment. You may also email the Writing Center directly at writingcenter@eiu.edu. Please note that appointments should be booked 24 hours in advance.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Course Description

In this class students will develop a repertoire of artistic strategies in the writing of literary nonfiction prose. Students will deepen their understanding of the subgenres of creative nonfiction, including memoir, the personal essay, literary journalism (including travel, nature, and sports writing), and hybrid forms such as the lyric essay through short readings and discussion. Three essays of varying lengths will be required.

Catalog Description of the Course

Advanced practice in the writing and revising of creative nonfiction, with an emphasis on the development of the student's individual style. May be repeated once with permission of the Department Chairperson. Three credit hours.

Objectives of the Course

Students will develop advanced ability and a repertoire of artistic strategies in the writing of literary nonfiction prose.

Students will deepen their understanding of creative nonfiction and its subgenres through intensive readings of contemporary authors.

Students will develop critical reading skills through intensive study of classic and contemporary writings in the genre.

Students will confront the various issues inherent in the practice of creative nonfiction, such as the tension between differing prose styles, the stance of personal voice and vision, and the importance of meditative/artistic approaches to experience.

Students will develop interpersonal skills and intellectual rigor through vigorous workshop participation.

TEXTS

Writing True by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz

Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction by Lex Wilford and Michael Martone

Additional readings will be available in D2L or provided via links to external resources.

ASSIGNMENTS and GRADING

	Percentage	Points
1. Three Essays		
• Short Memoir	20%	200
• Personal Essay	20%	200
• Literary Journalism Piece	20%	200
2. Eight Discussion Posts	20%	200 (25 pts each)
3. Peer Critiques	<u>20%</u>	<u>200 (67 pts each round of critiques)</u>
	100%	1000 pts

You will find descriptions of the three essays at the end of this syllabus (as well as on D2L) in addition to the rubric I use to grade.

Final grades will be calculated on a ten-point scale (i.e., 100 to 90 =A, 89.99 to 80 = B, and so on).

Late Work: Late work will slow down the class because so much of what we'll be doing will depend on the responses of others. If you have an emergency, please let me know as soon as possible. Extensions will be given at my discretion.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Discussion post assignments and due dates are bolded.

Drafts of essays and their due dates are italicized.

**Critiques of student essays (due dates) have asterisks in front of them.

Final drafts of essays are bolded and underlined.

Week 1 (June 1 to 7)

Introductions to the Course and to Creative Nonfiction

Learn to use the discussion forums/introduce yourself to the class. Very brief non-graded entry on Discussions by Tuesday, June 2nd, 11:59 p.m. Explanation in D2L.

Post 1: *Getting to Know You* response due by Wednesday, June 3, 11:59 pm.

**Briefly comment on 4 responses by Saturday, June 6, 11:59 p.m.

Read Chapters 1 and 10 in *Writing True* and *Do I Own My Story* and *The Ethics of Telling All: What's at Stake in Memoir Writing*.

Post 2: Ethical issues involved in creative nonfiction due Sunday, June 7th, 11:59 p.m. (Commenting on other posts is optional this week.)

Week 2 (June 8 to 14)

Writing Memoir: Approaches and Techniques

Read the following essays. From *Writing True: Let it Snow* (208) by David Sedaris and *Dinner with Uncle Boris* (217) by Charles Simic. From *The Touchstone Anthology: The Fourth State of Matter* (1) by Jo Ann Beard. Also read *Before Love, Memory* by Daisy Hernandez (link provided).

Post 3: Elements of Fiction in Memoir Writing due by Tuesday, June 9, 11:59 p.m. (Comments on other posts is optional.)

Post 4: Freewriting for Short Memoir due by Thursday, June 11, 11:59 p.m.
 **Also, brief responses to four of the freewriting posts due by Sunday, June 14, 11:59 p.m. (You can just saying something like "I like option one the best.")

Week 3 (June 15 to 21)

Writing Memoir: Approaches and Techniques, Continued

Draft of Assignment One due for class critique by Wednesday, June 17, 11:59 p.m.

***Critique responses by classmates due by Friday, June 19, 11:59 p.m.*

Final draft of Short Memoir (Assignment One) due in Dropbox by next Monday, June 22, 11:59 p. m.

Week 4 (June 22 to 28)

Memoir and the Personal Essay

Read the following essays: *Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self* (210) by Alice Walker and *A Few Words About Breasts* (200) by Nora Ephron. In the Touchstone Anthology read *Bad Eyes* (360) by Erin McGraw. Also read *What Fullness Is* by Roxane Gay and *Navigating Beauty Standards as a Trans Woman* by Kaitlyn Burns.

Post 5: Writing About the Body by Wednesday, June 24, 11:59 p.m.
 (Responses to other posts is optional.)

Post 6: Freewriting for Assignment Two due Friday, June 26, 11:59 p.m.

**Also, brief responses to the freewriting by Sunday, June 28, 11:59 p.m

Week 5 (June 29 to July 5)

Memoir and the Personal Essay, Continued

Draft of Assignment Two due for class critique by Tuesday, June 30, 11:59 p.m.

**Critique responses by classmates due by Friday, July 3, 11:59 p.m.

Final draft of Assignment Two due to in Dropbox by Tuesday, July 7th, 11:59 p.m.

Week 6 (July 6 to 12)

What is Literary Journalism

Begin by reading *Creative Nonfiction and Literary Journalism*. In *Writing True* read *Seven Ways to Gather Information* in *Writing True* (154-162). Also in *Writing True*, read *Among Schoolchildren* (309) by Tracy Kidder. In the *Touchstone Anthology*, read *Living Like Weasels* (148) by Annie Dillard and *Consider the Lobster* (545) by David Foster Wallace. Read the following selections with links below: *How to Spend 47 Hours on a Train*, *Not Here to Make Friends*, and *Latina Writers*.

Watch Susan Orlean video on finding subjects for writing. (Optional).

Post 7: What is Literary Journalism due Thursday, July 9th, 11:59 p.m.

**Please respond to three people by Sunday, July 12th, 11:59 p.m.

Week 7 (July 13 to 19)

What is Literary Journalism, Continued

Draft of Assignment Three due for class critique in Discussion by Tuesday, the 14th

**Critique responses by classmates due by Friday, July 17th

Final draft of Assignment Three due in Dropbox by Monday, July 21 p.m.

Week 8 (July 20 to 23)

Experimental Nonfiction

Read in *Touchstone*: *Son of Mr. Green Jeans* by Dinty Moore (389), *The Glass Essay* by Anne Carson (97), and *The Pain Scale* by Eula Biss (28).

Post 8: Short Experimental Essay due Wednesday, July 23, 11:59 p.m.

ASSIGNMENT ONE: Short Memoir (200 points)

After reading the essays for Week Two and writing about them, as well as freewriting possible scenarios, you probably have some sense of the nature of the first assignment: write about a slice of your life, an event that covers no more than two days and has left some kind of impression on you. It can be something small that revealed an aspect of another person (or of yourself) that you hadn't been aware of. It can be a bigger event that changed your life. In other words, you'll be writing what's sometimes called a mini-memoir, though I prefer the term Short Memoir.

There are no restrictions in terms of the period of your life--you can write about childhood, adolescence, or a fairly recent occurrence. You can include family members, friends, romantic partners, pets, etc. You can write in the present tense or in the past.

The tone of your writing can be serious, funny, poetic, philosophical. If you're stuck for ideas, see the attachment *Fifty Creative Nonfiction Prompts* in the last module, titled Resources for Writers. Numbers 5, 10, 13, 19, 21, 22, 29, 36, 45, 46.

Other requirements:

1. I would like you to use some dialogue in your piece. How much you use is up to you. If you need some information about how to use dialogue, you will find handouts under the Resources section.
2. Your essay needs a title. Don't simply write Assignment One. Also, don't underline, italicize, or bold titles.
3. Grammar counts.
4. Please double-space.

Your essay should be from 4 to 8 typed double-spaced pages.

The due date for you to post your essay to Discussion is Wednesday, June 17th at 11:59 p. m. This should be as full a draft as possible—that is, you need to fulfill the page requirements. Remember that you will be able to revise.

You must complete critiques for the members of your group by Friday, June 17th, 11:59 p.m. I know this isn't a lot of time, but you won't be giving feedback to everyone, only the members of your group. There are 15 students in this class. Divide that by three and you have five people to a group. So, you'll be looking at four different essays.

The due date to post your final paper to me in Dropbox is Monday, June 22, 11:59 p.m.

ASSIGNMENT TWO: The Personal Essay (200 points)

The human body is beautiful and flawed and unpredictable. Sometimes we betray it; other times we feel betrayed by it. The authors we discussed in this module write about their bodies in interesting, sometimes humorous, sometimes poetic ways. Using their essays as models, write a creative nonfiction piece about your physical self. Keep in mind that a personal essay can be a form of memoir and thus very similar to the small memoirs we just finished writing: you can focus on a time in your life when you realized your body could do wonderful things—run a marathon or climb a really big tree—or you can write about a time when you were ill or in an accident and how you healed (or didn't.) In this assignment, feel free to go back and forth in time, to speculate on how others who've gone through similar experiences handled these events, and to ponder how this experience changed you.

You may instead choose to write about a certain body part—your eyes, your feet, hands, your skin, etc. You may write about what people (including yourself) do to or with their bodies and why—hair coloring, tattoos, diets, etc. You can talk about gender—how does your body and the clothes you wear fit in (or not) with cultural expectations of what *real* men and women should look like? How do you subvert these expectations? You can write about what happened to your hair during COVID. (And maybe include before and after photos?) You can write about wearing or not wearing masks.

You may use dialogue in your piece but you don't have to. Yes, your essay still needs a title. And, yes, grammar still counts.

Please double-space.

Your essay should be from 4 to 8 typed double-spaced pages.

The due date for you to post your essay to Discussion is Tuesday, June 30th, at 11:59 p.m. This should be as full a draft as possible—that is, you need to fulfill the page requirements. Remember that you will be able to revise.

You must complete critiques for the members of your group by Friday, July 3, 11:59 p.m.

The due date to post your final paper to me in Dropbox is Tuesday, July 7th, 11:59 p.m.

ASSIGNMENT THREE: Literary Journalism Essay (200 points)

One way to look at literary journalism is to see it as a research-based personal essay. When you wrote your personal essays on the body, you probably **didn't** do much research, whether that research was in the form of reading articles on the topic or interviewing people. If you wrote your paper on the ways you've styled or colored your hair, you probably didn't refer to the fact that young women in the 1920s who cut their hair short were considered to be independent and sexually rebellious. If you were to include such information, your essay would start veering towards literary journalism. If you wrote about having asthma and then interviewed a specialist who believes there's a connection between early onset asthma and adult anxiety, you'd be writing an essay that melds the journalistic with the personal.

Literary journalism encompasses a wide range of topics and approaches, as you undoubtedly noticed when you read the articles for this module. Travel writing often falls under the category of literary journalism, though it can also be purely memoiristic. So, if you want to write a travel piece, you'll probably need to do some historical or geographical research and/or do a lot of personal observation—in any case, the focus should not be just on you. You can write about your COVID experience and talk to a shop owner about their feelings and also to someone who's survived the infection—that would make an interesting journalistic essay. In any case, these kinds of essays usually take some time to develop, so I'll be less stringent in my assessment. (I also think these are the hardest kind of essays to write.)

In our readings, I included two examples of book reviews. Book reviews (and film reviews) are by their nature journalistic, but they can also be personal. Feel free to mimic what the writers of the book reviews are doing in terms of form.

Your essay should be from 4 to 8 typed double-spaced pages.

The due date for you to post your essay to Discussion is Tuesday, July 14th at 11:59 p. m. This should be as full a draft as possible—that is, you need to fulfill the page requirements.

You must complete critiques for the members of your group by Thursday, July 16th, 11:59 p.m.

The due date to post your final paper to me in Dropbox is Monday, July 21st, 11:59 p.m.

CREATIVE NONFICTION RUBRIC

Total Points:

Ideas/Organization/Content—80 points

- Essay writer follows directions and fulfills essay requirements. Example: the Short Memoir is a short memoir that incorporates dialogue, not a book review. The essay is a minimum of 4 double-spaced pages.
- The essay conveys a clear sense of a guiding idea (not a hodgepodge of plots or actions.)
- The beginning is effective and pulls the reader in.
- The presentation of the self is convincing, interesting, and fleshed out.
- Other characters are developed and easily differentiated.
- The action is easy to follow.
- The setting is clear and sufficiently detailed.
- The ending is effective, fitting, and provides a sense of completion.

Style/Voice—60 points

- Vivid and imaginative descriptive details are present.
- The writing reflects a unique, consistent personal voice.
- Dialogue, when appropriate, is realistic, used judiciously, and properly formatted.

Word Choice / Sentence Fluency—40 points

- Word choice is inventive, sophisticated, and appropriate for work.
- Sentences read smoothly, making it easy to decipher meaning.
- Sentence structure is varied and complex or deliberately manipulated to affect style.

Conventions—20 points

- Spelling is correct throughout piece.
- Punctuation is used correctly.
- Punctuation is deliberately manipulated in a sophisticated manner to affect style.
- There is a properly formatted title.

DISCUSSION POSTS (25 points each)

There are eight discussion posts for this class. This may seem like a lot, but four of them are informal and fun (I'm hoping) creative writing exercises. In my face to face classes, I do a lot of in-class free-writing where I give students twenty or so minutes to write on a certain topic. Think of these four as examples of online freewriting. I'm a big believer in freewriting as a generator of essay topics. You may use what you've written in these posts as material for your bigger essays.

The four freewriting posts don't have to be grammatically perfect. What I'm looking for here is engagement with your topic and the willingness to take chances in your writing.

The other four discussion posts have to do with the readings from the textbooks or additional readings I've posted in each module. They should make very clear that you understood the readings and had something interesting/insightful to say about them. They should be well-organized and developed.

Every post will have specific instructions. Some of them require you to respond to the posts of others.

I will set up the discussion posts in a way that you have to post before you can see anyone else's post.

PEER CRITIQUES

An important part of any creative writing class is having others comment on your writing. You, in turn, will be commenting on theirs. In a class of fifteen (the current number enrolled in 4761 at this time), we won't be able to have every person comment on every piece of writing. What I hope to do is put you in groups—three groups of five seems reasonable to me, with groups changing members with each assignment. That means you won't have more than 4 writers to critique at a time.

Since there are 3 rounds of critiques, and since critiques are 20% of your grade, you'll get sixty-seven points for each round for a total of 201 points. (Yes, you get an extra point for doing nothing. You're welcome.)

The idea of class critique makes some people nervous. It certainly made me nervous when I was a student. I gradually came to realize that I'd never develop as a writer if I didn't ask for constructive feedback.

Here are some suggestions for effective critique:

- 1) I like to begin with a positive remark about the work. If everyone is trying hard, there will be something of interest, something at the very least worthy of further exploration. Simply writing "I can relate to your essay—it really struck a chord" is

fine. Sometimes you'll read an essay that just blows you over. It's okay to write: "Wow. This is fantastic—you are such a talented writer. I loved every word of this." If you dislike like a work, ask yourself why. It might be because the topic makes you uncomfortable or that you feel the essay is rushed or is difficult to read because of sentence level errors. Even in these instances, however, try to be positive. Writing is hard.

- 2) Take into account what you think the writer is aiming for. For example, you might write: "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." If the writer's motive is unclear, you might say "I'm not quite sure what you're getting at with this topic."
- 3) Be honest about what could be better in the essay. It could be something specific such as that the conclusion is too formulaic, or *wrappy-uppy*, as I like to call it. Very often certain sections can be taken out to make writing *flow* better. Conversely, many pieces need to be more fully developed. Don't be afraid to give concrete suggestion such as "I'd love to hear more about your dad. He's barely mentioned, but seems like an interesting character."

Don't ignore stylistic or grammatical issues. Example: "There's a lot of repetition of the word 'interesting' in paragraph three." Or: "You have a tendency to overuse commas."

Keep in mind that criticism should never be mean-spirited or vengeful. And it goes without saying that sexist, racist, homophobic or otherwise inappropriate comments will not be tolerated.

Your critiques should be several paragraphs long. Feel free to refer to the rubric I will use when critiquing your papers. It's on page 9 of this syllabus.

- 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. I like to implement the 50% rule. If more than half of my readers are troubled by something, I look very carefully at the criticism and usually revise that section of the paper.