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ENG 2001-001: Creative Writing: Creative Nonfiction

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The goal of this course is to help you become a better writer and reader of nonfiction, as well as to help you develop your critical skills in evaluating creative works in progress. In addition, you will gain a basic familiarity with several styles of prose written over the last 50 years. You will begin to find your own voice in the context of the contemporary nonfiction idiom.

Texts:
- On Writing Well. Zinsser.
- Pink Houses and Family Taverns. Bradway.
- The White Album. Didion.

Schedule of Assignments:

Jan.
12 Intro to course. What is Creative Nonfiction?
19 King’s Birthday—No Class
30 Workshop.

Feb.
4 R 299-301, 235-254. Turn in Literary Memoir.
6 R 254-286.
9 Conferences.
11 Conferences.
13 Lincoln’s Birthday—No Class. Be reading Bradway.
18 Ditto, 111-229.
19 Thursday reading: Becky Bradway at 4:30, Lumpkin Hall Auditorium.
20 Becky Bradway Visits Class. Each student should devise 3 questions to ask the visiting writer.

25 Workshop.
27 Workshop.

Mar.  1  **Literary Journalism.** Z 95-115. R 303-336. **Turn in Personal Essay.**
  5  R 364-392.

  8 Conference. R 392-406.
10 Conference.
12 Conference.

Spring Break—March 15—19

22 Workshop.
24 Workshop.
26 Workshop.

29  **Creative Cultural Criticism.** R 423, 517-533. **Turn in Literary Journalism Essay.**
  31 R 534-563.


  5 Conference. Didion 133-152.
  7 Conference.
  9 Conference.

12 Workshop.
14 Workshop.
16 Workshop.

  21 R 424-429, 442-449.
  23 R 500-517.

26 Conferences
28 Workshop
30 Workshop. **Travel, Nature or Science Essay due May 5, 3pm.**
Grade calculation:

- Literary Memoir: 10%
- Personal Essay: 15%
- Literary Journalism: 20%
- Cultural Critique: 20%
- Travel, Nature or Science: 25%
- Class Participation: 10%

**Plagiarism:** Here is the English Dept. policy—"Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—'The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's original work' (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office."

**Attendance:** Class attendance is mandatory and expected. Class participation is an essential part of the course and of your development as an educated, articulate person. Since class participation is contingent on attendance, more than 6 unexcused absences will lower your class participation grade to an F. As outlined in the student catalogue, I will consider an absence excused only for "reasons of illness, emergency, or university activity." If you are having a problem, please contact me by phone, email or in person in my office so we can discuss the matter. Also, please try to avoid being late—it is disturbing to the flow of class, and therefore a significant pattern of tardiness will lower your class participation grade.

**Office hours:** Please feel free to drop in to chat with me during my scheduled hours or to make an appointment for your convenience. I would especially be willing to look at rough drafts of essays in addition to scheduled conferences or to field any questions you might have about assignments.

**Disabilities:** If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

**Quizzes/In-class writing:** Unannounced quizzes may sometimes be given at the beginning of class. These may not be made up. Also, micro theme writing exercises may be assigned for the last few minutes of class in response to the readings and discussion. These also may not be made up. It is clearly to your advantage to attend on time having read the assignments carefully.

**Format for essays:** Length should be around 1000 words each. Type or print out your essays on standard sized white paper. Double space. Use a 12 point font such as Times New Roman; use something plain. In the upper right-hand corner of the first page, type your name, instructor's name, course/section and date. In the upper right-hand corner of
Course Procedures: Creative Writing: Creative Nonfiction will follow two related methods: About a third of the class time will be spent in lecture and discussion about essays from the textbook. The purpose of this is not only to strengthen the students’ ability with close reading of literary texts, but also more importantly to familiarize them with modern and contemporary literary practice and techniques. The best way to learn to write well is to study the work of recognized masters in the field, and to thoughtfully glean ideas from them (this is generally known as “stealing” in the profession of writing). All great writers were great readers first, so we will read to learn how to write—no one writes in a vacuum. Therefore, the students will be required to keep up with the reading for this course—it is not optional.

Much of the course will be devoted to what is known as “workshop,” which follows certain rules. Each student will take several turns presenting creative work to the class for critique over the course of the semester. The student on deck will bring sufficient copies of his or her essay for each person in the class, then read the work aloud. After that, the author must remain silent while the class critiques the text carefully, thoughtfully and honestly. Just as there is no place for uncalled for nastiness or superiority in tone, neither is there place for dishonesty or false praise. The point of workshop is to garner advice and ideas on how to make a piece of writing better structured, textured and artistically realized. It is recommended that the author take notes on what is said by the instructor and peers in order to revise later for the portfolio.

GENERAL ADVICE ON IMAGINATIVE WRITING FOR BEGINNERS

Good writing is concrete rather than abstract, and uses clear, specific images rather than vague abstractions or clichés. Good writers evoke rather than tell, or draw emotions and thoughts out of the reader rather than spill the beans all at once.

Imaginative writing is different from most academic or business writing in that the diction and tone of the characters or speakers should sound closer to the way people actually speak in their homes and on the street, rather than how people are supposed to sound. Essays should sound as if a friend is talking to you, but not “breezy,” or obnoxious, fake and cheap. They should obey the rules of grammar unless quoting a person verbatim.

Despite what Hollywood advertisements seem to say, the imagination is not the ability to make up Godzillas and light sabers. Rather, it has a much more important function: it is the way the mind negotiates between the inner and the outer world, and structures our ideas and emotions in terms of images and experiences. Literary artists channel this
mental function into language, putting words, sentences and larger blocks together to evoke the inner in terms of the outer, and vice versa. The best way to use your imagination, therefore, is to think about your experiences, specifically and sensuously, and how you could evoke them in words. This requires selection, choice and sensitivity for the language, the way it works and reverberates. And a LOT of reading.

Writers need to read the way athletes need to watch the game, the way musicians need to listen to their peers and masters, the way artists need to visit other studios. And after all that reading, they need to write twice as much, and throw a lot out. You get to be a good writer the same way you get to be good at anything: you work, you take criticism, and you work some more. It's easy to give up. Most do.

Therefore, what we are writing is not strictly for you and your private standards. No one needs a class for that. If you consider that your writing is "just for you," drop the class. Any person can keep a diary or journal and find their writing fascinating and brilliant and touching, as will their mothers. Such writing should stay locked in a journal and out of the classroom. What we are doing here in this or any creative writing class is attempting to shoot higher, to aim at the creation of a text that will mean something to many educated people who can enjoy the use of imagery and narrative, the subtle development of voice and theme. You should be trying to write texts that are in some way like the texts we are studying or others you have studied in literature or creative writing classes. Of course, no one expects you to be Shakespeare on your first attempt, but you are expected to try. It's the honest attempt and sincere revisions that get the A, not just latent, native talent. And the class is here to help guide you and show you the way, as best as humans can.

No one can possibly learn to be a good writer in a semester. That is the pursuit of a lifetime: the great Latin poet Horace said: "Life is so short, and it takes so long to learn the art!" But you can learn good solid principles that will help you get started, and you can have great pleasure along the way with the progress you make.