

Spring 1-15-2009

ENG 2001-001: Creative Writing: Nonfiction

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2001-001

English 2001-001
 Creative Writing: Nonfiction
 Spring, 2009
 TR 2:00-3:15, CH 3159

Notes & Announcements

SYLLABUS

Course Description: An introductory, workshop-style class in the writing of memoir, personal narrative, reverie, first-person journalism, confession, and whatever else can be meant by "creative nonfiction." Early on, the approach will be fairly prescriptive, with discussion of model essays and blunt how-to advice on style and structure. Then we will turn to very careful workshop discussion of essays by class members, and here we will be much less prescriptive, trying in each case to define what does and doesn't "work" in a given piece, respecting the necessarily tentative nature of such speculation. Students will complete a number of exercises in a workbook, participate in a group project that involves evaluating and presenting published essays, and write three essays of their own, submitting two of these for workshop discussion. Attendance and participation will be very important, as will the ability to give and take rigorous, constructive criticism. An enjoyable class, but lots and lots of work, and not always easy on the ego. Prerequisite: English 1002G. (old curriculum Group 6; new curriculum Group 5)

Instructor: John Kilgore. Office: 3331 (314K) Coleman Hall. Hours: M 10:30-12:30, TR 3:30-5:00. Also usually available right after class, and often here Wednesdays in the middle of the day. I prefer that you **NOT** visit me just before class, when I am usually making final preparations; just after is fine. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). E-mail: cfjdk@eiu.edu. When leaving voice mail at the office, include date and time of call.

Required Texts:

Kennedy, *et al*, *The Bedford Reader* (K)
 Wallace and Atwan, *Best American Essays, 2007* (W)
 Peterson & Brereton, *The Norton Reader, 11th ed.* (P)
 Fulwiler & Hayakawa, *The Blair Handbook, 5th ed.*

Course requirements:

- Class attendance and participation -- 10%
- Group Exercise -- 5%
- First Workbook Installment -- 15%
- Second Workbook Installment -- 10%
- Three Essays -- approximately 20% each

I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages. The participation grade will be based primarily on attendance, but also on evidence that you have carefully done assigned readings, especially the assigned essays for workshop discussion. Guidelines for the Group Exercise are given below. Ditto for the Workbook, due in two installments on February 3 and March 3. The three essays should be in the 1000-2500 word range (notice the wide latitude!), and the first two must be submitted in multiple copies, for workshop discussion. Optional rewrites of either of the first two essays will be accepted until April 23. If you take this option, revisions should be substantial, and the final draft will be graded somewhat more rigorously than the previous one. The new grade, if higher, will replace the initial grade.

Attendance policy. A workshop functions best when the members know each other well and all are participating regularly. Accordingly, I will take attendance (by means of a sign-up sheet) in every session. The resulting record, adjusted slightly for the quality of your class discussion, will be used to figure a participation grade equal to about 10% of the final grade for the course. Scale for the participation grade: **0-2 absences = A, 3 = B, 4 = C, 5 = D, 6 = F; more than 5—**continuing, proportional grade penalties (the attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade).

Note that you have 2 “free” absences. Use these if you have to, but otherwise keep them as insurance. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, but **I will not normally award attendance credit for any session that you have missed.** In truly exceptional circumstances, however, I MAY be willing to assign difficult and challenging make-up work for attendance credit. See me if you prefer make-up work to taking the absence. (**Hint:** It’s easier just to be here. Honest.) Another possibility is that you can attend **public readings by writers visiting EIU**; I will accept attendance at such readings in lieu of make-up work for any missed days. Note: it is your responsibility to find and sign the attendance sheet at each session, to make arrangements for make-up work if necessary, and to ascertain that the record has been corrected when the work has been done.

The workbook. Will be a place where important basic exercises are done early on, and with luck the place where good essay drafts begin for you. Due dates are **February 3** and **March 3**. See below for detailed guidelines.

- Use an accordion file or pocket folder, **NOT** a spiral notebook, **NOT** a looseleaf binder, so that you can easily add new exercises as you do them. Keep class handouts (you will be getting a ton of these) in another file or folder, please.

- Write your name in large, clear letters on both the file and on every assignment.
- Type every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will sometimes serve as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit. (If you can't help revising as you type, so much the better.)
- Make sure every assignment has a date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., "Exercise #1, Personal Statement."). **I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.**
- Make a habit of bringing the folder to class with you, as you will have the chance to read from it and get feedback.
- Organize work clearly in chronological order, earliest to latest. On March 3, keep new work waiting to be graded clearly separate from exercises already graded (or simply don't hand it in again -- I won't be re-reading it).
- In general, the exercises are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by writers; b) stimulate ideas. With luck some of the exercises will take off and turn into essays, and **you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-essay stage.**

Essays. Should be the fruit of long and thoughtful revision — third or fourth drafts, put into the very best form you can manage at the moment, though subject (of course) to further revision after workshop discussion. Clear and articulate writing at the sentence level is a must because everything starts there. Writing is endless labor (though endless pleasure as well), and publishing writers spend huge amounts of time and energy tinkering, revising, and polishing. They keep dictionaries and other resource books handy and know the rules of grammar (on some level, anyway) even when they decide to break them. Try to follow this example; cultivate your own readiness to take pains.

A word about grading. (Click here for my harangue on the topic.)

Short Story Guidelines. (Rules of thumb for short fiction. They may be worth a look if what you have in hand is a narrative essay.)

MANUSCRIPT FORM. PLEASE NOTE CAREFULLY. All assignments must be typewritten. Workshop essays should be **SINGLE-SPACED** (to save copying expense), and you must provide multiple copies — two for me, one for every other member of the class including yourself. Skip an extra space between paragraphs when single spacing (following the format you see on this page). Please use no fonts smaller than 10 point. The final essay will not go into workshop, so it should be **DOUBLE-SPACED** with twelve-point font, and no extra copies will be necessary. Likewise, double-space workbook assignments and rewrites. Omit extra spacing between paragraphs on double-spaced manuscripts.

Whenever you hand in something you prefer not to have read by the rest of the class, write "DR" ("don't read") at the top of the first page. I will feel free to read aloud — or even to copy and distribute — anything you hand in that does not bear this warning, though I will not announce your name in doing so.

Late work. Always get in touch with me BEFORE the deadline if you expect to be late with an assignment; the chances are pretty good that I can give you a short extension. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from B+ to B) for each calendar day of lateness, weekends and holidays included. Pick up the phone, dial my number, and save yourself from this demoralizing fate.

Miscellaneous. There will be no midterm or final examination.

I will be more than happy to grant reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Contact me or the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) if you will be needing such an accommodation.

Please make a habit of bringing this syllabus to class with you, as we will need to refer to it rather frequently.

Please be aware that the penalty for cheating or plagiarism will be automatic failure of the course. See me if you need further explanation of what constitutes cheating or plagiarism.

SCHEDULE

Note: **READ AHEAD** to make time for writing projects.
See end of schedule (or link at left) for detailed instructions for Workbook exercises. Note abbreviations: Kennedy, *et al*, *The Bedford Reader* (K)
Wallace and Atwan, *Best American Essays, 2007* (W)
Peterson & Brereton, *The Norton Reader, 11th ed.* (P)

1) January 12-16

READING: Amy Tan, "Fish Cheeks," K 92; Sherman Alexie, "Indian Education," K103.
Begin exercises in workbook. (See instructions below.)

2) January 20-23

READING: Annie Dillard, "The Chase," K 97. Brad Manning, "Arm Wrestling with My Father," K 136. Joan Didion, "Marrying Absurd," K 159.
Continue exercises in workbook.

3) January 26-30

READING: Scott Russell Sanders, "Looking at Women," P 244.
Malcolm Gladwell, "The Sports Taboo," P 266.

Continue exercises in workbook.
OTHER: Begin Essay #1 whenever you feel ready.

4) February 2-6

READING: Marione Ingram, "Operation Gomorrah," W 123; Roger Scruton, "A Carnivore's Credo," W 259.

THURSDAY: In-class writing.

TUESDAY: Workbook due, with ten entries.

5) February 9-12

READING: David Sedaris, "Remembering My Childhood on the Continent of Africa," K 234; Lucinda Rosenfeld, "How to Dump a Friend," K 281.

THURSDAY: Conferences, optional attendance.

6) February 16-20

TUESDAY: Essay #1 due, in multiple copies.

READING: Essays for workshop discussion.

T & TH: Workshop.

7) February 23-27

READING: Essays for workshop discussion.

T & TH: Workshop.

OTHER: Work on Workbook exercises. (See below for detailed instructions.)

Begin Essay #2 whenever you feel ready.

8) March 2-6

READING: Essays for workshop discussion.

T & TH: Workshop.

THURSDAY: Workbook due, with three substantial entries.

9) March 9-13

READING: Essays for workshop discussion.

T & TH: Workshop.

TH: Preliminary meeting with Group to choose essay for Group Exercise. Individuals provide story copies to their groups. (See below for detailed instructions.)

Spring Break, March 14-22

11) March 23-27

Group meetings in class Tuesday, to choose essay for class presentation.

Groups provide copies of chosen essays to class on Thursday.
READING: Essays assigned by Groups.
TH: Essay # 2 due. Provide copies for workshop.
Workshop.

12) March 30-April 3

READING: Essays for group presentations.
Class presentations: Groups 1 & 2 on Tuesday, Groups 3 & 4 on Thursday.

13) April 6-10

T: Essay # 2 due, in multiple copies.
Workshop.

14) April 13-17

Workshop.

15) April 20-24

Workshop.
Thursday: Last day for Optional Rewrites.

16) April 27-May 1

Workshop as needed
Essay # 3 due on Tuesday. Keep copy for your records.
Group reading.



Workbook

Format

- Use an accordion file or pocket folder, **NOT** a spiral notebook, **NOT** a looseleaf binder, so that you can easily add new exercises as you do

them. Keep class handouts (you will be getting a ton of these) in another file or folder, please.

- Write your name in large, clear letters on both the file and on every assignment.
- Type every assignment. In-class writings done by hand will sometimes serve as drafts for assigned exercises, but should then be typed up out of class, with revisions as you see fit. (If you can't help revising as you type, so much the better.) **Double-space.**
- Make sure every assignment has a date, your name, and a heading and exercise number drawn from the table below (e.g., "Exercise #1, Personal Statement."). **I will not read or give credit for items that lack headings.**
- Make a habit of bringing the folder to class with you, as you will have the chance to read from it and get feedback.
- Organize work clearly in chronological order, earliest to latest. On March 3, keep new work waiting to be graded clearly separate from exercises already graded (or simply don't hand it in again -- I won't be re-reading it).
- In general, the exercises are creative projects that try to a) drill you in fairly specific skills needed by writers; b) stimulate ideas. With luck some of the exercises will take off and turn into essays, and **you are welcome to turn in the same prose twice, though extensive revisions should normally take place between the workbook stage and the finished-essay stage.**

Content

The workbook is due twice, with the first installment a bit more substantial than the second.

For **the first installment**, write on **ten** different days, about 100-300 words per day, choosing 5-10 topics from the list below. If an entry gathers momentum and takes off, you may let it count for two consecutive entries, but no more. (Of course, you are always free to continue it on your own, perhaps turning it in later as a workshop essay. This would be a desirable development.)

For **the second installment**, choose 3 additional topics from the list, and give me 3 entries of 4-600 words. If the topic chosen doesn't seem to generate that much wordage, do it twice, i.e., repeat with variations.

Topics

1. **Reminiscence.** In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narration "now" and the experience "then."
2. **People Watching.** Go to some public place and "collect" a few of the people you see there, discreetly sketching them (in prose) in your notebook. Describe 2-4 in terms of clothing and personal items; 2-4 in terms of physical characteristics; 2-4 in terms of tics and behaviors. Make this a double entry (count it for two days) and try above all to make your brief sketches vivid and concrete.
3. **Sketch from Memory.** Sketch from memory 2-4 places you know well, trying to "put us there" as directly and quickly and completely as possible. Notice how concrete details matter more than anything else in this effort.
4. **Sketch from Observation.** Or go to one or two places and describe them as you are sitting there. Notice how much you notice that would not have occurred to you had you sketched from memory. Notice how some of this detail might be valuable, and some of it not.
5. **Guilt Trip.** Quick, before you lose your nerve: Confess in writing to some thought or feeling you always keep hidden or some deed you keep secret. Be blunt, direct, and matter of fact. Then if you wish to explain and add perspective, do so -- but get the gist out first. Write "Don't Read" if you don't want me to share this with anyone. I promise to keep it completely confidential.
6. **Interesting Thing.** In a sketch of at least 200 words, capture the most interesting thing that has happened to you in the last year. Avoid summary; concentrate on concrete details and images. Tell us nothing that we could infer for ourselves.
7. **Shocker.** Write something **shocking**. The shock may come either from the experience conveyed (you shoplifted a ring and aren't sorry, you saw a dog beaten half to death) or from the authorial attitude (you favor castration of the mentally ill). Write rapidly and continuously for no more than 40 minutes. If you then can't stand to show me the results, file them and hand in something else.
8. **Comedy Routine.** Write a stand-up comedy routine that you could imagine delivering. Leave out stage directions; just give the gags.
9. **Time Stopped.** In at least 200 words, capture a moment or an instant. Start by giving sensory details; then work at giving the emotional and psychological and situational significance of the details. The interval you choose can be as long or short as you like -- either a century or a second can plausibly be called a "moment" -- but the essential thing is

that you freeze it. Make it hold still until, like a portrait painter, you have it down.

10. **Character Study.** "Study" a person you know well. Start by giving us outward characteristics of body and dress and so on, then move into the psychological and personal and biographical. Avoid grandparents, unless you can be ruthlessly non-sentimental. Notice that vivid details tend to convey personality as well as appearance. "My roommate Jake has bony, scaly, calloused feet that wear no shoes except on really cold days." See how much we already know about Jake?
11. **Begin w./ Title.** Choose two or three of the following titles, and quickly write the first paragraphs of the essays that might correspond to them. "One Way to Make Enemies." "Blood Sisters." "What My Parents Didn't Know." "The Second Stupidest Thing I Ever Did." "My Home Town." "The Ten Most Annoying Habits of College Students." "Eve's Side of the Story." "Adults as Babies See Them." "Memo From Alpha Centauri." "Why Girls Lie." "Why Guys Lie." "How I Feel Upon Learning That _____ [fill in the blank]."
12. **What I Know.** Make a list of five things you have figured out in your life. Then explain each of the five, in question-answer format.
13. **Extreme Feeling.** Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible **without** ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke it. Concentrate instead on capturing the way powerful feeling shapes the perceptions of the physical milieu, and on the way specific memories and odd thoughts go whirling through the mind at such moments. The point is not so much to make the reader "guess" the feeling as to "show rather than tell."
14. **Imitated Opening.** Choose one of your all-time favorite essays. Type out the first paragraph or two, think awhile about the craft or technique of this opening, and then begin an essay of your own in similar fashion.
15. **Opening With a Scene.** Begin an essay with a narrative **scene**. That is, "plunge in" to some moment and render an action or dialogue in meticulous detail, blow by blow. The moment chosen should be short and dramatic.
16. **Opening With a Narrative Sketch.** Begin an essay with a generalized sketch or description of a time that is too long and complex to be caught in a single scene. For example, your first sentence might be, "Spring of my senior year was the saddest time of my life"--and the rest of the paragraph might explain and show why, by citing relevant details. If the thesis or topic of your essay is not clear by the end of your opening, add a short explanatory note.

17. **Opening With an Anecdote.** Very similar to #2, but the opening is less a vivid flash of felt experience, more a miniature story that should feel almost complete in itself; the narrative distance is greater, and tensions should be resolved in some way.
18. **Opening with a Paradox.** Begin an essay by stating the contrary of something all people, or some people, or at any rate an identifiable consensus, knows to be true. Then scramble to set up an argument which will explain and justify the opening without turning it into a mere trick.
19. **A Modest Proposal.** Begin an essay in which you satirize something you find ridiculous by pretending to advocate an extreme solution. "I have a simple solution to this country's problems. Make it legal to cook and eat Democrats." Whatever. The difference from #5 is that in this case your thesis is really a pseudo-thesis.
20. **Epistolary Beginning.** Begin an essay imagined as a letter, or an address to a specific audience.
21. **How I _____.** Fill in the blank: "Became a Lesbian," "Learned to Love Spiders," "Quit Smoking," whatever — and write the first two or three paragraphs of the essay.
22. **Why I _____.** Fill in the blank: "Hate Velcro," "Believe that God Exists," "Thought it Was a Good Idea to Move in With My Best Friend's Lover," whatever — and write the first two or three paragraphs of the essay.
23. **Report on Group Project.** Tell a) What essay you recommended to your group, and why; b) Which of the essays from other groups you like best, and why; c) What seems to be your own concept of essay excellence, what distinguishes and defines your own taste in nonfiction, what you look for.

Group Project — Special Directions

****** In week 8, everyone in class will be more or less randomly assigned to a study group. The groups will arrange to meet out of class, if necessary.

****** Each member of each group is to nominate an essay to be read by the

class as a whole. **By Thursday, March 12,** Provide copies for each member of the group, or refer your group to page numbers in any of our three anthologies. Choose stories that are **NOT** already included in the assigned readings (see syllabus).

****** Everyone in the group **must** read all the nominated essays — carefully — by **Tuesday, March 24.** On that day the four groups will meet during the normal class period. The purpose of the meeting will be to 1) choose **one** essay, out of the four or five nominated, as the group's favorite to be presented to the class as a whole; 2) plan your presentation to the class.

**** By Thursday, March 26,** each group must provide copies of its elected essay for the class as a whole. The exception will be stories from any of our anthologies — for these, you merely need to give us the page numbers. **Groups 1 & 2 will present their stories on Tuesday, March 31; Groups 3 & 4, on Thursday, April 2.**

****** Presentations should begin with each member of the group stating what essay he or she nominated and why. Give a brief, vivid summary and some discussion; share your enthusiasm for this author and work.

****** Beyond that, the nature of the presentation will depend on the chosen essay and your group's preferences. Remember that the class has read your story, and pitch your presentation accordingly: summary is unnecessary, and detailed discussion of scenes or passages is quite kosher. In most cases you should explain your group's reasons for choosing this essay, explaining what you find admirable, why you think this is good work and an author worth getting to. Try to plan the discussion sufficiently so that different group members don't echo one another too much; try to proceed from generalities to specifics, perhaps discussing important passages. For a primarily narrative or descriptive essay, talk about the art of the essay, how it takes us into its world. For more discursive or persuasive pieces, you might want to focus on issues raised, continuing the debate, responding with corollary observations, rebuttals or confirmations, independent arguments. Try to leave time for class discussion and questions, but give a thoughtful and organized presentation first.

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