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ENG 4761-001: Advanced Nonfiction Writing

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Eastern Illinois University

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ENGLISH 4761: Advanced Creative Nonfiction

Tuesdays/Thursdays, Coleman Hall 3159, 3:30 to 4:45 p.m.

Professor Daiva Markelis dnmarkelis@ciu.edu 549-8352

Office: Coleman Hall 3375

Office Hours:

Tuesdays 2:00 to 3:30 p.m.

Wednesdays 5:00 to 6:00 p.m.

Thursdays 2:00 to 3:30 p.m.

Purpose of the Course

This course is designed to help students craft non-fiction essays 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.

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.

Books and Materials

Writing True by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz

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

Various handouts

A journal for in-class writing

Requirements

1. Write four essays on a variety of topics in addition to a short introductory essay.
2. Read the assigned material by the assigned date and participate in class discussions and occasional in-class writing exercises. **YOU MUST BRING YOUR BOOK TO CLASS THE DAY WE'RE DISCUSSING STORIES.** Failure to do so may result in lower participation grades.
3. Participate in workshops: 1) Submit three essays for class critique. You have your choice of Essay One or Essay Two. All students must workshop Essays Three and Essays Four. 2) critique the work of classmates in an insightful and constructive manner, both orally and in writing.
4. Submit a portfolio of creative work at the end of the semester. The portfolio will include your essays, including revisions. Your portfolio may also include in-class writing you've revised and typed up.

Additional Requirement for Graduate Students

Graduate students must write an additional essay OR significantly add to an existing essay in order to produce a piece that is ready to be sent out for publication.

Grade Breakdown

Writing Portfolio, including revisions of stories: 60%

Written critique of other people's stories: 20%

Effectiveness at in-class discussion: 10%

Attendance: 10%

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 skip the comments. Or, if their grade is a B, they ask themselves, "Why not an A?" However, students also have the right to know what they might expect at the end of the semester, grade-wise. I'll give you the option of having your individual essays graded, with the understanding that you can rewrite pieces to include in the final portfolio. Part of your grade will be determined by how thoughtfully you incorporate the suggestions of others as well as how well you develop your own inner writing critic. Final drafts of essays included in the portfolio must be free of grammatical and mechanical errors.

Participation

Participation includes not only actively discussing the readings, but also making insightful and constructive comments on the writing of your peers. You must submit 2 detailed typed paragraphs for every essay we workshop. **You must email these to the author with a copy to me as well at dmmarkelis@oeriu.edu BEFORE the beginning of class. No exceptions.**

Attendance

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 class discussions or in-class writing. I do allow for excused absences if they are properly documented. These include approved university activities and illness. Unexcused absences are pretty much all others—oversleeping, finishing papers for other classes, out-of-town trips "because I'm homesick." More than one unexcused absence will lower your attendance grade by one grade.

Tardiness and Cell Phone/Computer Use

I expect you to be in class on time. Excessive tardiness may result in lower attendance grade. No cell phone use in class other than in emergencies. Computers to be used ONLY for class purposes—writing or reading others' stories. No checking social media, no emailing, no Googling.

University Policies

(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.

Writing Center

Please visit the Writing Center if you need help with any aspect of writing, including organization, development, verb tense, sentence structure, and comma use. The Writing Center is located at 3110 Coleman Hall. Drop by to make an appointment.

Workshopping Procedure

A large part of this course will be devoted to the workshop, a popular method of critiquing creative writing. This is how it works: You make a copy of your piece for all class members and submit it to them the class period before workshopping. **You may email the essay if you like, but it must be mailed out at least two days in advance. So, if your piece is workshopped on a Tuesday, it must be mailed out by Sunday evening at the latest. I realize that emergencies do arise. In such a case, email or phone me to let me know your piece will be late. Even in emergency situations, however, no essays can be mailed to the class later than 8pm on the day before we workshop—we will simply do something else in class that day and your grade for workshopping (a requirement in this course) will go down.** In class you read the first 2-3 paragraphs of your story out loud. Class members discuss strengths and weaknesses while 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. **NOTE: You MUST have a paper copy of your own piece. No reading from your phone or asking your neighbor to borrow his/her copy.**

IMPORTANT: If you are not workshopping Essay One or Essay Two, I must still have a copy by the last day of that particular workshopping period. We'll discuss this in class.

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.

CLASS SCHEDULE

#1	August 20	Introduction/In-class writing HOMEWORK for August 27: Look through the Touchstone Anthology and choose three essays whose subject matter and/or writing style intrigue you. Read the essays, then write a brief essay (1-2 typed pages) discussing your choices and what they say about you as a writer. NOTE: If you've taken 4761 before, you must choose new essays.
	August 22	Discussion of Chapters 1 and 3 in <i>Writing True</i> Discussion of <i>The Date</i> by Brenda Miller (381 in the Touchstone Anthology) Introduction to Essay #1
#2	August 27	Discussion of chosen stories from the Touchstone Anthology; short essay due to me Discussion of Chapters 1 and 3 in <i>Writing True</i> In-class writing
	August 29	Workshops (3 people)
#3	September 3 September 5	Workshops TBA (I have a previous commitment)
#4	September 10 September 12	Workshops Introduction to Essay #2 Discussion of David Sedaris, "Let it Snow" (208), Charles Simic, "Dinner with Uncle Boris" (271) in <i>Writing True</i> , and Mary Clearman Blew in the <i>Touchstone Anthology</i>
#5	September 17 September 19	In-class Writing Workshops

- #6 September 24 Workshops
September 26 Workshops
- #7 October 1 **Introduction to Essay #3: The Body Essay**
Discussion of Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” (210) in *Writing True*
October 3 Discussion of Floyd Skloot, “A Measure of Acceptance” (473) in TA (Touchstone Anthology); Phillip Lopate, “Portrait of My Body” (299) in TA; and Erin McGraw, “Bad Eyes” (360) in TA
- #8 October 8 Workshops
October 10 Workshops
- #9 October 15 Workshops
October 17 Workshops
- #10 October 22 Workshops
October 24 Workshops
- #11 October 29 **Introduction to Essay #4: Writer’s Choice**
Discussion of Dinty Moore, “Son of Mr. Green Jeans” (389), Ann Carson, “The Glass Essay” (97), and John McPhee, “The Search for Marvin Gardens” (370) All in Touchstone Anthology
October 31 Continued discussion
In-class Writing
- #12 November 5 Workshops
November 7 Workshops
- #13 November 12 Workshops
November 14 Workshops
- #14 November 19 Workshops
November 21 Workshops

THANKSGIVING BREAK WEEK

- #15 December 3 Workshops
December 5 Publishing Your Work

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.

Portfolios are due on Tuesday, December 10^h at 5PM

NO FINAL EXAM in this class

ENGLISH 4761 ASSIGNMENTS

I'm presenting these assignments in advance so if you come across an idea, image, or piece of dialogue that might fit an essay, you can jot it down. Feel free to revise essays at any point. The end result should be a portfolio you can be proud of.

Assignment One: Anaphora Essay

Anaphora is the repetition of a certain word or phrase at the beginning of successive paragraphs or sentences within a paragraph. It's commonly found in poetry, but is also used in novels, essays, and speeches. Brenda Miller, in her essay *The Date*, which we'll discuss on August 28th (Week 2), uses anaphora for great effect, repeating the line "A man I like is coming for dinner tonight." For this assignment I'd like you to choose a line and repeat it several times throughout your essay. The line must always come at the beginning of the paragraph or section. It can be its own paragraph if you want it to be.

Length: 3 to 5 typed, double-spaced pages

Assignment Two: Family Essay

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," writes Leo Tolstoy in his novel *Anna Karenina*. He might have added, "All families are unhappy at times." Use the readings about family by David Sedaris, Charles Simic, and Mary Clearman Blew to inspire your own reflections on family. You may choose to write about happy events, but don't give a glossy, sentimental version of your life—keep in mind that your readers appreciate complexity and insight. You may choose to write about one person in your family or to broaden the scope and explore family dynamics.

Length: 4-7 typed, double-spaced pages

Assignment Three: The Physical Self

The human body is beautiful and flawed and unpredictable. Sometimes we betray it; other times we feel betrayed by it. The authors we discuss during the 7th week of class (Alice Walker, Erin McGraw, Phillip Lopate, and Floyd Skloot) 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. You can focus on a time in your life when you realized your body could do wonderful things, or you can write about a time when you were ill or in an accident and how you healed (or didn't.) You may 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 their bodies and why—hair coloring, tattoos, diets, etc.

Length: 4-7 typed, double-spaced pages

Assignment Four: Open Theme, Experimental

Feel free to choose your own theme (though I'm always willing to give suggestions.) You can write about a hobby, an obsession, a difficult time in your life, a person you admire. You can write about other people in relation to yourself. The only requirement is that you be willing to experiment a little in terms of form. For example, you might try writing in the second person or using various images to construct a written collage. You might add drawings or photographs to your essay. The writers we examine in Week Ten—Dinty Moore, Ann Carson, and John McPhee—present us with examples of experimentation in form.

Length: 5-8 typed, double-spaced pages