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ENG 4761-001: Creative Writing: Advanced Creative Nonfiction

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ENGLISH 4761, Fall 2011
Creative Writing: Advanced Creative Nonfiction
T/TH 9:30 to 10:45
Coleman Hall 3159
Dr. Daiva Markelis/581-5614/348-9230/dmmarkelis@eiu.edu
Office: Coleman Hall 3375
Office Hours: T 11:00 to 1:00, W 12:00 to 2:00, R 12 to 2:00
F 10:00 to 12:00 and by appointment

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

Writing True by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz
The Art of the Personal Essay by Phillip Lopate
Character Studies by Mark Singer

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 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, which should include all of your essays, any revisions, and any in-class writing assignments you choose to type up.

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. Please visit the Writing Center if you need help with verb tense, sentence structure, comma use, etc.

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 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, hangovers, finishing papers for other classes, out-of-town trips “because I’m homesick.” More than one unexcused absence will lower your attendance/participation grade.

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, you must email essays out by Sunday evening at the latest.**) In class you read the first 2-3 paragraphs of your essay out loud. Class members have a few minutes to write down comments, questions, and suggestions for revision. 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 to me, please also submit all of the copies marked up by your fellow classmates. Written feedback on essays counts as participation.

CLASS SCHEDULE

- #1 T 08/23 Introduction/In-class writing
TH 08/25 Read Chapters 1 and 3 in *Writing True*
Read Brian Boyle, "Being Brians," in *Writing True*, 227
Read Shonagon, "Hateful Things" (24) and Kenko, "Lessons in Idleness" (30) in *The Art of the Personal Essay*
- #2 T 08/30 Mini-workshop (bring three copies of your piece to class)
TH 09/01 Workshop – Essay 1 (or in-class writing)
- #3 T 09/06 Workshop
TH 09/08 Workshop
- #4 T 09/13 **First assignment due**
Read David Sedaris, "Let it Snow" (208) and
Charles Simic, "Dinner with Uncle Boris" (271) in *Writing True*
TH 09/15 Read Chapters 4 and 10 in *Writing True*
Read Ginzburg, "He and I" (421) in *Art of the Personal Essay*
- #5 T 09/20 Workshop – Essay 2
TH 09/22 Workshop – Essay 2
- #6 T 09/27 Workshop
TH 09/29 Workshop
- #7 T 10/04 Workshop
TH 10/06 **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 *Writing True*
- #8 T 10/11 Workshop — Essay 3
TH 10/13 TBA (I will be out of town)
- #9 T 10/18 Workshop
TH 10/20 Workshop
- #10 T 10/25 Workshop
TH 10/27 Workshop
- #11 T 11/01 **Third assignment due**
Read "The Book Eater" in *Character Studies*
11/03 Read the first two pages of all of the essays in *Character Studies*
In-class writing

#12 T 11/08 Workshop – Essay 4
TH 11/10 Workshop – Essay 4

#13 T 11/15 Workshop
TH 11/17 Workshop

THANKSGIVING BREAK WEEK

#14 T 11/29 Workshop
TH 12/01 Workshop

#15 T 12/06 **Fourth assignment due**
TH 12/08 TBA

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 on Tuesday, December 13th at 5PM, in my office

NO FINAL EXAM in this class