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ENG 4761-001: Creative Nonfiction Writing

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4761-001

ENGLISH 4761, FALL 2005
Creative Nonfiction Writing
M/W/F 11:00-11:50
Coleman Hall 3159

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Office: Coleman Hall 3375

Office Hours: M/W 12:00 – 2:00, F 10:00 – 11:00, 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

Bird by Bird. Anne Lamott

The Art of Creative Nonfiction. Lee Gutkind

The Art of the Personal Essay. Phillip Lopate

My Grandfather's Book. Gary Gildner (late order)

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 be a minimum of thirty typed (double-spaced) pages, and will include the four class assignments as well as any in-class writing exercises you choose to submit.

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 forgo the comments. Or, if their grade is a B+, they ask themselves, "Heck, why not an A-?" We will talk in class about grading procedures. Portfolios, where one grade is given at the end for your entire creative output, work to your advantage. You can rewrite as many times as you like. You can include things you've written in the middle of the night, out-of-the-blue, spur-of-the-moment. And you'll feel good at the end seeing that neat folder filled with so many many pages of once-blank sheets.

Attendance/Participation

Many of the ideas used in your essays will be generated in discussions or in-class writing, which is why it is very important that you come to each class session. I realize, however, that emergencies do occur. Excused absences are those outlined in the student catalogue: “illness, emergency, or university activity.” Unexcused absences are pretty much all others—oversleeping, hangovers, finishing papers for other classes, out-of-town trips “because I’m homesick.” More than five unexcused absences will lower your attendance/participation grade to an E.

Since the format of this class is primarily workshop, participation is extremely important. If you have great attendance but rarely speak up in class, it will be difficult to get an A or B for this part of the class requirement.

Workshopping Procedure

A large part of this course will be devoted to the workshop, a method widely used in creative writing courses of all kinds. This is how it works: You make a copy of your piece for every member of the class. You read 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.

CLASS SCHEDULE

#1	M	08/22	Introductions/In-class Writing
	W	08/24	Discuss Lamott, pps. xi-32
	F	08/26	Lamott, 33-43; In-class writing exercise
#2	M	08/29	Workshop
	W	08/31	Workshop
	F	09/02	Workshop
#3	M	09/05	LABOR DAY-- NO CLASSES
	W	09/07	First assignment due Also, in-class list exercise
	F	09/09	Bring lists to class
#4	M	09/12	Discuss Gutkind, 1-21
	W	09/14	Discuss Gildner
	F	09/16	Discuss Gildner
#5	M	09/19	Gary Gildner visit; bring three questions to ask Gildner
	W	09/21	Workshop
	F	09/23	Workshop
#6	M	09/26	Workshop
	W	09/28	Discuss "Aunt Harriet" (393) and "He and I" (423) in <u>Art of the Personal Essay</u>
	F	09/30	Second assignment due In-class writing Discuss Gutkind, 21-32
#7	M	10/03	Conferences
	W	10/05	Conferences
	F	10/07	(FALL BREAK – NO CLASSES)
#8	M	10/10	Workshop
	W	10/12	Workshop
	F	10/14	Workshop
#9	M	10/17	Discuss Plutarch (16) and Kenko (30) in <u>Art</u>
	W	10/19	Third assignment due Discuss "Threshold and the Jolt of Pain" (662) and "Why Do I Fast" (454) in <u>Art</u>
	F	10/21	Discuss "Under the Influence" (733) in <u>Art</u>
#10	M	10/24	Conferences
	W	10/26	Conferences
	F	10/28	Conferences

#11	M	10/31	Workshop
	W	11/02	Workshop
	F	11/04	Workshop
#12	M	11/07	Workshop
	W	11/09	Workshop
	F	11/11	Workshop
#13	M	11/14	Workshop
	W	11/16	Workshop
	F	11/18	Preliminary Portfolios Due

11/19 to 11/27 THANKSGIVING BREAK

#14	M	11/28	Conferences
	W	11/30	Conferences
	F	12/02	Conferences
#15	M	12/05	Publishing your work
	W	12/07	Publishing your work
	F	12/09	Class wrap-up

FINAL PORTFOLIOS DUE: Tuesday, December 13th, 5:00, in my office
(You may turn them in earlier if you like)

NO FINAL EXAM in this class

NOTE: I may make minor changes to this syllabus in order to suit the needs of the class. Changes will always announced in advance.