ENG 4761-001: Creative Writing: Advanced Creative Nonfiction

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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
Writing True by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz
Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction by Lex Wilford and Michael Martone

Requirements
1. Write four essays on a variety of topics.
2. Read the assigned material by the assigned date and participate in class discussions and occasional in-class writing exercises. There may also be a few homework assignments.
3. Participate in workshops: 1) Submit at least two essays for class critique; 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. Graduate students also have the option of writing a longer, memoir-length work for class instead of the four essays on the assigned topics if they discuss the subject with me.

Grade Breakdown
Writing: 70%
Participation: 20%
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. Please visit the Writing Center if you need help with verb tense, sentence structure, comma use, etc.

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 2-4 typed paragraphs for every essay we workshop.

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, hangovers, 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.

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.

**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 look over their written comments. 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.

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, including the typed comments.
CLASS SCHEDULE

#1 T 08/25 Introduction/In-class writing
TH 08/27 NO class meeting
Homework for Tuesday: 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.

#2 T 09/02 Discussion of chosen stories/in-class writing
TH 09/04 Read Chapters 1 and 3 in Writing True
Introduction to Essay #1: The Name Essay
Read Brian Boyle, “Being Brians,” in Writing True, 227

#3 T 09/09 Read Chapters 4 and 10 in Writing True
TH 09/11 Workshop

#4 T 09/16 Workshop
TH 09/18 Workshop

#5 T 09/23 First assignment due
Introduction to Essay #2: The Family Essay
Read David Sedaris, “Let it Snow” (208) and Charles Simic, “Dinner with Uncle Boris” (271) in Writing True
TH 09/25 Read Mary Clearman Blew in the Touchstone Anthology

#6 T 09/30 Workshop
TH 10/02 Workshop

#7 T 10/07 Workshop
TH 10/09 Workshop

#8 T 10/14 Second assignment due
Introduction to Essay #3: The Body Essay
Read Alice Walker, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self” (210) in Writing True
TH 10/16 Read Floyd Skloot in TA (Touchstone Anthology)
Read Phillip Lopate in TA
Read Erin McGraw in TA

#9 T 10/21 Workshop
TH 10/23 Workshop

#10 T 10/28 Workshop
TH 10/30 TBA (I will be out of town)
#11 T 11/04 Workshop
11/06 Third assignment due
Read Dinty Moore in TA
Read Anne Carson in TA
Read John McPhee in TA

#12 T 11/11 Workshop
TH 11/13 Workshop

#13 T 11/18 Workshop
TH 11/20 Workshop

THANKSGIVING BREAK WEEK

#14 T 12/02 Workshop
TH 12/04 Workshop

#15 T 12/09 Fourth assignment due
TH 12/11 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 16th at 5PM, in my office

NO FINAL EXAM in this class