ENG 4761-001: Creative Writing: Advanced Creative Nonfiction

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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 realize, however, that emergencies do occur. Excused 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  08/21  Introduction/In-class writing
     TH  08/23  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  08/28  Mini-workshop (bring three copies of your piece to class)
     TH  08/30  Workshop – Essay 1 (or in-class writing)

#3  T  09/04  Workshop
     TH  09/06  Workshop

#4  T  09/11  First assignment due
     TH  09/13  Read David Sedaris, “Let it Snow” (208) and
               Charles Simic, “Dinner with Uncle Boris”” (271) in Writing True
               Read Chapters 4 and 10 in Writing True
               Read Ginzburg, “He and I” (421) in Art of the Personal Essay

#5  T  09/18  Workshop – Essay 2
     TH  09/20  Workshop – Essay 2

#6  T  09/25  Workshop
     TH  09/27  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  10/09  Workshop — Essay 3
     TH  10/11  Workshop

#9  T  10/16  Workshop
     TH  10/18  Workshop

#10 T  10/23  Workshop
    TH  10/25  Workshop

#11 T  10/30  Third assignment due
           Read “The Book Eater” in Character Studies
           11/01  Read the first two pages of all of the essays in Character Studies
                   In-class writing

#12 T  11/06  Workshop – Essay 4
TH 11/08 Workshop – Essay 4

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

THANKSGIVING BREAK WEEK

#14 T 11/27 Workshop
    TH 11/29 Workshop

#15 T 12/04 Fourth assignment due
    TH 12/06 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 11th at 5PM, in my office

NO FINAL EXAM in this class
English 4761 Assignments

Not all creative nonfiction is memoir (think New Journalism or interesting scientific writing), and not all memoirs fall into the category of creative nonfiction (think of all those factual books written in a dry, linear manner by many famous historical figures or celebrities.) In this class we will be focusing on creative memoir—writing about yourself in a way that allows you to try something different, to break free from rules, to reveal parts of yourself that even you may not be aware of. (As Robert Frost has written, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”) The assignments for this class are very loosely inter-related. I’m presenting them to you in advance so that if you come across an idea, image, or piece of dialogue that might fit in a future 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 #1 Name Essay
There are different ways to go about this one. Feel free to start with what we’ve written in class and go from there. Look to pages 15 and 16 in Writing True for inspiration. You might want to talk to your parents about why they gave you the name they did. Are there other Hildas or Elmers in your family? Has your name influenced who you are as a person? Feel free to use Brian Doyle as an example—connect with other people who share your name. You can find them on Switchboard or Face Book. You can Google them. Be funny or thought-provoking or lyrical. (Or all of the above.)

Length: 3-4 typed, double-spaced pages

Assignment #2 Family Essay
“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” writes Leo Tolstoy in Anna Karenina. He might have added, “All families are sometimes unhappy” Using the reading on the syllabus to inspire you to write about your family. David Sedaris writes about family in a way that some people consider outrageous. Simic is a master of dialogue. You may choose to write about happy events, but don’t give us a glossy, sentimental version of life. You can write about one or two people; you can write about an entire clan; you can write about individuals who are not biologically related to you but have taken on traditional family roles in your life.

Length: 4-7 typed, double-spaced pages
Assignment #3  Body Essay

The authors we discuss on the 7th week of class (Nora Ephron, Alice Walker, and Robert Benchley) all write about the body. Using their essays as models, write a creative nonfiction piece about bodies—your body, someone else’s body, bodies in general, body parts (noses, feet, essays, eyes, etc.) You may write about what people (including yourself) do to their bodies and why—hair coloring, tattoos, contacts, diets, etc. You may write about your body when it’s battered or sick. You may also write about clothing or image. Your focus can be narrow or broad. You may begin with something about yourself and then move on to write about a broader topic—e.g. begin with “glasses” (your own or others’), then move on to societal changes in perceptions of people who wear glasses, whether these changes are gender-related, etc. Or begin with “hair” and do the same, or body type, etc. etc.

Length: 4-7 typed, double-spaced pages

Assignment #4  Open Assignment

No special theme or topic here. 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 with form. Look to the authors we read Week 11 for inspiration.

Length: 5-8 typed, double-spaced pages