ENG 4761-001: Creative Nonfiction Writing

John Kilgore
Eastern Illinois University

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Current Assignment

Next Hand-In Date: Journal, due Thursday September 12.

Last Update: 8/17/2008

General Information

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Further adventures in creative nonfiction, for those who have already taken 2001, 2003, 2005, or 2007. Requirements will include a brief (2 week) journal, a well-prepared 20-minute presentation on a published essay of your choice, two medium-length essays, and a longer project that will entail some form of research. Workshop sessions will be cordial but intense, with everyone getting at least two chances to submit polished pieces for group attention. Be ready to write lots and lots, to revise obsessively, to speak your mind, to think energetically about the philosophical dimensions of your personal experience. (Old curriculum Group 6, new curriculum Group 1 or 5.)

INSTRUCTOR: John Kilgore. Office: 3331 Coleman Hall. Hours: T TH 4-5:30, W 1-3. Other hours by arrangement. Phone: (217) 581-6313 (office); (217) 549-0405 (home). Home page: http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~jdkilgore . Feel free to call me at home if you need to. I prefer that you NOT visit me with questions just before class begins; just after is fine. Feel free to email me at jdkilgore@eiu.edu ; if I don't have time to reply, I will say so.
**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

- Attendance and participation (10%)
- Assigned readings.
- Journal (10%)
- Oral report (10%)
- Essay # 1 (20%)
- Essay # 2 (20%)
- Essay # 3 (30%)

I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages. There will be no final examination.

**Required Texts:**

- Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay* (PE)
- Joyce Carol Oates, *The Best American Essays of the Century* (CN)
- Lee Gutkind, *The Art of Creative Nonfiction* (CN)

**ATTENDANCE POLICY:** Beginning with the second meeting, I will pass around an attendance sheet which you must sign. At the end of the term, I will assign a participation grade according to the following scale: 2 absences—A; 3 absences—B; 4 absences—C; 5 absences—D; 6 absences—F; more than 6—further, proportional declines in your course grade (your attendance grade becomes a negative number). I will raise or lower the basic grade a bit according to my sense of how reliable and useful your class participation has been. Please be aware that excuses however excellent will NOT be accepted in lieu of actual attendance. You have two free absences and should keep them as insurance; once they are gone, further absences mean that your attendance grade goes down, period, with one exception: I will award make-up credit for attendance at campus readings by visiting writers. Details will be announced during the term.

**JOURNAL:** Due September 12, this should contain 6 entries of about 2-400 words. Select exercises from the options below—or invent alternate exercises of your own—and write to the prescribed length. If you find yourself catching fire and wanting to continue an entry, wonderful—that is exactly how I hope this assignment will work. But every entry should start over with a fresh project, and (if this matters) the journal grade will be based on just the first 2-400 words of each entry. Later on, you can mine the journal for material to use in your finished essays, and the "extra" that you have written will come into play at this stage.

Make sure that every entry has a heading (e.g., "Opening With Anecdote") and a date.

**REPORTS.** Should last about 15 minutes, including class discussion if any. As soon as possible, you should select an essay or memoir to assign to the rest of the class. It will be added to the syllabus, and we will read it for the day of your report. You will be responsible for leading class discussion. Be as creative as you like with this. Don't bore us, and try to leave us with some worthwhile information, insight, or perspective. But the format is entirely up to you.

**ESSAYS.** Are subject to no hard-and-fast rules, but only to numerous, rather iffy guidelines, the most important of which is that they represent the best, most creative work you can do at this point. With luck one, two, or even all three essays will grow out of your journal exercises. I recommend but do not require that the first essay be a personal narrative, the second more an argument. And I require that the third essay have a research dimension of some kind, though this can take many forms. Recommended length is 1500-3000 words for the first two essays, 3000-4500 words for the third essay, though obviously the right length for any essay is "as long as it needs to be to accomplish its purpose." For the word-count feature of MS Word, go to >Tools >>Word Count, but don't worry much about length in itself.

If your natural penchant and preference is to work in shorter forms--writing briefer essays but more of them--see me and we will negotiate this.

The first essay will go into workshop automatically. For the second round of workshop, you will decide whether to submit your second or third essay. Two turns in workshop are required of everyone.

**OPTIONAL REWRITE.** You have the option to rewrite either essay #1 or essay #2 and hand it in by Tuesday of the final week of classes. A higher grade will be awarded only in the event of a substantial improvement of the previous draft; but the new grade will then entirely replace the old. Hand in the earlier version (with my comments still attached) along with the new draft.
NEW WORK RULE. I require that all work handed in for this class be new this semester: invented, planned, and written expressly for this course. Long experience has shown that opening the door to pre-existing projects is not fair to anyone. It tends to let students with such projects make unreasonable demands on everyone else's reading time, may give them an unfair grade advantage, and finally isn't in their best interest either, as it encourages them to "coast" rather than rising to new challenges. Obviously, the rule can only be enforced by the "honor system"; but please do respect it. If you have doubt about what constitutes new work in a particular case, come see me and we will talk it over.

MANUSCRIPT FORMAT. For the journal and for essays not being submitted to workshop, double-space all your papers and leave 1" or 1.25" margins all around. Use 12-point font and number all your pages. Indent all paragraphs 5-8 spaces, and do not skip extra spaces between paragraphs, except, rarely, to mark a major transition between sections of your paper. No cover pages please, and no report covers (these are a real nuisance). Get your staple all the way up in the top-left corner of your pages. All papers written with the help of sources must include a Works Cited page. Whenever you hand in something you do NOT want me to share with the class, write "DR" or "Don't read" on top of the paper.

COPIES. Due to budget constraints, you will be responsible for providing copies of your essays for workshop discussion. When you hand in an essay for workshop, provide one copy for me, one each for everyone else in the class, plus a couple of extras. When you hand in an essay that will not be in workshop, one copy will do. But be sure to keep at least one copy of anything—even a very rough draft—that you hand to anyone else in the course. On essays handed in for workshop, you may single-space and use 10- or 11-point fonts; but for better readability, leave 1" margins and skip an extra space between your single-spaced paragraphs (as in the document you are now reading). These departures are permissible because they will save you copying expense; but on everything else, follow usual practice, double-spacing and using 12-point fonts.

LATE WORK. I will be fairly flexible if you get in touch with me before the missed deadline and have good reasons for being late. Otherwise late work will be penalized one grade step (e.g., from "B" to "B-") for each day late, weekends and holidays included. DO NOT expect me to grant extensions at the end of the term, as it may be impossible for me to read late work in time to file final grades.

WORKSHOPS. Some quick thoughts on what makes a workshop productive: first, sweat like the dickens over your writing, getting it in the very best shape you can before we see it in workshop. A weak effort is not only embarrassing to you, but demoralizing to others. Second, when others' work is up for discussion, take your obligation to your fellow writers very seriously. Come to workshop extremely well prepared, with comments you have given some thought to. Be an extremely conscientious critic whenever you are called upon, rigorous but generous, meticulous but open minded. Never be dismissive of the kind of thing an essay is (or wants to be), but be a clear-sighted judge of how well it has met its own implicit goals. Make an extra effort to define what an essay is doing well — because that tends to be strangely hard to do — but then feel free to address problems candidly and unapologetically. Never give or take criticism personally, and never hesitate to point out supposedly trivial editorial issues relating to grammar, punctuation, phrasing and the like. (In my experience such advice is not "nitpicky" at all, but especially valuable when true.)

Note: I assign a grade to every essay before we discuss it in workshop, and will not change that grade even if workshop discussion has persuaded me (as it sometimes will) that the grade should have been higher or lower. This hardheaded policy is necessary because it frees you to say exactly what you believe in class discussion, without fear that you may hurt or unduly help someone's grade.

Networking. I hope that in this class you will feel very free to ask for one another's advice and feedback. To this end, I will circulate a class roster providing everyone with everyone else's contact information. Use your roster to get preliminary feedback via e-mail before you finish an essay, or to pose very particular kinds of questions ("Is it lie down or lay down?"). And of course, try to give feedback conscientiously if it is asked for. At your discretion, you may want to circulate your question to several classmates or to the whole class. I will normally not be the one to reply in such threads -- though I will follow them with interest if they are copied to me. When you are asked a question, be careful NOT to copy your reply to the class as a whole unless you are sure the questioner will not mind.

MISCELLANEOUS. I will be more than happy to make reasonable accommodations for any student with a documented disability.

Any instance of demonstrated plagiarism will result in automatic failure of the course, and in the filing of an incident report in the student Judicial Affairs Office. See me if you have any questions about this
policy.

SCHEDULE

1. August 25-29. Introduction
   Orwell, "Such, Such Were the Joys." PE 269.
   BEGIN JOURNAL.

2. September 2-5. PERSONAL NARRATIVE

3. September 8-12. PERSONAL NARRATIVE / EXPOSITION
   JOURNAL DUE ON THURSDAY

4. September 15-19. EXPOSITION / RESEARCH
   Reports

5. September 22-26. RESEARCH & MISC
   Reports

6. September 29-October 3
   Reports
   ESSAY #1 DUE THURSDAY. PROVIDE COPIES FOR WORKSHOP.

7. October 6-10
   Workshop.

8. October 13-17
   Workshop.

9. October 20-24
   Workshop.
   ESSAY #2 DUE THURSDAY. PROVIDE COPIES IF YOU WANT TO HAVE IT IN WORKSHOP.

10. October 27-31
    Workshop

11. November 3-7
    Reports

12. November 10-14
    Workshop.
    ESSAY #3 DUE THURSDAY IF YOU WILL BE PUTTING IT IN WORKSHOP.

13. November 17-21
    Clinics, in-class reading.
    THANKSGIVING BREAK, NOVEMBER 24-28
JOURNAL EXERCISES

Do any six, 2-300 words each. Hand in September 12.

1) Imitated Opening. Choose one of your all-time favorite essays. Type out the first paragraph or two, think awhile about the craft or technique of this opening, and then begin an essay of your own in similar fashion.

2) Opening With a Scene. Begin an essay with a narrative scene. That is, plunge into some moment and render an action or dialogue in meticulous detail, blow by blow. The moment chosen should be short and dramatic. If the thesis or topic of your essay is not clear by the end of your opening, add a short explanatory note.

3) Opening With a Narrative Sketch. Begin an essay with a generalized sketch or description of a time that is too long and complex to be caught in a single scene. For example, your first sentence might be, "Spring of my senior year was the saddest time of my life"--and the rest of the paragraph might explain and show why, by citing relevant details. If the thesis or topic of your essay is not clear by the end of your opening, add a short explanatory note.

4) Opening With an Anecdote. Very similar to #2, but the opening is less a vivid flash of felt experience, more a miniature story that should feel almost complete in itself; the narrative distance is greater, and tensions should be resolved in some way. If the thesis or topic of your essay is not clear by the end of your opening, add a short explanatory note.

5) Opening with a Paradox. Begin an essay by stating the contrary of something all people, or some people, or at any rate an identifiable consensus, knows to be true. Then scramble to set up an argument which will explain and justify the opening without turning it into a mere trick.

6) A Modest Proposal. Begin an essay in which you satirize something you find ridiculous by pretending to advocate an extreme solution. "I have a simple solution to this country's problems. Make it legal to cook and eat Republicans." Whatever. The difference from #5 is that in this case your thesis is really a pseudo-thesis.

7) Epistolary Beginning. Begin an essay imagined as a letter, or an address to a specific audience.

8) How I ________, Fill in the blank--"Became a Lesbian," "Learned to Love Spiders," "Quit Smoking," whatever--and write the first two or three paragraphs of the essay.

9) Why I ________, Fill in the blank--"Hate Velcro," "Believe that God Exists," "Thought it Was a Good Idea to Move in With My Best Friend's Lover," whatever--and write the first two or three paragraphs of the essay.

10) Invention Exercise. Sit down without any clear intentions. Close your eyes for at least a minute and concentrate on what you see. Then open your eyes and write furiously for a half hour or so.
11) **Strong Feeling.** Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible without ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke it. Concentrate instead on capturing the way powerful feeling shapes the perceptions of the physical milieu, and on the way specific memories and odd thoughts go whirling through the mind at such moments. Imagine this not as a beginning but as an excerpt from the middle of an essay.

12) **Insider’s Discussion.** Depict something you know well: a technique for scaling bass, strange speech habits in your own town, the best way of pissing off your mother-in-law—anything about which you are more or less an expert.

13) **Character Studies.** Produce three quick character profiles—sketches that introduce the reader to a person who will have an important role in your story. Make these vivid and clear, giving a clear physical sense of the person and letting well-chosen details carry most of the meaning.

14) **Sentence Rewrite.** From something you have written already, choose three sentences of 20-40 words; then rewrite each one 3-6 times, keeping the diction largely the same, but exploring all the different possibilities of varying structure and syntax. Notice how each version of the sentence has a slightly different impact and emphasis from all the others. Comment briefly on the qualities or advantages of each version.

15) **Long Sentences.** Write 2 readable, effective, clear sentences of about 100 words each, punctuating correctly, making extensive use of parallel structure, and avoiding grammatical errors. If you think it can’t be done, check any short story by Twain or Faulkner.

16) **Appeal to the Senses.** Depict a time, place, scene, or event almost exclusively in terms of basic sensations. E.g., "Fourth of July in Macomb, Illinois, was all sweat and mosquitoes and redneck laughter. It was the fizz of a lukewarm Bud exploding through its pop-top. It was the smell of gunpowder and the gummy texture of cheap hot dog buns." And so on.

17) **Anti-Logic.** Write a brief argument, perhaps in the form of a letter to the editor, in which you try to commit as many logical fallacies as possible: ad hominem argument, irrelevant appeal to authority, appeal to ignorance, appeal to emotion, name-calling or labelling, begging the question, red herring, post-hoc reasoning, tautology, statistical fallacy, general non sequitur, etc.

18) **Rebuttal.** Choose a quotation from some reasonably authoritative source, e.g. *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* or the *New York Times*. Copy it, then rebut or refute it and develop your argument.

19) **Confession.** Write an essay based in some way on thoughts you normally keep silent, or on actions you have rarely if ever confessed. Don’t go out of your way to shock the reader; but proceed on the assumption that what you have not previously told, needs telling -- and that most people have secrets. Trust the reader to forgive whatever has been well and clearly expressed. There’s a (fairly slight) possibility that I will want to read what you have written to the class; so if you don’t want this, be sure to put "Don’t Read" atop this entry.

*Remember that you are welcome to invent alternate exercises of your own if you like.*