

Nonfiction Workshop

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“Nonfiction is in the facts.
Creative nonfiction is in the telling.”

– Phil Gerard

“... life is an enormous subject, especially if you believe, as I do, that it has its mysteries. But to unearth things is not enough. You need to find a choreography for them.”

~ Stephen Dunn

This is an advanced workshop in the reading and writing of nonfiction literary prose – commonly called creative nonfiction. The course will begin by exploring the flash form in nonfiction and the importance of detail and scene. Students will read widely and write a number of their own essays.

Intended Learning Outcomes and Course Goals

By the end of the semester, students will:

1. Understand and define the genre and various subgenres of creative nonfiction.
2. Create works of creative nonfiction utilizing specific craft components.
3. Develop critical reading skills.
4. Understand the importance of revision and discovery.
5. Develop an eye and ear for language and its effects on the reader.

Required Texts

Williford and Martone, eds. *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: Work from 1970 to the Present*. Touchstone. 2007. [ISBN: 1416531742]

Mark Doty. *The Art of Description*. Graywolf. 2010. [ISBN: 1555975631].

Course Guidelines

Students will be expected to come to class prepared and ready to engage in classroom activities and discussions. This means having read and considered all of the material. Participation is a substantial part of your final grade. So, to put it briefly: *Show up. Speak up. Demonstrate evidence of focused cranial activity.*

Attendance

If a student has more than two absences—excused or unexcused—the third absence will result in the lowering of his or her final grade by one-third, and each subsequent absence will drop the grade another third. If a student accumulates more than five absences—excused or unexcused—he or she will fail the course. Note, students that miss class are still required to complete all assigned readings, and it is their responsibility to find out from their peers what was missed in their absence.

Late Assignments

This course requires you to conduct yourself as a professional writer. For writers, deadlines are sacred, so all assignments must be turned in on time. Any late assignment will be awarded no more than half the possible point total. (Exceptions may be made for documented illness or other outstanding circumstances, but not for sleeping late, spacing out, succumbing to beer fog or undergraduate rapture, or being in any way unaware of the assignment.)

Classroom Conduct

As a member of the classroom community, it is important that a student's personal behavior does not distract his or her peers' participation in classroom discussions and activities. Students should turn off all cell phones, beepers, foghorns, electronic tubas, and other noisy electronics during class. It is expected that students will arrive to class on time and will stay during the duration of the class period, and doing otherwise will lower your participation grade. Discussion and debate are encouraged as productive aspects of learning; however, a lack of respect for the classroom community will not be tolerated.

DESCRIPTION OF COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

You must fulfill all of these requirements to pass the course. For your own protection, please keep a copy of every assignment you submit.

Essays and Revisions

You will write three new essays during the semester. Remember to write scenes and description, not just summary, and be sure to describe and reveal, not just explain. Avoid clichés and predictability. Even though your “first” draft (which should really be your second, third, or fourth) is a work-in-progress, understand that sloppy, unedited, haphazard work that does not attempt to use the techniques of nonfiction will not receive full credit. Meet your deadline. Proofread. Take pride in your work.

Technical Discussions: *Assigned Readings*

On designated days, you will be asked to read one or two works of literary nonfiction and to discuss specific technical aspects of the works in a short paper. Do not analyze “meaning” – read the stories as a writer, and discuss the technical choices made by the writer and how these choices did or did not enhance the essay.

Technical Responses to Student Work

See Workshop Comments.

Visiting Writer Assignment

Details to follow.

Participation

What is Creative Nonfiction?

Creative nonfiction reports and reflects on events, places, lives, and ideas using techniques most often associated with fiction (intimate detail, rounded character, cinematic scene, vivid setting, dialogue, insight, conflict) and poetry (imagery, metaphor, the entire richness of words). Creative nonfiction does not mean that one is creative with the truth; instead, the CNF writer is creative with language and structure.

Workshop Comments

In preparation for certain workshops, you will be required to type a page of comments for the author. (You should type your name at the top of the paper followed below by “Review of” the piece’s title and the author’s name.) In your page, you should cover the following points:

1. What you liked best about the piece. Many writers are unaware of what’s strongest in their own writing, so don’t assume that the author recognizes what’s terrific: point it out.
2. Where do you think that the writer needs to make improvements? What places were problematic to you as a reader? Again, this is a required part of your response, even if you loved the piece. It is especially helpful if you can discuss the craft and artistic choices the writer made in presenting the piece, rather than focusing on what happened or how you feel about the people involved.
3. A few detailed constructive suggestions on how to make improvements. What should the writer do? Alter the timeline? Use more descriptors? Revise tone or voice? Add or remove description, setting, or elements of characterization? Title? Sentence rhythms?

Bring TWO hard copies of your comments to the workshop: one for me and one for the writer. I don’t return these, but I do read them. Remember to be specific, to give the kind of comments you’ll want to get when it’s your turn in workshop. And finally, remember, when you comment, talk about the writing, not the author.

Academic Conduct

The Ohio University Student Code of Conduct prohibits all forms of academic dishonesty. These include: cheating; plagiarism; forgery; furnishing false information to the University; and alteration or misuse of University documents, records, or identification. If a student engages in course-related academic dishonesty, his or her grade on the work in question or in the course may be lowered by the instructor. Instructors may also report cases of academic dishonesty to University Judiciaries for further action. (Ohio University Faculty Handbook)

Any student found engaging in academic dishonesty will fail the course and will be referred to the University for disciplinary action. Academic dishonesty includes:

- Plagiarism: presenting someone else’s words or ideas as one’s own
- Collusion: when a student allows someone else to write, revise, or alter the text of his or her paper
- Cheating: taking or giving answers to another student during an in-class or on a take home exam

What to Ask of Every Draft

Description: Can you see, smell, feel, taste, participate in what is being described? Are the verbs and nouns lively or dull? Do the details add to the mystery and texture of the essay, or do they just bog it down? Is the writing visual enough? Where do you lose the ability to see what is being told? Remember: abstractions are the enemy.

Characterization: Are characters well-developed enough to carry our interest? Where appropriate, does the author become a character in the work as well, through action, voice, dialogue, or other methods?

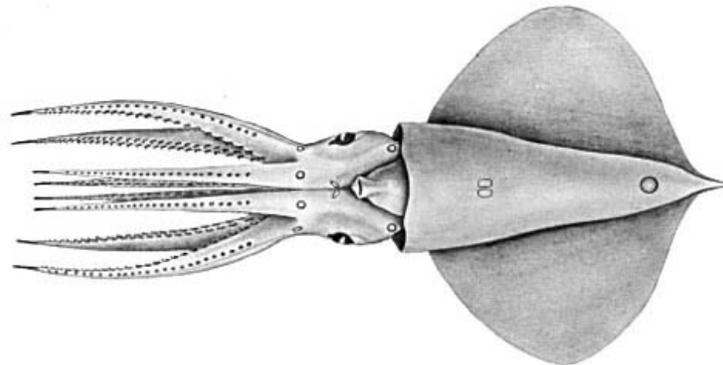
Pacing: Too fast, too slow? Are there parts that don't need to be there?

Narrative Structure/Frame: Where does the essay begin, where does it end? Does it follow chronological order or a different scheme? Are these choices the most advantageous for this essay?

Research: What facts are there and what facts, in your opinion, beg to be included too? Are there places where facts would fit and would be helpful, and aren't there now? Are you comfortable with the location of the facts?

Blind spots: Are there unexamined areas of the author's past that might benefit from deeper thinking? Are there people the writer discusses who might feel that the author hasn't taken the effort to characterize them thoughtfully? Are there times when the author brings up issues that beg for further reflection?

Discovery: Are you challenged as a reader? Do you see some part of the world in a new way? Is it about more than merely "the surface of things"?



ENGL 3950 / More Detail on the Essay Assignment

Whether your work is falling into the realm of memoir, literary journalism, or the personal essay, make sure you write scenes, not summary, that you describe and reveal, not merely explain, and that you avoid shallow writing or obvious material.

No less than 4.5 to 5 double-spaced are required for the workshop draft, though some of you may choose to go somewhat longer. Be sure you prune the deadwood and repetition **before** you bring your draft in for the class to read.

Unlike the traditional “college essay” assignment where you are allowed – sometimes encouraged – to write lifeless sentences destined for a textbook, literary nonfiction writers attempt to craft muscular, graceful, gorgeous sentences. You are attempting not only to entertain/engage the reader, but to touch their hearts, or souls, or minds, as well.

You can receive up to 20 points for this assignment , but **sloppy, unedited, haphazard work, or work that does not attempt to use the techniques of creative nonfiction – scene over summary, significant detail, sense memory (or observation)**, will receive less.

Meet your deadline. **Proofread.** Take pride in your work.

To meet the above requirements, you can't wait until the last minute. Solid pages require solid work – watching, remembering, writing.

No topic is out of bounds except for topics that belittle people because of race, ethnicity, gender, handicap, or the like.