

E641: THE PERSONAL ESSAY  
**Syllabus**

Wednesdays 7-9:50 p.m.  
Education 1  
Fall 2014  
Colorado State University

Professor: Debby Thompson  
Office: 158 Ingersoll  
Office hours: T 11:00-1:00  
or by appointment  
Deborah.Thompson@Colostate.EDU

Within the resurgent genre of creative nonfiction, that most ancient and contemporary of literary modes, the subgenre of the personal essay is particularly resonant with the needs of our era. Both a compact and an expansive form, it ranges from the reportorial to the self-reflexive, from serious to humorous, from the deeply personal, almost confessional pieces to auto-ethnography and cultural criticism, to essays insisting on the inseparability of the personal with the political. In addition to being a significant presence on the literary terrain, many of the crucial issues of creative nonfiction (and of our time) are brought to a crisis in the personal essay: What is truth and how do we know it? How can a rigorous demand for truth-telling accommodate the inherent—and sometimes generative—flaws of memory? What is “emotional honesty”? When is it appropriate to write about others, and when is it overly appropriative? What are the ethics of speaking for others? When is a writer being “self-indulgent” and what, exactly, is the problem with self-indulgence? What pressures and constraints does the very essay form put on our ability to speak and understand ourselves? What invisible ideological pressures underlie the essay form itself, as well as our concept of the “personal”? What forms of (self-) knowledge does the personal essay make possible?

This course is designed to explore the range, possibilities, and perils of this sometimes unnervingly flexible form. Students will both read and write a range of personal essays and will learn how to talk critically and appreciatively about essays at many stages of formation, from first draft to published (and presumably “finished”) pieces.

**Quick Overview:**

Week 1, Aug. 27	Introduction to the Course; Introduction to Creative Nonfiction
Week 2, Sept. 3	Introduction to the Personal Essay; Micro-Essays
Week 3, Sept. 10	Personal Narrative and Memoir Essays
Week 4, Sept. 17	Attend Gary Snyder Reading
Week 5, Sept. 24	Auto-Ethnography; Workshop first set of micro-essays
Week 6, Oct. 1	The Personal Essay as Cultural Criticism; Workshop next set of micro-essays
Week 7, Oct. 8	Experiments with Form; Workshop final set of micro-essays
Week 8, Oct. 15	Long Essay Workshop
Week 9, Oct. 22	Long Essay Workshop
Week 10, Oct. 29	Long Essay Workshop
Week 11, Nov. 5	Long Essay Workshop
Week 12, Nov. 12	Long Essay Workshop
Week 13, Nov. 19	First half of student presentations on Literary Journals
Week 14, Nov. 26	Fall Recess: NO CLASS
Week 15, Dec. 3	Second half of student presentations on Literary Journals
Week 16, Dec. 10	Discussion of Three Journal Essays; Continue Discussion of Publishing

(This syllabus may be subject to minor revisions as the course proceeds.)

### Detailed List of Readings:

Readings are available on the Writing Studio (Writing@CSU), which you can access at <http://writing.colostate.edu/>. At the start of the semester you will be asked through email to join the class list. Once joined, you will find additional course readings under the heading “Class Files.” (You’ll find it under the Options menu at the upper-right quadrant of your home page.) Drafts for Workshopping should be posted under Class DropBox.

### Week One, August 27: Introduction to the Course; Introduction to Creative Nonfiction

#### Week Two, Sept. 3: Introduction to the personal Essay; Micro-Essays

- Philip Lopate, Intro to *The Art of the Personal Essay*
- Stephanie G’Schwind, “An Artful Placement of Needle Against Album” (<http://essaydaily.blogspot.com/2013/11/stephanie-gschwind-artful-placement-of.html>)
- All essays in *Brevity* 46 (May 2014) ([brevitymag.com](http://brevitymag.com)) + Sarah Lin’s “Devotion” ([www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/past%20issues/brev33/lin\\_devotion.html](http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/past%20issues/brev33/lin_devotion.html)) and Jonathan Starke’s “The Wound” ([www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/pastissues2wo/brev34/starke\\_wound.html](http://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/pastissues2wo/brev34/starke_wound.html)).

Note: I’ve made a pdf version, available on WS, if you want to print out and write on these essays)

#### Week Three, Sept. 10: Personal Narrative and Memoir Essays

- J.D. Shraffenberger, “Dropping Babies” (<http://brevitymag.com/nonfiction/dropping-babies/>)
- Amy Monticello, “In Defense of the Confessional” (<http://essaydaily.blogspot.com/2014/06/amy-monticello-in-defense-of.html>)
- Christy Vannoy, “A Personal Essay by a Personal Essay”
- Philip Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence”
- Cheryl Stayed, “The Love of My Life”
- E. B. White, “Death of a Pig”
- Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That”

#### Week Four, Sept. 17: Attend Gary Snyder Reading

#### Week Five, Sept. 24: Auto-Ethnography; first set of micro-essays

- Richard Rodriguez, “Complexion”
- Sherman Alexie, “War Dances”
- Alice Walker, “Looking for Zora”
- Gerry Callahan, “Chimera”
- first five micro-essays

#### Week Six, Oct. 1: The Personal Essay as Cultural Criticism; next set of micro-essays

- David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”
- Jennifer Price, “A Brief Natural History of the Plastic Pink Flamingo”
- Leslie Jamison, “The Empathy Exams”
- Leslie Jamison, “How to Write a Personal Essay” (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/61591-how-to-write-a-personal-essay.html>)
- next five micro-essays

#### Week Seven, Oct. 8: Experiments with form; final set of micro-essays

- Eula Biss, “The Pain Scale”
- J. Drew Lanham, “9 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher” (<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/7812>)
- Dinty Moore, “Son of Mr. Green Jeans”
- next five micro-essays

**Week Eight, Oct. 15--Week Twelve, Nov. 12: Long essays for workshop**

**Week Thirteen, Nov. 19 & Week Fifteen, Dec. 1: Presentations on Literary Journals**

**Week Sixteen, Dec. 10: Discussion of Three Journal Essays; Continue Discussion of Publishing**  
• Readings TBA

### ***Readings:***

You are strongly encouraged to attend the following readings:

September 17, WEDNESDAY: **GARY SNYDER** (UCA Organ Recital Hall)

October 23, Thursday: Writers Harvest, featuring **IRA SUKRUNGRUANG & SASHA STEENSEN**

November 13, Thursday: **DINTY MOORE** (mini-workshop for 10 students on Friday, Nov. 14)

### ***Requirements and Grading***

- three micro-essays (30%)—one will be workshopped by the class and then revised by the student
- one full-length essay (approx. 6000 words or equivalent)—must have been workshopped and revised (35%)
- Class Participation (including written and verbal critiques of other students' work and in-class report on a literary journal, as well as, of course, participation in discussion) (35%)

NB: My **attendance policy** may override these percentages. Please try not to miss any classes except in case of illness or extreme personal/family crisis. Each unexcused absence after the first one will lower your final grade (the one that appears on your transcript) by 0.5 (on a 4.0-point scale).

Reasonable accommodation will of course be made to allow individuals to observe their established religious holidays. Please see me well ahead of time if you will need such accommodation.

This course will use the university's +/- grading scale, in which A+ = 4.0; A = 4.0; A- = 3.667; B+ = 3.334; B = 3.00; B- = 2.667; C+ = 2.334; C = 2.00; D = 1.00; F = 0.00

### **WRITTEN WORK**

By the end of this course you will have produced three polished micro-essays and one full-length essay. Your full-length essay and one micro-essay will be workshopped in class.

### ***Micro-Essays***

Micro-essays are generally highly condensed, often lyrical, sometimes stylized nuggets. We are particularly lucky this semester to have Dinty Moore, editor of *Brevity* and champion of the micro-essay, as part of our Reading Series. *Brevity* essays are all under 750 words. The practice of writing such essays trains writers in precision, concision, and disciplined editing. Every word must work.

This semester you will write three very short micro-essays (also called “flash nonfiction”) of the type that might appear in *Brevity*. One of these essays will be workshopped in class. At only

10% of your grade apiece, these micro-essays offer you a great opportunity to experiment outside of your comfort zone. I encourage you to use these essays as a chance to try on a new voice, style, tone, topic, or shape.

***Full-Length Essays:***

In this course you will workshop and revise a full-length essay of approximately 6000 words (the conventional length of essays in literary journals). You have lots of flexibility here, both in topic and in style. Ideally your long essay will be some sort of “personal essay,” but that term may be understood expansively. I prefer this essay to be new work, but I will entertain the option of a substantial revision of an existing essay, provided you talk to me about this option beforehand. Similarly, I prefer it to be a stand-alone essay for this class alone, though I may be persuaded to make a rare exception if you present your case to me beforehand.

***Critiques:***

You will have a chance to “workshop” one short essay and one longer essay, and will, in turn, workshop a short and long essay from each of your classmates. The workshop involves both in-class commentary and a written critique of approximately one page, single-spaced. Please bring two copies of your critique—one for the writer and one for me (your instructor). You will probably also want to hand-write some comments on the hard copy of the draft itself.

***Manuscript Submissions:***

All manuscripts submitted for workshop and for final grading must be typed and double-spaced, with pages numbered consecutively and one-inch margins. Times Roman in 12-point font is standard for most literary journals. Please proofread as a matter of courtesy if not policy. Manuscripts should be free of misspellings, punctuation problems, and grammatical gaffes. Excessive errors of this type will affect your grade.

The short and long pieces submitted for workshop must be posted on the Writing Studio at least one week in advance. Grades for short and long pieces will lower by half a letter grade (0.5 on a 4.0-point scale) for each day late. This policy applies both to workshop submissions and to final submissions.

At the end of the semester, you will turn in three short essays (approx. 750 words) and one longer essay (approx. 6000 words), in addition to your drafting journal. One of these short essays will be a meaningfully revised version of the one workshopped in class. The other two may have come out of prompts in class, but need not have. The longer essay will be a thoroughgoing revision in light of the class workshop. You may want to include a brief reflection on your revision process.

Revision is the most important part of writing. I spend far more time revising than I do creating my first draft. I hope you will discover the pleasure of deep revision as a way of life.

***Participation:***

This isn’t the kind of class where the teacher has information to transmit to students. The class will only work with the committed involvement of all class members. You are expected to come to class to come to class fully prepared, to actively and constructively participate in class discussion, and to listen to and respect (though not necessarily agree with) contributions made by peers and instructor. These expectations are true for any class, but are especially crucial in a creative nonfiction writing class. If you do not meet these obligations I may ask you to leave and count that class period as an absence.

I will discuss expectations for drafts, short pieces, long pieces, critiques, and workshop commentary in far more detail as the semester proceeds.

### → *A Note on Confidentiality:*

What happens in this class stays in the class. Do not share work by a fellow student, or the contents therein, with anyone outside of this class without explicit permission from that student. By staying in this course, you agree to this rule. This class needs to be a safe zone, in which writers can allow themselves be vulnerable. No infringement on the assurance of confidentiality will be tolerated. In cases of severe violation you may be asked to leave the course or worse.

### *Additional Legal Stuff:*

#### **Academic Integrity**

The course will adhere to the Academic Integrity Policy of the Colorado State University General Catalog and the Student Conduct Code. At minimum, academic integrity means that no one will use another's work as their own. Here's the CSU Writing Center's definition:

“Plagiarism is the unauthorized or unacknowledged use of another person's academic or scholarly work. Done on purpose, it is cheating. Done accidentally, it is no less serious. Regardless of how it occurs, plagiarism is a theft of intellectual property and a violation of an ironclad rule demanding credit be given where credit is due.”

(Writing Guides: Understanding Plagiarism.

<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/researchsources/understandingplagiarism/plagiarismoverview.cfm>

Accessed, January 15, 2009)

If you plagiarize in your work you could lose credit for the plagiarized work, fail the assignment, or fail the course. Plagiarism could result in expulsion from the university. Each instance of plagiarism, classroom cheating, and other types of academic dishonesty will be addressed according to the principles published in the CSU General Catalog.

(see page seven, column two: <http://www.catalog.colostate.edu/front/policies.aspx>).

Of course, academic integrity means more than just avoiding plagiarism. It also involves doing your own reading and studying. It includes regular class attendance, careful consideration of all class materials, and engagement with the class and your fellow students. Academic integrity lies at the core of our common goal: to create an intellectually honest and rigorous community. Because academic integrity, and the personal and social integrity of which academic integrity is an integral part, is so central to our mission as students, teachers, scholars, and citizens, you may be asked to write and sign the CSU Honor Pledge (“I have not given, received, or used any unauthorized assistance.”) on major assignments.

N.B. The most common kind of plagiarism I find arising in creative nonfiction classes is “auto-plagiarism” in the form of submitting the same work for more than one class. If you plan to do this, please discuss it with me first.

#### ***Time Commitment:***

Please note: as fun and fulfilling as it is, creative writing is hard work. (If it's not, you're probably not doing it right.) While the official credit hour definition is a minimum of three hours of outside work for each contact hour, you may find yourself spending far more than nine hours of outside work per week for this course.

#### **Policy on Unauthorized Recordings**

The classroom needs to be a safe space where students can try on new ideas without fear. Please be sensitive to the contextual nature of learning. You may not record (audiotape, videotape, podcast, etc.) this class without the instructor's permission.

REQUIRED READINGS, FILMS, AND DISCUSSIONS IN THIS CLASS WILL INCLUDE LANGUAGE AND TOPICS THAT SOME PEOPLE MIGHT FIND OBJECTIONABLE. I HAVE ASSIGNED POTENTIALLY OFFENSIVE MATERIAL TO PROVOKE THOUGHT AND EDUCATION. IF CERTAIN IMAGES, TOPICS, OR WORDS WILL BE SO OFFENSIVE TO YOU AS TO NEGATIVELY IMPACT ON YOUR ABILITY TO LEARN IN THIS COURSE, YOU ARE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE ANOTHER COURSE INSTEAD OF THIS ONE TO FULFILL THE REQUIREMENT SATISFIED BY THIS COURSE. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STATEMENT, PLEASE SEE ME WITHIN THE DROP/ADD PERIOD.