



Creative Nonfiction Workshop

Northwestern University
MCW 461-50
Summer 2014

Instructor: **Dr. Michele Morano**
Meetings: **Tues, 7-9:30pm**
Location: **University Hall 223**
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Course Overview

Telling true stories, and in the process grappling with what “true” means and where meaning resides, can be a thrilling, daunting, and artistically complex act. In order to help you generate and craft material in the most effective way, I have organized this course around several subgenres of creative nonfiction, from memoir to travel writing to profiles to personal/political essays. Studying the structures and techniques of published works in these subgenres (which often overlap), will help you choose appropriate angles from which to tell your own stories. Along the way, we will identify and discuss and practice many of the essential skills of creative writing in general.

This course is discussion-based and uses the workshop method of instruction.

Reading

Coursepack available from Quartet Copies, 825 Clark St., Evanston

Writing

Writing for this course consists of:

- 2 *new* essays of approximately 6-10 pages, submitted for workshop
- final revision of one of these essays
- short, informal, reflective essay submitted with your final revision
- 3 annotations of published work
- workshop responses to your classmates' essays

- one piece of generative writing due in week 2

All writing assignments are posted in detail on Blackboard.

Feedback

I will respond, in writing, to your essays, revisions, and annotations. I will also participate orally in workshop, during which you will receive written and oral feedback from your classmates.

In addition, I am happy to meet with you outside class to discuss your work. I'm available before class on Tuesdays and at various other times/days. Please request a meeting via email. Your chances will be greatest if you give me a 24-hour lead-time, but there's no harm in asking on shorter notice.

Evaluation

Your course grade is determined by the quality of your essays, revision, annotations, and course participation. To make an A, please attend each class session (except in the case of a true emergency), prepare fully for discussions and workshop, contribute regularly and insightfully to discussion, and submit all assignments on time.

Other Notes

Please read *actively* for this class. Mark up pages, writing notes in the margins that laugh at, argue with, or question the text.

Come to class prepared to discuss what we can all learn from a particular reading. Whether or not you *like* an essay is beside the point. You'll like some, hopefully love some, and not like others at all – what matters is that each one has something to teach us about craft and technique.

Please get in the habit of keeping a writing journal. I won't read this, but it's an essential part of good writing practice to have a small notebook with you at all times for jotting down ideas or practicing techniques.

For the ten weeks of this quarter, you have my absolute full attention. Please take advantage of that, since once the course ends, my schedule won't allow me to read additional revisions or extra pieces of your writing.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (6/24)	Introduction to course, to CNF, to ethical challenges & opportunities of the genre; discussion of writing process & goals; generation of ideas
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Week 2 (7/1) Subgenre: Memoir
Skills: crafting voice, interweaving scene and summary

Readings: Van Meter, “First”
Beard, “The Fourth State of Matter”
Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”
Miller & Paola, “The Particular Challenges of CNF”

Writing: 30-min. Autobiography

Week 3 (7/8) Subgenre: Travel Writing
Skills: choosing effective details, sketching place

Readings: Sedaris, “Journey into Night”
Adele, “Passing Through Bandit Country”
Oates, “A Visit to San Quentin”
Gornick, “from *The Situation and the Story*”

Writing: Annotation #1

Week 4 (7/15) Subgenre: Profile of a Person/Place/Thing
Skills: creating characters and atmosphere

Readings: Pemberton, “The Hottest Water in Chicago”
Didion, “Goodbye to All That”
Kincaid, “Biography of a Dress”

Writing: Essay 1 (post to Blackboard by 6pm Sunday, 7/20)

Week 5 (7/22) Subgenre: Profile of a Time Period or Phenomenon
Skills: bringing expositional info into narrative

Readings: Early, “Somehow Form a Family”
Harvey, “The Seventeen-Year Itch”
Caudron, “Befriending Barbie”

Writing: Workshop Notes (post to Blackboard by class time; bring a copy for the writer)

Week 6 (7/29) Lyric Essay & Multi-Media

Skills: using omission, creating echoes

Readings: Black, "The Answer That Increasingly Appeals"
Thomas, "I Ate There Once"
Cooper, "The Fine Art of Sighing"
Sutin, "Pissed Off...", "Tower..." "Young Man..."
Miller & Paola, "Playing with Form"

Writing: Annotation #2

Week 7 (8/5) Meditation or Essay of Ideas

Skills: Managing the Story of Thought

NO CLASS MEETING

Discussion of Readings will take place on Blackboard

Readings: Woolf, "Street Haunting"
Doyle, "The Greatest Nature Essay Ever"
Leach, "You Be the Moon"

Writing: Post *at least three* (and preferably more) entries to the discussion board for the readings

Essay #2 (post to Blackboard by 6pm Sunday, 8/10)

Week 8 (8/12) The Personal Political Essay

Skills: developing context; illustrating an argument

Readings: Biss, "No Man's Land"
Nye, "This Is Not Who We Are"

Writing: Workshop Notes
Annotation #3

Week 9 (8/19) Revision

Readings: Miller & Paola, "The Writing Process and Revision"
Moore, "Revision and Narrative Structure"

Writing: Bring an in-process revision of one of your essays to class

Week 10 (8/26)

Class Reading & Wrap-up
Final Revision Due

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

30-minute Autobiography

Due in week 2, this wacky assignment asks you to sit down for no more than 30 minutes and write the story of your life. Please turn off your phone and email notifications, set a timer, and spend no more than half an hour writing. When the timer goes off, you're done.

If you're tempted to cheat, OK. You may spend an additional 30 minutes cleaning up what you've written and fleshing out something that seems essential. But under no circumstances should you spend more than an hour on this, and 30 minutes really is enough time. Bring a copy to class for me (double-spaced, reasonable font, one-inch margins, your info at the top).

Essays

Each essay you turn in for workshop should be *approximately* 6-10 pages long. Your material should guide length, but remember that it's usually harder to write short than long. An essay under 6 pages has to be very tight and doesn't have much time/space to develop an underlying idea. On the other hand, essays longer than 10 pages have to hold their narrative arc and keep readers interested.

You are free to write whatever kind of essay interests you, in terms of subject matter and form. For help generating ideas, see the writing prompts on Blackboard. Let me know if you'd like to chat about an idea you're working on. A ten-minute discussion with me can save a lot of blank screen time.

Essays should:

- Be double-spaced, in a readable (12-point) font), with one-inch margins
- Be titled
- Have your name and course number at the top of the first page
- Have page numbers. Don't forget this!!

Please post your two workshop essays to the Blackboard discussion board by the date/time indicated on the syllabus.

Annotations

Annotations, or *craft commentaries*, are a wonderful mechanism for focusing your attention on technique and for helping you read as a writer.

Annotations should be approximately two pages, double-spaced and should describe in close detail the use of **one element** of technique or craft in an assigned reading. In general, I expect you to write annotations about one of the assigned readings for the night the annotation is due; however, if you are particularly interested in some aspect of an essay we have already discussed in class, you may write about that – provided that what you have to say goes far beyond what we discussed.

Please note that an annotation *does not* summarize a work or discuss theme. Rather, it explores what a particular *cnf* text can teach us about **one particular element** of craft, including but not limited to point of view, diction, syntax, structure, imagery, use of detail, use of summary, pacing, dialogue, characterization, transitions, setting, sensory detail, folding in of research and interviews, flashbacks and flashforwards, rhythm and variety of sentence lengths, focus (including what is left out), and exposition. **You may find it useful to focus on an element you have trouble with or that you want to use more effectively.**

Please title your annotation: (Craft Element) in (Title of work).

In the event that your annotation completely misses the mark, I may ask you to revise, not as a punitive measure but as part of your essential training as a reader.

Workshop responses

Please read workshop essays carefully and with an eye toward possibility. Tearing down a work-in-progress is the easiest thing in the world; more challenging and vastly more productive is reading with the sense that even the messiest drafts offer clues to their future (and sometimes lead to more promising revisions than tidy ones).

Put your name on the drafts you read, and make whatever marginal comments will help you contribute to discussion and will be useful for authors. You'll return drafts to their authors after workshop.

In addition, please write a 200-word response (about half a page, single-spaced) to the author. Your responses can be informal in tone, but they should also be insightful. Again, whether or not you like a piece is beside the point. Instead, our job in workshop is to help authors see a) what's happening on the page and b) what future possibilities they may want to focus on during revision.

Here are some guiding questions to consider as you respond:

- How would you characterize the voice in this essay? (Where do you see it on the page?) Does the voice seem appropriate for the material? (Why/why not?) Are there any places where the voice shifts uncomfortably?
- What interests you about this essay? Where do you feel drawn in, and where do you feel your interest falling away?
- How is this essay organized? What sections is it broken down into? How well does this organization work? Point out for the author any places where you got confused or where he/she might consider restructuring.
- What's working really well in this essay? Comment on the descriptions, scenes, metaphors, sentence rhythms – anything that strikes you as effective.
- What questions do you have about the essay? What do you want more of (background information? descriptions? explanation?) What material seems unnecessary or not as effective as the rest?
- What is this essay about? This may seem a silly question to answer for an author, but trust me: writers don't always have the best perspective on our works in progress. Summaries of a draft can be incredibly useful for everyone involved.

Final Revision and Informal Reflective Essay

Revision

The final piece you turn in should be a revision of one of the essays you've produced for this class. After getting feedback from the class in workshop (and after learning from others' essays-in-progress), you should re-think what you're trying to do, refine your ideas, consider what narrative strategies and techniques might help you tell this particular story more effectively. It's worth thinking about "story" as a combination of "story of thought" (exposition) and "story of experience" (narrative).

Reflection

When you turn in your final revision, please attach to it, at the end, a 2-3 page reflection on your writing. There's no need to craft this piece the way you would a formal essay. Rather, you should think of this as an opportunity to talk on paper about the essay you're turning in and your writing in general. Is there anything you want me to know about what you're trying to do in this piece? What aspects of writing/revising it did you find compelling? What did you find challenging? What (if any) discoveries did you make in the process of producing this piece?

In addition, you might offer some reflections on your writing in general. What do you think are some of its strengths? What aspects do you want to continue working on in the future?