

# CRWR 212: INTRO TO CREATIVE NONFICTION<sup>1</sup>

## SPRING 2025<sup>2</sup>

*The medium is the message.*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> What is Creative Nonfiction (CNF)? Why is there a class in it? Good questions. “Creative nonfiction is a genre of writing that uses literary styles and techniques to tell true stories.” That’s according to ChatGPT, anyway. It’s an okay definition. It provides a starting point, an idea. But while we need to have a shared sense of what we mean when we say “CNF,” we should immediately be skeptical of any too-clear definition, especially one we’re asked to take on authority. Writers, as I’ve come to admire them, are those most sensitive to easy answers and hollow conceptualization and most suspicious of authority’s tendency to relieve its audience of the responsibility to think. Authority in the classroom, I claim, therefore, is anathema to the essence of education, thought itself. So, what is CNF? We can point to instances (e.g., Jo Ann Beard’s “The Fourth State of Matter” or Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*), but any definition will invite doubt and admit exceptions. And isn’t this a good thing? And if you want to know what CNF is (assuming it’s something), shouldn’t you answer that to your own satisfaction?

On the question of why a class: well, here we are. Our university is the institution that supports our work and offers the space in which we do it. The danger that attends this generosity is that the university assigns us certain structural expectations that map awkwardly onto what we’re up to in creative writing. According to Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in their book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, the abiding lessons of the classroom setting are as follow:

- Passive acceptance is a more desirable response to ideas than active criticism.
- Discovering knowledge is beyond the power of students and is, in any case, none of their business.
- Recall is the highest form of intellectual achievement, and the collection of unrelated ‘facts’ is the goal of education.
- The voice of authority is to be trusted and valued more than independent judgment.
- One’s own ideas and those of one’s classmates are inconsequential.
- Feelings are irrelevant in education.
- There is always a single, unambiguous Right Answer to a question.
- English is not History and History is not Science and Science is not Art and Art is not Music, and Art and Music are minor subjects and English, History and Science major subjects, and a subject is something you ‘take’ and, when you have taken it, you have ‘had’ it, and if you have ‘had’ it, you are immune and need not take it again. (The Vaccination Theory of Education?)

As little as any of this would seem to have to do with education of any kind—let alone creative writing, which flies directly in the face of all of it—this list gives us a good indication of the kind of standardization we’re up against in the classroom. We must overcome the conventions we’ve internalized over a lifetime of “education.”

What have we learned already in the creative writing classroom? If we’ve been there before, we have likely been initiated into the craft method, according to which: there are identifiable skills that good writers possess; if we can learn these skills and practice them, our writing will achieve proficiency, where *proficiency* means something like “recognizably similar to what has come before.”

I don’t want to disparage this approach. It’s good, as far as it goes, probably the best we have. But it’s hard not to notice its limitations. Here now toward the bottom of this first footnote, let me offer a positive vision for this class. As writers, we will be cultivating our sensibilities (plural and each unique); we will be sharing our enthusiasms and inviting their contagiousness; we will be taking the energy and truth and meaning we feel as readers and aspiring to achieve it in our own work; we will not settle for learning the names of things; we will not sit around waiting for other writers to teach us how to write; we will get ourselves messy with the making of things; we will come to know writing as a perpetual apprenticeship—each occasion of writing being an occasion of discovering what a given piece of writing is and does. We begin each day as we began the day before. There is no such thing as tomorrow or graduation or perfection. We don’t “take” writing or “pass” writing. Simply, wonderfully, incomprehensibly, *we write*.

<sup>2</sup> This semester, by the way, will be my last, and I find myself, therefore, with bridges to burn and at liberty to express here some of those doubts I have been carrying around campus all these years.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall McLuhan, of course. You’ve heard this before, so often in fact that it’s easy to overlook. But let’s not overlook it here, where the medium is the syllabus, and the message is approximately this: creative writing is a subject like other subjects, and creative writing class is a class like other classes. Therefore, you will be evaluated according to your success at demonstrating that you have learned certain content. You will demonstrate this learning through your fluency in the dialect of your subject (in this case: learning how to write and speak about texts in an approved way). You should listen carefully to your teacher’s diction as well as his opinions and assume that you should approximate him in these, stopping short of obsequiousness. Additionally, the part of you that wants to be a writer, not just a good student, will be attentive to when the writing teacher reveals the secrets of the trade. It must be secret and specialized knowledge; otherwise, why would it be studied in a formal setting? Like all students, you will be trained in how to sit in desks, how to follow directions and rules, how to conform, how to succeed by meeting the expectations of

Instructor: Scott Parker  
Email: [scott.parker4@montana.edu](mailto:scott.parker4@montana.edu)  
Office: Wilson 2-171  
Office Hours: by appointment

---

## Course Overview

This course will explore the genre of creative nonfiction. Students will study, write, and workshop personal essays, memoir, literary journalism, and other nonfiction forms. Through readings, discussions, and peer feedback, we will explore how to develop voice, structure narratives, and integrate research and reflection.<sup>4</sup>

---

superiors (me), how to produce the work they (I) want to see, how to think as they (I) want you to think, how to be for fifty minutes at a time, three times a week, exactly who they (I) want you to be.

You know what a class is. You know what a syllabus is, too: a contract, fundamentally. *Caveat emptor*. If you fail to read the syllabus, where the expectations are laid out, clear as can be, the terms nonnegotiable, you have no one to blame but yourself. There will be no surprises in the class itself, just the delivery of the syllabus's promise. It is why, as Postman and Weingartner write, "All authorities get nervous when learning is conducted without a syllabus." They don't want to get any complaints from their ~~customers~~ students. They don't want to be found in breach of contract. And so, dutifully, the instructor complies, producing modified versions of the same syllabus semester after semester, each iteration marginally closer to achieving perfect indemnity. But it's all done with a bit of a wink, of course. Every teacher is aware of the inescapable gap between the official syllabus and the actual syllabus, which is nothing less than the gap between reality and representations of it. Depending on one's philosophical orientation and subject of instruction, some of us not only recognize the gap between the official and the actual but reside there. Here, then (again, this being my last semester and having, therefore, those bridges to burn), is the syllabus I teach by rather than the one I usually distribute. Here are the gaps I hope to inhabit.

Part of me, I must admit, hopes that you will not read on (if, out of a sense of duty or curiosity, you've made it this far). I want you to take this syllabus and place it in your trashcan, whether virtual or real. Students generally, but especially us writers, should be uninterested in syllabi. Writers are (should be) uniquely suspicious of official statements and official positions and all things official, syllabi not least among these. (And, yes, this includes the syllabus you are now reading and my instruction to be suspicious.) We, more than any others, distrust the received, the given, the official. We, more than anyone else on campus, including the physicists, are after the truth, and we know in our bones that a syllabus, no matter how well intended, is always a kind of lie: life doesn't fit in a spreadsheet or an equation, the territory doesn't fit in the map, and the class can never fit in the syllabus.

The origins of *syllabus* are in the Greek *sillybos*, which referred to a label placed on a book or a scroll.

If only a syllabus were more like a sign on the door. CREATIVE WRITING it would say. Beyond that, the student would have to step bravely into the unknown or not at all. We can't know what's going to happen ahead of time, we can't control it. I often think of Carl Rogers on the first day of his psychology classes, addressing his students and saying to them, "So, what should this class be about?" I can't think of a better way of teaching anyone anything. And yet here I am, like everyone on campus, teacher and student alike, sitting in front of a pile of syllabi, trying to figure out what I am supposed to do.

<sup>4</sup> Would you be surprised to know that ChatGPT wrote this paragraph, down to the punctuation mark? I left it alone for two reasons. First, I can't write this kind of boilerplate any better. Second, it suggests the extent to which creative writing has been standardized, institutionalized, and possibly tamed. This description works for every creative nonfiction class, not to mention (with slight adjustment for form) every creative writing class, I've taken or taught. While I have always found that this standard approach works fairly well, in that those who go through it tend to write better after than before, I have this lingering suspicion that what gets imparted to students ahead of how to be a better creative writer is how to be a better student of creative writing. Given the constraints of the classroom and the institutional context, perhaps this is unavoidable and I should not here make the perfect the enemy of the good. I readily concede as much. Nevertheless, for my sake as well as my students' sakes, I don't want to lose sight of the fact that our aim is to write and write well (according to standards each of us must, ultimately, assign to ourselves), not to meet the approval of authority. What I'm getting at, I suppose, is the question of whether art can be mass produced, which just asking brings me a wave of nausea. The course goals might be as basic as what is overviewed here, but the ultimate goal of making good art overwhelms.

---

## Course Goals and Learning Outcomes<sup>5</sup>

By the end of this course, students will:

1. Identify and analyze key features of creative nonfiction.<sup>6</sup>
2. Develop and refine their personal writing voice.
3. Apply literary techniques—such as scene, dialogue, and imagery—to nonfiction writing.<sup>7</sup>
4. Write and revise original pieces in a variety of creative nonfiction forms.
5. Offer thoughtful feedback to peers and engage in constructive workshop discussions.
6. Navigate issues of truth, ethics, and representation in nonfiction writing.<sup>8</sup>

---

## Class Policies

1. **Attendance:** Students are expected to attend all classes and notify the instructor in advance if they will be absent.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> This list, too, was produced by ChatGPT, as was most of the whole syllabus. If I sincerely listed my own goals for the course without AI assistance, the list would be very short (Write stuff that is meaningful to us.) and that would not meet expectations (i.e., the genre conventions) for the length and range of a syllabus. In its honesty, it would be insufficient. And so I find myself in a situation wherein I must produce bullshit—or have ChatGPT do it for me.

*A note on bullshit:* I refer to it in the Frankfurtian sense, as being indifferent to truth. It's not that I have anything against the list that follows. All of it seems reasonable to me, just mostly beside the point. It would be as if our goals for a swimming class were to change clothes and get wet and keep our breathing steady for thirty consecutive minutes. As important as each item is, even combining them does not achieve the goal of swimming, which to my mind is to swim. The items on this syllabus are beside the point and beg the important questions: Why are we doing this? What, finally, matters? All of us are going to die, and we have chosen to spend our time in this most impractical pursuit—the making of art. Why don't we quit screwing around? The stakes are too high for polite agreeableness. If we writers are in the business of doing anything it's not taking bullshit. Whatever our attitudes toward truth (I don't forget who we're talking to here, CNFers), we devote ourselves to the Truth.

<sup>6</sup> Why? Why would anyone care to do this? Is your goal to become a scholar of CNF? Is your goal to *know that* as a means to *know how*? Do you feel a strong desire to classify? Should someone pass a microscope? Are you much taken with Aristotle? What is CNF? You won't get a straight answer out of me. The good news is that you don't want one. A writer is, as has been claimed, one for whom boundaries are drawn to be trespassed. We are here to make art, nothing else. Let the literature students tell us what they think it means.

<sup>7</sup> Because, as everyone knows, it is the application of scene, dialogue, imagery, and the rest that make writing good.

<sup>8</sup> I have nothing critical to say about this or the previous two items. Worthy practices, all of them. Write and revise, write and revise. The being is in the doing. Keep writing and you will be a writer. Keep revising and your writing will, on the whole, improve. Keep reading and you will continue to renew the sense of possibility your writing holds. That's why we read as much as we do. Every book or essay or story or poem we read is an encouragement for our writing to unfold in a new dimension.

But what does this have to do with degrees, you may be wondering, and tuition? Ugh, yeah, tuition. If reading and writing and revising are the keys, aren't there lots of places we might find them? As it happens, there are. I, for one, have written in community-based classes, in writing groups, on my own, for select trusted readers, as well as in university classes. In fact, relatively little of my writing has come out of that latter space. So, the unavoidable questions: Why pay (so much) for it? Why get credentialed?

When I was applying to graduate school, I had a conversation with Tom Bissell, who was then teaching in one of the programs I had applied to. Very generously, he told me not to come to his school. "You can be a writer with or without attending an MFA program," he said. "Unless you are wealthy enough not to care about tuition, don't go to a program you'll have to pay for. Don't go into debt for a writing degree." I consider this among the best writing advice anyone has given me.

<sup>9</sup> This legalese is for my protection. (See grading policy below.) When I put myself in your shoes, I'm sympathetic to not attending class. (I was, myself, an expert in not attending class as a student.) One of my jobs will be to make our class meetings feel

2. **Late Work:** Assignments turned in late will receive a grade reduction unless previously arranged.<sup>10</sup>
3. **Plagiarism:** All work submitted must be original or properly cited. Cases of plagiarism will result in disciplinary action.<sup>11</sup>
4. **Technology:** Laptops and devices are welcome for class-related activities, but distractions will affect participation grades.<sup>12</sup>

---

## Accessibility and Accommodations

If you require accommodations, please contact me at the beginning of the semester, and I will work with the appropriate campus office to meet your needs.

---

## Texts

- Wesley Morris, *The Best American Essays 2024*<sup>13</sup>

---

worthwhile to you, such that they reward the sacrifices you make to attend them. If I fail in this, I see no real reason why you need to bother attending regularly. You would in that case have already wasted your money. Why also waste your time?

<sup>10</sup> Again, this is to protect me from being deluged with reading on any particular week, especially at the end of the semester. But if I can fit reading late work into my schedule, I will. That said, you may wish to think of deadlines as a tool in your writer's toolbox that you use to realize your projects. Without deadlines, some writers will hold onto their work, straining for a perfection that will never come, using fine tuning as an excuse to neglect the things it would be easier not to write. Ultimately, all writing falls into this category of what would be easier not to write. Ask anyone. To be a writer is to be someone who embraces their Sisyphean sentence to push the pen or the cursor indefinitely across one page after another. It doesn't mean that writing is easy for us or comes naturally. It means that it matters to us enough that we persist.

<sup>11</sup> Yeah, I guess. But what are you going to do, turn in Elisa Gabbert's poetry and tell me it's yours? Like, huh? The thought of plagiarizing creative work is absurd. Now if you have a one-sided collaboration with another writer, that's another story, a much cooler one. Of course, do that. Borrow, sample, steal, appropriate, all of it. Why not? I'm with David Shields here. There is always and only the world and the art we make with it. We're all working with the same basic material. The question is what anyone uniquely produces from it. Keep in mind, however, that you are reading the syllabus of someone who just asked ChatGPT to write it for him.

<sup>12</sup> Once upon a time—through 2019, that is—I banned all electronics in the classroom upon penalty of ejection from the room. Generally, I would send away one student one time per class per semester and that would be enough to establish the strictness of the rule. The reason I did this was to give everyone in the room the best chance of having their attention stay in the room on whatever we were discussing or working on. How can you be a writer, I used to ask, or a thinker, if you can't sit in a room and pay attention for one measly hour? For what it's worth, I think I was right. We writers, even above we humans, must protect our capacity to pay attention against the bombardment of distractions and engineered compulsions that are all the time tugging us away from ourselves. That said, the pandemic happened, and since then all bets have been off. I want to go back to my pre-2020 policy. I don't know how to do it. I'm not sure it's even possible. I apologize.

<sup>13</sup> I haven't read this latest volume yet. (It just came out last week, and I have a hold put on it at the local library, so I expect to get to it soon.) But I've been reading the series annually since 2006 and am happy to take a chance here. There's always something easy for me to love in these books and something to make me think I've made an impossible discovery and something for me to roll my eyes at and something to give me ideas, all of which responses are valuable to me. I trust that Morris's selections will offer a similar reading experience for you, even if we disagree on all of the particulars.

- Philip Lopate, *To Show and to Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*<sup>14</sup>
  - Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*<sup>15</sup>
- 

## Course Requirements

- **Participation:** Attendance and active engagement in discussions and workshops<sup>16</sup>
  - **Weekly Readings and Responses:** Short reflections or discussion posts based on assigned readings<sup>17</sup>
  - **Essays:** Two stand-alone pieces that are as good as you can possibly make them but, you suspect, could be improved by taking into account feedback from trusted readers<sup>18</sup>
  - **Final Portfolio:** Revised versions of both major pieces
- 

## Grading Scale<sup>19</sup>

A = 90–100%

---

<sup>14</sup> Good old Lopate, nothing wrong with him, despite what you might have been led to believe.

<sup>15</sup> I tip my hand here. If you want to know how I've come to think of writing, after years of struggling to write the way I thought it was supposed to be done, Rubin articulates an approach I think we all would be wise to take.

<sup>16</sup> By all means, participate. The more engaged you are, the more you'll get out of it. I remember vividly my own horrible life as a student from fourth grade through college, most of which was spent sitting in desks, staring at clocks, praying that I wouldn't be called on, and vaguely regretted not having done the homework. There were exceptions to this norm: a teacher here, a class there. Whenever I did manage to engage, my experience was utterly transformed. Suddenly, in those cases, I cared, I applied myself, I flourished (relatively speaking), I learned. When I eventually started taking creative writing classes, I felt like that more or less all the time, which was how I knew I had found where I belonged. If you aren't internally motivated to participate in creative writing class, why should you? This isn't supposed to be the means toward anything. When we sit down to write or think about writing, we have already arrived. This is where we're trying to be—not published, not famous, not rich, not successful, not even *good*, just doing what is in us to do: discovering what is in us to do. That is the mystery that never stops unfolding. Even the scientists must admit, creation is a miracle.

<sup>17</sup> In a perfect world, each student would develop their own curriculum. The first assignment might be to write a personalized syllabus, including reading schedule and goals and assignments and so on. You likely know better than I do where you're trying to go with your writing. If you tell me where that is, maybe I can help you along the way. Each of you is taking your own class anyway. You might as well have some say in it. If only this were feasible.

In this imperfect world, where we must make certain concessions to practicality, we'll all read the same stuff according to the same schedule. But while the texts themselves are the same, our readings of those texts can't be and won't be and shouldn't be. Neither, then, should the responses be the same or even similar. I'm not interested in two pages proving that you did the reading. I'm interested, as ever, in creative possibilities. Having read what we've read, what are you motivated to write in response? Write that. Follow your instincts, follow your impulses, don't follow conventions. Go weird, go wild, go where only you can go.

<sup>18</sup> We will try over the course of the semester through our demonstrated judiciousness and good will to become worthy of your trust so that when we offer our feedback you are inclined to accept the useful bits. These essays will not be graded for quality. Grades are stupid (see FN 19). But each piece of writing will be discussed with an eye toward how it can be made better, where better means whatever the writer thinks it means after all due discussion and efforts of persuasion.

<sup>19</sup> As mentioned in the footnote above, grades are dumb. No one who is interested in writing should be interested in grades. When I explained this to the administration, I was met with shrugs and mumbling about "the compromises we must make to get along." I'll spare you the part where I asked why we consider "getting along" a virtue. Where does this leave us? If you remain an active member of the class throughout the semester, you'll get an A or whatever grade you would prefer.

B = 80–89%  
C = 70–79%  
D = 60–69%  
F = 59% or below<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> I have retained ChatGPT's proposed scale here to highlight the absurdity of these conventions. What could possibly be the difference between 72 and 68 in the creative writing classroom? The percentage of assignments completed, the percentage of rules followed, the percentage to which your work agrees with my tastes? I don't want you to write what I want you to write. I want you to write what you want to write. My job is to help you discover what that is. My job is to help you achieve a better version of your own work, to get you to see yourself as a better writer than you were before. I think we can do that.