





# **COMM 397 Writing Nonfiction: Pop Culture**

Fall 2013  
TTh 1 - 2:15  
RH 241

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RH 240  
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This is a writing class in which the subjects can range from *Dancing With the Stars* to the *Twilight* series, from hip hop to Facebook, from ESPN to DKNY, from Disney World to Howard Stern—in other words, anything associated with commercial culture and all its trappings (movies, TV, radio, cyberspace, advertising, toys, games, etc.). You will be able to pursue your own subjects, as we read and practice the three primary ways in which people write nonfiction about popular culture: journalism, personal essays, and criticism. Our primary goal is to get better at producing nonfiction prose that is vivid, entertaining, and thought-provoking.

## **Objectives**

-  To learn to write with more vividness, exactness, concision, and imagination
-  To gain a working familiarity with the primary methods and traditions of writing about pop culture
-  To become more astute and articulate readers and editors of our own work and that of others
-  To become familiar with the primary media outlets for pop-culture writing

## **Books**

- *Pulphed*, by John Jeremiah Sullivan
- *On Michael Jackson*, by Margo Jefferson

## **Articles & Essays**

- “Panel Discussions,” by William Bradley
- “Quit Defending the Eagles! They’re Simply Terrible,” by Stephen Deusner

- “John Wayne: A Love Song,” by Joan Didion
- “Bruce Springsteen and the Story of Us,” by Hope Edelman
- “The Manly Arts, or What I’ve Learned about Being a Man Watching Professional Wrestling,” by W. Todd Kaneko
- “Me, On Shuffle,” by Chuck Klosterman
- “Even White Boys Get the Blues,” by Adrian McKinty
- “Why She Fell,” by Daniel Mendelsohn
- “You and Your Pussycat Lips: My Aunt Goes After Tom Jones,” by Dan Roche
- “The Only Solution to the Soul is the Senses,” by David Shields
- “Don’t Be Cruel: An Argument for Elvis,” by Ned Stuckey–French
- “Webb Pierce’s ‘There Stands the Glass,’” by Ken Tucker
- “Tom Cruise Makes Me Nervous,” by Sarah Vowell
- “Superwhite,” by Jim White

plus others as we discover them...

### Websites

<http://2paragraphs.com/>

<http://www.barrelhousemag.com/>

<http://flavorwire.com/408585/feminist-cultural-syllabus/view-all>

### Work & Grades

Here is the breakdown:

four long pieces @ 15% each	60%
weekly pitches on pop culture subjects	10%
2 Paragraphs (10 @ 2% each)	20%
5% verbal contributions to discussions and workshops	
written comments on workshopped pieces	5%

Each of the four long pieces will be graded individually. Each should be 1000–2000 words. The first piece will be *significantly* essayistic; the second will be *significantly* sourced (through interviews or other kinds of research); the third will be *significantly* critical; and the fourth will be your choice.

**Attendance & Participation:** We rely upon your presence and your contributions. This is an *action* class: talking, thinking, writing, discussing. So be here consistently. Participate dependably. Too many

absences will lower your course grade. Ten percent of your course grade is based on your written and verbal participation.

**75 Minutes of Devotion:** Commit yourself to the *entire* class period. Don't wander out for a breath of fresh air. Get a drink and pee beforehand. If you get the urge to walk into the hall, say to yourself, "There's no place I'd rather be than right here with my class. There's no place else I *must* be." It'll be true.

**Deadlines:** Have your work in on time, so you don't throw off our *very* sophisticated schedule. Anything coming in late will be graded down. If your piece is not available for its scheduled workshop, we'll just pass it by.

**Formatting Work:** Generally, turn in hard copies that are double-spaced, stapled, labeled clearly, and as meticulously edited as you can make them. I'll let you know if I'd like anything submitted in a different manner.

**Special Learning Needs:** If you have special learning needs or are in circumstances that necessitate special consideration, please contact me at the beginning of the semester. If you have a documented disability and wish to discuss academic accommodations, please contact me within the first week of class or as soon as possible. If you believe you have a disability that may influence your academic performance but have not yet had the disability documented, you should immediately contact and meet with the Director of Academic Support Center (x4118). This center also provides resources, including writing tutors, for all Le Moyne students.

## A Word about

# ◆ ◆ ◆ Grammar & Mechanics ◆ ◆ ◆

We want CMM students to produce writing free from grammatical and mechanical errors. Such writing exhibits carefulness and audience-awareness. The professional world values —and *expects*— writing that is competent in these fundamental ways.

Therefore, as a faculty, we will begin insisting even more strongly than before upon grammatical and mechanical correctness in all writing for CMM classes.

Any writing turned in for a grade must be essentially free from grammatical and mechanical errors. If it's not, one of two things will happen—the choice being that of the professor:

1. You'll be given the work back and asked to clean it up. When you turn in the newly edited version, it will be considered late and the grade will be lowered appropriately.
2. The grade will be lowered appropriately immediately. You will not have a chance to do another edit.

In no case will a piece of writing with excessive grammatical and/or mechanical errors earn more than a C+. (“Excessive” would be more than one per page, on average.)

You should own a grammar guidebook. Here are some that are especially good:

- *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*, by Jane Straus
- *Merriam-Webster's Concise Handbook for Writers*
- *Rules for Writers*, by Diana Hacker

Online grammar sites abound. Here are a few that we like:

<http://www.grammargirl.com>  
<http://www.chompchomp.com>  
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

During the year, we will be offering occasional “grammar sessions,” in which one of us will spend half an hour or so going over a common grammar problem. Look for these.

Yours in good grammar,

The CMM Faculty

*Department of Communication & Film Studies*  
*August 2015*

## **CMM 397 Writing Nonfiction: Popular Culture Fall 2103**

### **Class-by-class Schedule**

- *We'll likely add more readings as we discover and share them.*
- *Many class periods will be at least partly devoted to workshopping student writing. I'll update that part of the schedule as we go along.*

- T 8/27 Intro  
READ: "Me, On Shuffle," by Chuck Klosterman
- Th 8/29 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #1  
READ: "Panel Discussions" by William Bradley  
READ: "Bruce Springsteen and the Story of Us," by Hope  
Edelman
- T 9/3 DUE: pitch #1  
READ: "John Wayne: A Love Song," by Joan Didion  
READ: "Superwhite," by Jim White  
READ: "The Only Solution to the Soul is the Senses," by David  
Shields
- Th 9/5 DUE: 2 paragraphs #2  
READ: "The Manly Arts," by W. Todd Kaneko  
READ: "Tom Cruise Makes Me Nervous," by Sarah Vowell  
READ: "You and Your Pussycat Lips," by Dan Roche
- T 9/10 DUE: pitch #2
- Th 9/12 DUE: Long Piece #1
- T 9/17 DUE: pitch #3  
READ: "Upon This Rock," by John Jeremiah Sullivan
- Th 9/19 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #3

- T 9/24 DUE: pitch #4  
 READ: "Michael," by John Jeremiah Sullivan  
 READ: "The Final Comeback of Axl Rose," by J.J. Sullivan
- Th 9/26 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #5
- T 10/1 DUE: pitch #5
- Th 10/3 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #6
- T 10/8 DUE: pitch #6
- Th 10/10 DUE: Long Piece #2 (Sourced Writing)
- T 10/15 No class: Fall Break
- Th 10/17 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #7  
 READ: *On Michael Jackson*, by Margo Jefferson (entire book)
- T 10/22 DUE: pitch #7  
 READ: "Don't Be Cruel," by Ned Stuckey-French  
 READ: "Even White Boys Get the Blues," by Adrian McKinty  
 READ: "Webb Pierce's 'There Stands the Glass,'" by Ken  
 Tucker
- Th 10/24 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #8  
 READ: "Quit Defending the Eagles! They're Simply Terrible!"  
 by Stephen Deusner
- T 10/29 DUE: pitch #8

READ: "Why She Fell," by Daniel Mendelsohn

Th 10/31 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #9

T 11/5 DUE: pitch #9

Th 11/7 DUE: Long Piece #3 (Critical Writing)

T 11/12 DUE: pitch #10

Th 11/14

T 11/19

Th 11/21 DUE: Long Piece #4 (Your Choice)

T 11/26

Th 11/28 No class: Thanksgiving

T 12/3

Th 12/5 DUE: 2 Paragraphs #10

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**how to write a pitch**

**pitch #1 due on Tuesday, 9/ 3**

Each pitch you write this semester (there will be 10 of them) should follow the same format. It should be 50–150 words long. It should tell what the “nominal” subject is, and it should tell how the piece will expand beyond that nominal subject.

It takes some time and craftiness to pack all that into just a few sentences and make the pitch enticing in the way it needs to be. So, even though this is a very short piece of writing, expect to spend some time molding it.

Here is a pitch that might have been written for Hope Edelman’s “Bruce Springsteen and the Story of Us.” Edelman’s nominal subject (that is, her *named* subject) is the ways in which Springsteen was present in the lives of her and her friends. The bigger subject is really her own coming of age.

When I was a 17 year old in suburban New Jersey, my mother recently dead from breast cancer, my father drinking himself to sleep each night, I needed help from Bruce Springsteen. All my friends did. We had the Boss’s music, as well as the *feel* of him being nearby, but it was—I came to understand later—a grand and temporary illusion. This is the story of how I didn’t know that then, how in my search for an identity I latched onto a boyfriend who was actually recreating himself as a Springsteen replica, and how the only way for me to come out of that painful year intact was to take everything I could from Springsteen’s thunderous music and my boyfriend’s wild delusions until I was strong enough to leave them all behind.

In order to help you to get used to writing a pitch like this, I’ll give you an option for Pitch #1: You can either (1) write a pitch on a topic of your own creation or (2) write a pitch for one of the essays we’re reading for Tuesday. For this second option, you’d do what I’ve done above for Edelman’s essay—that is, work backward from an existing essay into what the pitch might have been.



## **CMM 397 Writing Nonfiction: Popular Culture Fall 2013**

2 Paragraphs #1

Due: Thursday, 8/29

Write two paragraphs—self-contained, vivid, concise, musical, grammatically correct, poetic—that explore, explain and/or dramatize your admiration of a particular icon of American pop culture.

Notes:

1. “Admiration” is not necessarily the same thing as “affection,” though the two can co-exist.
2. The pop culture icon you write about can be a person or thing. Oprah might be an example of the former; the Starbuck’s logo might be an example of the latter.
3. When I say “explore, explain and/or dramatize,” I mean that your writing can be expository or narrative, that it can be definitive or inquisitive. It can be a combination of these various modes.
4. This is a short piece of writing that needs to be cared for in the way that a poem would be. Revise.

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**2 paragraphs #2**

Due: Sept. 5 (Or the 6<sup>th</sup>, if you're going to Utica)

Write two paragraphs that list figures and/or objects that are part of *your* pop culture consciousness. Your paragraphs should contain nothing but the names of those things. Don't say anything about them. Just the names. The purpose of this assignment is to find out what you think of when you think about "pop culture." In the gigantic pop culture universe, we all have stars that shine brightest for us. What's bright for you?

Think of Billy Joel's song "We Didn't Start the Fire":

*Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnny Ray  
South Pacific, Walter Winchell, Joe DiMaggio  
Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Studebaker, Television  
North Korea, South Korea, Marilyn Monroe*

*Rosenberg's H-Bomb, Sugar Ray, Panmunjom  
Brando, The King And I, and The Catcher In The Rye  
Eisenhower, Vaccine, England's got a new queen  
Marciano, Liberace, Santayana goodbye...*

Your paragraphs don't have to rhyme. But aim for *musicality*. When you read the lists aloud (and we will read them aloud), there should be rhythm. Listeners should feel the movement. Let your ear guide you to the arrangement of all the names you come up with.

Your two paragraphs might be all of one piece. Or each could do something different—maybe people in one and objects in the other. Your choice. But give your piece a title. Don't make it too obvious. No "My Pop Culture." Aim to find something that speaks to the *nature* of what your list ends up being.

Longer paragraphs (at least 100 words) are better than short ones for this exercise. Pack a lot in.

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# 21's

**New Schedule:**

10/8: 2 paragraphs on an incredibly famous movie line—but the essay has to be about something other than the movie or the line

10/17: 2 paragraphs on one song by Michael Jackson—but the essay has to have a “big topic” that is even bigger than MJ

10/24: 2 paragraphs on the culture of beer—but the essay has to speak to people who don't drink beer

10/31: 2 paragraphs on the culture of candy—but the essay has to be about world hunger

12/5: 2 paragraphs on Hillary Clinton memes—but the essay has to be about the meaning of life

Each 2-paragraph essay should aim to do the following:

- include a vivid “story of action”
- include a “story of thought”
- provide readers with a fresh and surprising look at the subject
- have both a nominal subject and a “bigger topic”
- sound good when it is read aloud

*Some incredibly famous movie lines:*

“Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.”  
“May the force be with you.”

“You talking to me?”  
“Show me the money!”  
“Round up the usual suspects.”  
“Hasta la vista, baby.”

## CMM 397 WRITING NONFICTION: POPULAR CULTURE FALL 2013



### Piece 1: A Personal Essay about You and Pop Culture

*Choose one of the following. If a different idea is calling to you, tell me what is it, and we'll make sure it fits the bill for this assignment.*

Write about the **connection** between yourself and a celebrity. (See David Shields' "The Only Solution to the Soul is the Senses: A Meditation on Bill Murray and Myself" as an example.)



Tell the story of your most interesting **passion** for a celebrity. How did it begin? What sustained it? What did it give you? How did (do) you feel about it? If it ended, when and why? If it still exists, why? (Joan Didion's "John Wayne: A Love Story" is an example of this.)



How has a particular TV show **shaped** an important aspect of your worldview? (For "TV show," you could substitute movie, song, book, commercial, magazine, website, actor, fashion designer, snack food, band, piece of technology, etc.)



Write about how a piece of pop culture (song, movie, TV show, performer, etc.) exists within your life and/or the life of your family. What is its importance, and from where does it get that significance? (Ken Tucker's "Webb Pierce's 'There Stands the Glass'" could serve as a model here.)

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Piece 2: The Sourced Piece

Due: Thursday, Oct. 10

The primary requirement for this assignment is that it has to incorporate reporting and/or research. This could involve interviews, historical research, scholarly research, surveys, and such. The piece has to have a *significant* amount of research.

You may write in 1<sup>st</sup> person, 2<sup>nd</sup> person, or 3<sup>rd</sup> person. You may include personal experience if you'd like. You may leave yourself out of the piece altogether.

Here are some options. Choose any. Or create another that rocks you more.

1. Follow a celebrity on Twitter, and gather a month's worth of tweets. Write a profile based on those.
2. Watch a full season (or more) of a TV show. Write about the experience of that immersion. Tangents into the show's history and cultural context would be interesting. It's probably best to pick a show that hasn't been written about to death. So, think about avoiding: *Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Lost*, *Seinfeld*, and anything else that might come rapidly to the minds of millions.
3. Write a profile of an artist—in any medium—whose work falls into the category of pop culture. This could be part personal essay and part “research paper”—but without the stilted ENG 101 voice.
4. Write a parody of a celeb gossip article, using friends as the subjects.
5. Write a profile of someone who has an interesting pop-culture hobby: a collector of *Star Wars* paraphernalia, a musician who covers pop songs, a person who hosts fairy-themed birthday parties for little girls, a person who is seriously into comic books, a video-game champion (or wannabe), a great karaoke singer, etc.
6. Write about a pop-culture sensation from long ago: a 1940's actor, Rin Tin Tin, Davy Crockett, Debbie Boone, Hula Hoops, The Howdy Doody Show, etc. & etc. (Check with your parents and

grandparents for ideas. Also: [authentichistory.com](http://authentichistory.com) and [americanpopularculture.com](http://americanpopularculture.com).)

# CMM 397 Writing Nonfiction

*popular culture*

*fall 2013*



*"Let me through! I'm a critic."*

## *Piece 3: Criticism*

For this assignment, you will be primarily a critic of a piece of pop culture. (By "critic," I mean evaluator, and not necessarily a totally negative one.) You may be a movie critic, a TV critic, a book critic, a food critic, a restaurant critic, a music video critic, a cartoon critic, a magazine critic, a dance critic, a toy critic, a radio critic, an architecture critic, a fashion critic, a jewelry critic, a museum critic, a photography critic, a baseball cap critic, a cell phone critic.... Etc., etc., & etc.

As with Pieces 1 & 2, you may write in the 1<sup>st</sup> person or the 3<sup>rd</sup> (or, for the experimentalists, the 2<sup>nd</sup>). You may include yourself extensively, a little bit, or not at all. You may be serious, funny, sarcastic, biting, somber, nostalgic, impatient, sad, whiny, celebratory, analytical, biased, unbiased, crazy, sane, half-crazy, romantic, irritating, guilty, regretful, hopeful, angry, hyperbolic, silly, forlorn, proud, unsure, bombastic, or any combination of any of these and others not thought of here.

The absolute requirements are: (1) that your piece evaluate a piece of pop culture; (2) that you aim to make the writing as effective as it can be; (3) that the piece be long enough to accomplish its goals and not much longer than that.

This piece is due on Thursday, Nov. 7.