

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI
ENG 8520 ADVANCED CREATIVE NONFICTION PROSE: ON STRUCTURE
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(NB: This is a graduate seminar for MA and PhD students of creative writing)

“The approach to structure in factual writing is like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner. You set them out on the kitchen counter, and what’s there is what you deal with, and all you deal with.” – John McPhee.

Eventually, every writer of creative nonfiction learns a hard truth: structure is both the key to this genre and its hardest aspect to master. In this graduate seminar, we will tackle the challenge of structuring texts. We will analyze masterpieces and map out how they were made. We will take texts apart and then put them back together. We will read what the great ones have to say on the subject and apply their words to our own efforts. Above all, we will write from structure, toward structure, around it, and through it. We will doubtless fight with it, but in time and through understanding, we will tame it and try to make it our friend.

SEMINAR OBJECTIVES:

- 1) To examine the issue of structure in creative nonfiction.
- 2) To read and think critically about prose texts that grapple with the challenge of structure in a variety of ways.
- 3) To produce several new prose pieces.
- 4) To revise and polish at least one major piece.
- 5) To prepare mock AWP-style proposals and panels.
- 6) To engage with peer writing thoughtfully and critically but (and this is important) generously.

MY APPROACH:

I see the seminar structure as a kind of laboratory. At the outset, I set up a machine with various moving parts: texts and topics for discussion, writing assignments, deadlines, and then I turn the machine on and let it work. That’s where you come in: how the machine works and where it takes us is largely up to you. I can’t always predict where we’ll end up, but that’s part of the beauty of the concept (I’m trying really hard not to point out how this is also the beauty of how essays work). A strong framework allows for a good deal of fluidity and improvisation.

This is not to say I’m all hippy-dippy. You will indeed have to work. Reading is an important part of my approach: good writers read. And one needn’t always read texts that one loves or even recognizes as valuable at the time. Believe me when I tell you that some of the stuff I hated most in grad school has stayed with me the longest.

I know some of you are not nonfiction writers. No problem. Come as you are, and let’s see how you do in CNF. We’ll see if we can find ways to understand and help one another. Our genre is one that is still defining itself and the spectrum of what it accepts as its own is very wide. There’s likely a place for you too.

A NOTE ON GENRE BIAS:

Every text comes to your desk with a kind of self-definition. An essay written in fragments may look

like a poem to you. Nonetheless, it announces itself as an essay through its inclusion in a particular collection or through the use of a subtitle. You may be tempted to get angry at the text and shout: “*Why are you calling yourself an essay when you are so obviously a poem!*” (I kid you not: you’d be surprised at how worked up people get about this stuff.) If you feel outrage creeping up inside you, I gently suggest that you stop and back up. Quiet yourself and try to have a conversation with the text at hand. You might try starting with: “*Hub, so you say you’re an essay... I find that confusing, but tell me how you’re an essay. Explain to me how I should think about you and look at you to see you as you are. As you want to be seen.*” I suggest employing the same strategy for texts that declare themselves essays or memoirs or other forms of CNF but that might look like fiction. There, the temptation is to shout, “*Why didn’t this dumb author just write a short story or novel!*” The question of why CNF-ers insist on framing their texts as they do may indeed be a good question, as long as one asks it in search of an answer and not as an accusation or dismissal. By all means, ask the question (why is this not a novel or story?), but then it’s your responsibility to try and figure out what the answer might be.

WORKLOAD:

You should be working consistently all semester (and in life as a writer in general). Each week, you will have readings, texts, critiques, conversations, presentations, or writing assignments to prepare. The upside is that I don’t believe in great pushes at the end of a class (or, again, in life), so my final assignment is always a revision of a text from preceding weeks. It’s an opportunity to reflect and refine calmly, which is good for everyone at the end of a long semester.

TEXTS (REQUIRED READING...IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER):

Joan Wickersham, *The Suicide Index*
Deborah Tall, *A Family of Strangers*
Ander Monson, *Neck Deep*
Lia Purpura, *On Looking*
Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*
Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door to No Return*
Nicole Walker & Margot Singer, *Bending Genre*

SUGGESTED READING, FOR USE IN TEAM TEACHING AND AWP PANEL PREPARATION (SEE COURSE WEBSITE FOR LINKS AND/OR FURTHER BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFO):

Liz Stephens, “Ten Years I’ll Never Get Back”
Joey Franklin, “Stuck” & “Grand Theft Auto”
Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome”
W. Scott Olsen, “The Love of Maps” (Also: check out Karen Babine’s post on Olsen in “My Favorite Essay to Teach” at *Assay*)
Tim Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage & Labyrinth*
Simon Winchester, *The Map that Changed the World*
Ken Jennings, *Maphead*
William Least Heat Moon, *PrairieEarth*
Dinty Moore “Mr. Plimpton’s Revenge”
Jorge Luis Borges “On Exactitude in Science”
Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*
John Proctor, “The Map As Essay”
Maggie Messitt, “North 20°54, West 156°14”
D. J. Wilde, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*
Eula Biss, “The Pain Scale”

Jill Talbot, “The Professor of Longing”
Desirae Matherly, “Final: Comprehensive, Roughly”
Patrick Madden, “Finding a Form Before a Form Finds You”
Randon Noble, “69 Inches of Thread, Scarlet and Otherwise”
Louise DeSalvo, “Anorexia,” in *Vertigo*.

WORKSHOPS:

Each of you will workshop 2 original texts. There are no requirements for length: I’m a great believer in allowing texts to be as long or short as they require. That said, I find my sweet spot for essays (and you’re likely writing essays) is in the 1,500-3,000-word range. You can go as long as 5,000. If you want to go longer, check with me and with the group before submitting. In terms of form: you have total freedom. I welcome experiments: comics, audio essays, hermit crabs, poetic forms, as well as reflective essays in the tradition of Montaigne. You may write about small or big things and be as personal or objective as your texts demand (we may disagree on what your texts demand, but those discussions are what workshop is for). My one request is that you not recycle old work. Bring your best and newest selves and let’s make something good together.

WHAT TO WRITE:

- 1) Workshop 1. Steal a structure (from another writer, from music, from the world around you). Make it your own.
- 2) Workshop 2. Take some aspect of the seminar that challenged you and try to work with it. See if you can allow form and content to reflect one another, inform each other. Make them inextricable.

For both workshop pieces: Provide a map or other visual rendition of your text’s structure as well as a reflection. How did you arrive at this structure? Did it arise organically or did you impose it? Does the structure reflect the content in any way? What structural struggles did you encounter? Share this only on the day of your workshop. Do not distribute in advance.

EVALUATION SCHEME:

30% 2 Major Workshop Pieces. You may write in any form you like, as long as you write creative nonfiction, and can defend your piece convincingly as such. Length is not of the essence. Quality, creativity, and risk-taking are. If your preferred form is short, you may bundle together a small series of portraits or flash texts as a single workshop piece. Alternately, if your form is long, you may submit an excerpt of a longer work. Please submit a cover page with your name, working title, word count, and a short abstract (in the style you might employ in a cover letter).

20% AWP Panel. We will spend time analyzing and defining what makes for a good AWP panel structure. Please use our assigned readings as the basis for your panels and feel free to dip into the suggested readings and beyond. Your panel will designate a chair and together, you will write proposals and bios that adhere to AWP’s guidelines. Please run your panels as if we were at the conference. This means sticking to your time limits, introducing each speaker in a professional manner, and leaving time for questions and discussion. Each of you will present on one of the following two panels:

AWP I: On Fragments
AWP II: Genealogies

20% Team Teaching

Your job is to teach the class in pairs or trios. Take charge and please cover the core material I designate for your week (see the detailed week-by-week plan on the course website). You may also assign additional essays or pull passages from the core texts for close readings.

You may use the space and technology we have at our disposal in any way you see fit. Think about how to run an effective discussion and what sorts of activities might help. Feel free to take us out of the classroom, if that works for your concept. I've have witnessed team teaching by grad students that included a tour of library graffiti, that included videotaped conversations with journalists and writers about the state of truth-telling, and that incorporated movement and collective improvisation. These demonstrations were amazing. I've also witnessed some cringe-worthy flops.

Think about pacing, class participation, focus, the ideas you want to communicate, and how. You will have 60 minutes. Planning is key. You will be teaching on one of the following themes:

Team Teaching I: The Index

Team Teaching II: The Outline and List

Team Teaching III: Maps and Other Plans

Team Teaching IV: Itineraries and Visitations

10% Workshop Feedback and Literary Citizenship: It's imperative that you distribute your piece for workshopping in a timely manner, that you read your colleagues' work generously, in a professional spirit, and also in a timely manner. I ask that you prepare a one-page response for each workshopped piece. Please bring two copies to class: one for me and one for the writer whose work is in question. You may, if you wish, give line edits to the author, but please do not submit these to me. I will accept workshop responses only in hard copy. You are to file these in the blue filing box I bring to class.

20% Final Revision. Revise one of your two workshop texts with a view to submitting it for publication.