

ENGL 7450 Graduate Creative Nonfiction Workshop

Dr. Joy Castro

Wednesdays, 3:10-6 p.m.

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Office Hours: Mondays & Wednesdays 1:30-2:30 p.m. & by appointment

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"Telling a story means having something special to say, and that is precisely what is prevented by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness."

~Theodor W. Adorno, "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel"

"Why this pull toward the anatomy of self?"

~James Atlas, "Confessing for Voyeurs: The Age of the Literary Memoir is Now"

"Political power . . . entails the power of self-description."

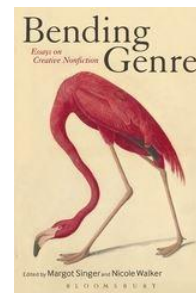
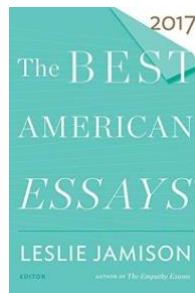
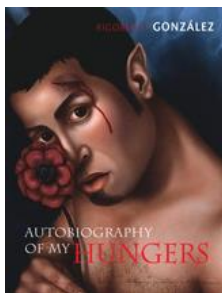
~Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

This course in reading and writing creative nonfiction will explore issues of craft and ethics in relation to a genre that oscillates explicitly between self and world: the essay.

Course Goals

- forming a supportive, informed, critical community in which to share new work
- producing 30 or more pages of creative nonfiction
- understanding the range of the genre and the issues (form, ethics, etc.) that concern it
- analyzing published work and gaining experience giving craft lectures
- revising work and identifying appropriate venues for its publication

Course Texts



- Rigoberto González, *Autobiography of My Hungers* (U of Wisconsin P, 2013)
- Leslie Jamison, ed., *Best American Essays 2017* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

- Margot Singer & Nicole Walker, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

Assignments and Grading

| | |
|---|-------------|
| 2 original, revised, polished manuscript submissions to the class (30% each; minimum 15 pages total each submission, divided into separate pieces or not, as you choose, for a semester total minimum of 30 pages of new work) | 60% |
| 2 written craft analyses and craft talks (10% each; 5% for the written portion and 5% for the in-class presentation) | 20% |
| Intellectual engagement on Twitter: twice-weekly tweets with the hashtag #ENGL7450 | 10% |
| Cover letter to a journal of your choice for the submission of a revision of one of the essays you wrote for class | <u>+10%</u> |
| | 100% |

There will be no final exam. Final assignments are due during our final class meeting.

Grading Scale

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 97% to 100% = A+ | (an A+ calculates as 98.5%) |
| 94 % to 96% = A | (an A calculates as 95%) |
| 90% to 93% = A- | (an A- calculates as 91.5%) |
| 87% to 89% = B+ | (a B+ calculates as 88.5%) |
| 84 % to 86% = B | (a B calculates as 85%) |
| 80% to 83% = B- | (a B- calculates as 81.5%) |
| and so on. 59% or below is an F. | |

Course Policies

- In a workshop, your attendance and contributions are crucial. Attendance will be checked at every class meeting.
- Assignments must be submitted on time.
- You are responsible for notes and assignments given when you miss class. Get them from another student.
- Failure to follow directions on an assignment can result in a failing grade on the assignment.

And three key policies:

- I do not give extensions. Please do not ask.
- Come to class having read and critiqued the material and prepared to participate in discussion. If you haven't read, then please stay home, take the absence, and get caught up. Being unprepared is as useless to the other students—and to you—as being absent.
- No cell phones, iPads, laptops, or other electronica may be visible or audible in class. Keep them stowed and silenced. Otherwise, you will be asked to leave, and you will be counted absent for the day. No exceptions.

Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Disability Services (EAD)

The EAD helps students, faculty, and staff with disabilities enjoy full participation in the Vanderbilt community. The Center can assist with accommodations for a variety of disabilities, including mobility impairment, learning disabilities, deaf/hard of hearing impairment, and visual impairment. For additional information on these and other support services, visit www.vanderbilt.edu/cas/supportservices/.

Reading Schedule

This reading schedule may need to be changed as the semester progresses. Alterations will be announced in class.

Week 1

W 1/10 Welcome, introduction, & in-class writing

Week 2

W 1/17 In-class writing
 Questions about syllabus and craft-analysis instructions
 Sign up for workshopping and craft talk dates
 Castro, "Racial and Ethnic Justice in the Creative Writing Course," *Gulf Coast*, available <https://gulfcoastmag.org/online/fall-2015/racial-and-ethnic-justice-in-the-creative-writing-course/>
 Castro, "On Length in Literature," *Brevity*, available <http://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/on-length-in-literature/>
 Brenda Miller, "Swerve," *Brevity*, available https://www.creativenonfiction.org/brevity/past%20issues/brev31/miller_swerve.html
 Miller, "'Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!': Courage and Creative Nonfiction"

Week 3

W 1/24 First two submissions are due to the class via email before 3 p.m.
 Todorov, "Structural Analysis of Narrative" (handout)
 Gornick, 3-26
 Singer, "On Scaffolding, Hermit Crabs, and the Real False Document"
 In-class writing

R 1/25 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Joy Castro, nonfiction & fiction

Week 4

T 1/30 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Daniel Alarcón, fiction

W 1/31 Lazar, "Queering the Essay"
Ali, "Genre-Queer: Notes Against Generic Boundaries"
Workshopping 2 submissions:

Week 5

W 2/7 Madden, "Creative Exposition—Another Way that Nonfiction Writing Can Be Good"
Moore, "Positively Negative"
2 essays from *Best American*, TBA
2 craft talks (written craft analyses due):

Workshopping 2 submissions:

Week 6

W 2/14 NO CLASS—WRITING WEEK
Read sections I and II of González's *Autobiography of My Hungers*.
Remember to tweet twice.

R 2/15 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Marilyn Kallet & Arthur Smith,
poetry

Week 7

W 2/21 NO CLASS—WRITING WEEK
Read sections III and IV of González's *Autobiography of My Hungers*.
Remember to tweet twice.

Week 8

W 2/28 Discussion of González
Bouly, "On the EEO Genre Sheet"
Biss, "It Is What It Is"
2 essays from *Best American*, TBA
2 craft talks (written craft analyses due):

Workshopping 2 submissions:

Week 9

W 3/7 NO CLASS—SPRING BREAK
(No tweets required.)

Week 10

W 3/14 NO CLASS—Please attend the *Hermanas in Crime* Visiting Writers panel
Two submissions are due to the class via email before 3 p.m.

Week 11

W 3/21 2 essays from *Best American*, TBA
2 craft talks (written craft analyses due):

Workshopping 2 submissions:

R 3/22 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Marie Howe, poetry

Week 12

W 3/28 2 essays from *Best American*, TBA
2 craft talks (written craft analyses due):

Workshopping 2 submissions:

R 3/29 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Danzy Senna, fiction

Week 13

W 4/4 2 essays from *Best American*, TBA
2 craft talks (written craft analyses due):

Workshopping 2 submissions:

Week 14

- W 4/11 NO CLASS—WRITING WEEK
Remember to tweet twice.
Read all the bio notes in *The Best American Essays 2017* in preparation for writing your cover letter. Decide on a venue for submission. For inspiration, have a look at “Notable Essays and Literary Nonfiction of 2016” and “Notable Special Issues of 2016,” pp. 291-302 in *Best American*.

Week 15

- T 4/17 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Robert Hass & Brenda Hillman, poetry
- W 4/18 Cover letters due for workshopping—bring enough hard copies for everyone in class
2 essays from *Best American*, TBA
2 craft talks (written craft analyses due):
- R 4/19 Vanderbilt Visiting Writers Reading: Amy Hempel, fiction

Week 16

- W 4/25 Turn in revised cover letter
Final discussion
Course evaluations

Happy Summer Holidays! Rejoice.

Compassionate Code of Conduct

We are here to share our work, to learn from each other, to befriend one another as fellow writers, and to re-commit ourselves to our writing in a supportive environment. In this class, we have an opportunity to create the world we would like to live in every day—a kind, generous, respectful, creative, and passionate community.

Creativity flourishes best in an atmosphere of curiosity, safety, trust, freedom, and play. All of us are responsible for creating and maintaining this atmosphere.

We have the opportunity here to be our most generous selves—checking our egos at the door, recognizing the spark within others, fostering creativity and well-being in others, and sharing what we most deeply and honestly can offer.

We approach each other as guests from different worlds, knowing that we all share the common impulse to create. Respect for other voices and other perspectives is fundamental to our success as a temporary community.

We will not tolerate

- verbal attacks—belligerent, combative approaches that are meant to shut down discussions or hammer others down others in workshop
- intolerance of any kind on the basis of class, race, sexuality, gender, profession, religion, age, ability, etc.

This is not to say that we avoid conflict. Because we are a community of writers learning to be better artists, we understand that in questioning the world, we sometimes question each other. In many cases, the friction between our fruitfully disturbed worlds gives rise to another virtue—learning from difference, which expands our vision and our work. We acknowledge that respectful disagreements can be extremely productive in many settings, including our workshops. Even when it is uncomfortable, challenging each other’s work or ideas is an essential part of growing and learning as writers and human beings.

Many of us come from places where we’ve been involved in long-term conflicts and have learned extremely valuable survival skills, including persistence, skepticism, and a willingness to confront others. But in declaring ourselves present, we do not get to silence anyone else. Our community is collective; by suppressing another voice, we shut down an unrecognized part of ourselves. Everything is an ongoing discussion. No one should consciously or unconsciously be working to shut down dialogue. No one can expect to have the last word or to persuade everyone of the rightness of his or her opinion. Our words can only open the next door.

When critiquing, think carefully about how you’ll phrase your comments. As Anne Lamott writes in *Bird by Bird*, “you don’t always have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it, too.” She reminds us, “what you think is the truth is just your opinion.” Be humble. Be open. Joyce Carol Oates suggests being “a friend of the text and a friend of the writer.”

Be a friend to both. Remember how delicate people’s hearts are, and how difficult it is to be a literary writer at all. You wouldn’t want to be the person responsible for demoralizing another writer. Be gentle. You can explain your good points without being hurtful.

[This has been adapted from the Compassionate Code of Conduct of the Macondo Writing Workshop.]

Intellectual Engagement on Twitter (10% total)

Twice weekly, post a comment to Twitter that engages in some smart and meaningful fashion the *published* text we're currently reading, a concept we're discussing, or your own creative process and that includes the hashtag #ENGL7450.

If your tweet does not include the hashtag #ENGL7450, I will not see it and thus will not be able to give you credit.

Do *not* quote things said by anyone in class, and do *not* comment about student-authored texts except in the most general terms—addressing, perhaps, some general aesthetic insight or craft concept provoked by a classmate's piece. *Online critiquing of another student's work (or snarky subtweeting about it) will earn you an instant fail on this assignment, which is worth 10% of your final grade).*

I will be grading these on a simple pass/fail basis. Tweet and earn the credit; fail to tweet and don't. However, if you begin tweeting things that are vapid, ludicrous, gratuitous, or unkind to your peers, I will ask you to stop, and you will receive no credit.

Vanderbilt Visiting Writers (required)

Attending literary events by authors in any genre triggers insight, sparks ideas, and offers resources and connections invaluable to emerging authors. Nonfiction and fiction writers in the Vanderbilt MFA program **must attend all readings and craft talks conducted by prose writers**. Serious emerging writers will take advantage of readings and craft talks by authors in *all* genres. Finally, the MFA Program offers the opportunity for graduate students to introduce visiting writers before literary events. Apart from the chance to join faculty for dinner with the guest writer, this provides more time to network with and learn from a professional in your field.

Spring Schedule: Readings in this series typically take place on campus, Thursdays at 7:00 p.m., followed by book-signings and receptions. Locations TBA.

January 25: Joy Castro, nonfiction & fiction

January 30: Daniel Alarcón, fiction

February 15: Marilyn Kallet and Arthur Smith, poetry

March 22: Marie Howe, poetry

March 29: Danzy Senna, fiction

April 17: Robert Hass & Brenda Hillman, poetry

April 19: Amy Hempel, fiction

How to Write a Craft Analysis (20% total)

Craft analyses offer you the chance to demonstrate your own suppleness and sensitivity as a reader and to share the pleasure you take in noticing the strategies authors use to build a complex, layered work. As with the labor you expend on each other's manuscripts in workshop, the labor you expend on these craft analyses will have a direct and beneficial effect on your own creative writing. You'll select an essay from *The Best American Essays 2017* that does something interesting; this means you'll have to read several to find one that you want to write and talk about.

So, the basics. These critical analyses of literary readings must be tightly focused on a single issue of craft. In writing a successful annotation, you're doing three things:

- 1) noticing a unique and interesting characteristic within a text,
- 2) providing textual examples of that characteristic, and
- 3) explaining how you see this characteristic/technique/strategy *working* in the text. What is the effect on the text as a whole? What is the effect on you as a reader? How does it *work*? What does it *do*?

Writing a craft analysis is primarily about discovery. By paying close attention to a text on a second or third reading, we come to notice its elements and how they work to produce its effects.

Writing up our discoveries to share them with others in a clear way is the final step. Writing about what we have noticed forces us to dwell thoughtfully on it for longer than we otherwise would—and in a more exploratory frame of mind. Often, this process of articulation pushes us to deeper levels of discovery and insight, so here we are using writing as a tool for thinking. As E.M. Forster wrote, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" The written assignment also offers us the opportunity to think through how we can implement in our own work the technique we've been analyzing so closely.

But why write craft analyses in the first place?

Because people who want to be writers are almost always readers: passionate, devoted, voracious lovers of reading, lovers of books, lovers of literature. And when we pick up a book, we read to be swept away, to be transported, to sink or drift into another world. We suspend our disbelief and plunge in, willing to navigate whatever current the writer has created for us. We read for story, for revelation, for the music of language, for excitement, for awe, for grace—for a host of motivations and desires.

But rarely do we read with an eye toward technique. In fact, reading for all those other delicious reasons may well mitigate *against* our noticing an author's strategies, because we become so immersed in what's happening—we can see it, feel it, smell it—that we speed past or through technique without recognizing it.

Craft analysis assignments force us to slow down and take a careful look not at the *what* of a piece, its content, but at its *how*, its strategies and techniques.

These can run the gamut, from the use of white space, to the use of questions, or verb tense, or animal imagery, or second person, or various poetic devices, or flashbacks, or whatever else you notice being used in a repeated way in a piece.

I say "repeated" because part of what your written essay needs to do is explain how the technique is working, and it's easier to determine that if you have several examples to examine. You can look at all of them and figure out what the pattern means.

Let me emphasize this point about explaining how the technique is working. It's not sufficient to say, for example, "Author X marks every transition into a flashback with a reference to the color blue," and then fill your paragraphs with quoted examples for five or so pages. Rather, you need to explain how this choice works. What does it do to the piece? What is its effect on your reading? Why do you suppose the author is using it?

Reading and Thinking

As you reread a piece in order to write a craft analysis about it, you're being deliberate and self-conscious about what you notice. Be especially alert for things that crop up again and again. Mark them in your text. When you finish this preliminary annotating, assess what you've got. Then try to choose the *one* element about which you have the most to say.

In any text, there will likely be several viable options from which to choose. Not only will different readers of a single piece notice different things, but each individual reader will probably notice a number of different elements that could be analyzed. So once you have gone through your text and marked it up, you need to choose the *one* thing best to write about.

How do you choose? Speaking practically, you'll want to choose something about which you have five pages' worth of legitimate things to say. So if you've noticed three different interesting strategies in a work, and one occurs once, one occurs twice, and the third occurs six times, you might want to choose the third. On the other hand, if the third one bores you, but the one that occurs only twice is particularly complex and will require a richly developed explanation, then you might want to go that way instead. You might choose a single thing with several highly specific subsets. For example, you might announce that you will examine the poetic techniques of "rhyme and sound" in an essay and then consider endrhyme, internal rhyme, consonance, alliteration, and assonance.

This is only a general guideline, and worthwhile exceptions may crop up. Quantity, the number of times a technique is used in a piece, isn't a hard-and-fast criterion, just a guideline.

Alternatively, you could choose the technique from which you—as a unique, individual writer—have the most to learn, perhaps something outside your current range that you'd love to try in the future. By examining closely how one author uses it, you can prepare to use it yourself. By understanding its function and effects, you can adapt it to appropriate moments in your own work.

And really, this is the great hope for the craft analyses, the secret goal: that you will discover strategies you will love and use in your own writing.

Drafting

So once you have reread the piece, logged all your observations in the margins or in a document (or both), decided which strategy to write about, and figured out, at least roughly, how it is working in the text, how do you go about actually writing the craft analysis?

You can use a very simple, straightforward structure. In the first paragraph, you'll want to introduce the author and the text by name, and perhaps briefly describe the text as a whole in a sentence or two. Then tell readers which aspect of the text you'll be analyzing and how it works. You can state this in a clear, direct way, like a thesis statement in a college paper. Don't go into detail yet, though; that's for the body of your paper. Another way to structure the opening would be to present a question about the text that puzzled you. Then answer the question by referring to the author's technique.

Once you've introduced your focus clearly, one straightforward way to structure your paper is to devote a paragraph to each of your subtopics or each of your examples. Provide an opening sentence for the paragraph that clearly indicates its topic. Introduce and quote the word, line, or passage as appropriate, using italics or bold to emphasize any specific element(s) within the quotation to which you want to draw attention. This strategy helps make it crystal-clear to your reader precisely which elements in the quoted passage you wish to emphasize in support of your point. Then, using MLA style, cite the page number in parentheses at the end of the sentence. Then explain exactly how you see the technique working in this particular instance. *Show* your reader what you perceive in the passage. Show your reader how to read and understand it the same way you do. Don't assume that if you just drop the quotation in, the reader will find in it the same things you've found. Do the work of explaining what you see, and how you see it working.

As you write, leave room for your own discoveries, leaps, illuminations. *They will happen.*

Once you have written four or seven or twelve paragraphs—however many it takes to address the technique’s uses sufficiently and make your page count—you’ll want to close with a concluding paragraph that shares your big-picture insights about the technique you’ve just analyzed—and, if applicable, explains how you might use it in your own future work. (Sometimes this evolution can happen quite rapidly. One former student analyzed the use of short, direct questions in a piece by Alice Munro, and her concurrent creative writing submission deliberately employed short, direct questions to beautiful effect.)

The concluding paragraph would be a good place to connect the technique and its effects back to the content, meanings, and/or larger project of the text, too.

A good craft analysis can stand on its own. It presents all the context and textual evidence necessary to explain and support its points clearly. If your craft analysis is well written, even a reader unfamiliar with the literary text under discussion should be able to follow the thread perfectly well.

Revising

When you have a solid rough draft that pleases you, let it cool, and then revise it for economy and clarity. You may have been tempted to include summary or unnecessary references to the content of the piece. Cut them. Include only what is relevant to your point about the technique under discussion.

Remember that paragraph unity demands that everything in a paragraph be about the same tightly defined subtopic. If you notice a phrase or sentence that doesn’t relate to the point at hand, decide if there’s another paragraph in the paper where it belongs, or if it’s a good idea that needs to be developed into its own new paragraph, or if it’s simply off-topic and needs to be cut.

If you don’t naturally include signposts and transitions in a first draft, incorporate them now, in order to lead your reader more smoothly through your analysis. Your tone can be informal: “First, let’s look at how . . .”; “In addition to the last words in a line, Laux plays with all types of rhyme . . .”; “On the other hand . . .,” and so on, throughout the piece. Opening lines of paragraphs link back to what has come before and forecast what is to come, carefully guiding the reader through the logic of your analysis.

After you have trimmed away excess and smoothed the flow for your reader, always do a careful copyediting to make sure your prose is clean and your citations are correct. If you can, ask a good reader who has *not* read the literary text to read through your craft analysis to see if there’s anything you need to add or clarify. If you don’t have anyone like that available, try to read it yourself from that perspective.

Avoiding

Based on my experience as a teacher, I would warn you away from three common errors in writing craft analyses.

The first is fairly common. Some students do a fine job of the first two steps in writing a craft analysis:

- 1) noticing a unique and interesting characteristic within a text, and
- 2) providing textual examples of that characteristic.

They can largely miss the crucial third step, though, which is

- 3) explaining how you see this characteristic/technique/strategy *working* in the text. What is the effect on the text as a whole? What is the effect on you as a reader? How does it *work*?

A pattern I sometimes observe is that students—even very bright, talented ones—will 1) make an assertion about what the work is doing, and then 2) include quoted passages from the text. Those steps are great—as far as they go.

But think of them as only the first two steps. The missing third step is providing the reader with a crystal-clear explanation of *your* understanding of how the text is doing what you're asserting it does.

Let me give you an example. Let's say I'm an art historian. I'm giving you a guided tour of the museum, and I say, "In this painting, Monet's mastery of color conveys the harmony of the natural world." And then I gesture toward the specific painting. And then I move on to the next painting.

Now, if you could read my mind, you'd know exactly which elements of color I was referring to in the painting, and you could figure out how they somehow contributed to a depiction of nature's harmony.

But otherwise, you'd need me to use my laser-pointer and say, "Here in the shadow of this tree, you can see daubs of purple in the grass. If you look closely at the lake, here, you can see lighter echoes of that same hue. And if you look up here at the clouds in the corner, again, that same purple occurs. Monet ties each of the three major components of nature together with the subtle use of color to suggest that the natural world exists in a kind of harmony." Or whatever. But if I've already moved onto the next painting without explaining any of that, you're left guessing.

Similarly, what students sometimes do on the page is to say, "Didion's tone is ironic here," and then quote (gesture toward) a passage. Sometimes those passages are dozens or even hundreds of words long. Your reader doesn't know which particular element is doing the work you're asserting it does. The reader has to guess.

Get out your verbal laser-pointer and connect the dots for your reader. *How* does this passage exemplify the judgment you've made? Go in there and get your hands dirty. Tear it up. Point to *exactly* what you mean. Articulate your thought process, so we can follow along.

Without that work, *you* know what you mean, but the reader has to guess. It's your job to do the work of making your assertions crystal-clear, so the reader can follow your reasoning.

One assertion and one quotation can take whole paragraphs to analyze. ***Slow down and do that work.***

One structural clue that you may be giving short shrift to analysis would be if you notice your paragraphs frequently ending with quotations. You're presenting the evidence, which is a good and necessary thing, but then not following up with the work of analysis and explanation. Think of yourself as a lawyer in a courtroom. It's not enough simply to hold up Exhibit A and Exhibit B; you must explain how they fit into your larger argument about what happened in the case. Generally, your paragraphs should end with your own commentary about the passages you've quoted.

A second common mistake is to try to address everything you notice about a text's multiple strategies. This leads to an unfocused and superficial treatment. Any literary text you select is going to be richly patterned, so there will always be several things about which you *could* write. What happens when you try to squeeze them all into five or so pages is that you pay each of them short shrift. Your craft analysis glances over the surface of the piece without really delving into how the strategies work.

This is ineffective. Choose one focus and stick with it.

The third approach to avoid, which I have seen less often, would be choosing to analyze an element that you think does *not* work in the piece. Let's say the author of an otherwise good published piece does something you find clumsy—and does it several times. It may be tempting to choose that element for a craft analysis.

But obviously, if you can tell it's not working, then you already know the principle(s) by which it is not effective, so you can't really *learn* anything by describing and explaining the author's examples of failure. That's just showing off your superior knowledge and skill. While it's great that you already *have* that knowledge and skill, the assignment doesn't really do anything for you, because you're not actively learning.

Since the secret goal of the craft-analysis assignment is to come to understand and be able to apply a new technique or strategy, focusing your analysis on something you don't want to do is a waste of your time and effort.

If you can't find anything to admire or wonder at in the piece you've chosen, keep reading until you find a better piece.

If the written portion of this assignment in any way confuses or intimidates you, please invest in Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer* and read it carefully.

Presenting

Most people don't like public speaking, but practice makes it easier. Presenting your craft analyses to the class is a chance to practice public speaking, and it's also a chance to give a mini-craft-lecture, which is something you'll probably have to do if you go on the job market or become a Fellow at Bread Loaf or the like.

Don't read your piece, but have it available beside you for easy reference if you get lost. Maybe have an outline if it helps to speak from notes.

Explain your insight clearly, and then illustrate it by taking us to text. After locating and reading each passage, explain how each example works. Relax. Breathe. You're sharing something interesting and useful with your fellow writers—a technique that you and/or we might adopt and adapt. You're doing something helpful for the world.

It's important to be clear and take your time. Make sure we understand.

Your presentation should take between 10 and 20 minutes.

Workshop Guidelines (60% total)

Submitting your piece

For each of your two submissions, turn in a minimum of 15 pages of original, revised, polished new work, divided into separate pieces or not, as you choose.

Prior to the beginning of the class meeting **before** we consider your piece(s)—that is, before 3:00 p.m. on the Wednesday one week **before** your piece(s) will be workshopped—please email a MS Word document (saved as a .docx, please) of your piece(s) to all members of the class, so we will have time to print it out, read it carefully, and type up our comments before we discuss it together. Please send cleanly-typed, proofread, page-numbered copies. Page numbers are essential for ease of reference.

All pieces must look neat and professional.

Pieces must be edited for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Manuscripts must have page numbers.

Manuscripts must have your name, the word count, and a title on the first page.

Critiquing work

Print out the author's piece(s). As you're reading, make notes in the margins. Underline passages that work (or don't work), and make notes to yourself about your own personal responses as you read. Line-edit to the extent that you're confident doing so. Anything that you can do to help the piece, offer it.

Then, to each piece you're critiquing, attach a typed critique that includes your name and the title of the piece. On that sheet, consider the following questions:

1. What is the piece *about*, in a deep way? Briefly summarize what you see as "the larger preoccupation," "the true experience," "the real subject" (Gornick 160). This is where the writer will check to see if her or his intended point(s) came across—and to learn what else might be resonating in the work.
2. Whose story is it? Does it clearly focus on one person's consciousness and experience? (Short pieces can usually only handle one focus effectively.) If it focuses on more than one, does it do so successfully?
3. What is the piece's narrative point of view? (1st person, 2nd person, 3rd person) How effectively does that choice work with the material?
4. What is the piece's verb tense? How effectively does that choice work with the material?
5. What do you notice about the piece's use of language? Are the sentences varied (some short and simple, some long and winding) or all of the same type? Does the writer favor periodic sentences or tend toward the continuous/running style? Is the vocabulary simple or erudite and sophisticated? Is the diction formal or informal? What kind of tone is established, and how is the writer accomplishing this? Is there strong sentence variety in each paragraph, or does the sentence structure and length become repetitive, monotonous?

These first five questions require very short answers, a few sentences at most. Expect to spend the remainder of your critique answering the following:

6. Ultimately, what do you think the piece is *doing*? What are its aims, in a deep way—aesthetically, politically, ethically?
7. Given your answer to #6, what works well? Quote specific brief passages from the text so the writer can see exactly what you mean. Think about characterization, language, image, sound, symbol, and structure. Are the descriptions vivid? Are the word choices precise? Is the tone consistent (or inconsistent in a meaningful way)? Is the persona

clearly developed and well suited to the material? If you like the piece, tell the writer here.

8. What could be improved? Remember, you're helping the piece become more fully what it seems to want to be, as identified by you in #6—not become more fully the kind of piece you would write or your favorite author would write. How can you help it achieve its own aims, as best as you can decipher those? Also point out clichéd language, passages that are confusing or predictable, inadvertent sing-songy rhymes, etc. Where would you like to see more development? What remains unclear? Again, be specific: quote short sections, identify longer sections by page and paragraph number. If the piece really isn't working for you, according to what you understand its intentions to be, say so here—but explain clearly why.

8. What do you think of the *form* of the piece? Is it the best possible form for this particular material? Is the writer exploring/exploiting all of the available possibilities for formal invention?

You will return the entire packet—the marked-up piece plus your attached typed comments—to the author at the end of the workshop. You will also turn in a copy of your typed answers to #s 1-9 to me.

Special note: If you receive a critique that you feel is inappropriate—that includes not merely something you disagree with, but something that breaches the boundaries of professionalism and civility—please see me.

During the workshop

When we are discussing your piece, please listen quietly. Try to welcome the criticism with an open mind, jotting it all down for future reconsideration. When people are talking about your work, it's hard not to take it personally, especially if their comments are negative. But try not to react defensively. Remember, the final decision about whether or not to change anything is yours, and yours alone.

But listen carefully to what different people have to say; it will usually give you a helpful new perspective. (It can even help to write, "I notice myself getting defensive when people criticize x." Later, you can think about why that is and see if it opens up a new avenue into the material.)

Throughout the critique process, stay as neutral and curious as you can. This is your chance to see how people responded to *the words on the page*, not what you intended to write or imagined you wrote. The words on the page are all an editor will have when considering your work for publication, so it's crucial that those words function exactly as you wish them to.

When *you* are critiquing someone else's work, remember to do so in a friendly, helpful spirit. (See the Compassionate Code of Conduct, above.) "This is ridiculous," is not as effective as, "I don't understand what you were trying to do here," or "The final paragraph didn't work for me." Explain why.

After everyone has asked their questions and offered suggestions, it's time for the author to speak. If you're the author, this is **not** a chance for you to defend the work. It's a chance for you to ask for further clarification if anything was vague, and to explain what your goal was for an element that the workshop found unclear or problematic, so that you can receive further suggestions. If you have nothing to say, that's fine; just thank the class.

When the author explains what he or she was trying to accomplish, try to respond with specific suggestions. (If this were your piece, how would you fix this particular problem?) These are far more helpful than a blanket criticism.

Don't flatter someone if you don't think her or his work is very good, but on the other hand, remember how it feels to be the one in the hot seat. Be honest but gentle.

*Thank you in advance for all the effort, time, and care you'll spend
on your own work and on each other's.*