English 91: Creative Nonfiction

Course objectives:

In creative nonfiction, we writers are hemmed in by two equally powerful forces – the facts (those unalterable details, such as time, place, people, and history) and the self (the consciousness, the "I" who experiences, argues, presents, and feels). In this introductory course, we will read and write with careful attention to these two forces. We will begin by reading a selection of essays spanning more than a hundred years, and using those essays as models for our own writing. We will read for content, but more importantly we will study figurative language, character and setting development, and dramatic structure. Our goal will be to write with skill and verve about things that are real, about the material world of which we are part.
Course Requirements

Class Participation (30%) This includes attendance, punctuality and involvement in class discussions, as well as a presentation on one of the assigned essays.

Absences: Attendance is required and essential to your experience of the course. Individual workshops are especially affected by absences and are impossible to recreate. If you have a legitimate reason to be absent, please arrange this in advance; otherwise unexcused absence will reduce your overall grade by 1/3 of a letter grade. Chronic absences will affect your grade significantly.

Essay Presentation: In the first half of the quarter, you will lead a 20-minute discussion on one of the essays I’ve assigned. I will model this the first few class meetings, and am available to help you plan your discussion. Handouts, in-class writing exercises and other ways of involving the class are very much welcomed.

Writing and Blog (40%) This includes all writing exercises you’ve completed in class and for homework, one 10-20 page essay, and a revision of that essay.

About the blog: We’ll be posting some of the work for class on our class blog, including annotations on the published essays we read and responses to department readings. I’ll ask that you post a short comment on our class blog about each essay we read in class.

We’ll also produce and respond to some short writing assignments.

The blog content will be entirely private to our class. We’ll use Lore.com, a simple and functional site for academic coursework. If you haven’t used it before, check it out!

Required Materials

Course reader (available at the Stanford Bookstore)
Notebook & folder (to be brought to each class period)
Copies of your essay for workshop (8-10 copies, once per quarter)

Written critiques (15%) One of the most valuable elements of a writing class is the opportunity to have your work seriously critiqued both by your instructor and your peers. It will be as beneficial to your nonfiction to think critically and generously about your classmates’ work as it will be to have your own writing discussed. It isn’t necessary to write pages and pages of comments to your classmates, but make sure your letter is carefully thought-out and both critical and kind. It’s important to remember that we won’t be discussing polished essays but early drafts; we’ll be talking about the process of writing and all of the narrative possibilities inherent in each piece.

Attendance at Readings (15%) Attendance at three readings in the Creative Writing program is required. A list of readings this quarter can be found at http://creativewriting.stanford.edu and http://events.stanford.edu/.

[I write nonfiction] to change my own mind. I try to create a new vocabulary or terrain for myself, so that I open out—I always think of the Dutch claiming land from the sea—or open up something that would have been closed to me before. That’s the point and the pleasure of it.

-- Marilyinne Robinson
Due Dates
Failure to turn in work on assigned dates will result in a half letter grade for each day submitted late. For more information on how to make up missed courses or readings, please see “Make-up Work” below.

There is no extra credit offered in this course.

If you anticipate not being able to meet a deadline, in some cases extensions may be granted in advance. These must be agreed upon by the professor at least 48 hours before the assignment is due. It is your responsibility to plan accordingly.

The Honor Code is the University’s statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work. The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. That they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. That they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish

Make-Up Work If you miss a class, or cannot make three readings, please read an author interview on either The Paris Review’s website, as part of their Art of Nonfiction series theparisreview.org/interviews or on the Identity Theory website identitytheory.com/interviews/ and write a two-paragraph analysis of it, due Dec 12 by 5 p.m.

All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.

–Galileo

Accommodation Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations.
Provisional schedule (subject to change & expansion)

Tues Sept 23: Who put the ‘non’ in nonfiction?
Thurs Sept 25: A Most Popular Genre
Selections from NPR, 99% Invisible, Radiolab, given in class and available on the course blog.
Selections from The Devil's Dictionary (in course reader)

Tues Sept 30: The Facts & The Self
David Sedaris “Twelve Moments in the Life of an Artist” (handout)
Dan Baum "Happiness is a Worn Gun"

Thurs Oct 2: Attention
Jeanette Winterson "Art Objects" (handout)
*The second half of class we will go to the Andersen Collection, across from Cantor in Museum Row

Tues Oct 7: Tension & Suspense
Vanessa Veselka "Highway of Lost Girls"
James Baldwin "Notes of a Native Son” (handout)

Thurs Oct 9: Subtext
Joan Didion “On Morality”
Kathy Acker “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body”
Louise Glück “Education of the Poet”

Tues Oct 14: Style
Zora Neale Hurston "How it Feels to be Colored Me"
Richard Rodriguez "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood"

Thurs Oct 16: Time & Temporality
Zitkala-Ša "Impressions of an Indian Childhood“
James Agee "Knoxville: Summer of 1915"

Tues Oct 21: Imagery
Annie Dillard “Total Eclipse”
David Foster Wallace "Consider the Lobster"

Thurs Oct 23: Mock workshop
Tues Oct 28 - Thurs Nov 13: Draft workshops
Tues Nov 18: On revision
Thurs Nov 20 - Thurs Dec 4: Revision workshops (no class Nov 25 & 27)

Final essays due Friday Dec 12 by 5 p.m.