

Writing Nonfiction

English 135, Section 1 – Spring 2015

**A person is a fool to become a writer.
His only compensation is absolute freedom.
He has no master except his own soul,
and that, I am sure, is why he does it.
— Roald Dahl**

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

English 135 is an advanced writing workshop in Creative Nonfiction (also referred to by some as the New Journalism, or Literary Journalism). You will read a variety of forms of the genre and learn a great deal about topics other than literature—which is the beauty of nonfiction. During the course of the semester you'll write a personal essay, a travel story, a profile, and a feature article. The various pieces you write will leave a nonfiction record of your world as you see it today, examining your own life, the physical planet, the people you share it with, and hopefully look at some of the forces that are driving them all. (Prerequisite English 71.)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- ❖ Explore four subgenres of nonfiction: the personal essay, travel writing, profiles and feature articles.
- ❖ Develop the skills of a thoughtful editor.
- ❖ Become an active part of a literary community, through writing, editing, discussion, attending events and becoming a participant in our class dialogue.

TEXTS

Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction (2nd edition); ed. Sondra Perl, Mimi Schwartz Reed, Issue 67
A good quality grammar handbook, dictionary and thesaurus

Our text for this course will be *Writing True*, which contains both how-to chapters and sample essays. In addition you will be reading San José State's own journal, *Reed*, and handouts I will distribute in class. Please obtain the reference books I've listed as support for your writing.

GUIDELINES

In order to be successful in this course there are some simple guidelines to follow. First among these is to come to class prepared to participate. This means having done the assignments, read the material, and arriving equipped with questions, comments, and observations. In this class we will learn a great deal from each other, so discussion and creating a community of writers/critics is an integral part of the process. We will be looking at writing from many perspectives, so your ideas count.

The second guideline is to think and plan well ahead of assignments. Begin from day one to anticipate your schedule, topics for papers, research sources, etc. And third, if you have any questions that you need further assistance with, please feel free to consult me during my office hours; that's what they're for. Think of my office as an extension of the classroom where we can discuss any aspect of the course: material you don't understand, topics, problems, pieces you're working on, ideas you wish to develop, strategies you'd like to try. I give priority to students who have made appointments; otherwise meetings are on a first-come, first-served basis. I am available via email, but only for brief questions; this medium should not be considered a substitute for an in-person conversation.

WORKSHOP

You will learn to critique other authors' work, which is a very different skill than being a talented writer. The trick is to 1) praise what's good 2) ascertain what's wrong with a piece 3) offer positive criticism and suggestions on how to fix it—while realizing the individual style and goals of the author may differ from your own. You will be divided into small workshop groups and will remain in these groups for the whole semester.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

You will be writing in four levels of increasing length and complexity. The first, completely informal level, is your in-class writing exercises. The second is short assignments of two pages in length; these will offer opportunities for you to experiment with different ideas and styles—completely free of risk—as you will be given credit for merely completing the assignment. The third category is the drafts of your full-length essays that you will workshop in class. The fourth category is the final version of the four major assignments, which will be graded. Naturally, all papers must be nonfiction, i.e. true stories.

ATTENDANCE

Required, because English 135 depends on your participation each class. You are allowed one unexcused absence before your grade can be dropped, and students who come in after roll call will be considered absent. If you are ill, or are presented with an emergency that will cause you to miss more than one class, please contact me as soon as possible.

CLASS ETIQUETTE

Please observe the following: no eating during class, no laptop use, and of course, no cell phone use.

**Somebody gets into trouble then gets out of it again.
People love that story. They never get tired of it.
— Kurt Vonnegut**

The secret to getting ahead is getting started.
— Mark Twain

GRADES

Your final grade will be comprised of the following:

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|---------------------|-----|
| Personal Essay | 20% |
| Travel Essay | 20% |
| Profile | 20% |
| Feature Article | 20% |
| Class Participation | 10% |
| Short Assignments | 10% |

Grades are meant to reflect, quite simply, the quality of your work. Ninety percent of your grade will be based on your writing, and your assignments will be judged on their creativity, clarity, content, and the quality of the prose. Since this is an upper-division course, it is a given that you have a fundamental mastery of the proper mechanics of standard written English, like punctuation and grammar. Misuses of these will count against your grade. When I finish reading a piece I should feel that you, as a writer, had something important to say—not that it was a waste of my time.

IMPORTANT NOTE: One of the vital aspects of this course is learning how to manage and schedule the different aspects of a writing project, especially ones involving research. For this reason, deadlines are extremely important. **The grade for any paper handed in late, whether for the draft workshop, or the final, will immediately be reduced by one letter grade.** In other words, if you receive a C on a paper, but handed in late work, your final grade on the assignment will be a D. **Students must complete and turn in all four papers in order to PASS the class.**

Grading Guidelines:

A paper: has a creative approach, polished prose free of mechanical problems, keeps the reader's interest, is organized logically, flows smoothly, impresses the reader with the author's ethos and command of the topic, was delivered on deadline and within the appropriate word count.

B paper: has all the above except may contain one or two minor areas for improvement.

C paper: C is considered "average" by departmental policy. Usually a C paper offers lackluster creativity and/or content and needs further refinement at the prose level.

D paper: is either substantially shorter than the required word count, or has so many problem areas that it is difficult to follow because it contains poorly-crafted content or a plethora of mechanical problems. It is below the standard of writing acceptable for an upper-division undergraduate course.

F paper: is a failure to achieve the majority of requirements outlined above for an A paper.

DEPARTMENTAL GRADING POLICY

The Department of English reaffirms its commitment to the differential grading scale as defined in the official SJSU Catalog ("The Grading System"). Grades issued must represent a full range of student performance: A = excellent; B = above average; C = average; D = below average; F = failure. In English Department courses, instructors will comment on and grade the quality of student writing as well as the quality of the ideas being conveyed. All student writing should be distinguished by correct grammar and punctuation, appropriate diction and syntax, and well-organized paragraphs.

**There are only two things a child will share willingly—
communicable diseases and his mother's age.
— Benjamin Spock**

PAPER FORMAT

All material handed in should follow the same guidelines as those for submitting professional manuscripts:

- typewritten, double-spaced, black ink with copy dark enough to be easily read
- one-inch margins on all sides
- text on one side of the paper only
- 12-point type in a highly-legible font, preferably Times New Roman or Courier New
- your name and the assignment title single-spaced in the upper left-hand corner of the first sheet
- title centered on the first page
- pages numbers included
- pages stapled or paper clipped together

Points will be subtracted for improper formatting.

SJSU ACADEMIC INTEGRITY POLICY

Your own commitment to learning, as evidenced by your enrollment at San Jose State University, and the University's Academic Integrity Policy require you to be honest in all your academic course work. Faculty are required to report all infractions to the office of Judicial Affairs. The policy on academic integrity can be found at <http://www2.sjsu.edu/senate/S04-12.htm>. The SJSU rules against plagiarism are set forth in the SJSU Catalog, which defines plagiarism as the act of representing the work of another as one's own (without giving appropriate credit), regardless of how that work was obtained, and submitting it to fulfill academic requirements. Plagiarism at SJSU includes, but is not limited to: (1) the act of incorporating the ideas, words, sentences, paragraphs, or parts thereof, or the specific substance of another's work, without giving appropriate credit, and representing the product as one's own work. It is the role and obligation of each student to know the rules that preserve academic integrity and abide by them at all times. This includes learning and following the particular rules associated with specific classes, exams, and/or course assignments. Ignorance of these rules is not a defense to the charge of violating the Academic Integrity Policy. All instances of violating the Academic Integrity Policy will be reported to the Dean of Student Services.

CAMPUS POLICY ON COMPLIANCE WITH AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT

If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible, or see me during office hours. Presidential Directive 97-03 requires that students with disabilities register with the DRC to establish a record of their disability.