

**San José State University**  
**English Department**  
**English 135, Creative Nonfiction, Fall 2018**

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<b>Office Hours:</b>	T/TH: 11-11:45; T, 3-3:45
<b>Class Days/Time:</b>	T/TH: 1:30-2:45
<b>Classroom:</b>	BBC 221

### **Course Format:**

This is a discussion/writing intensive course. Students will also read extensively about the practice of creative nonfiction and read examples of the genre.

### **Course Description**

Creative nonfiction is a booming field. The term includes a wide range of prose: memoir, travel writing, biography, science writing, nature writing, personal and lyrical essays, feature writing. In this class we will explore that range. The goals of this course are to help you improve your writing; to practice research, interview and observational skills; to recognize the strengths of published work; and to discuss your own and others' prose. But first and foremost it is a writing course

In the first part of the semester, you will turn in 9 short pieces, one per week. You will post these by the day and time indicated on the syllabus, read your group's essays before class (5 in each group), and workshop pieces on dates indicated on the syllabus. In class, you will provide each member of your group with a 200 written critique of their essays as well as oral suggestions on the work (please print these critiques). By the beginning of November, if not before, you should have ideas about a longer piece you wish to write—it may grow out of one of the short pieces or you may develop a new idea or work on a longer work in progress. Each student will meet with me to discuss

your longer prose work—these too will be discussed in workshop at the end of the semester.

You will also read several examples of creative nonfiction, both essays and longer works.

## Course Learning Outcomes

The goal of this course is to introduce students to a variety of approaches to creative nonfiction. At the end of the course, students should:

- a. Recognize and appreciate various genres of creative nonfiction: travel writing, memoir, food writing, reporting, sports, science, portrait. Satisfied by course readings.
- b. Appreciate longer works of creative nonfiction and attend readings of published writers who come to SJSU. (Note: 4-unit enhancement. Writers TBA. *Reed* launch, Sept. 21)
- c. Practice writing short pieces in several genres, with the goal of appreciating the challenges of each. Satisfied by writing assignments throughout the semester.
- d. Improve his/her own writing by working on clarify, precision, interest, voice, etc. Satisfied by essays written throughout the semester, revisions and final long essay.

## Required texts

*Creative Nonfiction*, Second Edition (2018), Philip Gerard

*On Writing Well, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, (2006), William Zinsser.

*This Boy's Life*, Tobias Wolff

*Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah

Course reader: Maple Press

## Course requirements and assignments

**Because this is a 4-unit course, students can expect to spend a minimum of twelve hours per week preparing for and attending classes and completing course assignments. This course will have integrated into the syllabus the following 1-unit enhancement:**

**Writers reading:** Attend the REED kickoff with T.C. Boyle, September 21. Attend at least one other author reading in the region and write a 2-page review of each event.

**A. Class participation, 20%:** This grade is determined by written and oral comments on your peers' writing during workshops (written critiques checked off each workshop); participation in each scheduled workshop; and discussion of assigned readings.

**Readings:** Read all assigned material carefully and be prepared for unannounced quizzes on the material.

**Discussion:** Since this is a collaborative class, attendance is key. Please attend each class, arrive on time, post weekly writing by times noted on syllabus, and come prepared to discuss writing by your peers as well as assigned readings.

**Written critiques of group writing (for workshops):** Please read your peers' essays with care and on workshop days write and print a 150-200 word commentary on each, noting strengths and suggestions for improvement. **For workshop days, please bring to class 2 printed copies of your critique.**

**B. Prose for workshops, 60%.** On dates indicated on the syllabus, please email assignments to group + instructor by the date and time posted on the syllabus. Unless otherwise indicated, each assignment will be 3-5 pages, or 750-1250 words. Please send essays by the times indicated, giving your peers ample time to read your work. Work not submitted on time to your group and to me will be noted as late—and final grades adjusted accordingly. Each student will write 8 short pieces and one long piece, which may be a revision of 2-8.

**Use this format for heading:**  
**NAME\_ASSIGNMENT #\_TITLE**

**C. Portfolio with selected revisions, 2-8 + revised longer essay + 2 author events, 20%**

The portfolio will be turned in at the final exam and will include the following:

- a. 8 short pieces, original + any substantial revisions of weekly work (marked clearly as revisions—you may choose to revise one, some, or all. The final portfolio is based on quality, not quantity).
- b. Longer essay (#9). Each student will have at least one conference with instructor to discuss your work. The longer essay will be 5-7 pp.
- c. Two two-page reviews of two regional author events (one-unit enhancement for 4 unit class)

### **Final Exam or evaluation**

The final exam is a portfolio of your work for the semester, due on Thursday Dec. 13 by 2 pm (scheduled exam).

## **Grading Information**

Please type and double space all work. For each essay submitted, in addition to your peers' comment, you will receive a written comment from me + number grade on your **first 5 assignments (see rubric below)** and a letter grade on assignments 7 and 8. **If you**

**do not wish to receive my written comments on your work, please let me know at the beginning of the semester.**

**4: Excellent work** on the assignment, a superior piece of writing: thoughtful, original, imaginative, substantive. The point is supported throughout the essay. Language is sharp, style elegant. Sentences are powerful, varied. The work is error free—no spelling or punctuation errors or grammatical errors. Posted by Wed. noon.

**3: Good work**, successful completion of assignment and solid writing. The reader's attention is held throughout. This essay may lack some of the elegance, heft, vision, clarity of a 4 essay. The central idea is clear but may not be supported or developed throughout. Transitions may need some work, structure might need tightening. Some minor punctuation or grammatical errors. Sentence structure contributes to overall vision of the work, but may need to be tightened or varied.

**2. Completed assignment**, but the work may lack depth, precision, keen observation. It meets the guidelines for the assignment but does not go beyond expectations in any way. The point may be too broad or insufficiently supported. There may be spelling and grammatical errors, but not so many that they are distracting. It lacks originality, significant purpose, or point of view.

**1. Unsatisfactory work.** Lacks insight, originality. It may be too short, too general. Sentences may be clumsy.

**Grading:** 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 this course, as in all English Department courses, I will comment on and grade the quality of writing (grammar, organization, clarity, specificity, etc.) 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.

## **Determination of Grades**

Final grades for the course are determined by participation in writing workshops and class discussions, reading of assigned material, submission of essays on time, and submission of a final class portfolio.

## **Classroom Protocol**

Please come to class on time. All cell phones must be put away during class. Please read all assignments, listen respectfully to your classmates and contribute to class discussions. To prepare

fully for workshops, read your peers assignments carefully and come to class with thoughtful commentary on the writing of each person in your group.

### **University Policies**

Per University Policy S16-9, university-wide policy information relevant to all courses, such as academic integrity, accommodations, etc. will be available on Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs' [Syllabus Information web page](http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/) at <http://www.sjsu.edu/gup/syllabusinfo/>

# English 135, Creative Nonfiction, Fall 2018

## Course Schedule

### WEEK 1

**August 21: Introduction/introductions:** What is Creative Nonfiction? Who will be reading my work?

**August 23: On Writing:** Gerard, Chapter 1; Zinsser Chapters 1, 2, 3. **Assignment 1 due: My Thoughts.** Bring to class a two-page essay, selecting one option from “Thinking About Memoir.”

### WEEK 2: Place

**August 28: PLACE.** What makes one place different from another? Why does it matter? Gerard, Chapter 2; Reader: Wallace Stegner, “At Home in the Fields of the Lord,” from *The Sound of Mountain Water*. Annie Dillard, “Seeing.”  
<https://www.scribd.com/doc/27035226/Seeing-Annie-Dillard>

**Assignment 2, Place—due Sept. 3:** Write about an important place in your life and what happened there.

**August 30:** Gerard, Chapter 7; Reader: John Steinbeck, “My War with the Ospreys”; E.B. White, “Once More to the Lake”

**WEEK 3: Place:** “To have humility,” observed Dag Hammarskjöld, “is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves but in its sacred independence.”

[**Monday September 3, noon: Assignment 2, place, due:** Send your essay to group + instructor by noon.]

**September 4:** Workshop on Place essay, Assignment 2. Review Gerard, Chapter 7; Zinsser, Chapters 4, 5.

**September 6:** Place/participation: Zinsser, Chapter 6, 7. Reader, Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction”; Diane Ackerman, from *A Natural History of the Senses*, “How to watch the sky”

**Assignment 3, Sensual details—due Sept. 10:** Go into nature after dark, alone, and record what you experience with as many senses as possible, considering: kinesthetics, balance, directional sense, vibration in earth, air pressure, vertigo, peripheral vision, the olfactory landscape, air temperature, wind speed and

direction, height or depth, pain, air currents, water currents, gravity, light, harmonics. Taste things. (SLG 3)]

#### **WEEK 4: Details/Travel**

**[Monday September 10 by noon: Assignment 3, sensual details, due:**  
Send your essay to group + instructor by noon.]

**September 11:** Workshop on sensual details essay; Brian Calvert, "How to Face the Ecocide." <http://www.hcn.org/issues/49.12/essay-climate-change-confronting-despair-in-the-age-of-ecocide>

**September 13:** Zinsser, Chapter 13. Reader, T.C. Boyle, "The Land of the Green Sheen." Keija Parssinen, "A Scottish Lesson"

**Assignment 4: Travel--due Sept. 24.** Write about family travel/solo travel.

#### **WEEK 5: Travel**

**September 18:** Reader, excerpts from John Steinbeck. *Travels with Charley*. David Foster Wallace, "Shipping Out," <https://harpers.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/HarpersMagazine-1996-01-0007859.pdf>.

**September 20:** Considering form: Gerard, Chapter 6; Zinsser, Chapter 8. Review of travel essays, Boyle, Parssinen, Wallace. Reader, John McFee, "Travels in Georgia"

**Sept 21: REED kickoff and TC Boyle reading.**

#### **WEEK 6: Travel Workshops**

**[Monday September 24 by noon: Assignment 4, travel, due.** Send your essay to group + instructor.]

**September 25:** Workshop on Travel essay. Zinsser Chapter 9.

**September 27:** Workshop on Travel essay, revisions. *All revisions in italics*. Gerard, Chapter 10. Send revised essay with all changes in *italics* to instructor by Friday, September 28, 5 pm.

#### **WEEK 7: Food writing**

**October 2:** Reader: M.F. K. Fisher, "The first oyster" and "Fifty Million Snails." Excerpts from *Hidden Kitchens*, Davia Nelson and Nikki Sliva, "The Chili Queens."

**Assignment 5: Food--due October 8.** Write about a meal with more than food in it.

**October 4:** Experiential learning: **Assignment 6, group review.** In groups of two-four, go to a restaurant in downtown San Jose and write a review of the food. **Use class time to eat OR schedule a dinner with the group (more difficult, but possible).**

**WEEK 8: Food writing/restaurant critique**

**[Monday October 8, by noon: Assignment 5, FOOD, due.]**

**October 9:** Workshop on food essay. *This Boy's Life*, 3-33.

**October 11:** Sharing group food reviews, **Assignment 6 (bring written reviews to class from each group. One review per group).** *This Boy's Life*, 37-84.

**WEEK 9: Memoir**

**October 16:** Gerard, Chapter 8; Zinsser Chapter 24. *This Boy's Life*, 87-178.

**October 18:** Gerard, Chapter 9; Zinsser, Chapters 14, 20. *This Boy's Life*, 181-233

**Assignment 7, memoir about your family—due October 22.** Write about you and your family, one telling incident.

**WEEK 10: "The Art of the Interview"**

**[Monday October 22 by noon. Assignment 7, memoir due.]**

**October 23:** Workshop on memoir essay. *This Boy's Life*, complete

**October 25: Interviews/portraits:** Zinsser, Chapters 12; Gerard Chapter 4. Wallace Stegner, "Letter, Much too Late," in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*.

**Assignment 8: The art of the interview—due November 5.** Select someone older than you are by at least a decade and interview that person about the greatest risk they took in life.

**WEEK 11: Memoir/portrait**

**October 30:** *Born a Crime*, Part I.

**November 1:** Reader, Jane Kramer, "Cowboy." **Writing workshop on assignment 8, based on interview.** Turning the interview into a portrait. Bring your interview notes *only* to class.

**WEEK 12: Memoir/Portrait**

**[Monday, November 5 by noon. Assignment 8, interview to portrait due.]**

**November 6:** Workshop on interview to portrait.

**November 8:** *Born a Crime*, Part II.

**WEEK 13: Revisions**

**November 13:** *Born a Crime*, Part III.

**November 15:** Revisit Chapter 10, Gerard. Zinsser, Chapter 22. 23. Workshop on revisions: Which essay to turn into a longer essay? Assignment 9.

**WEEK 13: Revisions**

**November 20:** **Workshop on Assignment 9, longer essay.** Zinsser Chapters 10, 21, 25.

**November 22:** THANKSGIVING

**WEEK 14: Longer essay. Considering humor.**

**November 27:** Zinsser, Chapter 19. Reader, Mindy Kalig, "Love, Dating, and Boys who Ruin the World." David Sedaris, <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a1780/three-stories-sedaris-0300/>

**[Wednesday, November 18 by noon. Assignment 9, revision/longer piece due.]**

**November 29:** Workshop on longer piece.

**WEEK 15**

**December 4:** Workshop on longer piece/revisions in italics. Zinsser, Chapter 16, 21.

**December 6:** Workshop on longer piece/revisions in italics. Zinsser, Chapter 17.

**December 13:** Portfolio due by 2:00 pm, Essays 1-9.

**Suggested Reading, a very incomplete list, just a few of my favorites...**

**Memoir/Autobiography**

*Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, William Styron

*The Liar's Club*, Mary Karr

*A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers

*The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother*, James McBride

*Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje

*One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty

*The Glass Castle*, Jeannette Walls

*The Kid*, Dan Savage

*The Road to Coorain*, Jill Ker Conway

*This Boy's Life*, Tobias Wolff

*Educated: A Memoir*, Tara Westover

*A Celtic Childhood* by Bill Watkins

*The Wind Is Not a River* by Brian Payton

*Not My Father's Son* by Alan Cummings

*Dreams of My Father*, Barack Obama

**Biography**

*Composing a Life*, Mary Catherine Bateson

*Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, Janet Malcolm

**Nature**

*Blue Meridian*, Peter Matthiesen

*Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez

*The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder

*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, Terry Tempest Williams

*Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris

**Travel**

*Blue Latitudes*, Tony Horowitz

*A Russian Journal* and *Sea of Cortez* John Steinbeck

**Journalism**

*The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell

*Confederates in the Attic*, Tony Horowitz

*May you Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India*,  
Elisabeth Bumiller

*Hell's Angels*, Hunter S. Thompson

"Act Five," Episode 218, *This American Life*. And others.

**Humor**

*Me Talk Pretty One Day*, David Sedaris

*When You are Engulfed in Flames*, David Sedaris

*Into the Woods*, Bill Bryson (and travel)

*Why Not Me?* Mindy Kalig